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**THE ~~MASTER/SERVANT~~
RELATIONSHIP IN NINETEENTH
CENTURY ENGLAND AND INDIA.**

by

Fae Ceridwen Dussart

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of**

PhD

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Abstract

This thesis juxtaposes the relationship between domestic servants and their employers in metropole (England) and colony (India) between 1850 and 1914. It considers the master/servant relationship as a site for the formation, maintenance and contestation of class, gender, race and national identities. As well as exploring the significance of the relationship in terms of the construction of social identities, this thesis also argues that in certain circumstances the servant/employer relationship could take on an unexpected political significance. For Britain this is considered in relation to the labour and women's movements. For India, the connection between service and notions of 'the Indian' is linked to the perceived purpose of the imperial project and fear amongst colonizers of nascent Indian nationalism. The structure of service engendered certain 'the tensions of intimacy', which could spill into violence. These are explored in both contexts, with reference to the effects of the employment of a primarily female service workforce in Britain, and a male workforce in India.

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Introduction

This thesis concerns the relationship between domestic servants and their employers in metropole (England) and colony (India) in the nineteenth century and seeks to locate domestic service within both a national and an imperial context. It explores how discourses of race, gender and class intersected to shape the relational construction of the identities and roles of servant and master/mistress, and the ways in which that relationship was negotiated in England and India respectively. It argues that the relationship between domestic servants and their employers was crucial to the structuring of social identities and relations in metropole and colony and demonstrates how in certain circumstances the servant/employer relationship could take on an unexpected political significance. Domestic service is one of the key under-explored areas of history. This thesis constitutes an argument for its validity as a topic of historical inquiry.

Bringing the servant/master/mistress relationship in England and in India into the same analytic frame adds an important dimension to understanding the complex ways in which hierarchies of difference and associated identities were defined during the period.¹ Relations with servants were integral to shaping the sense of an English 'middle class' and the gender norms that so defined the men and women of that class. The servant/employer relationship was also essential to the conceptualisation and execution of the imperial project. The development of this project shaped the ways in which servant/master/mistress identities were constructed. An ambivalent rhetoric of immaturity was adapted to connect servants with putatively inferior 'Others', whether lower class or of colour. This process was heterogeneous, uneven and contradictory and the identities of servant/master/mistress became sites upon which notions of class, gender and racial difference were consolidated and contested.

¹ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997) p4.

Historiography²

In the twentieth century, particularly its second half, the objectives of history broadened. With the insistence of new generations of academics and their development of novel theories and methodologies, lives that had appeared insignificant to some historians began to emerge as legitimate objects of historical enquiry, such as those of women, or members of so-called 'inferior' races. Certain historians began to recognise the complexity, depth and range of different processes of change and to analyse them in new ways. Central to the approaches of some of this new work are two principles; firstly, that the forms of human existence today are the outcome of historical processes. Thus, no human practice is static; all demand a historical perspective, which uncovers the dynamics of change over time. Secondly, no aspect of human culture is essential.³ These principles enable a sense of the layered and mobile intricacies of the past, of the intersections and interactions of all aspects of human life from thought, to language, to action. Furthermore, the notion that no aspect of human culture is essential entails a sense of the constructedness of that culture; assumptions about the permanence and naturalness of social identities associated with categories such as 'class', or 'race' are necessarily called into question. The ever-expanding cast of historical actors' identities no longer just *are*, but are *constructed relationally* within discourse, and are plural, diverse, in flux, and marked by conflict.⁴ Crucial in this attention to the historical and cultural contingency of identities, and particularly important for this thesis, has been the development of feminist and post-colonial history writing.

During the early 1970s women's history emerged as a strand of Women's Liberation and feminist historians sought to address women's absence in mainstream

²This section draws upon the historiography discussed in Fae Dussart 'Horrible Cruelty to a Servant Girl': 'civilisation' and domestic service in mid nineteenth century England, unpublished MA Dissertation, (UCL, London, 2000) pp5- 13.

³ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, Third Edition (Harlow, 2000) p9; Paul Rabinow *The Foucault Reader* (London, 1984) p4.

⁴ Discourse will be understood to mean a historically and culturally specific body of language practice which structures 'knowledge' and facilitates power, confining people within its regulatory scope as it situates them in a certain linguistic way. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, 1972). See Paul Rabinow's *Foucault Reader* for a useful introduction to Foucault's main theoretical themes.

history writing.⁵ Feminist historians began to write about women workers and women activists, questioning their invisibility in existing history.⁶ Class was a key axis of power around which these feminists sited their new interpretations of the past. In 1963 E.P. Thompson published *The Making of the English Working Class*, which had had a profound effect on the way that subsequent historians understood the concept of 'class' in society. In the Preface to this seminal work, Thompson stressed that class was not a solid entity or structure, but something that 'happens in human relationships'. Indeed, class for Thompson entailed the 'notion of historical relationship', happening when

some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter voluntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.⁷

The perception of difference, represented by class struggle and expressed in cultural forms, was a crucial part of Thompson's analysis. In its focus on the cultural representation of class-consciousness, his work represented an inspirational revision of the classical Marxist emphasis on economic relations. In its emphasis on the importance of culture in the formation of class consciousness and its commitment to rescuing the 'poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian artisan' ...from the enormous condescension of posterity' *The Making* suggested new points of departure for historians interested in those disenfranchised from history.⁸ However, although E.P. Thompson acknowledges that if we 'stop history at any given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences' he also argues that class 'happens', coming before culture, arising out of common primary experience and recognition of

⁵ See the introductory essay in Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class. Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge, 1992) pp1-42 for an autobiographical account of the development of feminist history writing from the 1970s.

⁶ For important examples of this work see Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History. 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London, 1973); Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem. Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1983).

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963) pp8-9.

⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p12.

that commonality as expressed by the development of class consciousness, which then shapes the cultural boundaries of the class.⁹ As Patrick Joyce has written, 'there is a clear hierarchy of cause and effect'.¹⁰ Secondly, Thompson's class difference was a difference between men. Women, while not absent from Thompson's account, occupy a marginal, if important role, a gendered role indeed. The language of class as Thompson heard his actors speak it was the language of manliness. Joan Scott, in her essay on *The Making of the English Working Class*, has shown how 'the organization of the story and the master codes that structure the narrative are gendered in such a way as to confirm rather than challenge a masculine representation of class'.¹¹ Feminist historians, finding the existing uses of 'class' inadequate to answer their questions about women in history, sought to 'do a different kind of work, write different histories, inspired by a different set of political imperatives'.¹²

Challenging the notion that what it means to be a man or woman is the product of 'nature', feminist historians in the 1970s and 80s turned their attention to the way in which men and women's identities had been historically and relationally constructed in ways that facilitated power differentials between and within those categorical constructions. Feminists developed the analytic concept of gender in order to interpret the social organisation of sexual difference. Gender embodied the assumption that most of what passes for natural sexual difference is in fact socially and culturally constructed and must be understood as the outcome of historical processes.¹³ In sympathy with the insights of theorists such as Foucault, feminists recognised that the elaboration of male or female into a masculine or feminine identity is based upon the discursive construction of meaningful differences between men and women from the premise of reproductive difference. Masculinities and femininities came to be understood by feminists to be 'always defined in relation to each other and only made sense when placed in a whole social, economic and cultural world'; they are

⁹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p10 Joan Scott has argued that historians need to consider 'experience' as a historically constructed category that is 'an interpretation and is in need of interpretation.' Joan.W. Scott "Experience", in Judith Butler and Joan Wallach Scott (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York, 1992) p37.

¹⁰ Patrick Joyce (ed.) *Class* (Oxford, 1995) p127.

¹¹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York, 1988) p72.

¹² Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class*, p11.

¹³ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p156.

historically specific and changes can be traced over time in the definitions which have been in play and in power.¹⁴

Gender ‘touches on subjectivity and identity in profound ways’.¹⁵ In the early 1980s, drawing on post-structuralist theory, in which language is seen not as mirror of a world external to it, but as a conventional and arbitrary structure of relations and differences, the eventual shape of which is produced through culture and power relations, feminists problematised the whole question of what identity is.¹⁶ In *Gender and the Politics of History* Joan Scott drew attention to the linguistic construction of meaningful difference. Positing gender as a category for historical analysis Scott argued that the ‘story is no longer about the things that have happened to women and men and how they have related to them; instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed’ and suggested that a linguistic approach can reveal the gender dimension of all power relationships.¹⁷ In this way gender identities can be seen as historically and culturally formed by their linguistic representation within competing discourses. They are not the product of an external referent, which confers meaning upon them, but of conflicting cultural forces, and viewed as relational, composed of systems of difference.¹⁸ The sets of differences structuring identity are in fact a series of exclusions; defining oneself requires defining what or who that self is not: the ‘other’. Analysis of discourse is vital to understanding the ‘othering process’ by which identities are formed because it is through discourse that difference is defined and constructed as meaningful.

In 1978 Edward Said articulated the idea that through Orientalism, ‘the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it...European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period’.¹⁹ Though there are problems with Said’s argument, in

¹⁴ Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class*. p13. Davidoff and Hall’s study of gender, class and the middle-class family in the nineteenth century, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850, Revised Edition* (London, 1987, 2002) was pioneering in its application of this understanding.

¹⁵ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p187.

¹⁶ Patrick Joyce (ed.) *Class*, p5.

¹⁷ Scott, Joan Wallach, *Gender and the Politics of History*, p6; p41-42.

¹⁸ Patrick Joyce (ed.) *Class*, p5.

¹⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978, 1995) p3.

connecting culture and colonialism it offered important new points of departure for those interested in empire and the dynamics of cultural power and difference.²⁰ Moving on from Said's analysis of a West/East binary, scholars in a range of disciplines turned their attention to the multiplicity of colonialisms and colonial identities. 'There were... colonialisms associated with the different European empires and the different forms of colonialism which operated within the British empire' writes Catherine Hall. 'On each of those sites different groups of colonisers engaged in different colonial projects. Travellers, merchants, traders, soldiers and sailors, prostitutes, teachers, officials and missionaries – all were engaged in colonial relations with their own particular dynamics'.²¹ My thesis adds the masters and mistresses of domestic servants to that list.

Using discourse analysis to re-think the way in which identities are formed and given meaning, post-colonial scholars challenged the notion that race is a fixed objective category.²² Historians and anthropologists posited racial identities as discursively constructed and constantly in the making. They suggested that both nineteenth century contemporaries and traditional historians, to secure the unstable otherness of coloniser and colonised, continuously crafted a 'grammar of difference'.²³ As Cooper and Stoler have argued, colonialism was not something that was transported from the metropole overseas, but metropole and colony and their attendant hierarchies of identity were mutually constitutive.²⁴

In the 1980s black and Asian feminists began to question the authority of the 'knowledge' upon which white, western scholars and feminists based their interpretations of gender. Black and Asian feminists argued that 'a white, Eurocentric

²⁰ Catherine Hall 'Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial. Thinking the Empire.' in Catherine Hall (ed.) *Cultures of Empire. Colonizers in Britain and the empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A Reader* (Manchester, 2000) pp14-15.

²¹ Catherine Hall *Civilising Subjects. Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Cambridge, 2002) p15.

²² Catherine Hall 'Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial. Thinking the Empire.' p19.

²³ Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, pp3-4.

²⁴ See Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, pp 1-56 for a discussion of the need to rethink a research agenda and consider how 'both colonies and metropolises shared in the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, and in what ways the colonial domain was distinct from the metropolitan one.' This requires treating 'metropole and colony in a single analytic field, addressing the weight one gives to causal connections and the primacy of agency in its different parts.' pp 3-4; Catherine Hall explores the mutual constitution of coloniser and colonised in relation to the construction of national identities in *Civilising Subjects; In Colonial Masculinity. The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester, 1995) Mrinalini Sinha explores the relational construction of the identities of two elite groups – the western educated middle class Indian and the English gentleman and shows how this happened 'in the context of an imperial social formation that included both Britain and India.' p2.

feminism had attempted to establish itself as the only legitimate feminism...and that there was little recognition of the ways in which the gains of white women were made at the expense of black women'.²⁵ White feminists had sought to explain the othering process by which oppositional gender identities were produced, and gender and class had emerged as key axes of difference in this process. However, feminist and traditional imperial history had neglected to assess the way in which notions of 'race' and 'civilisation' were based upon gendered and gendering assumptions. As Joanna de Groot has argued, 'nineteenth-century representations and discourses of sexual identity and difference drew upon and contributed to comparable discourses and representations of ethnic, 'racial', and cultural identity and difference' in terms of contemporary understandings of domination and subordination.²⁶

The mutually constitutive operation of historically and culturally specific discourses in producing tensely classed, gendered and raced identities became a new focus of attention for certain historians. In terms especially of the writing of nineteenth century socio-cultural history, this was a not just an issue of putting black and Asian people back into the historical picture, but was a question of examining how the construction of racial difference through the production of 'knowledge' about the non-European 'Other' intersected with the articulation of class and gender difference. This process worked both to construct relationally, and to fracture the identities of coloniser and colonised, male and female, master and servant.²⁷ It is important to emphasise that such 'others' do not necessarily have to be non-European, but can be constructed as 'aliens within', as people perceived as peripheral and implicitly threatening are defined as being beyond the bounds of the 'imagined community' of respectable Englishmen (sic). In the nineteenth century such groups – criminals, prostitutes, servants – were frequently discussed in pejorative language that

²⁵ Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class*, p18.

²⁶ Joanna de Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': the Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century" in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (eds.) *Sexuality and Subordination* (London, 1989) p89.

²⁷ Some examples of recent work by feminist historians examining the intersection of discourses of gender, race and class in identity construction in metropole and colony are Antoinette Burton *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, 1998); Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Stroebe (eds.) *Western Women and Imperial Power: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington, 1992); Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (eds.) *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, 1998); E.M.Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj* (Cambridge, 2001); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects*; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York, 1995); Mary Procida, *Married to the Empire. Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947* (Manchester and New York, 2002); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2002).

connected them through references to atavism, nature, barbarity, backwardness and bestiality with the people of so-called 'uncivilised' lands. As Leonore Davidoff has written, the 'world view of Victorian society' was created and propagated by people in powerful positions who had the resources and the necessity to maintain their position:

Within this world view, those categories of people who are furthest away from the centres of decision-making are ranked accordingly; and they are also visualised in images that emphasise their powerlessness and [/or] degradation as well as their potentially threatening and polluting effects on those persons closer to the centre...certain groups were seen to be closer to nature than the rational adult middle-class man who dominated educated opinion. These groups included women, children, servants and many other elements in the working class, but also natives in the colonies and by extension all non-whites.²⁸

Recent attention to how identities are relationally constructed through the operation and conflict of different discourses has called into question collective identities and the sets of characteristics seen as defining them, such as 'servants' or 'masters', 'Englishmen' or 'Indians'.²⁹ As John Tosh has written, 'once discourse analysis is given full play, 'identity' cannot be frozen at this macro-level; dissecting the complex web of meanings in which individuals situate themselves has the effect of fracturing these large categories by opening up fissures along lines of class, nation, ethnicity, region, age, sexuality and so on'.³⁰

Discourse analysis allows us to uncover the conflicts in the construction of broad categories and reveals them as sites of constant contest and negotiation between competing discursive influences. Historically and culturally specific discursive configurations produced unstable identities that were shaped by the intersection of mutable and contingent notions of difference. In the nineteenth century, pre-existing notions of femininity and masculinity were elaborated and invested with new meaning. These femininities and masculinities were also fissured and shaped by the processes of definition and redefinition by which 'race' and 'class' difference was established and rendered meaningful. Different forces operated and competed in this process, ranging from medical and legal practice to evangelical moral endeavour and

²⁸ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge, 1995) pp104 – 105.

²⁹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, pp188-189.

³⁰ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p189.

ideological articulation within the literature, art, politics, religion and 'science' of the nineteenth century, through which people tried to make sense of the changing world in which they lived.

In their claim that the personal is political, from the 1970s, feminists drew attention to areas of life previously neglected by historians. They began to explore the 'most private recesses of ...experience' in an effort to understand the interplay between power and identity and to challenge the 'natural' relations between the sexes.³¹ In Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's pioneering text, *Family Fortunes*, the authors used the language of separate spheres to explore the gendering of public and private in 18th and nineteenth century England.³² Problematizing the English middle-class family, Davidoff and Hall revealed the linkages between processes of gendering, the structure of family relations and the construction of class difference. Using a wide range of source material, they demonstrated that what goes on in the home has a resonance well beyond its walls.

Davidoff and Hall showed how the development of a specifically middle-class culture in the nineteenth century involved the articulation of a domestic ideal, which necessitated the gendering of public and private space into masculine and feminine 'spheres'. According to this ideal, which manifested in a wide range of texts, the private sphere was defined as the site of the family, administered by a woman's gentle touch, while the public sphere was the world of 'work', where a man's strong hand was put to task. But, '[p]ublic was not really public and private not really private despite the potent imagery of 'separate spheres'. Both were ideological constructs with specific meaning which must be understood as products of a particular historical time'.³³ Structures of domesticity and the intimate were organised through reference to gender in nineteenth century England.³⁴ At the same time, one's

³¹ Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class*. p15.

³² For a critique of 'separate spheres' as representing a new gender order defining the modern middle class see Amanda Vickery 'Historiographical Review. Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993); See also Linda Kerber 'Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History' *Journal of American History*, 75, 1 (1988); Judith Lewis 'Separate Spheres: Threat or Promise?' *Journal of British Studies*, 30, 1, (1991).

³³ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes* p33.

³⁴ In my thesis domesticity will be understood to denote 'not just a pattern of residence or a web of obligations, but a profound attachment: a state of mind as well as a physical orientation. Its defining attributes are privacy and comfort, separation from the workplace, and the merging of domestic space and family members into a single commanding concept (in English, 'home')' John Tosh, *A Man's*

ability to conform to a gendered domestic ideal was proscribed by wealth, and therefore, to an extent, linked to class. Domesticity and different people's relation to it then, was constitutive of class and gender difference in the nineteenth century.³⁵

As Davidoff and Hall suggest, domestic servants in particular blurred the boundaries between public and private.³⁶ As Davidoff has written elsewhere, '[n]ineteenth century residential domestic service was a twilight world; domestic servants were not really part of the family (as many employers would have liked to believe), but neither were they legally or traditionally seen as unequivocally part of the paid workforce'.³⁷ In dealing with tradespeople, receiving visitors, cleaning the step, domestic servants mediated the contact between public and private. Their work marked the difference between inside and out, the worlds of home and work, as they swept dirt out of the house and released family members from some, if not all, household labour.³⁸ As my thesis will discuss, as (mostly) women paid to work in the home, domestic servants in England transgressed, even while they were essential to, the boundaries of a powerful domestic ideal propounded in verse, novels, paintings, pulpits and linked by contemporaries to morality and the 'natural' difference between the sexes.³⁹

Since the publication of *Family Fortunes* historians' interest in investigating the culture of the family and its wider significance has expanded. For example, Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden have collaborated to produce *The Family Story*, in which they critique existing family history and explore aspects of family life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, using 'the concepts of *blood*, of *contract* and of *intimacy*' to 'illuminate the meaning and significance of such relationships while demonstrating how these concepts also interact and conflict

Place. Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven and London, 1999) p4.

³⁵ See Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, Chapter 4 for a case study exploring linkages between class, gender and sexuality; See also Catherine Hall *White, Male and Middle Class*, Part 2 for a collection of essays which consider gender, class and the relation of these axes of power to ideas about work, family and politics; See also Theodore Koditschek, 'The Gendering of the British Working Class', *Gender and History*, 9 (1997) Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods. Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1992).

³⁶ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p33; pp 388-96.

³⁷ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* p3.

³⁸ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p24; Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story. Blood, Contract and Intimacy 1830-1960* (London, 1999) p167.

³⁹ See Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, Chapters 1 and 4 for further discussion of these ideas. See also Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, pp158-182 for a discussion of servants' ambiguous status and the tensions it produced in nineteenth century families.

with our understanding of the meaning of family'.⁴⁰ In *A World of Their Own Making* John Gillis considers myth and ritual and the construction of family life, while John Tosh has explored the shifting significance of domesticity to notions of manliness in nineteenth century England.⁴¹ Historians of empire have also investigated the functionality of domesticity and the politics of intimacy to the making of identities in metropole and colony. Through her work on intimate relations in the Dutch East Indies, Ann Laura Stoler has demonstrated that the regulation of affective bonds and sexual intimacies by the colonial powers was central to the making of colonial categories and to imperial ruling practices in both metropole and colony. As Stoler argues 'domains of the intimate figured...prominently in the perceptions and policies of those who ruled'.⁴² Conjugal relations, parenting practices, servant/employer relations in colonial homes were all crucial to the processes by which colonial identities were constituted:

...it was in the disarray of unwanted, sought after, and troubled intimacies of domestic space that colonial relations were refurbished and their distinctions made...Assessments of civility and the cultural distinctions on which racial membership relied were measured less by what people did in public than by how they conducted their private lives – with whom they cohabited, where they lived, what they ate, how they raised their children, what language they chose to speak to servants and family at home.⁴³

Structures of domesticity in empires were crucial in the making of the identities of coloniser and colonised, and therefore in the construction of the nations which they were figured as belonging to or excluded from. In nineteenth-century India, a specifically Anglo-Indian way of domestic life emerged that was peculiar to its Indian context but was also shaped by metropolitan discourses constructing 'Englishness'.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*; Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, p4.

⁴¹ John. R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making. Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996); John Tosh, *A Man's Place. Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. For examples of other work on the problematic of the family in Britain see Jane Lewis (ed.) *Labour and Love: Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940* (London, 1986); James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in nineteenth century Married Life* (London, 1992); A.S. Wohl (ed.) *The Victorian Family: Structures and Stresses* (London, 1978); For an anthology of primary accounts of school and family life see John Burnett (ed.) *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1982).

⁴² Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p7.

⁴³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, p6.

⁴⁴ I use Anglo-Indian throughout this thesis according to its contemporary usage to refer to white Britons resident in India, who may or may not have also referred to themselves as British, English or

Anglo-Indians would refer to themselves as Anglo-Indian, but also seemed to position themselves interchangeably as English, British or European. Whatever community they imagined themselves as a part of, Anglo-Indians' faith in their connection to Home, to the Homeland, was an important part of their identities.⁴⁵ The use of the word 'Home' to describe Britain was apposite; they imagined it in part in terms of a certain kind of domesticity, which they would reference in their Indian households in efforts to maintain the connection to the metropole. However, as Elizabeth Buettner has shown, on return to Britain they frequently suffered disappointment that things were not as they felt they should be. No longer part of a powerful white minority, many Anglo-Indians found they could not afford the numbers of servants they were used to or the domestic lifestyle they had envisaged themselves leading. Somewhat estranged from metropolitan society, Anglo-Indian returnee communities developed, with their own domestic cultures.⁴⁶ Beryl Irving remembered of the Anglo-Indian community of Bedford, in which she grew up, that 'the houses were crammed with Benares tables, strings of little carved elephants, placid buddhas and malevolent Gods' while 'our mothers made good curries'.⁴⁷

The difference of those Englishmen and women who had permanently or temporarily made the outposts of empire their homes, signified by their development of a different kind of domesticity, strained simple links between whiteness and metropolitan national belonging. As an advice manual written for returnees from India suggested, Anglo-Indians were a different kind of English people, who understood 'each other's language' requiring 'no aid from a dictionary to understand the meaning of *Durzee* or *Ghorawallah*, and they do not want an explanation if you should happen to speak of a *pucka* house!'⁴⁸

European depending apparently on context. I have seen few references to people as Welsh or Scottish though there were many Scots and Welsh people in India at this time. Of course, who was and was not included in the category of 'Anglo-Indian' was a vexed question and requires further research.

⁴⁵ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991) for an exploration of the idea of 'imagined communities'.

⁴⁶ For work on patterns of family life in India and Britain in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a particularly interesting exploration of returnee communities see Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families. Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford, 2004) especially Chapter 5; For a readable and comprehensive introduction to better-off British women's lives in India see Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj* (London, 1988).

⁴⁷ Beryl Irving, 'Our Road', *Bedfordshire Magazine*, 6/46 (1958) p225; Beryl Irving, 'Edwardian Schooldays', *Bedfordshire Magazine*, 9/67 (1963-4) p95 quoted in Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families*, p235.

⁴⁸ Edward J. Waring, *The Tropical Resident at Home: Letters Addresses to Europeans Returning from India and the Colonies on Subjects Connected with their Health and General Welfare* (London, 1866) p62-3.

Categories of identity were never fixed, but were protean and malleable, their contents shifting as the movement of discourses across metropole and colony moulded them. What it meant to be a master or a servant varied according to the historically specific discursive context in which one was a master or a servant, and it is important to note that between 1850 and 1914 this was a context that included both metropole and colony. For example, the construction of the identity of the Anglo-Indian employer shifted as the nabob, apparently in India simply to make money, gave way to the sahib, a product of the Evangelical revival, whose mission was to civilise India according to a British standard. As Elizabeth Collingham has argued in her work on the centrality of the body to the construction and maintenance of British authority in India between 1800 and 1947, shifting ideas about the purpose of empire affected the construction of the colonisers' identities in ways that were expressed through their bodies. According to Collingham, while the British were 'in the process of establishing their dominion, they demonstrated their authority with the partially indianized figure of the nabob'. However, once India's governance was handed from Company to Crown the British

legitimized their rule by re-casting themselves as the embodiment of racial superiority, pre-ordained to rule over the Indians, trapped as they were within their racially inferior bodies. Thus, the British grounded their authority in the bodily difference between ruler and ruled, thereby ensuring that the body became the central site where racial difference was understood and reaffirmed in British India.⁴⁹

As Collingham's investigation of the British body as an instrument of colonial rule suggests, there were limits to anglicization. Despite efforts to anglicize India, its climate and culture nevertheless shaped domestic life, with the employer-servant relationship acting as a conduit through which India could flow into the intimate and private recesses of Anglo-Indian life, even while Anglo-Indians attempted to interpret the metropolitan domestic ideal in the Indian context for the sake of both their own sense of Englishness and their native servants' edification.⁵⁰

In her book *Married to the Empire*, Mary Procida has suggested that a specifically imperial domesticity developed in nineteenth century India. She argues that Anglo-Indian women were active agents of empire, figuring themselves as doing the work of

⁴⁹ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p8.

⁵⁰ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p8; Chapter 3.

empire in the way they ran their homes. Procida argues that the gendered division between public and private characteristic of metropolitan domesticity collapsed in India under the weight of circumstance:

although women and domesticity were still conjoined, the domestic space of the home was neither private nor exclusively feminized. Rather than providing a haven from the heartless world of business and politics, the Anglo-Indian bungalow served as a crucial locus for the creation and maintenance of British imperialism in India and for the integration of Anglo-Indian women into the politics of the British Raj.⁵¹

Certainly, Anglo-Indian women did figure their domestic management as fulfilling an imperial duty. However, Procida's research is based largely on the experience of the minority of women married to civil servants who would perhaps be more likely to take an interest in Raj politics as a result of their husband's work than the average soldier, railway worker or even planter's wife. Also, Procida's suggestion that the gendering of public and private, or indeed the division between the two, was subverted in India is questionable. It is true that bungalows were more open, but the occupants were not necessarily always available to callers. Indeed, as Margaret Macmillan has shown, there was a strictly gendered etiquette for calling which belied a highly structured and conservative society.⁵² Furthermore, while husbands may have helped mediate between wife and servants, supervising the household labour was still women's work; it is no co-incidence that the majority of Anglo-Indian advice manuals after 1858 were written by and for women.

The biggest problem with Procida's argument though, is what it implies about metropolitan domesticity. Firstly, the domestic sphere in England was not 'exclusively feminized'. Women superintended the home, but men had their place in it, as John Tosh has shown.⁵³ Secondly, the (ideally) gendered division between public and private in the metropole did not preclude the possibility of the domestic sphere being used for public ends. Well-connected women used dinners and teas to influence politics.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the work of 'civilisation' went on in less exalted circles as in middle-class metropolitan homes, just as in Indian households, domestic servants were supposedly educated by their involvement in and observation of the

⁵¹ Mary A. Procida *Married to the Empire*, p21.

⁵² Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p155.

⁵³ John Tosh, *A Man's Place*.

⁵⁴ Davidoff, Leonore, *Society and the Season*

display of their employers' domesticity. Imperial domesticity was not unique to India; metropolitan domesticity was a part of it. The notion that home was the cradle of empire was certainly as pertinent in Birmingham as in Bombay.

As Bridget Hill has written 'domestic service provides a point of entry into a host of interesting questions for the historian, [and] it is one that British historians as yet have scarcely started to probe'.⁵⁵ Although some significant qualitative work has examined the articulation of power in the construction of nineteenth century servant/master/mistress class and gender identities in England, in most general studies of nineteenth century society and culture written before the 1970s, and often since, domestic servants tend to have little more than a few paragraphs devoted to their lives, tending to feature as 'footnotes to larger dramas of class struggle'.⁵⁶ Domestic service in India, which employed well over 2 million and was the fourth biggest occupation according to the 1881 Census, has also not received the critical attention it demands. The relation between race and service not been thoroughly explored, though attention to the Indian servant/employer relationship amongst historians interested in questions of identity is expanding.⁵⁷

Given the scale of domestic service in the nineteenth century and its centrality to the construction of the gendered, and necessarily classed domestic ideal that was a defining characteristic of respectable status during the period, the absence of domestic servants from social histories is surprising. Even in studies of nineteenth century women and women's work, domestic servants were frequently marked by their absence. For example, in Ivy Pinchbeck's pioneering study *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (1930), female domestic servants hardly featured. As Leonore Davidoff has written, 'up through the mid-twentieth century, domestic servants were a taken-for-granted part of the social landscape'.⁵⁸ One reason for their absence may be the problematic position servants occupied as dependants but employees in nineteenth century 'respectable' homes, a status that was both a product and constitutive of notions of gender, class, and in India, racial difference.

⁵⁵ Bridget Hill, *Servants. English Domesticity in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1996) p7.

⁵⁶ Julia Wrigley, 'Feminists and Domestic Workers', *Feminist Studies*, 17, 2 (1991) p317.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Buettner gives substantial attention to Indian servants in relation to childcare in *Empire Families* (pp36-45), while E.M. Collingham discusses them in relation to the limits of anglicization in *Imperial Bodies* (p103-113). Mary Procida devotes Chapter 3 to servants in *Married to the Empire* arguing that servants freed Anglo-Indian women from 'the practical and ideological burdens of housework' so that they could 'turn their energy and attention to the work of empire both in the home and beyond' (p105).

⁵⁸ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p3.

Servants were neither family members, nor were they legally or traditionally seen as part of the paid workforce. As such they occupied a curiously ambiguous position. They did not fall easily into the traditional academic categories of historical disciplines. Nor was there any obvious incentive to analyse servants' anomalous status. As a topic of historical investigation their lives were defined as 'inessential to the real and significant aspects of society, such as class, political, military or cultural affairs and institutions'.⁵⁹ 'Servants', states Julia Wrigley, 'did not seem central to modern societies'.⁶⁰ The majority of nineteenth century domestic servants in England were female and in association with their gender status, the work they did was regarded as unproductive labour because it 'added nothing defined as of economic value and was carried on outside a recognised workplace'.⁶¹ Mainstream and Marxist historians alike did not see servants as agents of change, and so they failed to attract the attention of historians. The lack of historical interest in Indian domestic servants is telling. Indian servants were generally male and so were of interest neither to social historians (because their labour was 'unproductive') nor to historians of women (because they were men). Until historians developed an interest in gender – in relational femininities and masculinities - as Indian men who did 'women's work' there simply wasn't a category of analysis into which Indian domestic servants could fit. Indeed, the examination of Indian servants' maleness as an important issue in the servant/employer relationship in colonial India is one of the novel aspects of my thesis.

In recent years historians interested in questions of gender and class have begun to get interested in domestic servants. As mentioned earlier, Leonore Davidoff has explored the intersection of class and gender and sexuality in the structuring of the master/servant relationship in nineteenth century England. She has considered the exercise of authority and possibilities for resistance for employers and servants respectively, in relation to dominant discourses, which constructed and rendered meaningful class and gender difference. Davidoff's work has been important in the recognition that the relation between employer and servant was laden with ambivalence and taut with the pressure of power differentials. She has drawn attention to servants' roles as deference givers and as protectors of their employers'

⁵⁹ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p1.

⁶⁰ Julia Wrigley, 'Feminists and Domestic Workers', p317.

⁶¹ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p3.

clean, white bodies. In its focus on questions of power and interest in the nitty-gritty of domestic relations, Davidoff's work challenges conventional histories of service, which describe 'upper-class households with large specialized staff'.⁶²

Much work on service tends to document the servant/employer relationship as it operated in elite households, reflecting the availability of source material. As Edward Higgs has pointed out, the majority of servant employers quoted by Pamela Horn in her otherwise extensive overview of service, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Domestic Servant*, were members of the landed or titled class, as were most of the servant employers referred to by the servants featured in John Burnett's *Useful Toil*.⁶³ Jessica Gerard's work focusses on country house servants, while Merlin Waterson's work on the Yorke family in Erddig, while a useful introduction to a unique archive, is hardly a study of an average household.⁶⁴ Edward Higgs has attempted to redress this balance. He uses census information to get behind the stereotypes and argues that there was not necessarily a straightforward connection between servant-keeping and class status.⁶⁵ According to Higgs '[s]ervants were employed in the homes of retailers, farmers and members of all social classes to perform productive work'.⁶⁶ Rather than the servants themselves being symbols of status, their work made the

⁶² Leonore Davidoff *Worlds Between*, p24. See also 'Domestic Service and the Working-Class Life Cycle', *Society for the Study of Labour History*, Bulletin 26 (1973), and Leonore Davidoff and Ruth Hawthorn, *A Day in the Life of a Victorian Domestic Servant* (London, 1972). Other historians who have looked at service from the perspective of analysing the tensions and ambivalence of the employer/servant relationship include Carolyn Steedman, whose article on servants uses psychoanalytic ideas; see Carolyn Steedman 'Servants and their Relationship to the Unconscious' *Journal of British Studies* 42 (July 2003). See also 'Below Stairs: the Maid and the Family Romance' in Peter Stallybrass and Allen White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Cornell University Press, 1986) ch 4. Some work has also been done on tensions between servants over questions of sex and matrimony. Jill Barber has written about sexual harassment and servants in ' "Stolen Goods": The Sexual Harassment of Female Servants in West Wales during the Nineteenth Century', *Rural History* 2, 4 (1993) pp123-136. John Gillis has examined servants and illegitimacy in London in his article 'Servants, Sexual Relations and the Risks of Illegitimacy in London, 1801-1900' in Judith. L Newton, Mary P. Ryan, and Judith R. Walkowitz (eds.) *Sex and Class in Women's History* (London, 1983).

⁶³ Edward Higgs, 'Domestic servants and households in Victorian England', *Social History*, 8, 2, (1983); Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Domestic Servant* (Gloucestershire, 1986, 1990); John Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London, 1974).

⁶⁴ Jessica Gerard, *Country House Life: Family and Servants 1815-1914* (London, 1994); Merlin Waterson *The Servants' Hall. A Domestic History of Erddig* (London, 1990).

⁶⁵ See Edward Higgs 'Women, Occupations and Work in the nineteenth Century' *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987); 'Domestic servants and households in Victorian England', *Social History*, 8, 2, (1983). Ebery and Preston's *Domestic service in late Victorian and Edwardian England, 1871 – 1914* (Reading Geographical Papers, University of Reading, 1976) is also essential reading for anyone interested in the Census and service.

⁶⁶ Edward Higgs 'Domestic Service and Household Production' in Angela V. John *Unequal Opportunities. Women's Employment in England 1800 – 1918* (London, 1986) p144.

display of status possible.⁶⁷ Higgs further argues convincingly that the decline of service can be explained as due to the reluctance of the increasing population of urban women to seek employment in service, rather than as due to a decline in middle-class demand as other historians have suggested.⁶⁸ Higgs' research 'points towards the existence of a tension between domestic service and the emancipation of women,' an insight that has been fruitful for my thesis.⁶⁹

Methodology and sources

Getting at the servant/employer relationship in the nineteenth century is problematic. The lack of historical interest in servants discussed earlier is reflected in their infrequent appearance in the categories of archives. As Leonore Davidoff has written, available sources relating to both England and India overwhelmingly document the perspective of employers and often afford only fleeting glimpses of servants working in the background.⁷⁰ I have been unable to find personal documents generated by Indian servants in which they talk about their work. Indian servants really do seem to be seen and not heard in the archives. The asymmetry of available source material is reflected by an asymmetry of focus in the thesis; sadly, there is more discussion of service in England than service in India.

There are exceptions to the tendency for personal sources to rarely mention the servant/employer relationship. One oft-quoted source is the diary of Hannah Cullwick, the maid-of-all-work who, at the encouragement of her middle-class lover Arthur Munby, kept diaries throughout her working life.⁷¹ To assume Hannah's attitudes were typical of servants generally would be rash, but nevertheless her accounts of work and relationships with employers and fellow servants make this an invaluable resource. Another, very different, exception is Jane Carlyle, whose

⁶⁷ Edward Higgs 'Domestic Service and Household Production' pp135-136.

⁶⁸ Edward Higgs 'Domestic Service and Household Production' p144. Theresa McBride follows J.A.Banks in arguing that reduction in demand due to financial difficulties in middle-class families produced a decline in service towards the turn of the century. See J.A. Banks *Prosperity and Parenthood* (London, 1954); Theresa McBride, *The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France 1820-1920* (London, 1976). Theresa McBride considers service in comparative perspective looking at Europe and Britain and her work is necessarily general in nature; see also 'The Modernization of "Woman's Work"', *Journal of Modern History*, 2, 49 (June 1977).

⁶⁹ Edward Higgs, 'Domestic Service and Household Production', p145.

⁷⁰ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p19.

⁷¹ Hannah Cullwick's diaries are in Box 98, Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

relationship with her servants was a constant theme of her correspondence.⁷²

Similarly, for India the letters of the poverty-stricken soldier's wife Minnie Wood have been a useful counterpoint to the weight of elite accounts, such as the letters of Lady Mary Hobhouse.⁷³ Though none of these sources can be seen as archetypal, they do afford important insights into the variable intimacies and tensions possible in the employer/servant relationship and often resonate with wider themes identified across more fragmentary source material. In order to identify these themes, manuscript and oral sources identified in record offices in London, Essex, Wales and the Oriental and India Office Collection have been supplemented with other published autobiographies and diaries and cross-referenced with official records such as reports from social investigator Charles Booth, and letters between Members of the Government of India.⁷⁴ Analysis of census statistics for both India and England also gives some quantitative insight to an otherwise qualitative analysis.

Although as Edward Higgs has warned, '[r]elying on the use of domestic manuals' to write the history of domestic service is 'equivalent to reconstructing the average modern home from the pages of *Vogue*', domestic advice manuals have nevertheless been a fruitful resource for this thesis.⁷⁵ The genre of the domestic advice manual flourished in the nineteenth century. These books cannot tell us much about conditions of service or specific servant-employer relationships in India or in England *per se*; manuals and chapters on servants in more general books tended to describe ideal, rather than real, domestic set-ups. However, when placed in context, they reflect a 'structure of feeling' in terms of domestic service and the servant/employer relationship in the nineteenth century, and it is possible to trace the development of certain themes as the century progressed.⁷⁶ Moreover, in contributing to a discourse on service and servants they were a part of the process by which the identity of 'servants' (and by association 'mistresses/masters') as a sociocultural grouping was constructed

⁷² There are various published collections of Jane Carlyle's correspondence. See J.A. Froude, (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, 3 vols (London, 1883); Townsend Scudder, (ed.) *Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle to Joseph Neuberg 1848 – 1862* (London, 1931); Leonard Huxley, (ed.) *Jane Welsh Carlyle: Letters to her Family, 1839-1863* (London, 1924); Alexander Carlyle, *New Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (London 1903); Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (Cambridge, 1977).

⁷³ Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210, OIOC; Mary Hobhouse *Letters from India 1872-1877* (London, 1906).

⁷⁴ I have used oral material from Paul and Thea Thompson's 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918' (Essex University Oral Archive) and from the OIOC's Oral Archives.

⁷⁵ Edward Higgs 'Domestic Service and Household Production' p127.

⁷⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961) p48.

and the terms of conduct for the servant/employer relationship were established, including the limits of acceptable behaviour. As a part of this discursive process, the writers of advice literature drew on normative notions of gender and class and racialising language and in doing so, contributed to the process by which those categorical distinctions were reified and invested with meaning.

There is a heavy reliance on newspapers as a source for this thesis. I use them to access the elusive servant voice, examining a 'letters page' dialogue between servants and employers in *The Times* in which English servants asserted their selfhood and challenged a dominant employer discourse that constructed them as lazy and dishonest. I also employ them to investigate the desire of some servants to unionise at the end of the nineteenth century. Newspapers are used to explore the shifting representation and significance of servant 'character' during a moment of political crisis in late nineteenth century India and to examine the content and representation of court cases involving servants and employers in both metropole and colony.⁷⁷

It is important to note that newspapers are a problematic source due to the likelihood of editorial bias, their appeal to specific segments of the literate population and the possibility of letters printed in them being faked. However, as John Tosh has written, 'no text has ever been composed in isolation'.⁷⁸ My concern is with what the appearance of such texts at specific moments can represent in terms of the discursive construction of identities. Feeding back into the particular sociocultural contexts in and out of which they have been produced, textual representations can tap into and challenge, and/or reconstitute, ideas about and conflicts of opinion over behaviour and identity within the wider society to which they relate. In doing so they can suggest alternative possibilities and images for discursive and behavioural emulation, rejection or development. Thus representations of class, gender or race, or even just allusions to these axes of difference, can not only be read as constitutive within discursive constructions of identity, but can also reveal the play of wider ideological power over the meaning of differentiated identities. As Roger Chartier has written in relation to the early impact of print in sixteenth and seventeenth century France, 'representations of the social world themselves are the constituents of social reality'.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ In current parlance a 'character' would be a reference from an employer

⁷⁸ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p124.

⁷⁹ Roger Chartier 'Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories' in Dominic LaCapra and Steven.L. Kaplan (eds.) *Modern European Intellectual History: Re-appraisals and New Perspectives*, (New York, 1982) p30. I have also discussed the problem of newspapers as a historical

In this way, newspapers could serve as shapers of reality.⁸⁰ It is crucial, if the newspapers are to be of any use to us, to place the concerns and anxieties expressed within their pages in the wider socio-cultural context out of, and into which, they emerged. Looking at the newspapers of the day may limit us to the opinions of the literate reading public, or even to the opinion of an editor, but with careful reading and attention to we can trace conflicts and ambivalences within a paper's pages and in this way gain access to the making of nineteenth century identities.

In addition to the general theoretical approaches discussed in the previous section, concepts that have been useful in my analysis include Mary Poovey's notion of 'border cases', and Lewis Wurgaft's psychoanalytic interpretation of tensions in late 19th century Anglo-Indian society. A short discussion of these concepts follows.

In her book *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender* Mary Poovey has analysed a wide range of texts to explore the way gender was implicated in the construction of 19th century social identities. Through consideration of a range of problematic issues, including the ambivalent representation of governesses and the controversy over whether to administer chloroform to women to ease the pain of childbirth, Poovey explores "border cases" that 'had the potential to expose the artificiality of the binary logic that governed the Victorian symbolic economy'. The notion that domestic servants constituted such a "border case" has been important within this thesis and has particularly informed my understanding of the late 19th century 'servant problem'. As Poovey has argued, 'those issues that are constituted as "problems" at any given moment are particularly important because they mark the limits of ideological certainty'. Such issues 'were the site of such intensive debates... because they threatened to challenge *the* opposition upon which all other oppositions claimed to be based – the opposition between men and women'.⁸¹

Servants were fundamental within the classed and gendered division of labour that sustained ideal middle-class domesticity. As we will see, the ideology of domesticity legitimised and was legitimised by the meaningful definition of gender difference,

source in 'Horrible Cruelty to a Servant Girl': 'civilisation' and domestic service in mid nineteenth century England, pp 13-17.

⁸⁰ Christopher A. Kent 'Victorian Periodicals and the Constructing of Victorian Reality' in Don. J Vann and Rosemary.T. VanArsdel, (eds.) *Victorian Periodicals: A Guide to Research*, vol 2, 5, (New York, 1989) p5.

⁸¹ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments. The Ideological Work of Gender in mid Victorian England* (London, 1989) pp10-11.

through which women were excluded from openly wielding political and economic power. To quote Poovey again:

In producing a distinction between different kinds of labor (paid versus unpaid, mandatory versus voluntary, productive versus reproductive, alienated versus self-fulfilling), the segregation of the domestic ideal created the illusion of an alternative to competition... Locating the difference between men and women also set limits to the groups that actually had access to liberalism's promise of universal economic opportunities... This process included generalizing the morality attributed to middle-class women to all women, translating the discrepancy between what one now has and what one could acquire into a psychological narrative of personal development, and subsuming the economic rewards capitalism seemed to promise into the emotional rewards that seemed available to every man in the castle of his home.⁸²

Domestic servants were problematic within this process. Although ostensibly conforming to the gendered role of woman as caretaker of the domestic sphere, female servants did not perform domestic work because it was in their nature to do so, but because 'there was little that an unskilled girl who was under the unfortunate necessity of having to earn her own living could do except to clean, cook and generally minister to others' wants'.⁸³ Thus, while conforming to the ideology that dictated 'a woman's place was in the home' in the sense that they performed domestic tasks in the private sphere as dependants of the master of the house, domestic servants, by virtue of their being working women earning their own living in a home that was for them a workplace, contradicted and even contested it in essence.

In their mediation between the differently constructed worlds of work and home, servants occupied a border zone which belonged completely neither to the domestic sphere nor to the public sphere. The ambiguous nature of this zone was reflected in other ambiguities. Were servants children or adults? They were often young and could be more physically immature than the children they might be charged to mind. Were they part of the family or not? They might be kin and certainly were ideally and legally dependent on the head of the household. Such uncertainties shaped the position of servants in 19th century society and were reflected in their limited legal rights and denial of independent status.

⁸² Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments. The Ideological Work of Gender in mid Victorian England*, pp10-11.

⁸³ John Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p135.

At the end of the century some commentators and servants began to argue that the institution of service required reform. In a sense, in calling for regulation of the terms of the employer/servant relationship, such people were seeking to resolve contradictions thrown up by the march of progress, to move service out of the border zone. This was problematic because service was so central to the maintenance of 'separate spheres' and the social and economic structures that depended on the separation of spheres, that a threat to the service relationship was a threat to the very heart of English social stability. As attention was drawn to the need to regulate service, and comparisons were explicitly drawn with other trades, the servant's position on the border between the 'normative (working) man and the normative (nonworking) woman' became clear.⁸⁴ Of course, as working-class women domestic servants' position was different from that of the governesses Poovey considers; servants' working did not compromise their class status. However, their working for a wage, potentially doing fixed domestic work for fixed hours did threaten to corrupt the sanctified notion of the home, and women in the home, as a haven free from the taint of waged labour. Poovey has argued that the border cases she identifies 'threatened to relocate difference – either to move it from the sexual to some other, cultural division (such as class) or to uncover it *in* women, the very subject upon whose self-consistency the ideology rested'. According to her 'either of these moves had the potential to challenge the social arrangement of separate spheres and everything that went with it: the sexual division of labor, the model of moral influence, the notion that there was some boundary to the alienation of market relations'. In seeking to move out of the 'border zone', servants similarly threatened the status quo underpinned by notional separate spheres and revealed the constructedness of the identities occupying those spheres. In a sense, the 'servant problem' constituted a description of this threat.

In his book *The Imperial Imagination. Magic and Myth in Kipling's India* Lewis Wurgaft uses psychoanalytic object relations theory to 'examine the imaginative element in the British involvement in India'.⁸⁵ Object relations theory attempts to describe the development of ego and self systems of the infant and child through the assimilation of 'objects' encountered in its parenting environment. These objects are not necessarily things, but rather representations of persons, or aspects of persons.

⁸⁴ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p14

⁸⁵ Wurgaft, Lewis.D. *The Imperial Imagination. Magic and Myth in Kipling's India* (Connecticut, 1983) pxi

‘[T]hese introjected... ‘objects’ are subject to massive distortion in response to the repeated experience of frustration or deprivation, or to extreme idealization in keeping with the needs of the child to protect its fragile psychic systems.’⁸⁶ According to Wurgaft, culture and society ‘represent the developing individual’s ultimate object world’ and ‘objects’ in that world can include abstract concepts such as certain ideologies or values. Wurgaft suggests that ‘shared social values, as well as cognitive and affective orientations as ‘objects’ can penetrate to unconscious levels of personality across an entire group and influence collective behaviour. Just as the individual remains vulnerable to psychic regression under the threat of object loss, so groups can react collectively to threats to culturally sanctioned objects’.⁸⁷ Anglo-Indians idealised their vision of India and its relation to the metropole and feared its loss, especially after 1857 when they were violently rejected by the natives they thought should at least be grateful to, if not love them. The Anglo-Indian community responded to its prospective loss of India as a love ‘object’ with ‘an increasing reliance on political and instinctual control...and with a mythology of British heroism in which instinctual and social control were major constituents...The increasingly rigid posture the British assumed was supported by fantasies that compounded their isolation from Indian life, and obstructed a realistic approach to native political aspirations’.⁸⁸ As Wurgaft implies, and Chapter 6 of this thesis also suggests, Anglo-Indian communities sought to control India to protect not only their material but also their emotional psychic investments.

It is highly likely that the experience of empire affected service in England – imagine housemaids negotiating ‘oriental’ furnishings, their movement through a room proscribed by furniture from around the globe, or cooks being required to make uniquely colonial dishes, like curry, for their employers. However, this study does not discuss the impact of colonialism on domestic service in England. Rather, it juxtaposes servant/employer relationships in England and in India, exploring aspects of both in an effort to understand how dynamics of gender, race and class variously shaped the relationship in metropole and colony and how the meaning and possibilities of ‘service’ were constructed in the two sites. Using close textual

⁸⁶ Wurgaft, Lewis.D. *The Imperial Imagination*, pxiv

⁸⁷ Wurgaft, Lewis.D. *The Imperial Imagination*, pxiv

⁸⁸ Wurgaft, Lewis.D. *The Imperial Imagination*, pxvii; pxix

analysis of a range of qualitative and statistical source material to move between the general and the specific, it attempts to investigate in new ways the tension between intimacy and social distance that characterised the relationship in both India and England. It also tries to access the selfhood of servants who are too often portrayed as silent victims of omnipotent employers. Though many historians have dismissed their efforts, the growth in representative institutions in nineteenth century Britain afforded domestic servants the opportunity to assert themselves. It is instructive to consider the difference with India, where no such institutions existed. The exploration of the links between the servant/employer relationship, colonial domesticity and the construction of the gendered and classed identities of ‘the Indian’ and ‘the Englishman’ adds a new dimension to work done in this field by historians such as Mrinalini Sinha, E.M.Collingham and Mary Procida.⁸⁹ The association in this thesis of the servant/employer relationship and wider politics - the significance of feminism and trade unionism to the decline of service in Britain and the way in which ideas about servants could influence law-making in India – is also novel.

Though underpinning this thesis is the understanding that discourses shaping domesticity and the servant/employer relationship were developed ‘in the context of an imperial social formation that included both Britain and India’, to use Mrinalini Sinha’s useful phrase, this is essentially not a comparative study.⁹⁰ It would be disingenuous to pretend that the study of one site has not informed the analysis of the other and inevitably, at certain points in the thesis, comparisons are made between the two sites. Nonetheless, stark differences in climate and in culture, and the asymmetry of available source material made detailed comparison problematic. Having said that, the possibilities for future comparative work also became clearer in the process of writing and one Chapter in the thesis begins this work by directly comparing Indian and British servants’ use of the law courts.

Thesis structure

The thesis consists of five Chapters. The first Chapter provides an analytical survey of the context to the master/mistress/servant relationship in nineteenth century

⁸⁹ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*; Mary Procida *Married to the Empire*; E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*.

⁹⁰ Mrinalini Sinha *Colonial Masculinity*, p2.

England. It outlines the structure of domestic service, using Census returns to assess numbers of servants and the gender division of labour. Advice manuals, articles, published autobiographies, novels and legislation are used to consider the way in which servant and employer rights, roles and responsibilities were variously defined by the employer class in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the second Chapter the analytical focus moves to nineteenth century India. It explores the way Anglo-Indians negotiated the Indian context through their explanation and definition of Indian servant roles and identities. It argues that the servant/employer relationship in colonial India was essential to the development of colonial domesticity, through which management of the colonial home was constituted as critical to the imperial civilising project. This had an impact on the way in which women conceived of their domestic role in India. White women attempted to manage their encounter with India in the nineteenth century Anglo-Indian home, particularly through their relations with their servants. However, these efforts were complicated by the conflict between metropolitan notions of domesticity and the circumstances of the Indian colonial context. These women positioned the home at the centre of the imperial civilising project, using the language of imperial governance to describe domestic organisation, translating metropolitan domestic ideology to develop a specifically Anglo-Indian domesticity.⁹¹ It was in the domestic sphere, however, that the limits of this process were most clearly revealed. As this Chapter suggests, Indian domestic servants complicated efforts to recreate England within the private sphere.

The third Chapter focusses on the experience of middle and upper class employers in England, and particularly on their perception, observance and transgression of the limits of acceptable behaviour in relation to ideas about who a master/mistress was and who a servant was. These limits were defined by private experience interacting with the public construction of roles and responsibilities and with wider discursive pressures. Through this ongoing process, the identities and rights of servants and employers were ambivalently contested and shaped. Using autobiographies, letters and diaries, this Chapter focusses on contests over employers' and servants' respective responsibilities and rights. It argues that although the servant/employer relationship operated in variable ways 'behind closed doors', similar areas of tension

⁹¹ In my thesis ideology will be understood to mean a system of ideas, which is moulded by the flow of discourses.

emerge across households. These tensions point towards insecurity over the roles, rights and responsibilities discussed in Chapter 1.

The fourth Chapter considers the way British servants contested and contributed to the construction of their characters in public dialogues with the employer class. Letters and articles published in *The Times* are used to assess how servants engaged in the public discourse on the servant/employer relationship, entering into a dialogue with employers over the extent of their authority. Secondly, this Chapter concerns the efforts of some servants to unionise towards the end of the nineteenth century. The reasons why servants felt the need to unionise at this time are examined, and I discuss their what their concerns as union members were and what the response of wider English society was to their unionisation. This part of the Chapter considers how efforts to unionise influenced and were influenced by ideas about the identities of servants and employers, by ideas about how the relationship between them should be conducted and by wider thinking about work and worker's rights in the late nineteenth century.

The fifth Chapter compares the different ways in which domestic servants in India and England used the courts, and the way their cases were differently represented in the Anglo-Indian and the British press respectively. Court cases in particular are of interest as the courtroom was a 'functional site of power for the contested formation of ...social identities' and a place in which representations of private experience were publicly judged.⁹² The exercise and representation of violence is a particular concern of this Chapter. There was a difference in the way employers expressed violence towards servants in metropole and colony. Metropolitan and colonial newspapers represented the court cases generated by that violence differently. Also, the illegitimacy of violence was configured differently in metropole and colony. This Chapter explores these contrasts, revealing contemporaries' gendered and raced interpretations of the limits of acceptable behaviour in the employer/servant relationship.

The final Chapter discusses the significance of the relationship between servants and employers in India in the Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883. It explores the significance of the relationship between servants and employers during the controversy, the way this relationship facilitated women's intervention in the conflict

⁹² Shani D'Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage. Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women* (Manchester, 1998) pp 4-5.

over the Bill and the way it both complicated and underwrote the construction of a homogeneous 'native' character that was central to the arguments of those opposing the Bill. Servants emerged as a particular site of colonial anxiety during the Ilbert Bill controversy. Opponents of the Bill often imagined a native threat, posed by servants employed in Anglo-Indian households. The domestic sphere was integral to the imperial project, and to the gender, class and racial identities of the colonizers. Servants, though positioned as subordinates within the Anglo-Indian home, nevertheless had the power to subvert its order and disrupt its sanctity. As such, they were crucial in the construction of the character of the 'vindictive native' that was perceived by the anti-Ilbert Bill movement to threaten the foundations of the empire.

Chapter 1

Masters, mistresses and servants in nineteenth century England: the structure of their relationship

By 1800 the servant/master relationship had long been fundamental to English social relations. The houses of the nobility had for centuries employed grand domestic retinues and '[s]ervice to a master or mistress, to King and country, and to God all figured in accepted world views'.¹ The first half of the nineteenth century saw a significant increase in the number of servant employing households. Although some historians have argued that servant employing was not an index of middle-classness the expansion in such households in the nineteenth century was part of a significant cultural shift.² This chapter will discuss the nineteenth century culture of domesticity, its centrality to Victorian life and identity and the numbers and roles of servants. It will then focus on a discussion of the decline of service and the so-called 'servant problem'.

Domesticity, class and gender in nineteenth century England

The nineteenth century was the period when English society experienced the disruptive effects of industrial capitalism. The establishment of a free-market and the associated logic of individualism and competition were challenging and re-working received notions of hierarchy and patriarchy.³ Social mobility was a theoretical possibility for many who in the previous century would have had little opportunity to alter their status. A growing commercial and professional middle class was challenging an old elite, whose wealth was based in landholding. The transition from a joint to an individual wage, together with increasing employment of working-class women outside their homes, was also profoundly unsettling to patriarchal and hierarchical norms in the first part of the nineteenth century.⁴ These developments were marked in the development of a status hierarchy that interacted with elaborated constructions of

¹ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, p161.

² See Edward Higgs 'Domestic servants and households in Victorian England' pp201-210.

³ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p74.

⁴ Wally Secombe, 'Patriarchy stabilised: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in nineteenth-century Britain', *Social History*, 11 (1986) p67.

gender difference. Class definition did take place at the political and economic level: the developing proletariat and industrial bourgeoisie defined themselves through political organisation in relation and opposition to each other, a shift stamped by the Reform Act of 1832 which gave middle-class men the vote and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 around which political opposition to landed interests was articulated. However, as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have suggested, status definition also took place at the cultural and ideological level, which interacted with political and economic expressions of both class and gender.⁵

The response of those who had obtained, or were aspirant to, upward mobility (or a share in power in some way) in the nineteenth century was one that manifested a tension between a profound anxiety about, and a supreme self-confidence in the rapidly changing social world. One way of relieving anxiety and boosting self-confidence was to differentiate, define, explain, educate and thereby control that world and secure one's place in it. Different forces operated in the process of definition and classification ranging from ideological articulation to medical and legal practice and evangelical moral endeavour. These forces intersected at that crucial site for modern identity, the family, which was invested with meaning as the basic unit of society, its members enfolded and the outside world excluded as 'home' came to represent a stable refuge from an unstable and changing world. An image of a domestic ideal evolved, immortalised in the art and literature of the period. 'Home' took on a spiritual significance that elevated it above the mundanity of the quotidian. In John Ruskin's words, home was 'a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods...'.⁶

'Home' came to mean the private sphere, ideally a unit of consumption sharply differentiated from the public world of work, politics, production and capital. The cut and thrust of the public sphere came to be defined as 'naturally' the man's arena – the responsibility to financially maintain the family was ideally his alone. The man's role as provider for, protector of and importantly, Master of his home and family was constitutive of his manliness, underpinning and re-working the traditional association of masculinity with authority, self-reliance, bravery, chivalry and reason:

⁵ See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes*.

⁶ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 1864, (pocket edn, London, 1906).

The Master: the Husband, the Father, the head of the House, the Bread-Winner is the responsible individual whose name and power upholds the household...he holds the place of highest honour; he is the supporter and sustainer of the establishment. He is also legally and politically responsible for all the other members of the family...such are the duties of a master, a husband and a father.⁷

This required that he have something to provide for, protect and rule over. In the nineteenth century the man's masculinity was associated with the existence of a private, domestic home, dependent on him, to which he could return at the end of the day as father, husband and master.

In relation to the developing ideal of masculinity, in the nineteenth Century a lasting image of the ideal wife, daughter and sister evolved, an image that masked the exclusion of women from political and economic power by assigning them a domestic purpose and a distinct set of roles. Women were assigned a special position as the caretakers of religion and morality within discourses constructing this image, ideally segregated within the private sphere of the home, free from the taint of market forces that would have undermined paternalistic authority.⁸ Eventually society's fear of the taint of market activity as an agent in undermining the purity and moral capabilities of women extended to any work involving manual labour, even within the home.⁹ The attributes that fitted the ideal Victorian woman for her role in the private, domestic sphere were both overlaid with spiritual meaning and were seen to be the result of the mystical workings of nature. Innate 'biological' differences between men and women, supposedly identified by well-known 'experts' such as William Acton and Sir James Paget, scientifically 'proved' the idea that men and women should occupy different roles in different spheres of activity. This gave academic weight to the moral notion that 'separate spheres' were to the benefit of society at large. As John Angell James wrote in his long-term bestseller *The Family Monitor*:

In general, it is for the benefit of a family that a married woman should devote her time and attention almost exclusively to the ways of her household: her place is at the centre of domestic cares. What is gained by her in the shop is oftentimes lost in the house, for want of the judicious superintendence of a mother and mistress. Comforts and order, as well as money, are domestic

⁷ Cassell's *Book of the Household: A Work of Reference on Domestic Economy*, vol. 1, (London, 1890) p27.

⁸ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p74.

⁹ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p74.

wealth; and can these be rationally expected in the absence of female management? The children always want a mother's eye and hand, and should always have them. Let the husband, then, have the care of providing for the necessities of the family, and the wife that of personally superintending it: for this is the rule both of reason and of revelation.¹⁰

'Domesticity' was thus associated with ordering and morality, with the ability to live by socially and culturally constructed norms that distinguished 'civilised' from 'uncivilised' behaviour. As such domesticity was inextricably linked to moral notions of respectability, which in the nineteenth century was a standard by which most people (excluding perhaps the aristocracy) judged their own and other people's social status. Such ideas about status intersected with thinking about the differences between men and women to produce differentiated masculinities and femininities. Domesticity was crucial to the development of class consciousness; working-class men's organisation around issues such as pay and citizenship rights was frequently articulated in terms of their need and ability to maintain and represent their respectable families and domestic lives, while the separation of spheres and the withdrawal of women from domestic labour within the home was a defining characteristic of middle-classness.

The middle-class ideal of femininity was immortalised in Victorian poetry, literature, art and advice manuals. A symbol of social status in herself, the ideal Victorian lady manifested conspicuously the qualities of feminine gentility and appropriate morality. The construction of her gender identity, of ideal feminine identity (and relational masculine identity), was classed and classing, as its signifiers – the trappings of ideal domesticity – could only be fully achieved by those of a certain status. Those signifiers therefore worked to symbolise and construct broad conceptions of class and gender difference, as well as nicer degrees of difference within the categories 'middle' and 'working' class and 'men' and 'women', as people tried to reconcile the tension between ideology and the material constraints on their lives.

Maintaining households in conformity with the domestic ideal of a non-working wife and children ensconced in a large and richly furnished private home necessitated the employment of domestic servants. Seebom Rowntree, in his study of York in the late nineteenth century, took the distinction between the working class and those above them in the social hierarchy to be marked by 'the keeping or not keeping of domestic

¹⁰John Angell James, *The Family Monitor, or a Help to Domestic Happiness*, (1828) reprinted in T.S. James (ed.) *The Works of John Angell James*, 17 vols. (Birmingham, 1860-64) p56.

servants'.¹¹ As Pamela Horn has written: '[F]or any nineteenth century family with social pretensions at least one domestic servant was essential'.¹²

By definition, truly genteel women could only be a small proportion of the population. Those who must work, therefore, should ideally only be engaged in domestic work that protected the purity of others – domestic service, charwomen, washerwomen or prostitutes – and thus conformed to the feminine ideal of women as the nurturers of the moral order of the private world.¹³ Located within the private sphere of the home domestic service was seen as an appropriate preparation for young working-class girls for their future domestic roles, whether they married or remained servants. As W.R.Greg wrote, domestic servants

do not follow an obligatorily independent, and therefore, for their sex an unnatural career: - on the contrary, they are attached to others and are connected with other existences which they embellish, facilitate and serve. In a word, they fulfil both essentials of a woman's being: *they are supported by and they administer to men*.¹⁴

According to John Burnett: 'By their number, dress and function [servants] proclaimed in an outward and visible way the degree of success in life that their employer had attained and, by implication, conferred upon him membership of the [middle] class'.¹⁵ Seeking to augment their social status, employers hired servants not only to maintain their lifestyles, but also as 'deference givers'. As J.F.C. Harrison has written: 'the essence of middle-classness was the experience of relating to other classes or orders of society. With one group, domestic servants, the middle classes stood in a very special and intimate relationship: the one fact played an essential part in defining the identity of the other'.¹⁶ The intimacy and dependence of this relationship, juxtaposed with the difference that it marked, resulted in the uneasy and distrustful attitude many employers expressed towards their servants.

The middle-class domestic ideal had a power that stretched beyond the hazy borders of class categories. Even while tighter boundaries were drawn around the private sphere of home and family in the nineteenth century, more and more of those who

¹¹ Seebohm B. Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, 2nd edn (London, 1903).

¹² Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Domestic Servant*, p17.

¹³ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p74.

¹⁴ W.R. Greg 'Why are Women Redundant?' *National Review*, Vol. 15 (1862) p451.

¹⁵ John Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p136.

¹⁶ Quoted in Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p24.

aspired to middle-class status were bringing strangers into their homes to cook their food, nurse their children, clean their homes and deal with the most intimate aspects of their daily lives. Throughout our period, in order to release the mistress from some of the dirtiest and most degrading chores, farming, artisan and respectable working-class households acquired poor girls cheaply from institutions such as workhouses and houses of mercy, hired local girls desperate for work or took on relatives as servants.

As well as wife and children, domestic servants were defined within law as among the household head's dependants, rather than as employees. Although the mistress of a household would probably manage the servants, the head of the household, who was usually a man but could also be a single woman, was legally responsible for hiring and firing them, and for ensuring they were fed and clothed.¹⁷ Domestic servants' dependence on the household head was necessary within the ideology that gave meaning to and legitimised the definition of separate spheres and the attendant distinction of roles for men and women; defining them as dependants within a family home obscured the fact that they were working women. Where the household head was a woman – as could be the case with widows and spinsters – the construction of the servant's childlike dependence bolstered the notion of the woman as motherly guide and domestic superintendent. Indeed, one advice manual writer pseudonymously styled herself 'Mrs Motherly'.

Nevertheless, the contrast between the notion that servants were family dependants and the reality of their difference to the families whose lifestyles they maintained emphasised their ambiguous status, implicitly blurring the class and gender boundaries that marked the edges of the middle-class domestic world. As we shall see when we consider the representation of servants and service in advice manuals, it was in the constant effort to combat such ambiguity and achieve the closure of those social boundaries through enforcing difference of dress, freedom of movement and behaviour that employers' ambivalence towards their servants was most marked. Arguably, it was in these areas where the limits of acceptable behaviour for servants were defined, that the artificiality of their difference, and deference, was most psychologically challenging.

¹⁷ Edward Spike, *The Law of Master and Servant*, (London, 1839) p45; 'Bill for the better Protection of Young Persons under the Care and Control of Others as Apprentices or Servants', *PP*, 1851 (32) 1.97.

Various discourses worked to elide the challenge domestic servants posed to the theoretically sharp distinction between the classed and gendered 'separate spheres' of family and work, femininity and masculinity, which 'underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions'.¹⁸ Within legal discourse servants, along with wife and children, were defined as dependants rather than as employees of the head of the household in which they worked. Within advice literature service was frequently referred to as training for marriage. This made it possible to believe not only that the employer was doing the servant a service, rather than the other way round, but also that service was an appropriate education for a young working-class girl. Through service a working-class girl supposedly learned how to maintain the domestic sphere and to fulfil her role as a woman through her practice in the home of her benevolent employers. Religious arguments were marshalled to show that the relation between master and servant was a natural part of a divinely ordained hierarchy, and that the servant owed the master obedience as a result.

Nonetheless, the ambivalence of the employer class towards their 'dependants', evidenced in contemporary writings on service and servants, is testament to a possibly unconscious and certainly unwilling recognition of the uncomfortable artificiality of such distinctions. It points towards the underlying and constant potential for changes in the ideological and material structure of gender and class relations, as articulated by feminists and socialists towards the end of the century. The nature of the 'servant problem' in the late nineteenth century and the debate over it constituted both a tacit admission of this artificiality and an effort to contain the impact of such an admission. To use Mary Poovey's words, the debate over the 'servant problem' in the final decades of the nineteenth century was a moment when the 'limits of ideological certainty' were exposed and tested.¹⁹ What was at stake in the debate over what should be done about the problem was not just a question of how to find good servants, but the very sanctity of the feminine domestic sphere as a site free from the taint of 'masculine' notions of 'work'. There wasn't a radical change; domestic labour continued and to a certain extent continues to be defined as 'women's work'. The debate revolved around the way in which that work was organised and paid for, and on the status of those women who did it. As such those participating in this discussion

¹⁸ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p8.

¹⁹ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p10.

articulated, even while they attempted to contain, a challenge to the normative notions that had structured the servant-employer relationship in earlier decades

Servants' failings had long been a source of complaint for their employers. However, as John Burnett has noted, the first half of the nineteenth century 'seems to have been unusually quiet on the subject'.²⁰ From around mid-century however, as domestic servant numbers began to increase rapidly, complaints about servants and advice as to how to deal with the problem of servants emerged with more frequency. Around the same time the genre of the domestic advice manual developed, creating a textual space in which women could publicly establish their domestic authority over both their homes and their 'subordinates'. Common themes encompassed issues of discipline and morality and the necessity for mistresses to ensure that their households' dependants observed behaviours appropriate to their lowly station. The servant problem, at this stage, focussed on the difficulties mistresses faced in enforcing deference, obedience, honesty and industry and the attendant risk that servant girls might fall into a life of vice and crime, possibly at the employers' expense.

From 1871, the rate of growth in domestic service slowed down and commentators began to express increasing concern with the 'problem' of the scarcity of servants and its causes. Thus in the final decades of the nineteenth century the nature of the 'servant problem' shifted. Middle-class anxiety about the unwillingness of young girls of good character to enter service intensified, and with good reason. As a result of a range of material and ideological developments, such as the introduction of comprehensive elementary education in 1870, shifts in ideas about citizenship and manliness, the possibility of alternative respectable occupations for women in factories, shops and offices and the arguments of feminists with regard to women, work and independence, fewer young men and women were choosing to become servants. The fact that they were making such a choice was extremely unsettling to their would-be employers as it challenged the principles upon which middle-class lifestyle and identity was predicated in the nineteenth century.

²⁰ John Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p139.

The structure of service

Census returns must be treated with some caution with regard to domestic service. As Edward Higgs has pointed out, the occupational tables in the nineteenth century census reports contain aggregates that disguise local variations and shifts over time, not to mention categorical changes between censuses as to the definition of a domestic servant.²¹ Furthermore, a potentially large number of domestic servants were working in the households of kin, who may or may not have acknowledged the kin relationship in their census returns.²² However, despite this the census material is useful in providing us with at least a rough idea of the scale of the occupation.

According to the Censuses, domestic servants were the largest occupational group of working women and indeed, were the largest occupational group in the economy after agricultural labourers in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1851 751,641 women were categorised as servants.²³ Between 1851 and 1871, while the total of separate families increased by 36%, the figure for female servants rose by over 56%. In 1871 12.8 per cent of the female population of England and Wales was engaged in domestic service or allied occupations.²⁴ In 1881 the number of resident female domestics in the census was 1, 230, 406 and by 1901 it was calculated as 1,285, 072. The 1911 census gave the number of servants, including around 24,000 day servants, as 1,295,991. In 1891 the number of female servants had apparently peaked at 1,386,167 – over a third of all women employed. However, as Higgs has shown, this figure is likely to be inflated by the fact that the 1891 Census ‘included with domestics all those female relatives returned in the census as employed in ‘helping at home’, performing ‘housework’ and so on’, and thus it seems more accurate to regard the figures as indicating a gradual slowing down of the rate of expansion in the domestic service sector rather than an actual decline.²⁵ Nevertheless, servants were noticeably fewer in number, in relation to the number of families, in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In 1881 there were 218 female domestic servants per 1000 families

²¹ Edward Higgs ‘Domestic servants and households in Victorian England’, p202; Mark Ebery and Brian Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England, 1871 – 1914*, pp11 – 15; see also Edward Higgs, ‘Domestic Service and household production’.

²² See Di Cooper and Moira Donald, ‘Households and “hidden” kin in early nineteenth-century England: four case studies in suburban Exeter, 1821-1861’, *Continuity and Change*, 10, 2, (1995) for a discussion of this in relation to mid-century Exeter.

²³ Census of 1851. Ages and Occupations, 1852-3, Vol LXXXVII, parts 1 and 2.

²⁴ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Domestic Servant*, pp26 –27.

²⁵ Edward Higgs ‘Domestic servants and households in Victorian England’, p202.

in England and Wales; by 1911 this ratio had dropped to 170 domestics per 1000 families, hence the frequent expression of anxiety about servant ‘shortages’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Herbert. P. Miller expressed a common fear when he claimed that ‘little foresight is required to see that unless a remedy is found for this state of things, the inevitable consequences will be that servants will dictate what terms they please, and employers will be obliged to accept them or become their own servants’.²⁶

A large proportion of female domestic servants was under twenty (39 per cent of the total in 1860; 42 per cent in 1880; 31 per cent in 1911), though this proportion declined around the turn of the century as educational provisions improved after the passage of the 1870 Education Act, which introduced comprehensive primary education, and alternative occupations became available to young women.²⁷ Some commentators, such as Miller, blamed the decline on ‘shortsighted parents, who attempt to artificially force [girls] beyond that station of life in which Providence has destined them to act’.²⁸ Nonetheless, the experience of service was still a very common one for teenage girls; in 1881 1 in 3.3 girls aged between 15 and 20 was classified as a domestic servant.

The number of men in service had shown a decline since the 1850s. In 1851 there were 74,323 indoor male servants (not including coachmen, grooms or gardeners), a number that had fallen to 56,262 by 1881 and to 42, 034 by 1911.²⁹ This may have been due to the fact that male servants tended to cost more than their female counterparts and were thought to be harder to control, but it is also likely that the increasingly exclusive association of domestic labour with ‘women’s’ work and subordination, while the diversifying economy provided alternative ‘manly’ occupations for working-class men, did much to dissuade them from pursuing a career in indoor service as the nineteenth century progressed. The number of men in outdoor service – working as coachmen, grooms and gardeners increased from 26,827 to 209, 100 between 1851 and 1911. Gardeners saw the biggest increase – from 18,700 to

²⁶ Herbert. P. Miller, *The Scarcity of Domestic Servants: The Cause and the Remedy* (London, 1876) p15.

²⁷ In 1880 attendance in school was made compulsory for children aged between 5 and 10 and in 1891 fees in elementary schools largely disappeared.

²⁸ Herbert. P. Miller, *The Scarcity of Domestic Servants*, p44.

²⁹ Census statistics taken from *General Reports of the Censuses of Population*: 1851: *Parliamentary Papers*, 1853, LXXXVII; 1871: *Parliamentary Papers*, 1873, LXXI; 1881: *Parliamentary Papers*, 1883, LXXX; 1891: *Parliamentary Papers*, 1893-94, CVI; 1901: *Parliamentary Papers*, 1904, CVIII; 1911: *Parliamentary Papers*, 1913, LXXVII.

118,700 as compared with coachmen and grooms who increased in number from 37, 400 to 90, 400 between 1851 and 1911.³⁰ Ebery and Preston have argued that the huge increase in number of gardeners was due to the '[t]he rural myth [which] became embedded in English urban society through the thousands of little suburban estates and parks which were to be the urban equivalent of the Arcadian landscape. All these needed full or part-time gardeners'.³¹ Outdoor work did not carry the same stigma of unmanliness as indoor domestic service, it being manual labour outside the home, rather than cooking, cleaning and ministering to personal needs and wants inside the private sphere.

The demography of domestic service varied according to region. In mining and manufacturing areas, where servant employers constituted a smaller proportion of the total population and where there were other possible occupations for girls and women, the number of domestic servants was lowest. Servant employers in industrial areas had to recruit resident servants from further afield or go without. For example, Pamela Horn's research into the 1871 Census has shown that in the Lancashire cotton town of Colne only one in twenty three households had a resident servant (though more households may have employed day servants, or used kin as servants). Only a quarter of the Colne maids had been born in Lancashire, the majority being migrants from agricultural districts in Yorkshire, Cumberland, Westmorland and Wales. This pattern was common for industrial towns and London also relied on immigration to provide servants, though partly this was out of preference – city girls were thought to be less malleable, honest or hardworking than country girls.³² Servants were more numerous in agricultural areas and towns such as Brighton, Bath and Cheltenham, 'the habitual resorts of the wealthier classes' according to the 1881 Census report, showed the greatest number of servants.³³ In London in 1881 the ratio of domestic servants was one in fifteen persons; in Brighton it was one in eleven and in Bath one in nine. In the agricultural counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex the average was one to every twenty one, but in industrial Lancashire it was one in thirty one. In 1891 around one in five of all females over the age of ten living in Bath was a domestic servant, while in

³⁰ Mark Ebery and Brian Preston, *Domestic service in late Victorian and Edwardian England, 1871 – 1914*, pp28-29, p112; Census of 1851.

³¹ Mark Ebery and Brian Preston, *Domestic service in late Victorian and Edwardian England, 1871 – 1914*, p29.

³² Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, pp 30 –32.

³³ *General Report of the Census of Population 1881*.

York, Reading and London the proportion was one in seven. However, in Halifax, Bury, Bolton, Rochdale, Blackburn and Burnley the ratio was only one in twenty.³⁴

By the time of the 1911 Census employers in the North of England had real difficulty in finding servants as the rate of growth in numbers of servants slowed. In Lancashire there were only 97 female indoor servants to every 1000 families and in the West Riding of Yorkshire 100 per 1000 families. In Bath, on the other hand, there were 307 servants per 1000, while in Bournemouth the ratio was 415 per 1000. The national average in 1911 was 170 per 1000.³⁵ Thus by the early twentieth century the incidence of domestic service in some areas, particularly the North, was clearly in decline, even if in other areas its expansion was merely slowing. This goes some way to explain the prevalent anxiety surrounding the scarcity of servants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the increased willingness on the part of middle-class commentators to argue for service to be considered and regulated as work in the same way as other jobs, in the hope that this would attract girls to the profession. However, other factors were at stake, as employers well knew. The scarcity of servants was, and was feared by contemporaries to be, symptomatic of wider shifts in ideas about work, women, individuality, freedom and citizenship. Potential servants, with little other outlet for expression, were voting with their feet. As Amy Bulley wrote in the *Westminster Review* in 1891: 'The spirit of the age is against the rendering of indefinite service; all workers nowadays insist upon distinct limits of hours and work ... The institution in its present form is doomed, and it must go'.³⁶

Domestic servant roles

The nature of domestic service varied widely. At one end of the spectrum was specialised service in a large house within a hierarchy of servants, which could result in a measure of autonomy, a good standard of living and authority over others.³⁷ According to John Burnett, 'Victorian households built up their staffs of domestic servants in accordance with a well-understood pattern: this was based on a natural and

³⁴ Miss C.E. Collett, *Report on the Statistics of Employment of Women and Girls*, PP, 1894, LXXI, pt II, p22.

³⁵ *General Report of the Census of Population 1911*; Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, pp 30–32.

³⁶ A. Amy Bulley, 'Domestic Service. A social study', *Westminster Review*, 135, 2 (Feb 1891) p182, pp 182-183.

³⁷ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p22.

logical progression from general functions to more specialized ones, heavily reinforced by an outpouring of literature and advice on domestic economy and household management'. Though the relation between the number of servants employed by a family and its status was not necessarily straightforward, on the whole the bigger the establishment of servants in a household, the better the status of the family. The first resident servant would be a maid-of-all-work, or general servant, the next a housemaid or a nursemaid. The cook would be the third servant hired, and these three could together manage a household in conformity with the conventions of middle-class respectability. According to Burnett, the fourth servant would be male, and his duties would 'combine indoor work such as waiting and valeting with care of the horse or pony and carriage'. The family might engage a lady's maid or a kitchen maid next, or a nursemaid if there were children without a nurse. The next servant hired would be likely to be a male, acting in the capacity of butler. He would release the other manservant to act as coachman or groom full-time, 'which would be necessary with ownership of a four-wheeled carriage and an income of £1,000 a year'. Subsequent hirings would follow the household's capacity to afford increasingly specialized service roles: 'on the male side footmen, valets, a chef and a housesteward, and on the female a housekeeper, a governess, more lady's-maids, upper and lower parlour-maids, a laundry-maid and additional kitchen- and scullery-maids'.³⁸

A strict hierarchy operated in households with large staffs of domestic servants. In terms of female servants, the head of the staff was the housekeeper, her authority signified by the large bunch of keys clinking at her belt. In homes where no housekeeper was engaged, the cook oversaw the other servants. The lady's maid was next in the spectrum of authority, served none other than the mistress of the house and thus was often regarded with suspicion by the other servants. After the lady's maid came the nurse, housemaids, kitchen maids, scullery-maids and laundry staff. Each one's role was specialised and valued according to its position in the hierarchy.

The majority of domestic servants in England in the mid-nineteenth century worked, often alone, as general servants, maids-of-all-work or skivvies.³⁹ According to census figures, in 1851 there were 575,162 female general servants in England and Wales.⁴⁰ In the 1871 census just under two thirds of all female servants worked as

³⁸ This information is drawn from John Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p176.

³⁹ See Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p22, and Bridget Hill, *Servants*, p10.

⁴⁰ J.A.Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1954) p83.

general servants.⁴¹ Although usually associated with lower-middle-class or artisan employers, such girls could also be the only servants employed in wealthier households. John Foster's mid-century sample of servant employer families in Oldham who left more than £25,000 or more shows that over half had less than two servants.⁴² Ebery and Preston have shown that less than fifty per cent of Class I servant employing households in Lincoln, Coventry, Bolton and Wallingford kept more than one servant. However, it is important to note that in sixteen of the twenty areas considered by Ebery and Preston, fifty per cent or more of the Class I families employed more than one servant and Class I families in all areas employed at least one servant. Although the percentage of Class II families employing more than one servant was higher than fifty per cent in only one area – Eastthampstead – in all but one area Class II families employed at least one servant.⁴³ Prochaska's argument that servants 'did not 'necessarily' mark the division between the rich and the poor, between respectable middle and upper classes and their social inferiors' is valid; about twenty per cent of Class I households in mid-century York had no servants.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, over fifty per cent had more than one.⁴⁵ This suggests that a family was unlikely to consider and attempt to represent itself as middle or upper class and not employ one servant or more.

Since one of the signifiers of upper- and middle-class status was a certain gendered relation between domesticity and work that necessitated the labour of servants both practically and symbolically, it is easy to see why servant employing has so often been understood to indicate middle-classness. If servant employing wasn't always an indicator of achieved middle-class status, as represented by a certain kind of lifestyle, it does not seem implausible that servant employing was frequently an indicator of aspiration to such status.

Many Victorian people saw conformity to the domestic ideal associated with middle-classness, insofar as was possible, as an indicator of respectability, which was linked to the moral idea that one should constantly strive honestly to improve oneself

⁴¹ *General Report of the Census of Population: 1871*.

⁴² J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974) p178.

⁴³ Mark Ebery and Brian Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England, 1871 – 1914*, p64.

⁴⁴ F.K. Prochaska, 'Female Philanthropy and Domestic Service in Victorian England', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 54 (1981) p84.

⁴⁵ A. Armstrong, *Stability and Change in an English County Town* (Cambridge, 1974) p 179, cited in F.K. Prochaska, 'Female Philanthropy and Domestic Service in Victorian England', p84.

and one's status. Throughout our period farming, artisan and respectable working-class households, in order to release the mistress from some of the dirtiest and most degrading chores, employed poor girls cheaply from institutions such as workhouses and houses of mercy.⁴⁶ It is important to note that these servants often did productive work in the household such as cheese-making or shop-minding. In Bradfield and Reading in 1871 50 per cent of the servant keeping household heads in skilled manual occupations employed more than one servant.⁴⁷ According to Mrs Nassau Senior's 1874 report on the education of girls in pauper schools for the Local Government Board '[t]he low rate of wages given to these girls...makes them sought after by many people who, a few years ago, would have done their own housework, whose income does not permit them to keep a superior servant, and who often look on their little servant as a mere drudge'.⁴⁸ Such girls would not be desirable employees for more established middle- or upper-class families, as Mrs Senior noted: 'The girls in service repeatedly tell me that they would have no chance of getting into a "good" family'.⁴⁹

In 1896 Charles Booth divided servants into three basic categories, claiming that 'the roughest single-handed places' were run by the 'wife of an artisan or well-paid labourer who does the work of the household herself, with the assistance of a servant,' while a 'better class of servant' would work alone in the households of 'small clerks, where the mistress often takes a great pride in her house, doing a great deal of the work with her own hands, and superintending the whole of it'.⁵⁰ Booth's third category included 'those serving both in middle class households and in the large establishments of the wealthy, it being scarcely possible to make any practical division between these two classes of servants. Moreover, each of the three groups merges almost imperceptibly into the other, so that no hard or fast line can be drawn between them'.⁵¹ Booth's difficulty in clearly marking off the boundaries of class within the hierarchy of servants reflects and is linked to the lack of clarity at the borders of class categories in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Booth's statement suggests that it wasn't

⁴⁶ F.K. Prochaska, 'Female Philanthropy and Domestic Service in Victorian England', p82 – 83.

⁴⁷ Mark Ebery and Brian Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England, 1871 – 1914*, p64.

⁴⁸ Local Government Board, *Third Annual Report: Report by Mrs Nassau Senior on the Education of Girls in Pauper Schools*, PP, XXV (1874) p 338.

⁴⁹ Local Government Board, *Third Annual Report*, p 344.

⁵⁰ A single-handed establishment was one in which a servant worked alone as a maid-of-all-work or a general servant.

⁵¹ Charles Booth and Jesse Argyle, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Vol VIII, part II (London, 1896) pp 213; 214.

necessarily the number, but the quality and status of the servant that helped define the social images of households in relation to each other at the end of the nineteenth century. In Bridget Hill's words: '[h]ouseholds varied in size and wealth, but their complement of servants did not necessarily reflect their income'.⁵² Nevertheless, servants' existence allowed a merging of the difference between the employer and the employed with the difference between the master and the mastered, the powerful and the powerless. This dynamic did not necessarily work along the lines of the usual class boundaries to which we are accustomed, but operated to construct a status hierarchy within intersecting categories of class and gender that was nicely graduated both within, and without the private home.

Many general servants were paupers, hired out from workhouses and charitable institutions at ages as young as six or seven, though more usually they were around twelve years old. The conditions of their working lives were frequently poor, particularly in the cities, where as sole servants and/or paupers and/or rural girls they were integrated into neither the household nor the local community.⁵³ These so-called 'slaveys' would often have to work from 5 am until midnight for a nominal wage, if anything at all. Note the connection with slavery, abolished in 1833, and made explicit in the name 'slavey', suggesting a perceived affiliation between servants and supposedly inferior colonised peoples. 'These poor creatures', wrote J. Fenimore Cooper in 1837, 'have an air of dogged sullen misery that I have never seen equalled in any other class of human being'. He described one girl as entering his room at 'a sort of drilled trot, as if she had been taught a particular movement to denote assiduity and diligence, and she never presumed to raise her eyes to mine, but stood the whole time looking meekly down'.⁵⁴ The workload borne by such girls was enormous, and their tasks wide-ranging. Girls working as general servants in farming households would often have to help with the dairy and livestock, as well as be responsible for the all dirty and unpleasant household chores.

⁵² Bridget Hill, *Servants*, pp16-17.

⁵³ Frank E. Huggett *Life Below Stairs* (John Murray 1977) p108.

⁵⁴ J. Fenimore Cooper, *England*, Vol III (Bentley, 1837) p123-4.

The servant's rights and legal status

In a section on household law, the author of *Cassell's Household Guide* went so far as to state that 'of private relations subsisting between human beings, the first in importance is that of master and servant; the second, that of marriage, which, in the words of a great lawyer, includes the reciprocal rights and duties of husband and wife'.⁵⁵ Although 'the duties, privileges, and perquisites of servants' were 'details specially agreed upon between the contracting parties', there were certain features common to most residential service positions in the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ The position was located in a private home.⁵⁷ If married, the master was responsible for establishing a contract with a servant, as his wife had no independent status in law, although in practice the mistress would usually choose and engage the household staff. The master was responsible for all the servant's basic needs: food, housing and sometimes a small cash wage. If the master failed to 'find his servant in victuals' the servant could legally leave the position without notice. If the servant was 'of tender years' and unable to provide for and take care of him/herself:

...it is an indictable offence, in the nature of a misdemeanour, for the master, or mistress, to refuse, or neglect, to provide such servant with sufficient food or other necessities, so as thereby to injure its health: and, it will be murder, or at least manslaughter, if death ensue; as likewise, if caused by pre-meditated negligence, or harsh usage.⁵⁸

In 1851, after two highly publicised cases in which their employers abused young servants, legislative action was taken to improve the provisions of the law "for the better protection of young persons under the care and control of others as apprentices and servants." The Apprentices and Servants Act established that the master or mistress of any servant or apprentice under the age of eighteen was legally required to supply 'necessary Food, Clothing, or Lodging,' and that failure to do so could result in up to three years imprisonment. Furthermore, where any 'young person under the Age

⁵⁵ *Cassell's Household Guide, New and Revised Edition*, vol I (London, c.1880s [no date]) p130.

⁵⁶ *Cassell's Book of the Household. A Work of Reference on Domestic Economy*. Vol1 (London, 1893) p31

⁵⁷ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p22. It has been noted that 'servants were not exclusively resident in the homes of paying employers', but 'may have been working as domestics in one or several other households during the day', (Edward Higgs 'Domestic servants and households in Victorian England', p205). Servants might also be working in clubs or commercial properties. However, this thesis is concerned specifically with residential service in private homes.

⁵⁸ Edward Spike, *The Law of Master and Servant* (London, 1839) p45.

of Sixteen' was hired out as a servant from a workhouse, 'so long as such young person shall be under the Age of Sixteen' he or she was to be visited at least twice a year by the local relieving officer or other official appointed by the Poor Law Guardians.⁵⁹

Servants did, therefore, have a legal right to freedom from neglect, though they only received specific legal protection from physical punishment by their employers in the provisions of the Offences against the Person Act of 1861.⁶⁰ Custom dictated that employer and servant had to give a month's notice before ending the contract, unless the servant did something 'flagrantly wrong – such as getting intoxicated, committing a theft, willfully refusing to obey lawful orders, or staying out all night without being able to give a satisfactory reason for so doing' in which case instant dismissal was permitted.⁶¹ If an employer did not want a servant to work the month he or she had to pay the servant a month's wages in lieu of notice.⁶² The employer had the right to order the servant to wear a cap, provided it was not 'ridiculous and unusual', but was not allowed to search or detain a servant's box without permission.⁶³

However, such rights could be ambiguous. The English legal system was notoriously ridden with prejudicial attitudes towards the different and the powerless. Domestic servants, as female workers of low class status, were in a double bind. As Jill Barber has shown in her study of sexual harassment cases brought by servants in Wales in the nineteenth century, servants rarely took their employers to court and when they did, it was unlikely their actions would be successful.⁶⁴ More often than not servants stood in the dock rather than the witness box, having been prosecuted by employers for leaving their 'places' without due notice. There is a grim irony in the fact that it was not infrequent for a servant to state as her reason for her breach of the hiring agreement that she had suffered poor treatment at the hands of her employer. If

⁵⁹ Bill for the better Protection of Young Persons under the Care and Control of Others as Apprentices or Servants, *PP*, 1851 (32) I.97.

⁶⁰ Complaints had to be made to two JPs. See J.D.Caswell, *The Law of Domestic Service* (London, 1913).

⁶¹ Cassell's *Book of the Household. A Work of Reference on Domestic Economy*. Vol1 (London, 1893) p31

⁶² A Barrister-at Law, *The Home Lawyer. A Practical Handbook for the Household* (Cassell and Company Ltd, London, 1903) p25

⁶³ A Barrister-at Law, *The Home Lawyer. A Practical Handbook for the Household* (Cassell and Company Ltd, London, 1903) p25-26

⁶⁴ Jill Barber, 'Stolen Goods', pp123-136.

the court disbelieved such claims the servant could be fined or even sentenced to 3 months hard labour.⁶⁵

In return for food and lodging the servant was expected to be entirely available to the master and his family and guests, as this extract from a guide to the law of master and servant demonstrates:⁶⁶ ‘A servant...has no right to call any portion of his time his own, but is bound to execute his master’s commands at all reasonable times’.⁶⁷ The idea that servants were dependants rather than employees provided justification for their lack of a legal or customary right to freedom from the absolute power of their master. It is not insignificant that in the 1851 Act young servants are not described as being employed by their masters, but are under their ‘care and control’. The law, confirmed in the case of *Turner v. Mason* in 1845, established that it was ‘a master’s province to regulate the conduct of his domestic servant’ and that no duty to anyone else came before that owed to the master. In this case Ann Turner, a maid whose mother was thought to be dying, was refused permission to visit her. Ann went anyway and was immediately dismissed by her employer. Her employer’s action was upheld in the subsequent court case, as it was considered doubtful ‘whether any service to be rendered to any other person than the master would suffice as an excuse for defying a master’s lawful command’.⁶⁸

Though servants did often receive a cash wage ‘[t]he existence of a cash payment *in itself* does not mean escape from paternalistic control; it only creates possibilities for an alternative way of life’ and wide variations in wages between households emphasised the informal nature of the cash payment.⁶⁹ As Leonore Davidoff has argued, it was not uncommon for female relatives to work as unpaid domestic servants and the intersection of domestic service and kinship duties meant that legally a servant had to clearly establish with an employer that service would be waged, otherwise the employer could assume that it was being given voluntarily:⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Bridget Hill, *Servants*, p102.

⁶⁶ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p22.

⁶⁷ Edward Spike, *The Law of Master and Servant*, p45.

⁶⁸ Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p130.

⁶⁹ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p20; pp22-23. We must not underestimate the significance of the possibilities engendered by earning a cash wage. See also C.E. Collett, *Report on the Money Wages of Indoor Domestic Servants*, PP, 1899, XCII for details of actual wage rates.

⁷⁰ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p23.

In England the rule is that the mere fact of service does not itself ground a claim for remuneration, unless there be either an express bargain as to wages, or circumstances showing an understanding on both sides that there should be payment.⁷¹

Significantly, residential servants were exempt from the Truck Act of 1831, which established that employers had to pay workers in the current coin of the realm and could not impose conditions on where the wages were spent. These Acts were an important step on the way to developing a cash nexus from which residential servants were excluded. The change in labour law of the 1870s, which transformed 'Master and Servant' to 'Employer and Workman', also did not apply to them. Servants' exclusion from this legislative shift enshrined their status as dependants in law, something reinforced by their being denied the vote in the franchise extensions of 1867 and 1884.

In theory the relationship between servant and employer operated as a familial one, though unfortunately for the majority of young girls and women, this was not the case. Ideally servants were invisible to the family whose lives they maintained, keeping to the back rooms and back stairs, sleeping in attics after working days as long as 17 hours. As Edward Salmon wrote in 1888, '[b]eyond the paying of wages or the performance of duties the barrier between the drawing room and the servants' hall is never passed. Life above stairs is as entirely severed from life below stairs as is the life of one house from another'.⁷² Such a clear physical distinction between family and servants as described by Salmon would only have been possible for middle- and upper-class families who could afford large houses and several servants. According to Charles Booth, in respectable working-class families the servant and mistress would 'go about the work together and eat the same meals, if not always at the same table' and it was 'when the kitchen ceases to be also the family dining room, that peculiar relations come into existence... whoever tries to ignore [the social barriers] finds before long how real and how inevitable they are... Domestic service provides no general bond – perhaps indeed, rather accentuates class difference'.⁷³ Booth notes that in working-class households, the servant might not eat at the same table as the family, suggesting that even when the servant and employer were of similar class backgrounds

⁷¹ Patrick Fraser, *Treatise on Master and Servant* (London, 1875) quoted in Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between* fn27, p36.

⁷² Edward Salmon, 'Domestic Service and Democracy', *Fortnightly Review* (March 1888) p411.

⁷³ Charles Booth and Jesse Argyle, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Vol VIII, part II, pp225-226.

markers of hierarchical difference were still relevant within the operation of the household.

In an expression of authority that showed a total disregard for a servant's individuality employers would sometimes change their servants' names if they were the same as a member of the family, or if they couldn't be bothered to remember their real names. On hiring a new nursemaid called Emma, the sister of a nurse previously employed by her, Gertrude Lloyd resolved to call her new employee 'Mary for she is so ludicrously like her sister'.⁷⁴ Employers also had much control over their servants' futures. In order to get a place a servant had to provide her potential employer with a character reference from a previous employer. The issue of 'characters' was a problematic one. Although it was technically illegal for both employers and servants to supply false characters there were consistent complaints throughout the period in letters, articles and manuals as to the pernicious incidence of the practice. However, the advantage was on the employers' side; employers were not legally obliged to provide references and could withhold a character to spite a servant whom they felt had wronged them in some way. A servant's livelihood depended on their 'character'. As one butler wrote to *The Times* in 1879: 'At the whim of the master, the servant starves or he lives'.⁷⁵ Within the wider context of the power masters or mistresses held over their servants the use of the word 'character' is significant – these references were rarely referred to as references. 'Character' is associated with the distinctiveness of personality and in this sense employers had control, not only over the likelihood of a servant's chances of future employment, but also over their personal reputation. The employer's control of the 'character' of a servant may thus be seen to symbolise their potential for exercising power over all aspects of the servant's existence from their livelihood right down to the definition of their personality.

The employers' complete authority over the servants' daily existence, combined with rituals of deference, which will be discussed later in this chapter, contradicted the notion that the relationship between servant and master or mistress was anything other than the relation of subordinate to superior. For employers it was crucial to maintain a sharp distinction between the family and its servants, as the following survey of the representation of service in household advice manuals demonstrates.

⁷⁴ Gertrude Lloyd, eighteenth August 1891, '*Biography of Gerald Braithwaite Lloyd*', manuscript privately owned by Mrs Judy Lloyd.

⁷⁵ Frederick Seward, letter, *The Times*, 21 August 1879 quoted in Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Domestic Servant*, p54.

The representation of the servant/employer relationship in household manuals

Although not a nineteenth century invention, it was during this period that the domestic advice manual was established as a genre. It was both a product and constitutive of the 'cultural imaginary' of domesticity and of its gendered/gendering and classed/classing meanings. As Dena Attar has written:

it is hard to overestimate the role of the household book in promoting the ideal pattern of middle-class domestic life. Women bought books in their millions seeking advice on household routines, managing servants, provisioning, decorating and furnishing their homes, marketing, planning menus and cooking, bringing up children, home nursing, entertaining and correct social behaviour.⁷⁶

There were literally hundreds of titles published in the nineteenth century and the content was varied. Domestic manuals could take the form of receipt books, dictionaries, comprehensive general manuals, cautionary narratives illustrating moral precepts alongside practical advice, or the miscellanies that emerged from the flourishing mid-century popular press, amongst other types. They could be very specific, aimed at a defined market, such as servants, or dealing with a specific area of nineteenth century domestic existence such as laundry, or etiquette. Alternatively, they could be general, produced for a wider market and imparting a broad range of moral advice and practical information. Naturally, the vast majority of these books were aimed at women and upheld the idea that women had certain domestic duties, which were theirs by nature, divinely ordained. However, in the second half of the nineteenth century, as alternative occupations to housewifery and service gradually became respectably available, 'the rhetoric authors used gradually changed, becoming more persuasive and less dictatorial, offering rational arguments for women to aim at nothing more than being good housekeepers or else painting enticing pictures of the happy homes it was women's lot to create'.⁷⁷ Women wrote many of these books, increasingly throughout the nineteenth century. They wrote on the basis of their authority as mistresses of households, about the authority of mistresses of households,

⁷⁶ Dena Attar, *'A Bibliography of Household Books Published in Britain 1800-1914'* (London, 1987) p13.

⁷⁷ Dena Attar, *'A Bibliography of Household Books Published in Britain 1800-1914'* p34.

and in so doing, contributed to a discourse that both situated women within the home as the custodians of all things domestic, and defined degrees of status and difference between them.

My research suggests that there were three kinds of advice manual written in relation to domestic service. These constituted books written by members of the servant employing class for servants, books written by the servant employing class for other servant employers, and a very few books written by servants, which were recommended for mistresses but were primarily aimed at other servants.

From *Truslers' Domestic Management* (1819) through to Isabella Cowan's *The High Estate of Service* (1898) a ubiquitous theme of the books written for and about servants by servant employers throughout the century was the idea that servants should know their place as subordinates.⁷⁸ Biblical authority was invariably invoked to justify this. In the books directed at servants the Bible was quoted to justify their subservience, while in the books written for mistresses, it was quoted to justify and regulate what was frequently called their 'rule'. As 'A Lady' wrote in 1852:

We know that men and women are intended for various stations in life...the rules they [the master and mistress] lay down must, therefore be obeyed with a willing spirit, and not considered as severe and harsh commands. St Paul says, "For rulers [and the master and mistress of a household may be so regarded (author's insert)] are not a terror to good works, but to the evil; do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same."⁷⁹

According to Mrs Taylor, writing in the early nineteenth century servants should be 'reminded of the relation in which they stand to their supreme Master and Lord' by their employer's good example.⁸⁰ Towards the end of the century Adelaide Sophia Kilvert claimed that the 'Christian religion has placed the relation of master and servant on the right basis' and masters and mistresses owed to 'our Heavenly Master an account of those over whom we become rulers that in this station we should govern with justice and equity, in mercy and forbearance'.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Dena Attar, 'A Bibliography of Household Books Published in Britain 1800-1914' p38.

⁷⁹ 'A Lady' *Instructions in Household Matter or The Young Girl's Guide to Domestic Service*, 5th edn (London, 1852) pp15-17.

⁸⁰ Mrs Taylor, *Practical Hints to Young Females on the Duties of a Wife, a Mother and a Mistress of a Family* (London, 1815) p49.

⁸¹ Adelaide Sophia Kilvert *Home Discipline or Thoughts on the Origin and Exercise of Domestic Authority* (London 1874) p32, p39.

Some of the texts aimed at mistresses stressed the responsibility of Christian employers to superintend their servants' moral and physical welfare. For example, in 1874 'A Mistress and a Mother' suggested that:

...there is a sense in which we are all servants, for "One is our Master, even Christ"... We must get into our characters the same tenderness over the erring as He had, the same pity for the suffering, the same care for the faltering, if like Him we would do the work that is given us to do.⁸²

This responsibility is not only presented as a responsibility towards the servant, but as a responsibility towards society in general and other mistresses in particular and was frequently articulated with reference to women's nurturing proclivities within the domestic sphere. A popular theme of evangelical discourse, the notion of mothers and mistresses' social responsibility became increasingly prevalent within household manuals as the genre flourished in the nineteenth century. As Lady Baker advised her reader, '...you and I ought to be a mother, not only to our own little ones, but also to the whole household':

It seems to me that for every good and faithful servant that we come across in our lives (and I do not fear to say there are many) we are duty to our neighbours bound to put up with, and train some rough untaught one in our turn. Is it fair that we should, each one of us, expect to get the finished article and leave to our neighbours the task of making it?⁸³

Mistresses were exhorted to recognise that 'the habits of the drawing room form the habits of the kitchen', and to 'raise the standards of a servant's morality to a point more nearly approximating their own' because 'immense good would result from it to society in general'.⁸⁴ While this concern suggests recognition of the importance of servants to the maintenance of the 'domestic imaginary' that structured middle-class gender and class relations, it is predicated on assumptions about servants' morality and ability – or lack of. The author implied that servants were a source of immorality in wider society, and that it was the mistress's task to combat this tendency. In this way mistresses could not only establish a sense of moral superiority that infused their class position as 'betters' with value, but also drew on a discourse in which the domestic

⁸² 'A Mistress and A Mother', *At Home* (London 1874) p8.

⁸³ Lady Baker, *Our Responsibilities and Difficulties as Mistresses of Young Servants*, p4, p5.

⁸⁴ Anon, *Home Difficulties*, p16; p8; p26.

was constructed as the heart of life and of public importance as the place where characters were made or broken. Women, as mistresses and mothers thus participated in the development of an image of their feminine role as of public significance and social importance. As Catherine Buckton wrote 'domestic service is a trade of *national* and *vital* importance because it affects the health, comfort, and welfare of every household'.⁸⁵ As the statement by Lady Baker quoted earlier suggests, girls in service were the raw material of this trade; it was up to the mistresses to manufacture the finished product: good, obedient maids.

As the century progressed servants' subservience was still referred to as divinely ordained, particularly in tracts published by religious organisations such as The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. Such tracts usually consisted of a simple story with a moral conclusion in which the 'bad' servant ended up living in depravity and the 'good', obedient and religious servant achieved the reward of a good place. The huge number of such tracts published specifically for servants also suggests that they were assumed to be especially at risk from the pitfall of immorality. Although the idea that servants were at risk from the depredations of sin was a theme in books published for servants throughout the nineteenth century, it became a theme of books published for mistresses in the century's second half. As servants' dependence had become enshrined in law, their morality had become their mistresses' responsibility.

The association of servants with prostitution was particularly common from mid-century and was a real as well as rhetorical linkage, though discussions of the problem tended to focus on moral rather than material causes. Servants were thought to be particularly prey to policemen and soldiers who supposedly flattered the vanity that was assumed by many commentators to be a particular characteristic of servant girls and a major cause of their potential downfall. Although some observers were aware that if servants did slip into casual prostitution, which some did, it was as a result of poverty and/or unemployment, there was a willingness within Victorian society to view servants as having a natural predilection for vice. Henry Mayhew claimed that 'Maid-servants live well, have no care or anxiety, no character worth speaking about to lose, for the origin of most of them is obscure, are fond of dress, and under these circumstances it cannot be wondered that they are as a body immoral and unchaste'.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Catherine Buckton, *Comfort and Cleanliness. The Servant and Mistress Question* (London, 1898) p46.

⁸⁶ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, IV (London, 1861).

In 1858 G. Oram wrote that ‘it has ...been said, in the recent discussions which have taken place respecting the so-called social evil, “that domestic servants are to be found in large numbers among its victims.” This, I fear, is too true’.⁸⁷ Lady Baker related to her readers ‘one of the very saddest facts that ever came to my knowledge’, and placed responsibility on mistresses’ shoulders:

...the ranks of the great army of outcast women of England are largely recruited – it makes me shudder to think of it – from among our domestic servants. Oh, my friends, is it not a crying shame? Should it not be a bitter sorrow to us, mothers of England, mistresses of households, that this thing should be? Somehow, with all our boasted rules and regulations we must be making some awful mistake.⁸⁸

Although presented as a concern for the welfare of servants, such discussions of mistresses’ responsibilities contain ambivalent undercurrents that seem to revolve around issues of authority and power. The styling of the Mistress as guide and mentor to servants elides servants’ status as employees and the emphasis on guidance often transmutes into one on management and control. In one book mistresses are advised that ‘Those under us must look up to us with reverence and fear mingling with their respect and love’.⁸⁹ There is also a sense, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, that servants present some kind of threat. In some books, such as Amara Veritas’s *The Servant Problem* (1899), this is openly acknowledged. Servants are ‘internal foes’ and the home is a battlefield.⁹⁰ Similarly, ‘Internuncio’ wrote that ‘The mistress and her dependants have no friendly relations...a sort of guerilla warfare is kept up between them...Distrust and hostility are marked features of this domestic conflict’.⁹¹ In other books, the perception of servants as posing a threat is more tacit, inferred by continual reference to servants’ dishonesty, or even their sexual vulnerability. As Lady Baker stated:

How truly thankful we all are, from time to time, to light upon some steady, competent, middle aged servant, free from all the vanity of flirting...who, equally helpful and hideous, will neither fall in love herself nor cause anyone else to do so. But how about the pretty little maid who

⁸⁷ G. Oram, *Masters and Servants: Their Relative Duties* (London, 1858) p44.

⁸⁸ Lady Baker, *Our Responsibilities and Difficulties as Mistresses of Young Servants* (London, 1887) p10.

⁸⁹ Anon, *Home Difficulties* p23.

⁹⁰ Amara Veritas, *The Servant Problem* (London 1899) p68.

⁹¹ ‘Internuncio’ *Mistresses and Servants*, (London 1865) p7.

answers the doorbell in spotless white cap and apron? Are we not in constant agonies over her, lest that same pretty face should prove her ruin?⁹²

In the following statement by 'Internuncio', the implication is that servants use their appeal to come between their master and mistress:

...Jane and Sarah, instinctively conscious that their master is, from various causes, inclined to be more lenient towards them than their mistress, put on their best manners when coming into contact with him, and show a certain desire and assiduity to please him, so much so indeed as to present an indirect protest against all he has heard alleged in their disfavour.⁹³

The perception of a need to manage servants and the tone of mistrust that pervades so many of the advice manuals is predicated on a set of assumptions about servants that relate to their gender and class status. As women their performance of domestic duties was the destiny of their sex, but paying for such work created knotty ideological and moral tensions. How does one place monetary value on something that is ideally beyond value? The act of selling what shouldn't be sold – ability to perform feminine duties in the domestic sphere - arguably established a rhetorical linkage between servants and prostitutes. Also the presence of a working-class girl, associated by her class status with a potential for depravity, in the private home, may have posed a sexual threat, added to by the fact that it is she, rather than the mistress of the household, who has intimate knowledge of all its members, including the men. This threat was not necessarily a threat to the mistress's relationship with her master, but could be a threat to the respectability of the household, in relation to which familial and feminine status identity was defined. One writer expressed such apprehensions when advising mistresses not to leave their servants alone in the house for any length of time:

What can be more injurious, more fraught with temptation and danger – servants perhaps of both sexes left for weeks, even months, with...no check upon them...living together, day and night, without the intellectual pursuits or the conventional habits of society, which afford so much protection to the educated classes? What can happen but what does happen, - that year by year hundreds are tempted into sin of all kinds.⁹⁴

⁹² Lady Baker, *Our Responsibilities and Difficulties as Mistresses of Young Servants*, p8.

⁹³ 'Internuncio' *Mistresses and Servants*, p6.

⁹⁴ Anon, *Home Difficulties*, p9.

This statement was based upon an assumption that servants, unlike their employers, were unable to regulate their passions. The same author later talked about good servants ‘becoming contaminated’ by bad ones, employing the language of degeneracy and exhorted mistresses to ‘consider the souls of their kitchen maid and underhousemaid at least as much as those of the visionary hordes around Timbuctoo’.⁹⁵ In this way the author established a semantic and racialising link between the idea of such ‘hordes’ and servants, both of whom were in need of civilizing. Such an ambivalent attitude towards servants was a product of their peculiar position in the middle-class households in which they were defined as dependants, but which were dependent upon their labour. Further to this that labour was paid for, although the home was supposed ideally to be free from the taint of market activity. Finally, servants came to that home as avatars of a lower class that was in the nineteenth century, a real source of middle-class fear, mistrust and anxiety:

But now, when “life below stairs” is totally distinct from life above, and the strong class feeling which I have described has had time to develop, the existence of dwellers within the household who are not yet of the family is felt – on one side at any rate, and that the side which is most concerned – to be intolerable.⁹⁶

The encouragement and endorsement of mistresses’ authority within manuals carried an implicit acknowledgement of servants’ power to defy that authority and disrupt class and gender relations. The emphasis on deference rituals signified anxiety about a relationship, the naturalness of which was increasingly questionable in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Despite continued references to divine authority, from the late 1850s as authors of advice manuals placed stress on maintaining the symbols that signified status difference, the tone of texts on servants and service became more defensive. Servants’ dress was a major preoccupation and servants were exhorted to dress in ways that suited their station for (it was argued) they could only look ridiculous if they attempted to dress like their superiors. As one mistress put it ‘A gaudily dressed servant looks, at best, like a coarse and vulgar lady; for with all the fine ribbons and gay colours that

⁹⁵ Anon, *Home Difficulties*, p6; p19.

⁹⁶ A. Amy Bulley, ‘Domestic Service. A social study’, p183.

London can produce, a girl cannot whiten or soften the skin of her hands, or make her movements as graceful as those of a finished lady'. Another writer, more bluntly, wrote: 'You cannot be a lady, you know; therefore there is no reason why you should wear clothes which are not suitable and there is every reason why you should avoid such as are not'.⁹⁷ Such statements contributed to the discursive construction of a hierarchy of status within the notion of 'femininity', bolstering the idea that all humans were not born equal. They also provide us with an insight into a certain anxiety on the part of 'ladies' to ensure the symbols of gentility were not debased by servants' use of them.

Another emphasis in advice manuals directed at servants was the necessity for them to be both silent and invisible. In some books this desire was framed within the definition of specific rituals of deference, such as not speaking unless spoken to, or keeping one's distance from one's superiors. One book, the *Servants' Behaviour Book*, is particularly concerned with such rituals, with only a nod to the oft-repeated values of honesty, sobriety, industry etc. in its closing paragraph. The author, Mrs Motherly, emphasizes a difference between servants and 'ladies', claiming that servants should not speak unless spoken to because:

Ladies have been educated in a very different manner to you. They have read many books, have travelled and seen many sights, talked with educated people, and know a great number of things about which you know nothing. It is not likely that you can have anything to say that will amuse or interest a lady. When she talks to you, it is in kindness, and all the pleasure of the talk is on your side.⁹⁸

Contrary to the idealised view of service, where servants, as dependants, are a part of the families they serve, Mrs Motherly exhorted girls to 'remember that, as long as you are in service, you are always in the house of another, and have strangers around you, and should not think, therefore, that because your mistress chooses to let her voice or step be heard, you are at liberty to do the same'.⁹⁹ Mistrust of servants was most clear in writing concerned with their honesty and truthfulness. It was almost universally acknowledged that servants were dishonest and not to be trusted, and, as the century

⁹⁷ Mrs Motherly, *The Servants Behaviour Book* (London, 1859) pp 87-88; Christian Knowledge Society, *A Mistress's Counsel*, (London, 1871).

⁹⁸ Mrs Motherly, *The Servants Behaviour Book*, pp20 –21.

⁹⁹ Mrs Motherly, *The Servants Behaviour Book*, p40.

progressed, manual writers appear to have felt that they were getting worse. In 1859 ‘A Practical Mistress of a Household’ wrote that ‘about sixty per cent of the servants, in and out of place, would properly belong in the criminal class, if their antecedents as well as their present doings were known: this is no exaggeration. I believe I am understating the figures’.¹⁰⁰

The association of servants with the ‘lower orders’, and their presence in the houses of middle-class employers at this time may have sharpened the sense that there was an enemy within. ‘Internuncio’s’ ambivalence is typical: ‘It is an open question whether this greater independence which they are enabled to assume, and all the additional advantages of education which have fallen to their portion during the onward march, have really tended to elevate their moral character’.¹⁰¹ Increasingly the concern in writings about servants was with the ‘problem’ of their desire for independence.

In this context a theme of many manuals is servants so-called ‘love of change,’ which became very prominent in the 1860s, around the time of the Reform Act. It is frequently stated that servants will not stay in their ‘places’ but are constantly on the move in search of better things. Such mobility was probably a result of the high demand and low supply of skilled servants in the later nineteenth century. However, the concern carries other connotations. Books aimed at servants encourage them to stay with one employer for as long as possible:

“A rolling stone gathers no moss,” is an old and true saying; and by roaming from place to place your money is wasted, your time is wasted, your character is injured – for no one cares to engage a servant thus given to change; and, what is far worse than all these reasons – though they are bad enough – it fosters in you that restless spirit which, as I have before told you, is most pernicious.¹⁰²

The same author claimed that ‘*Restlessness*...is the characteristic of the present age’ and devoted her whole book to the ‘foolish reasons’ why servants left their places. These include too much work (to which she retorts ‘work never killed anyone’); temper (‘there are but few cases where temper in any member of the household will

¹⁰⁰ ‘A Practical Mistress of a Household, *Servants as they are and as they ought to be* (London, 1859) p9.

¹⁰¹ Internuncio’ *Mistresses and Servants*, p11.

¹⁰² ‘A Friend’, *A Word to Maidservants*, p8.

justify a servant in leaving a situation’); particularity of mistresses (‘the mistress against whom so heavy a charge was laid were really good ones...Servants... [cannot] imagine all the thought and care involved in the superintendence of daily life’); higher wages (‘the wages given in the present day are acknowledged to be very high...Is the result what one ought to expect? Is the work better done, and more of it? Alas! No. It is far otherwise’.); lack of freedom (‘It is a plain fact, perhaps not a palatable one, that servitude in any capacity entails the loss of liberty...Our Bible... supplies a rule of conduct; in it we are told “women are to be the keepers at home”’).¹⁰³

Although this common theme –servants’ ‘love of change’ – refers explicitly to geographical mobility, the advice against it makes constant reference to social mobility. In many books servants were advised not to look for higher wages, not because of mistresses’ pecuniary anxieties (though this may have been a reason) but because higher wages could facilitate the blurring of symbolic status boundaries:

Whereas a really good servant, fifty, or even thirty years ago, had about half the sum that is now given to one in the same capacity, and upon that would always “appear respectable” as it is called – nay, would wear far better clothes, as well as lay by a good store for old age or sickness, or to set out with in life when she gets married: many now-a-days will fritter away their all, lay by nothing, and for what? “To dress like a lady.”¹⁰⁴

Thus the exhortation to servants to keep their ‘places’ can be seen to refer not only to their place of employment, but also their place in a spectrum of classed femininity. Also the distaste for servants’ pursuit of higher wages is also evidence of discomfort with them being paid at all. Immediately after she discussed the ‘evil’ of seeking better pay, ‘A Friend’ invoked Biblical authority to confirm that “women are to be the keepers at home,” suggesting that she was uncomfortable with the idea of the relationship between servants and mistresses being a business one.¹⁰⁵

The elaborate deference rituals endorsed by Mrs Motherly, combined with the desire neither to see nor hear her servants, served to elide any individuality a girl might have with a work persona that was predicated on the assumption of servants’ collective lack of value in anything other than a service role. Underlying the recommendation of such rituals, also, is a sense that servants must be controlled, which resonates with

¹⁰³ ‘A Friend’, *A Word to Maidservants*, *passim*.

¹⁰⁴ ‘A Friend’, *A Word to Maidservants*, pp15-16.

¹⁰⁵ ‘A Friend’, *A Word to Maidservants*, p25.

other defensively toned writings of the later period which were concerned with highlighting servants' dishonesty and depravity as a social problem of wide significance. There were a number of specific values that were repeatedly endorsed in manuals relating to servants written by members of the employing class throughout the nineteenth century. These were honesty, truthfulness, sobriety, neatness and cleanliness. As values underpinning appropriate morality for all classes of people during the nineteenth century these may not seem to be particularly unusual, but there appears to have been a perceived necessity to drum these precepts into the minds of servants (particularly honesty), which was related to the dominance of certain notions of meaningful gender and class difference.

As we have seen, in texts written for mistresses about, rather than for, servants, the mistrust of the employing class towards servants is clear. To some extent this seems to have been a product of servants' association with the 'lower orders' from whom middle-class respectable people wished to distance themselves. According to Mrs Taylor, writing early in the nineteenth century, complaints about servants were 'strong indicators of the depravity of the lower orders, notwithstanding the benevolent exertions of the last thirty years to banish ignorance, and vice as its offspring'.¹⁰⁶ Servants were also often associated with children, seen as ignorant and irrational. As one writer claimed 'servants – as well as children – require to be managed with *kindness* and *firmness*. The greatest kindness we can exercise towards them is to endeavour, by a mild rein, to keep them in the path of duty'.¹⁰⁷ By reducing servants to a childlike status, mistresses tried to neutralize their fear of the threat, which was possibly sexual, that they posed to domestic order.

By the mid-nineteenth century, as racial theory such as that developed by Knox in *The Races of Men* gained credence, some writers made use of racialising language. In 1847 Adelaide Sophia Kilvert asked: 'Born and bred in ...squalid nothingness, how can we hope to find men or women derived from such a race fitted for the proper duties of a well-conducted family?...Nurtured in poverty, the consequence of their vices, they are the slaves of their own passions, and surrounded by ignorance'.¹⁰⁸ As the century progressed, and particularly from the mid-century, references to servants both as a class, and as a race began to emerge in household manuals. Writing in 1865,

¹⁰⁶ Mrs Taylor, Mrs, *Practical Hints*, p36.

¹⁰⁷ A Practical Mistress of a Household, *Servants as they are and as they ought to be*, p16.

¹⁰⁸ Adelaide Sophia Kilvert, *Home Discipline*, p28.

‘Internuncio’ asked ‘...is it really the truth that during the past half-century the nature of servants has undergone a rapid change, from good to bad, and that as a class, they are indeed come to be worthless?’ He/She answers the question: ‘undoubtedly’, and makes reference to the ‘idleness of the race who serve’, whose ‘instincts are less under control and less governable’ than those of their mistresses.¹⁰⁹ Though such explicit references in literature relating to English households are rare, specific characteristics often associated with the so-called ‘savage’ indigenous people of colonised lands - such as inherent dishonesty or the inability to regulate passion - are pejoratively associated with the generality of servants, as well as the class from which they come, by a considerable number of writers. Through such slippages racializing constructs underwrote ideas about class inferiority, and in the late nineteenth century, with the increased popularity of the idea of hereditary degeneracy, class degeneration. Arguably, the emphasis on the necessity to maintain symbols of difference, chiefly articulated in discussions of servants’ dress or their ‘love of change’, also relates to this. It does not just refer to the idea that servants should be kept in their place, but that it is somehow unnatural for them to imagine themselves as anything other than servants.

The late nineteenth century ‘servant problem’

The gradual realisation of middle-class dependence on servants and by implication of servants’ power, which was a feature of late nineteenth century writings on service and servant/employer relations as numbers of servants dwindled, may also have contributed to the sense of discomfort and distaste that characterises so much of the writing about servants in the second half of the nineteenth century. As ‘A Mistress and A Mother’ put it: ‘the comfort and well-being of our whole domestic life, which in England lies so much within doors, depend very much upon our servants’.¹¹⁰

Much of this anxiety was a result of the perceived ‘shortage’ of servants, which was understood by many commentators to be the result of new ideas about independence, freedom, individuality and workers’ rights. In an article in the *Westminster Review* A. Amy Bulley argued that the evidence of labour unrest, ‘trades’ union manifestoes, strikes, resulting in wholesale stoppage of business or pleasure among the well-to-do

¹⁰⁹ ‘Internuncio’ *Mistresses and Servants*, pp 8 – 9; p 10; p24.

¹¹⁰ ‘A Mistress and A Mother’ *At Home* (London 1874) p3.

classes,' meant that 'the veriest recluse in the land' could not ignore 'the great upheaval' which was 'stirring the labouring class to its very depths'. However, Bulley's main concern was with 'silent forces,' which alongside the 'strongly pronounced demonstrations' were 'slowly but steadily undermining no small portion of the structure of our social like'. 'I refer to the rebellion in the ranks of domestic service' wrote Bulley, 'Rebellion is the only word; no other adequately expresses the facts'.¹¹¹

As Bulley's words suggest, a new kind of 'servant problem' emerged in the final decade of the nineteenth century when many trade unions were increasingly vociferous. Some servants themselves set up unions in the 1870s and 1890s, which, though not entirely successful, caused significant sensation in the press. The threat of servants attempting to combine was enough to agitate employers. W.L.M of Surbiton Hill censured the *Surrey Comet* in 1872 for publishing letters by servants in which they talked about striking, complaining that 'what possible good can the publication of such stuff do, I am at a loss to conceive; while the harm that may be done is very great in unsettling the minds of really good servants'.¹¹² In 1890 Ellen Darwin argued that 'domestic service is a problem as momentous as that of Capital and Labour...Social theorists and philanthropists...are silent on this – a most important and significant side of human life, where the individuals of the two great classes, commonly known as Capital and Labour, come into the closest and most direct personal relationships'.¹¹³ In 1893 Mrs Lewis described mistresses as being 'directly menaced with an invasion of the eight hours movement' in an article in *Nineteenth Century*.¹¹⁴

At this time a new generation of feminists was developing arguments for women's right to independence and self-reliance. Although late nineteenth century feminists do not seem to have been much concerned with domestic service, it is possible that their ideas, alongside the opening up of new occupations for women and the expanded provision of elementary education, influenced girls' decision whether or not to go into service. Commentators on the servant problem certainly noted a new desire for independence as driving girls away from service. The feminist Clementina Black

¹¹¹ A. Amy Bulley, 'Domestic Service. A social study' p177.

¹¹² Letter, *The Surrey Comet*, 20 July 1872.

¹¹³ Ellen.W. Darwin, 'Domestic Service' *The Nineteenth Century*, 28, 39 (August 1890) p 288.

¹¹⁴ Mrs Lewis, 'A Reformation of Domestic Service', *The Nineteenth Century*, 191, 33 (January 1893) p 138.

argued that the 'conditions of domestic service' were outdated and did not 'harmonise with sentiments of today'. She compared domestic service with other employments in which 'the person employed sells a certain number of hours of labour, and, when those hours are over, all relation ceases between employed and employer'. According to Black in other jobs the worker had 'a life of her own, absolutely apart from her industrial life. The servant has no such life of her own...The domestic servant, in short, still lives under a system of total personal subservience'. Black identified that gradual growth of a feeling amongst women that 'total personal subservience' was 'intolerable and degrading' and linked it to young women's increasing reluctance to become servants. According to Black:

it is this feeling which causes domestic service to be held in low social esteem by women who are often harder worked and less materially prosperous than most servants. The servant is despised not because she cooks, or scrubs, or nurses a baby, still less because she has to yield obedience to orders – every factory worker has to do that in working hours – but because she consents to put herself at some other person's beck and call.¹¹⁵

Unlike Black, who sought the reform of service and championed the cause of servants, most middle-class writers of articles generally agreed that 'this mischievous craving for independence' in working-class girls, as Lady Aberdeen put it, was not only a serious problem for servant employers, but also for the girls themselves. M.E. Benson wrote ominously that 'the foul talk that is forced into the ears of young girls who go to business, the black stories they hear, the evil words, the bad novelettes, the fierce temptations, are difficult to realise'.¹¹⁶ In Benson's view domestic service constituted an opportunity for working-class girls to be educated in the ways of respectability through association with their 'betters', rather than those of their own class:

Is it a small opportunity to have the lives of a large number of the future wives and mothers of the working classes so closely bound to ours that it becomes our right and duty to see that the physical, mental and moral conditions of their lives are favourable to their development and happiness...?¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Clementina Black, 'The Dislike to Domestic Service', *The Nineteenth Century*, 193, 33 (March 1893) pp454-455.

¹¹⁶ M.E.Benson, 'In defence of domestic service: a reply' *The Nineteenth Century*, 164, 28 (October 1890) p623.

¹¹⁷ M.E.Benson, 'In defence of domestic service: a reply', p626.

The various commentators on domestic service developed a range of solutions to the ‘problem’ in the last decade of the nineteenth century. There seems to have been general agreement that changes needed to be made by employers ‘before we are driven to it by the rapidly increasing growth of independent employment for women, or before we reach that stage through which America is passing at present, where, we are told by American ladies, servants have it *all* their own way’.¹¹⁸ However, what these changes should constitute was a contentious issue. Ellen Darwin thought that ‘every servant should have, at least, every day, two hours definite leisure, during which she is her own mistress’, that servants should be treated with greater trust by their employers, that every servant should be ‘kept as much as possible in connection with her family’ and friends, that servants should have a right to a fair character and that they should be better paid.¹¹⁹ Lady Aberdeen saw the solution to the problem as in the establishment of ‘household clubs’, daily meetings at which all members of the households could pursue artistic and educational interest, the object being ‘to bring the general progress of our times towards education, self-culture, self-government, and co-operation, to bear upon those employed in domestic service’.¹²⁰ Lady Hamilton thought that such clubs ‘to the heads of small households can afford but little help’. She argued for a rather more old-fashioned solution:

[i]f in our complex society, we are to retain the advantages of the households of earlier days, we must certainly re-adjust our relations with our servants...But the essence of service is and must remain the same – Rule: and, until the prejudice against rule is eradicated, servants cannot be very numerous and will often be unsatisfied and unsatisfactory.¹²¹

Other writers proposed rather more radical changes to the structure of service. Mrs Lewis expressed a common mistrust of domestic servants, which was linked to her class prejudice, writing that

We have to admit unknown outsiders, of a low class perhaps, into the heart of our homes, with facilities for prying into every detail of our lives, and scattering broadcast the information they have obtained when they change their places, which many of them are bound by the rules of a

¹¹⁸ Ellen. W. Darwin, ‘Domestic Service’ p295.

¹¹⁹ Ellen. W. Darwin, ‘Domestic Service’ p293-294.

¹²⁰ Isobel Aberdeen, ‘Household clubs: An experiment’ *Nineteenth Century*, 181, 31 (March 1892) p396.

¹²¹ Margaret Hamilton, ‘Household Clubs: How will they affect small household’ *Nineteenth Century*, 183, 31 (May 1892) p807; p809.

Servants' Union to do frequently. They share our creature comforts and yet they are not of us...their unknown companions may be a danger to ourselves and the safety of our homes¹²²

In her view there was a need to 'put the domestic system on a new and expedient footing, remembering always that which is old is not necessarily good because it is old'. To this end, Mrs Lewis suggested the 'abolition of the culinary department' as a first step. A 'noble army of certificated day-housemaids rises before the mental vision as performing the matutinal house duties with promptitude, regularity, and thoroughly trained skill, to disappear when their fairy wands have done their office'.¹²³ Similarly, Clementina Black argued that the reluctance of girls to become servants was 'likely to be removed only by the removal of the special conditions which differentiate service from other employments. That is to say, servants must cease to be domiciled under their employer's roof, and must, instead, come to work for a specific number of hours, as dressmakers and charwomen already do'.¹²⁴ In the view of these writers, the institution of service needed to be entirely transformed in order to be preserved.

As well as Clementina Black, the 'servant problem' began to be taken up by other writers with feminist leanings in the late nineteenth century, though potential resolutions to the 'problem' proved hard to reconcile with embedded ideas about class hierarchies. For example, 'A Mistress and a Mother' claimed optimistically that 'the common bond of womanhood is a stronger tie between a mistress and a maid, than any difference of station can nullify or destroy' and drew attention to servants' vulnerability as women: 'they share alike the defencelessness of sex'.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, despite these claims to sisterhood, she still exhibited the sense of antagonism that characterised so much late century writing on servants recommending that 'whenever it is necessary to have a 'talk' with a domestic it must be in one's own sitting-room. As the king on his throne, the cleric in his pulpit, and the pedagogue in his seat *seem* to possess greater authority than elsewhere, so the mistress in her parlour chair. The chances of an impertinent reply are much less than if the maiden were encountered anywhere in her own domain'.¹²⁶

¹²² Mrs Lewis, 'A Reformation of Domestic Service', p131.

¹²³ Mrs Lewis, 'A Reformation of Domestic Service', p137.

¹²⁴ Clementina Black 'The dislike to domestic service', p456.

¹²⁵ 'A Mistress and A Mother' *At Home*, p3.

¹²⁶ 'A Mistress and A Mother' *At Home*, p7.

Putative sisterhood was fractured by a sense of antagonism that had much to do with the negative connotations of class difference. Amara Veritas and other writers approached the problem differently. After many chapters on the exasperating deficiencies of servants in her book *The Servant Problem*, Veritas argued that the problem of the relationship between servants and mistresses was due to the fact that service was unregulated and unrespected work, which would be better placed on a formal business footing. This had not happened, she argued, because women did not have the right to vote and so their problems, such as with servants, were overlooked by men. ‘Yes, we must have our lives placed upon an equal footing with our husbands...’ she proclaims, ‘...our men at the head of affairs should long ere this have passed measures to defend their helpless mothers, sisters, and wives from internal foes’:

All good men reverence women, and it is to them we look for assistance and help. Some men will oppose - do oppose- the passing of ‘The Franchise Bill for Women’, but they are only men of a certain stamp, who look upon women as beings who have been created for their sole use, pleasure and amusement. Men such as these should be met on their own ground. Say to them: ‘You depend on us for your pleasure and amusement. Well, then, make life easier and smoother to us, and until you do so we refuse our favours to you,’ My sisters, if you said this and adhered to it, there would soon be a pretty general stampede to St Stephen’s, and your Bill would not be long delayed in passing.¹²⁷

While Amara Veritas appealed to a sisterhood of women, it was limited to women who employed servants. She wanted rights in order to gain some protection against the ‘internal foe’ that servants represented to her. Even though she claimed that putting service on a business footing would benefit servants by enabling service to be recognised as a skilled profession, so that servants could claim dignity in their labour, she was really concerned with the needs of servant employers for a steady supply of reliable servants. Other writers took a similar stance. ‘[T]he time has surely come’ claimed Mrs Lewis, writing in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1893:

for English housekeepers to consider the well-being of their homes and hearths, and to be beforehand with a practical scheme for the preservation of domestic privacy and comfort. It is not for them to remain so enslaved and disenfranchised as to accept unhesitatingly such conditions as may be prescribed to them. They have as much right as any other class of British subjects to choose for themselves the conditions under which they prefer to live, and to

¹²⁷ Amara Veritas, *The Servant Problem*, p13, p68, p179-180.

combine in organising some intelligent scheme of management...which will secure comfort, economy and health in the house...enabling them to employ each worker in the special work best suited to his capacities – an advantage which he enjoys in trade or houses of business.¹²⁸

In this extract Mrs Lewis used the status of ‘English housekeepers’ as managers of ‘workers’ to make an implicit claim for political rights for mistresses of servants. By insisting that domestic labour was work, exemplified by comparison with ‘trade or houses of business’, she suggested a transformation of the meaning of separate spheres was necessary to preserve the distinction between public and private that sustained ‘domestic privacy and comfort’.

Articles in the *Englishwoman's Review* in 1890 on the education of servants exhibited similar attitudes. These articles concerned a training college at Newnham on Severn, set up to teach ‘the rudiments of housework’ to ‘little women’.¹²⁹ These lessons would make them ‘helpful little daughters, and will be invaluable when they come to have homes of their own to work in, or to manage, or if they become domestic servants’.¹³⁰ According to one article the institution would encourage respect for domestic labour:

the domestic work of women will not attain to its true dignity amongst us until it has its recognized place amongst the skilled trades, with its regular curriculum and certificated teachers. This conviction, which has been in the air, so to say, would now seem about to become embodied in a tangible and well organised plan.¹³¹

However, although the institution was set up for the education of both working- and middle-class girls, it did nothing to break down those class distinctions. Rather, its curriculum was specifically designed to reinvest them with meaning, training young women in the relational roles of mistress or servant established ‘in the good old days’.¹³² The school had three departments ‘one for students of housewifery, one for upper- and middle-class girls, with a housewifery department attached to the ordinary branches of teaching, and one for the training of girls for service’.¹³³ As part of the

¹²⁸ Mrs Lewis, ‘A Reformation of Domestic Service’, p138.

¹²⁹ Anon, ‘The National Housewifery Association’, *The Englishwomen's Review* (Jan 15 1890) p10.

¹³⁰ Anon, ‘The National Housewifery Association’, p10.

¹³¹ Anon, ‘A Domestic College’, *The Englishwoman's Review* (July 15 1890) p293.

¹³² Anon, ‘A few thoughts about the technical college at Newnham-on-Severn’, *The Englishwoman's Review*, (July 15 1890) p297.

¹³³ Anon ‘The National Housewifery Association’, p11.

education the girls training for service would wait on the upper- and middle-class girls, so that they could all learn how to properly acquit themselves in their respective roles:

The idea of various grades of inmates has already been started there, and this is essential, for in order to learn how to wait on people there must be people to wait on. Large Industrial and Union schools do not turn out good servants, though they turn out good sweepers and scrubbers, because all are at one level...and there is no one to serve.¹³⁴

As this quotation suggests, there was more to being a servant than being able to clean. Being a servant was also about creating and expressing status difference through the performance of deference rituals. The various writers' approval of this institution in the *Englishwoman's Review* was motivated by the fact it aimed at preserving, rather than transforming, the hierarchical structure of the servant/employer relationship, even within the context of providing training, and attempting to redefine domestic work as skilled labour.

But what about the servants themselves? Unfortunately their views were rarely published. In those books by servants that were published, such as *Servants Defended* (1847), servants were quick to point out that their masters and mistresses were not faultless, that domestic service was a trade requiring a certain degree of skill and knowledge and that servants, though much maligned, were usually hard-working and respectable. In their self-writings servants demonstrated a clear awareness of their importance to the maintenance of a middle-class lifestyle and asserted their belief in the dignity of their work. For example, the authors of *The Complete Servant* stated that:

Subordination, indeed, attaches to your rank in life, but not *disgrace*. All men are servants in different degrees... those are the most worthy characters who best perform the various duties incumbent on them, *in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call them*. Perhaps, there is not a more indispensably necessary description of persons in society than those who are denominated *Servants*.¹³⁵

Similarly, Thomas Cosnett, in the popular *Footman's Directory*, which ran to several editions through the nineteenth century, stated scathingly that 'Some persons speak of servants as if they were so much beneath them as to be unworthy of notice; but this

¹³⁴ Anon 'A few thoughts about the technical college at Newnham-on-Severn', p297.

¹³⁵ Samuel and Sarah Adams, *The Complete Servant* (London 1825) p17.

adds nothing to their own respectability, and only betrays their ignorance and pride'.¹³⁶ Cosnett advocates servants knowing their place, but interprets this 'place' through Christian principle in a way that claims dignity for servants. Cosnett fills 'service' with honourable meaning, seeing the difference associated with class and status not in terms of a hierarchy of value, but in terms of the distribution of different roles to be played in a grand scheme of God's devising. He shows that servants must act out a part that belies real skill, knowledge and ability:

Were I to pourtray [sic] a good domestic servant, I should say, he must have *eyes* like a *hawk* but be as *blind* as a *bat*; ears like a *cat*, but be as *deaf* as a *post*; must have more *sensibility* than the *sensitive plant*, but yet be as *hard* as *stone*; must be as *wise* as a *counsellor*, yet as *ignorant* as an *ass*; his *movement* *swift* as that of an *eagle*, but *smooth* as that of a *swallow*; in *manners* and *politeness* a *Frenchman*, in *probity* and *virtue* an *Englishman*; in dress a *gentleman*; in *disposition* a *saint*; in *activity* a *harlequin*; in *gravity* a *judge*: he must have a *lady's hand*, a *maiden speech*, and a *light foot*; in *protection* and *defence* he must be a *lion*; in confidence and trust like the law of *Medes* and *Persians*, 'which altereth not', in domestic management a *Moses*; in *chastity* a *Joseph*; in *pious resolution* a *Joshua*; in *wisdom* a *serpent*; in *innocence* a *dove*.¹³⁷

It seems important to note that Thomas Cosnett was a manservant, writing for menservants, who generally enjoyed higher status and better wages than their female counterparts. The butler John Robinson echoed Cosnett's attitude at the end of the nineteenth century when he wrote: 'Intrinsically there is nothing in service of which a man need be ashamed. There is nothing derogatory to a man's dignity or self-respect in the discharge of its humblest duties'. Nevertheless, Robinson was concerned with his loss of manly independence, claiming that 'the thorn lies in the fact that a man, for peace sake, is reduced to a kind of degrading sycophancy; or to use a phrase common among servants, 'he cannot call his soul his own'.¹³⁸

The advice manuals relating to service in the nineteenth century overwhelmingly document the views of the servant employing class, but at the same time, reflect wider concerns about gender and class difference and the putative difference between different human groups. Nevertheless servants did publish their own writings. In writing books for themselves they were claiming agency in the construction of their

¹³⁶ Thomas Cosnett, *The Footman's Directory and Butler's Remembrancer* (London 1825) p3.

¹³⁷ Thomas Cosnett, *The Footman's Directory and Butler's Remembrancer*, pp175–176.

¹³⁸ John Robinson, 'A Butler's View of Men-service' *Nineteenth Century*, 184, 31 (June 1892) p932.

individual and work identities that was denied them in dominant discourses. As the century progressed there are subtle changes in representations of the servant/employer relationship. The necessity of servants to middle-class domestic comfort was increasingly acknowledged in manuals and articles, and the recommendation to discipline servants gave way to exhortations to kindness and better regulation of their work. At the same time however, the constructed 'difference' of servants became increasingly marked, and the way in which they were described drew on notions of congenital inferiority and depravity that characterised the way in which 'Others' of non-English origin were also represented within a range of discourses. Some of these 'Others', Indian servants, and their relationship with their British employers, are the subjects of the following chapter.

Chapter 2

The master/mistress/servant relationship in nineteenth century Anglo-Indian households

Francis G. Hutchins has suggested that ‘India’s conquerors were men ...unexcited by questions of morality. They conquered India but they did not despise it’.¹ In the 18th century significant Enlightenment thinkers, such as Burke, Robertson, Jones and Maurice, while critical of certain aspects of Hindu culture, such as its perceived sensuality, produced ‘largely appreciative works’ on India, seeing it as a different, but also ancient and highly complex civilisation that had fallen into decay due to Mughal mismanagement.² Ancient Hindu laws represented ‘the jurisprudence of an enlightened and commercial people’ according to Robertson while Warren Hastings claimed that Indian learning had achieved a ‘higher degree of perfection many ages even before the existence of the earliest writers in the European world’.³

Following the defeat of Britain’s imperial rival, Napoleonic France, in 1815, the idea that India should be ruled in an ‘Indian idiom’ was revived in official and academic circles, having fallen into disfavour under Cornwallis’s administration from 1786.⁴ Of course, as various scholars have pointed out, so-called Indian traditions of rule were shaped by their identification and classification by late eighteenth century colonial scholars and administrators, whose codification (and even construction) of ‘indigenous’ laws and customs helped facilitate a specifically colonial perception of what constituted an ‘indigenous tradition’.⁵ Furthermore, the motivation for the employment of ‘traditional’ methods of rule was the extension and consolidation of

¹ Francis G. Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence* (New Jersey, 1967) p3.

² Brian Young ‘The Lust of Empire and Religious Hate’: Christianity, history and India, 1790 – 1820’ in Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.) *History, Religion and Culture: essays in British intellectual history, 1750 – 1850* (New York, 2000) p110.

³ William Robertson, *A Historical Disquisition Concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients had of India* (1791) p275, quoted in Brian Young ‘The Lust of Empire and Religious Hate’ p94; Hastings quoted in Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p9.

⁴ D.A. Washbrook, ‘India, 1818 – 1860: The Two Faces of Colonialism’ in Andrew Porter (ed.) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. The Nineteenth Century*. (Oxford, 1999) p399; p404; the phrase ‘Indian idiom’ is from Javeed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings. James Mill’s ‘The History of British India’ and Orientalism*, (Oxford, 1992) p22.

⁵ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p4; See also J.D.M Derrett, ‘The Administration of Hindu Law by the British’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4 (1961), pp 10-52; Rosanne Rocher ‘British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government’, in C.A. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer (eds.) *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1993) pp215- 59.

Company rule in India, rather than a respect for indigenous cultures.⁶ Nevertheless, until the late 18th century conscious efforts by colonisers to instigate radical social reform in India were limited. The practices of rule employed by Company administrators incorporated aspects of 'traditional' Indian ruling practice, such as the use of grand ceremonial display, in an effort to consolidate and legitimize their dominion. As Elizabeth Collingham has shown, the Anglo-Indians' self-perception and projection as 'a new Indian nobility' drew on aspects of both British and Mughal rituals to produce a 'composite mode of communication, shaped by Indian ideas of appropriate forms of display, as well as their own notions of ceremony in medieval England and the splendour of oriental magnificence'.⁷

The colonizers' concern with displaying the prestige of putative nobility was not restricted to official life, but impacted on the domestic existence of Englishmen in India, many of whom lived in India in homes not dissimilar to those of the nobility in England. Eliza Fay described the banks of the river in Calcutta as 'absolutely studded with elegant mansions', while J.H.Stocqueler described Anglo-Indian residences in Calcutta as 'surrounded by extensive grounds, laid out in miniature representations of the beautiful parks of England'.⁸ Of course, there were plenty of English people in India who did not live in quite such luxury, residing in colour washed mud-brick bungalows or, if they lived in the cities, in boarding houses or flats. The spouses of ordinary British soldiers certainly enjoyed little luxury; for many, throughout the nineteenth century, their living arrangements constituted a 'screened-off corner in the barracks'.⁹ Nevertheless, for all the British in India, regardless of its level of luxury, the interior of the Anglo-Indian home was then, and would continue to be, an important site for the display of British prestige. Crucial to this performance were servants, preferably a large retinue of them. The relation between Indian servants and their English employers was central to the colonial and imperial project.

⁶ D.A.Washbrook 'India, 1818 – 1860: The Two Faces of Colonialism', pp385 – 420.

⁷ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p15; p17.

⁸ Mrs Eliza Fay, *Original Letters from India (1779-1815)* (London, 1925) p171; J.H.Stocqueler, *The Hand-book of India, a guide to the stranger and the traveller, and a companion to the resident* (1844) p257.

⁹ Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, pp75 – 76.

Anglo-Indian society in India

In 1881, the first comprehensive Census of British India was taken.¹⁰ Taking in 'with the exception of Kashmir, the entire continent of British India, including under this term the feudatory states in political connection with the Government of India' and the 'province of Burmah', it estimated the 'purely British population' as not more than 150,000 out of a total population of 253, 891, 821.¹¹ The population of India was 'for the main part purely rural, and the number of towns is small'.¹² In all India in 1881, the ratio of town dwellers to villagers was 1 to 10, while in England it was 2 to 1.¹³ It has been estimated that about half the Europeans in India resided in the larger towns and cities, where they could find European shops, restaurants and clubs, unlike in the remoter towns, villages, army outposts and most hill stations.¹⁴ The large cities tended to be situated towards the north rather than the south of India and were mostly found in states and provinces that were British possessions. The greatest cities of India were the presidency cities of Bombay, which had a population of 77,196, Calcutta (including Howrah), which had a population of 871,504, and Madras, which had a population of 405, 848.¹⁵ Of these city populations, approximately 10 000, 12 000 and 5000 were estimated to be European respectively.¹⁶

The British population was spread unevenly throughout British India. The largest numbers of British people were to be found in states that were British Possessions. Unsurprisingly, native states tended to have relatively small populations of British origin. The North-Western Provinces had the largest British population at 20,184, followed by the Punjab at 17,590. According to the Census, this was because these two provinces contained 'by far the largest portion of the British troops quartered in

¹⁰ Regional censuses had been taken before 1881, but at different times and by different agencies and there was no uniformity in the arrangement of the statistics obtained.

¹¹ *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881*, Vol 1, (HMSO, 1883) p1; p224; p5.

¹² The census classed only 66 'gatherings of habitations' as cities in India, 1836 as towns and 602,467 as villages. *Census of British India*, Vol 1, p271.

¹³ *Census of British India*, Vol 1, p273.

¹⁴ Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p43.

¹⁵ *Census of British India*, Vol 1, p276.

¹⁶ Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p43.

India'.¹⁷ There were 13, 772 British people living in Bombay, while 10, 583 lived in Bengal. Madras and Burmah had 5,883 and 5,346 British residents respectively, while none of the other British or Native provinces and states had more than 5,000 British residents. The ratio of 'purely British' people to native Indians was in the North-Western Provinces approximately 1 in 2,222, in the Punjab 1 in 1,219, in Bombay 1 in 1,698, in Bengal 1 in 6,570 and in Madras 1 in 5,298. In the late nineteenth century, despite the fact that British people had travelled to India in increasing numbers since it had come under Crown control in 1858, the British population in India was still a tiny, if supremely powerful, minority.

According to the Census, the majority of British-born people were single males (62, 050), of which the largest age group was 20 –24 (24,218). Married men numbered 13, 948. There were almost twice as many married women as single women (7,943 and 3,972 respectively), and the largest female age group was 30 – 39.¹⁸ Thus, in the late nineteenth century, amongst the British born residents, the population was overwhelmingly male, young, and even if not single, it would appear that around half the married men had travelled to India without their wives. This tallies with Mary Procida's research, which has demonstrated that unless a husband had achieved a certain status in his official or army career, 'there was no place for wives in the Raj'.¹⁹ For the unmarried man, as Alice Perrin wrote, 'India could be a very Paradise; to a married man it might easily become the reverse, what with anxieties about health and money and children, and the everlasting self-sacrifice that a family must needs entail'.²⁰ Many single men in India saved expense by living in the regimental mess, a boarding house or a club; a married man must keep an independent establishment with its own servants. As Procida has pointed out, even those men who had lived in their own houses as bachelors found their expenses significantly increased by the accoutrements of matrimonial bliss.²¹ The testimony of Anglo-Indians, who recorded their experiences of colonial life in letters, journals,

¹⁷ *Report on the Census of British India*, Vol 1, p223.

¹⁸ *Statistics of the British-Born Subjects recorded at the Census of India, 17th February 1881* (Calcutta, 1883) pp1-2 According to this report, the total number of British born males was 77, 188 and the total number of British born females was 12, 610. This figure contradicts numbers given elsewhere, but only by a small degree. It is useful as an approximate figure.

¹⁹ Mary.A.Procida, *Married to the Empire*, p31.

²⁰ Alice Perrin, *The Anglo-Indians* (London, 1912) p164.

²¹ Mary.A.Procida, *Married to the Empire*, p33; Swati Chattopadhyay 'Goods, Chattels and Sundry Items'. Constructing nineteenth Century Anglo-Indian Domestic Life' in *Journal of Material Culture*, 7, 2 (2002) p251.

memoirs, advice books and interviews, also confirms the lack of a place in India for children or the elderly. Anne Wilson wrote in a letter that '[n]o one is old in Calcutta; everybody is of the same age and that is about twenty five'²², while Mrs Murray Mitchell noted '[t]wo points of difference between Indian and home society [which] strike the eye at once; here there are hardly any old people, and very few boys and girls'.²³

As efforts to reform India according to anglicist principles got under way in the first half of the nineteenth century, Indian politics, society and culture were increasingly denigrated in relation to English 'civilisation'. This process naturally impacted on the social existence of Britons in India. Vastly outnumbered by native Indians, the Anglo-Indian community grew ever more insular, rejecting interaction with Indians in favour of 'the compulsory sociability of the English nation' as the missionary Edward Thompson termed it.²⁴ Anglo-Indian society came to be exclusively white. Although well-to-do Indians might be invited to dinners and events, Anglo-Indians were often reluctant to speak to them, especially after 1857. Annette Beveridge, relatively exceptional in her willingness to socialize with Indians, wrote in her journal that she heard 'of ladies who say 'Oh! no! I never spoke to a native', when asked to help to entertain & talk to some of numerous Indians present, & of another who said 'Let us sit in the verandah to get out of the natives''.²⁵

Anglo-Indian society was highly stratified. The class categories that operated in the metropole were transformed in the Indian colonial context to a certain extent; social status was defined by a man's occupation and if he was married, his wife shared his status. Members of the Indian Civil Service were the elite. The Indian Political Service also ranked highly, as did the Indian Medical Service and the upper reaches of the Public Works Department. Clergymen and non-officials tended to form inferior social categories, though money could buy respect as some of the wealthier businessmen and planters discovered.²⁶ Indian Army Officers could rank highly, though they were often looked down on by civilians, and looked down on civilians in their turn. As Edith Dixon remembered:

²² Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India* (London, 1911) p292.

²³ Mrs Murray Mitchell, *In India: Sketches of Indian Life and Travel from Letters and Journals* (London, 1876) p71.

²⁴ Edward Thompson, *An Indian Day* (London, 1927) p117.

²⁵ Friday 27 March, Journal of Annette Beveridge, MSS/EUR/C176/104 OIOC.

²⁶ Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, pp47-48.

the army looked down at each regiment, the cavalry looked down on the infantry, the infantry all the soldiers, looked down on the civil department who on the other hand considered themselves to be the lords anointed, and then there were the government departments railways, PWD, salt revenue, all these things, which again were accepted into that society and they were expected to know their place.²⁷

Knowing one's place was of prime importance in India. An etiquette developed that determined social behaviour from the order one went in to dinner, to whom one requested leave from (the *Burra* Memsahib – wife of the most senior official present rather than the hostess), and to the order one left in.²⁸ *The Warrant of Precedence in India* was an official guide to the order of precedence published by the government from mid-century and as Macmillan has written, it became 'the bible of every hostess'.²⁹ Mary Procida and Swati Chattopadhyay have argued convincingly that the use of an administrative hierarchy to structure social relations in India resulted in the blurring of the distinction between public and private because the household 'was merely an extension of the public world of administration where all the rules and ceremonies of the latter applied'.³⁰ This had an impact on the way in which women conceived of their domestic role in India. In advice manuals, literature and articles they increasingly positioned the home at the centre of the imperial civilising project, using the language of imperial governance to describe domestic organisation. As Steel and Gardiner wrote: 'an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire'.³¹

Poor whites, of course, were at the bottom of the Anglo-Indian social order. David Arnold has argued that nearly half the European population living in India by the end of the nineteenth century could be classed as poor whites.³² Often recruited from the ranks of soldiers and sailors, they worked as semi-skilled workers and low-grade intermediaries between white officers and their Indian subordinates in government departments and private enterprises. Poor whites could also be found working as

²⁷ Edith Dixon, MSS.Eur.T26,OIOC Oral Archives.

²⁸ Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, pp47-48; Mary.A.Procida, *Married to the Empire*. p43-44; Swati Chattopadhyay 'Goods, Chattels and Sundry Items' p265.

²⁹ Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p48.

³⁰ Swati Chattopadhyay 'Goods, Chattels and Sundry Items' p265; Mary.A.Procida, *Married to the Empire*, chapter 2.

³¹ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (London 1898) p9; Swati Chattopadhyay discusses this process at length in 'Goods, Chattels and Sundry Items'.

³² David Arnold, 'European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 7, 2 (1979) p104.

‘domestic servants, nurses, midwives, clerks, teachers and shop assistants for European employers’.³³ Generally despised by their social superiors, there were few opportunities for social advancement for the members of this stratum of Anglo-Indian society and they would often live cheek-by-jowl with native Indians in the larger cities.³⁴ For example, the probate of Elizabeth Tilyard, a midwife who died in 1859, indicates that her small house in Calcutta was part of a neighbourhood inhabited by Indians as well as Anglo-Indians. Nevertheless, Elizabeth, like many other poor whites, employed three servants.³⁵ Minnie Wood, whose officer husband’s profligacy resulted in the family’s poverty, thanked her mother for sending money in a letter in 1857, claiming that ‘I have to have two ayahs, dearest Mama...I enclose a list of the servants we keep, perhaps large to you, but essential out here’.³⁶ Though poor, Minnie needed her servants in order to display her status both to racial and social others. Keeping servants was not only a necessary part of distinguishing oneself as a member of the ruling race. Servants were also crucial to maintenance of social status within the Anglo-Indian community.

In fact, social distinctions within the white community became less relevant when the possibility of socialising with Indians arose. Whiteness identified all Anglo-Indians as the rulers. One returnee to England, on visiting his Grandfather’s house described it being ‘strange that...the servants were white. I had never seen white ladies in that role before’.³⁷ Mary Hobhouse noted in a letter to England:

‘Tis amusing to see all the subdivisions here; all, however, pretty well unite in keeping out the Hindu element. Mr Campbell gave a large soiree on Tuesday and invited numbers, but was afraid of what his European guests would think, and accordingly they separated like oil and water; and I was especially invited to the verandah, by some lady friends, to be out of the way of the natives.’³⁸

³³ David Arnold, ‘European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century’, p105. Work on white domestic servants in India might prove a fruitful area of future research.

³⁴ David Arnold, ‘European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century’, p105.

³⁵ ‘Estate of Elizabeth Tilyard’, Inventories of Deceased Estates, L/AG/34/27/163, OIOC cited in Swati Chattopadhyay ‘Goods, Chattels and Sundry Items’ p246.

³⁶ 16 September 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210, OIOC.

³⁷ George Roche (Terrell, Richard ed.) *Childhood in India: Tales from Sholapur* (Radcliffe Press, London and New York, 1994) quoted in Elizabeth Buettner ‘From Somebodies to Nobodies: Britons Returning Home from India’ in Martin Daunt and Bernhard Rieger (eds.) *Meanings of Modernity. Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Berg, Oxford, 2001) p225.

³⁸ Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India 1872-1877* (London, 1906) p114.

The 'Hindu element' also included those Europeans in whose veins some Indian blood pumped. Eurasians occupied a peculiar and difficult position in nineteenth century India. In one of her letters Anne Wilson termed them as 'one of the unfortunate classes of the community'.³⁹ Though they styled themselves as European, they found themselves excluded both from Anglo-Indian and native Indian society as the Anglo-Indian community drew ever more racially restrictive boundaries around its membership and the gulf between native and British society widened.

Exclusion worked two ways though. As other scholars have pointed out 'in the eyes of Hindus they [the English] were outcasts with the power to pollute'.⁴⁰ This offended and irritated many Anglo-Indians, as did the fact that many Indian women stayed hidden behind the walls of the *zenana*. They blamed such Indian cultural practices for the growth of a gulf between natives and Anglo-Indians, as Anne Wilson's words attest:

You must understand that some Europeans of the old school would not allow a lady to accept an Indian gentleman's proffered hospitality. They would not permit her to drive through an Indian town, be a spectator of tent-pegging, or receive an Indian as visitor, far less dine with him. They, in short, prefer her to be as wholly absent from every kind of Indian society as are the inmates of zenanas. Their argument is that until an Indian gentleman will allow them to meet his wife, they will not allow him to meet an English lady.⁴¹

Making a home from Home

You would be astounded if you could see the makeshift way people live in this land. It is difficult to realise that English people with their great love for comfort, are willing to put up with such things. As long as they have plenty of horses, dogs and servants they are perfectly happy.⁴²

Anglo-Indian life was remarkably transient. First of all, most Anglo-Indians were in India on a temporary basis. Many may have stayed for years and years, but it was always England that was 'Home'. Secondly, Anglo-Indians moved frequently within India, both because of work duties and as part of the annual pilgrimages between the

³⁹ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, p181.

⁴⁰ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p55. See also Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p8; p58-9.

⁴¹ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, pp33 –34.

⁴² Letter from Freda Maynard, 7 March 1897, in Katherine Lethbridge (ed.) *Letters from East and West* (Devon, 1990) p134.

plains and the mountains as the seasons changed. It was difficult for Anglo-Indians to identify with any one place. Rumer Godden's description of Anglo-Indians as 'cut flowers; that is why most of them wither and grow sterile, they cannot live without their roots, and so few of them take root' seems an appropriate one.⁴³ The transience of Anglo-Indian life, along with 'the impression of *aliens*'⁴⁴ that resulted from being part of a self-conscious white minority, was an incentive to Anglo-Indians to bond in ways they may not have done in the metropole. As Herbert John Maynard wrote in a letter to his mother in England:

I expect you do not grasp the transience of things out here...I meet all manner of people with whom I have had casual conversations in hotels and railway carriages, and this constitutes a bond between us which it is perhaps rather difficult to appreciate until one is away from one's own country.⁴⁵

In the effort to not take root, to not 'go native', the Anglo-Indian community idealised 'Home' and attempted to recreate its Englishness in microcosm inasmuch as their circumstances would allow. The necessities of climate and frequent moves meant that Anglo-Indian houses in India could never exactly replicate those in the metropole. The open-plan bungalows favoured in India bore little resemblance to the storied townhouses of England. Nevertheless, efforts were made by Anglo-Indian women to familiarise the domestic environment. The author of *Indian Outfits and Establishment* suggested that 'By dint of hanging up photographs, pictures, brackets for odds and ends of china, Japanese scrolls, having books and papers about, and a piano...a room can be made fairly pretty'.⁴⁶ Anglo-Indians even made such efforts when travelling and living in tents:

A bowlful of Gloire de Dijon roses on the table next to me is a delight to my eyes; beyond is a little bookcase filled with our favourite books, and on the top of it is the guitar, the poor ill-used guitar! We have pictures on our walls, comfortable chairs, tables and rugs, and in short, are as snug as snug can be.⁴⁷

⁴³ Rumer Godden, *Breakfast with the Nikolides*, (London, 1942) p10 quoted in Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p44.

⁴⁴ Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India*, p75.

⁴⁵ Katherine Lethbridge (ed.) *Letters from East and West*, p33.

⁴⁶ An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments: A Practical Guide for Persons about to Reside in India*, (London, 1882) p63.

⁴⁷ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, p13.

But as we have seen, Anglo-Indian society was a product of a specifically colonial encounter and experience. Anglo-Indians could never eradicate the traces of that ongoing encounter, as it was continually being embedded in the very structure of their lives. Nevertheless, this didn't stop Memsahibs from trying. After all, 'the end and object is not merely personal comfort, but the formation of a home'.⁴⁸ Home was the cradle of empire and 'home' carried a double meaning in India (particularly after 1857 when more women joined their husbands in India) relating both to the metropole and the domestic sphere – 'that unit of civilisation where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties' wrote Steel and Gardiner, echoing metropolitan advice literature.⁴⁹ In this way the organisation of the domestic sphere was posited as intrinsic to the imperial civilising project.⁵⁰ For women in both metropole and colony, the domestic sphere became the place where they worked in the service of empire, displaying the values of British civilisation to servants and visitors, insisting on cleanliness, order and respect for the ruling race and/or class.

Maintaining households in an appropriately imperial fashion necessitated the work of many servants. Anglo-Indians required servants to sweep verandas and clean floors and furniture, keeping the constant barrage of dust at bay in the hot months and later in the year removing the stains caused by monsoon damp. Various servants were needed to cook elaborate western and Indian meals on basic stoves, fetch water and wait at tables at both family and social events (in India Anglo-Indians took their own servants with them to other people's houses to serve them at dinner parties). Servants were needed to do laundry, beating their employers' calico dresses and cotton undergarments against heavy river stones to get them clean. Servants were required to admit callers and deliver cards, assisting their white employers' translation of the rituals of 'Society' in the colonial setting. Liveried servants were needed to carry the heavy *jhampannies* in which wealthier Anglo-Indians reclined while travelling. Servants were required to sit on the veranda and pull the great fans that cooled houses in hot weather. Servants performed intimate personal services for their employers; they washed their employers' bodies and dressed their hair. Servants were required to

⁴⁸ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (London 1898) p7.

⁴⁹ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, p7.

⁵⁰ Mary Procida has discussed this at length in her book *Married to the Empire*.

care for, and even breastfeed children. The work of servants facilitated the domestic civilizing project, and as the natives with whom Anglo-Indians had the most contact, they were its primary recipients.

In the domestic sphere in India, however, 'the limits of anglicization' were clearly revealed.⁵¹ As Elizabeth Collingham has pointed out, 'anglicization was neither a uniform nor an uncontested process'.⁵² The gentle brown hand and jangling bracelets of a soft-footed ayah are recurrent, if stereotyped, images in the rememberings of Anglo-Indian children. Far more than the climate and the transience, Indian domestic servants complicated efforts to ignore Indian society and culture and recreate England within the private sphere. They brought that society and culture right into the Anglo-Indian home and constantly reminded their employers of their dependence on it, both practically and in terms of their self-image as avatars of an imperial power.

Structure of service in Anglo-Indian households

Unsurprisingly, domestic service in nineteenth century India was organised very differently from in nineteenth century England. Distribution of wealth, difference in customs, climate and domestic habits were all factors in the different structure of service in India. According to the author of a report on Madras in the 1881 Census, because houses were more open and more sparsely furnished due to the effects of the climate and the frequent moves, 'the work of the housemaid, of the charwoman, of the general houseservant is absent; and so, the housemaids, charwomen, and female general servants, who number close on one million in England and Wales, are wholly wanting in Madras - a not uninteresting fact, which may perhaps be seriously accepted among the mitigations of Indian life'.⁵³ Within the category 'servant' there were many variations, as the following extract from Dr Riddell's book *Indian Domestic Economy* indicates:

The races of servants are very different at the three Presidencies; at Bombay there is a large proportion of Native Portuguese, Parsees, Mussulmans, and Hindoos, besides Eurasians; at Madras Native Christians take the place of Parsees at Bombay; and at Calcutta there is a

⁵¹ The phrase 'limits of anglicization' is E.M. Collingham's. See E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, chapter 3.

⁵² E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p93.

⁵³ *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881*, Vol 1, p391.

mixture of every caste and grade in India. There are some among these who speak English, and who generally bear but very indifferent characters.⁵⁴

There were also geographical variations in the way domestic service occupations were defined, as Flora Annie Steel claimed in *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*: 'In Bombay, Madras, Ceylon, and Burmah the manner of life is so different, that residents in these Presidencies will find it necessary to piece the duties of the various servants together into a new classification'. She also suggested that, despite the variations, there was one similarity between all Indian servants, which was that 'the majority of servants, from Himalaya to Cape Comorin, are absolutely ignorant of the first principles of their various duties'.⁵⁵ While many employers expressed similar frustration with their servants – the view expressed by Anne Wilson, that 'if one wants a thing done one must do it one's self, or at least superintend its being done,' was a common one in letters and manuals – such attitudes were not necessarily universal.⁵⁶ Mrs Eliot James was able to claim that 'we have been singularly fortunate in our dependents'⁵⁷ and employers, including those who decried some of their servants' characteristics, often expressed satisfaction with their servants' loyalty, patience and ability to negotiate problems faced by their employers due to their unfamiliarity with Indian customs, climate and circumstances. Even while 'Lady Resident' condemned servants' 'want of truth and the impossibility of placing any dependence on them', she also claimed that there was 'a bright side':

The unwearied patience and gentleness of all domestics with children, the kindness of horsekeepers to their horses, the way in which cooks accommodate themselves to having meals ready at all kinds of irregular hours, and the manner in which all servants submit to the querulousness produced by the climate in Europeans, - these and many other points are greatly to be praised.⁵⁸

According to the Census of 1881, there were 2, 149, 629 male domestic servants in all India. This number must have vastly underestimated the actual number of

⁵⁴ Dr R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book* (London 1871) p3.

⁵⁵ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (London 1898) p54.

⁵⁶ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, p9.

⁵⁷ Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management* (London, 1879) p43.

⁵⁸ [Maud Diver]A Lady Resident, *The Englishwoman in India* (London, 1864) p61.

servants, as women's occupations were not counted and every respectable Englishwoman had at least one ayah. Domestic servants were the fourth largest occupational group, after agriculturalists (though many 'agriculturalists also had a second occupation which was sometimes service), 'indefinite labour' and cotton manufacture. However, the report also states that 'the figures under this sub-order are largely understated'. The highest concentration of domestic servants was in Bengal, where almost half the entire number worked.⁵⁹ Of the total number of servants, the vast majority (1,707,454) worked in British Provinces and the majority of these (1,589,563) were defined as general servants.⁶⁰ There were far more male servants in India than in England. According to a report on Madras there were 'only 445 females to 555 males' in domestic service, while in England there were in every 1000 domestic servants 894 females to 106 males.⁶¹ Indian servants were often married with families of their own, with whom they lived in huts on the compound. Finding an unmarried servant could be difficult, as Minnie Wood discovered:

my under-ayah took herself off on the day of the mutiny and has never come back. I find it most difficult to get another like her, for she was one who did not possess what is the greatest nuisance to us in this country, namely husband and children, and consequently she slept in the house at night.⁶²

With the demands of their own families competing with the employing family's needs, Indian servants were not subject to their employers in the same way as English servants. As a result, the politics of dependence worked in different ways in India, as Minnie Wood's experience suggests.

In India, although individuals of any creed could perform most service roles, these roles were specialized and for many Hindus, could only be performed by individuals of certain caste. For example, a Hindu bearer, who would usually be of high caste, would not have anything to do with foodstuffs. Lower caste or non-Hindu table servants would be required for serving food, while a Muslim or Christian bearer could be persuaded to wait at table. Similarly, while a Catholic ayah of Portuguese

⁵⁹ *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881*, Vol I, pp349–352.

⁶⁰ *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881*, Vol I, p358. The Census doesn't say what proportion of this number worked in Anglo-Indian households and what proportion in Indian or other households.

⁶¹ *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881*, Vol I, p391.

⁶² 16 September 1857 Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210 OIOC.

descent might wash laces and stockings, a higher caste Hindu ayah might refuse to; a lower caste or non-Hindu under-ayah would therefore often be required to undertake personal cleaning duties for the mistress of the house. According to the Census of 1881, the majority of domestic servants were Hindus (74.74%). 23.73% were Muslim and 1.52% were tabulated as 'other', which may explain why caste restrictions on servants' roles were so often noted by Anglo-Indian employers.⁶³

The indoor servants were generally regarded as 'upper' servants and the bearer was the head of the Indian servant hierarchy in Anglo-Indian households. His role was an important one, more or less equivalent to that of the housekeeper in English households. It was important to engage the right man, as the author of *Indian Household Management* advised: 'On your head servant or bearer depends much of your comfort; be, therefore, very particular in your choice, and do not engage too young a man'.⁶⁴ As well as discharging 'all the functions of a valet for the sahib' the bearer was, according to most accounts, also responsible for dusting furniture and looking after the lamps. He would receive guests or their cards and as a measure of his responsibility, was usually 'entrusted articles of value – money, jewels, clothes, &c' and was responsible for 'the general good behaviour of the staff'.⁶⁵ The bearer could act as an intermediary between employer and staff. As Elizabeth Garrett wrote of the bearer, 'his master and mistress should be able to look to him in case of any dispute in the compound'.⁶⁶ Bearers were valued for their loyalty and trustworthiness and their employers often appreciated and reciprocated their bearer's attachment to them. The Hobbouses intended to bring their bearer to England with them when they left India and Bertie Maynard wrote of his bearer, Khuda Buksh, that he

was one of those Indians who for thirty rupees a month or thereabouts - shall we say eighteen pence a day – and a little "cherishing"... will serve with whole-hearted devotion a strange being of another complexion, of different religion and different thoughts; put up with his tantrums; bring meals into existence for him in the wilderness, wait for him for months, even for years, when he withdraws himself to that distant and mysterious "home" of his; love and guard his children; risk disease and death for his sake and under his protection, and most effectively

⁶³ *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881*, Vol I, p376.

⁶⁴ Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management*, p44.

⁶⁵ An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments*, p50.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Garrett, *Morning Hours in India*, (London, 1887) p20.

thwart the machinations of others like himself to get other employers served first and served best; putting affection before justice and before self.⁶⁷

Another very important servant role, and apparently the only household role occupied by a woman, was the ayah's. The ayah would act as a lady's maid for the mistress of the household and as nanny to any children. Many more wealthy households employed more than one ayah, particularly when there were children to be catered for. Memsahibs could become close to their ayahs and a good ayah was highly valued, as the author of *Indian Outfits* attested: 'a better maid I never wish to have; gentle, quiet, attentive, careful and trustworthy – in fact, a domestic treasure'.⁶⁸ Ayahs' work tended to involve providing personal services. She would tend to her employers when they were sick and would carry and care for children. She would often take care of her mistress's jewellery, wardrobe and hair, and would help to bathe and dress her mistress. As such the ayah and her mistress experienced a physical intimacy that highlighted the racial and social differences between them.

Wet nurses – *Dhayes* or *amahs* - were often hired to feed unweaned babies. They seem usually to have been engaged from the poorest echelons and were a source of great anxiety for many Anglo-Indian parents. Their necessary bodily intimacy with the children they suckled and the dependency of those children on their milk transgressed the racial and class boundaries Anglo-Indians were so keen to maintain. *Amahs* were frequently accused of blackmailing their employers. Dr Riddell claimed that wet nurses 'make the most exorbitant demands, which from necessity you are often compelled to comply with' while Julia Maitland wrote that her *amah*'s 'whims are the plague of my life'.⁶⁹ Florence Marryat even suggested *amahs* used special skills to inconvenience their employers:

An amah also, or native wet nurse, offended by some word or action of her mistress, will revenge herself by causing her milk to dry up or 'backen', as it is technically termed, in a few hours, and what is more extraordinary still, will, when perhaps in possession of the dismissal she coveted, bring the draught back again almost as quickly.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Katherine Lethbridge (ed.) *Letters from East and West*, p158.

⁶⁸ An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments*, p47.

⁶⁹ Dr R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy*, p6; 'A Lady' [Julia Maitland] *Letters from Madras*, p106.

⁷⁰ Florence Marryat, "Gup" *Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character* (London, 1868) p165.

Anglo-Indian writers also expressed fear of contamination by wet nurses. This was usually articulated in terms of a fear that the wet nurse would infect the child with sickness, but the subtext is one of a fear that supposed Indian degeneracy, particularly that of the low status Indian, might be communicated to the suckling child. The cross-racial physical closeness between wet-nurse and child was crucial in the development of this fear. Advice manuals invariably recommended that the wet nurse be closely watched, her habits inspected and that her diet be carefully supervised.⁷¹ Some families, such as the Lyalls, refused to engage such a servant. '[W]e are determined to eschew black foster mothers, and our triumph over other households who maintain negresses is great and deserved', wrote Alfred Lyall to his sister in 1866.⁷²

Cooks were also important within the Anglo-Indian household and Steel and Gardiner advised Memsahibs who had found a good one to 'do anything to keep him – short of letting him know that you are anxious to do so'.⁷³ Memsahibs were advised to avoid the kitchen, or at least give notice before they went into it because, according to Elizabeth Garrett, '[a]n Indian cook-room is so painfully unlike a kitchen at home that a visit to it affords little pleasure to the English matron'.⁷⁴ Steel and Gardiner did not mince their words, in their estimation the Indian kitchen 'is a black hole, the pantry a sink'.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, good cooks could work apparent miracles with limited equipment, as Anne Wilson discovered: 'As for the cook, all that he seems to need is two bricks or a hole in the ground. He takes the pots out of the panier...lights his fire of wood or charcoal, and gives us dinner as good as he ever prepared in his kitchen at home'.⁷⁶ A cook's boy, or *masalchee*, who would do the washing up, assisted the cook. The *khansamah* was also a servant of significant responsibility. He oversaw 'the concerns of the table and of the servants attached to it', who were called *kitmutgars*, and would also go to the bazaar and do the marketing for the household.⁷⁷

Servants in India did not live in the house as their counterparts in England did, but usually occupied huts on the compound where they lived with their families. The kitchen was also usually sited apart from the main house. Employers preferred that

⁷¹ See for example 'A Medical Practitioner', *Domestic Guide to Mothers in India* (Bombay, 1848) pp70 – 75; [Maud Diver]'A Lady Resident', *The Englishwoman in India*, p97; Riddell, Dr R, *Indian Domestic Economy*, p6.

⁷² Letter from Alfred Lyall, 15 July 1866, Lyall Collection, MSS Eur F132/4 OIOC.

⁷³ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, p72.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Garrett, *Morning Hours in India*, p19.

⁷⁵ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, p ix.

⁷⁶ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, p15.

⁷⁷ Dr R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy*, p6.

the external servants of the household did not enter the house beyond coming to the verandah to receive instructions or wages. Even indoor servants would ideally wait on the verandah until summoned by their employers with a call of '*Qui hye?*', though such restrictions were hard to place on servants who worked indoors. Bathrooms had doors opening onto the compound so that the servants who cleaned them would not have to walk through the house.⁷⁸ External servants included punkah pullers, employed during the hot season to pull the great fans used to cool houses, who would do their monotonous work from the verandah and who apparently tended to fall asleep while on the job. Most households also employed a *bheestie* to fetch and carry water for the house. In a household with horses a *syce* was required to look after each horse, while grasscuts would cut grass for them. Similarly, if cows were kept a cow-man was hired, if fowls, a fowl-man. *Malis* cared for the garden. Better off establishments also hired *jhampannies*, footmen who carried sedan chairs for their employers, *chuprassies*, who acted as messengers and *chowkidars*, who were watchmen. The *dhobie* was the washerman and was the source of much complaint and the butt of many jokes for his brutal treatment of his employer's clothes. EHA provided a sketch of this servant:

Day after day he has stood before that great black stone and wreaked his rage upon shirt and trouser and coat, and coat and trouser and shirt. Then he has wrung them as if he were wringing the necks of poultry, and fixed them on his drying line with thorns and spikes, and finally he has taken the battered garments to his torture chamber and ploughed them with his iron, longwise and crosswise and slantwise, and dropped glowing cinders on their tenderest places. Son has succeeded father through countless generations in cultivating his passion for destruction, until it has become the monstrous growth we see and shudder at in the *Dhobie*.⁷⁹

At the bottom of the servant hierarchy in Anglo-Indian households was the *mehter*, or sweeper, described by Steel and Gardiner as 'a savage with a reed broom'.⁸⁰ The sweeper was invariably of very low caste, or was Untouchable. It was his task to sweep and perform 'other menial offices, which no other servant will, on any

⁷⁸ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p 103.

⁷⁹ EHA [E.H. Aitken], *Behind the Bungalow*, 14th edn (London, Calcutta and Simla, 1929) p81 quoted in Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p149.

⁸⁰ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, p ix.

consideration, put his hand to' such as emptying and cleaning the thunderbox and dealing with refuse.⁸¹

As deference givers, servants were important within the lavish ceremonial display through which India's conquerors sought to establish their political legitimacy as rulers in the late 18th and early nineteenth centuries. Anglo-Indian households employed large numbers of servants, often many more than they would have been able to afford in England. In Edward Braddon's words: 'The active and handy housemaid who cleans the house, washes a child or two, does the marketing, cooks the dinner, waits at table, and performs other offices, is represented in India by some ten individual specimens of menial humanity'.⁸² Fanny Parks listed 57 servants as necessary to cater for the needs of a private family while she was living in Cawnpore in the earlier nineteenth century. She was however the wife of the Acting Collector, a man of significant status. Other Anglo-Indians of this period wrote of employing significantly fewer servants than Fanny Parks, but still considerably more than they would have been able to afford in England. In the 1830s Julia Maitland wrote that she kept 'fewer than many people...altogether twenty seven,' while Emma Walter recorded in her journal in 1839 that she had nineteen servants, not more than she needed.⁸³ Julia Maitland poked fun at the extravagance:

I have an ayah (or lady's maid), and a tailor (for the ayah cannot work); and A- has a boy: also two muddles – one to sweep my room and another to bring water. There is one man to lay the cloth, another to bring in dinner, another to light the candles, and others to wait at table. Every horse has a man and a maid to himself – the maid cuts grass for him; and every dog has a boy. I inquired whether the cat had any servants, but I found that she was allowed to wait upon herself; and as she seemed the only person in the establishment capable of doing I respected her accordingly.⁸⁴

Numbers of servants employed in Anglo-Indian households do appear to have declined somewhat as the century progressed, but still remained far higher than in the English counterparts. Servants remained as important an indicator of status for the sahib as they had for the nabob. In 1873 Lady Mary Hobhouse had around 30

⁸¹ Edward Braddon, *Life in India* (London, 1872) p114.

⁸² Edward Braddon, *Life in India*, p113.

⁸³ 'A Lady' [Julia Maitland] *Letters from Madras*, p51; 28 Nov 1839, Journal of Emma Walter, MSS/Eur/B265/1, OIOC.

⁸⁴ 'A Lady' [Julia Maitland] *Letters from Madras*, p18.

servants to cater for her and her husband's daily requirements, while most manuals recommended approximately thirteen servants to cater for a household in India, with extra servants to care for children as required.⁸⁵ As one author claimed in 1882, echoing the view expressed in the anthology cited earlier in this chapter, it was 'one of the social follies of Indian life... that you must keep three [servants] to do the work of one'.⁸⁶

The problem of caste

The class categories by which society in nineteenth century England was increasingly stratified were transformed in the Indian colonial context. Social rank depended on official position on the whole, and military families ranked below those in which the husband held a government position.⁸⁷ Status in the metropole was of relatively little consequence in determining social ranking in early nineteenth century India, but the signifiers of high rank were similar nonetheless. As one commentator put it, India provided the opportunity for 'clerks' and 'pedlars' to sit on 'the thrones of Aurangzebe'.⁸⁸ Early nineteenth century images of Anglo-Indians attended by retinues of servants display references to stereotypes of the indulged European aristocrat and the court of the 'oriental' prince. Englishness was re-defined in India, as a uniquely Anglo-Indian way of life endorsed European power in an 'Indian idiom'.⁸⁹ Eliza Fay described Madras society as characterised by 'Asiatic splendour, combined with European taste exhibited around you on every side, under the forms of flowing drapery, stately palanquins, elegant carriages, innumerable servants, and all the pomp and circumstance of luxurious ease and unbounded wealth'.⁹⁰ The large numbers of servants employed by the British were an important status symbol,

⁸⁵ See for example the recommendation in *Indian Household Management* by Mrs Eliot James, pp44 – 46, also An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments*, p49.

⁸⁶ An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments*, p49.

⁸⁷ Although it is important to note that those who worked for the civil service or became army officers would most likely be drawn from the middle class. Collingham has suggested that 'they came from a circumscribed section of the traditional middle class' and 'among both civilians and army officers the aristocracy, small-scale businessmen, artisans and men of the new entrepreneurial middle class, were under-represented' E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p20; Of course, due their whiteness, those working class men who occupied the lowest ranks of Anglo-Indian society always had the edge on most Indians.

⁸⁸ James.M.Holzman, quoted by E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p21.

⁸⁹ Javeed Majeed *Ungoverned Imaginings*, p22.

⁹⁰ Mrs Eliza Fay, *Original Letters from India (1779 – 1815)* p162.

assisting Englishmen, mostly of modest beginnings, in usurping and mimicking the lives of elites both Indian and English:

The Anglo-Indian did not carry his own chattah (an umbrella traditionally signifying royalty), this was carried by a chattah bearer; if he stirred more than a few yards out of doors he was relieved of the necessity of walking by the use of his palanquin; washing and dressing required little exertion on his part as he was ministered to by a bevy of attendants.⁹¹

The number of servants one employed was important in representing one's significance and magnificence, not only to other Englishmen, but also to Indians. Servants both facilitated the pampered lifestyles of nineteenth century Anglo-Indians and formed a symbolic barrier distinguishing the Anglo-Indian from the country and people on which he lived. Furthermore, the employment of many servants placed the Englishman at the centre of a nexus of patronage within the Indian community, adding to his social and cultural capital.⁹² The 1881 Census report on Madras suggested that domestic servant keeping had not been usual in native Indian households:

It is not the custom to keep servants for domestic purposes. It is the custom among the landed gentry to have numerous retainers; but these are generally tenants. They perform many offices, and often receive consideration in grain and marks of honour, but they are not domestic servants.⁹³

The implication was that the colonising British had developed domestic service, in its colonial form. It was not only individual prestige that was on display, but also, by association, that of the British Company, and later nation, represented by the Anglo-Indian. The perceived need to maintain prestige in Indian eyes was to remain an important factor structuring the relationship between servants and employers and their relation to Indian and English identities.⁹⁴ For Englishmen and -women the domestic sphere was the heart of civilisation and the place where characters were made and broken. This idea had been translated from the metropole to the colony, and

⁹¹ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p22.

⁹² E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p19 – 21.

⁹³ *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881*, Vol I, p391.

⁹⁴ David Cannadine discusses the centrality of 'prestige' to imperial self-perception in *Ornamentalism. How the British saw their Empire* (London, 2001).

was given imperial significance in the translation. In England, people learned their social place through their relation to service. In India, service became a part of the way in which the colonisers displayed the racial and social hierarchies underpinning British notions of civilisation to colonial subjects.

Anglo-Indians were aware that such large numbers of servants would seem 'ridiculous, not to say extravagant' to families and friends in England and the complaint that it was 'not a matter of choice, but of necessity' was a common one throughout the nineteenth century.⁹⁵ The most frequent explanation throughout the century given for this 'necessity' was that it was a product of caste restrictions upon servants' activities, which were believed to 'render the occupations of all perfectly distinct'.⁹⁶ As Minnie Wood wrote to her mother in 1857: 'Each department has a Servant of a caste which does not permit them to do anything else consequently it obliges one to keep more than one would wish'.⁹⁷

However, the scholars and administrators of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were to a large extent responsible for the rigid categories of behaviour associated with caste that determined servants' occupations. Part of the process by which India's laws and 'traditions' were codified and categorised involved cataloguing castes and their associated occupations, including those of domestic servants, fixing in text and image as rules what had been relatively flexible relations between caste and occupation.⁹⁸ Nicholas B. Dirks has controversially written, '[c]aste...is a colonial construction, reminiscent only in some ways of the social forms that preceded colonial intervention'.⁹⁹ It was not in servants' interest to challenge the British belief that caste restrictions were fixed, because the decline of the Mughal aristocracy meant that many servants needed work, and the differentiation of tasks ensured employment for the greatest number.¹⁰⁰ Also, the assertion of caste arguably provided a way for servants to resist the absolutism of their employers' authority. Indeed many writers appear to have felt that servants asserted caste

⁹⁵ Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management*, p46; Mrs Murray Mitchell, *In India: Sketches of Indian Life and Travel from Letters and Journals*, p71.

⁹⁶ Thomas Williamson *The East India Vade-Mecum; or complete guide to gentlemen intended for the Civil, Military or Naval Service of the Honourable East India Company*, I, (London, 1810) p181.

⁹⁷ March 10 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210, OIOC.

⁹⁸ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p18; See also Nicholas B. Dirks 'Castes of Mind', *Representations*, 37 (1992), pp56 –78 for further discussion of this process.

⁹⁹ Nicholas B. Dirks "The original caste: power, history and hierarchy in South Asia", in McKim Marriott, (ed.) *India through Hindu Categories* (New Delhi, 1990) p74.

¹⁰⁰ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p18.

restrictions simply to irritate their employers, as Edward Braddon words suggest: 'Caste or custom forbids that the Indian servant should make himself generally useful and live in the esteem of his fellow men, and so he is generally useless'.¹⁰¹

The caste system was a major source of both confusion and irritation for English mistresses, despite the fact that it provided a justification for Anglo-Indians to keep the number of servants they believed the maintenance of prestige required. Often Indian servants, on the basis of their caste designation, would only perform certain tasks. Minnie Wood, referring to servants' observation of caste, claimed it required an 'excellent temper to stand all their nonsense'. 'Actually,' she wrote

the other day I ordered my Table Attendant to bring me the Drawing Room Lamp to clean as I take charge of them & he refused saying he would lose caste. Fool. I got so angry & after a hard battle got my way but they really are enough to drive one mad.¹⁰²

In their effort to construct themselves as a modernising force by defining an ancient, yet primitive, India, it was useful for the successive generations of Anglo-Indians to refer to the caste system frustrating their domestic lives as an example of the primitive irrationality of Indians, as compared to the clear, sober rationality of the Englishman. The demarcation of service occupations by caste also served as a signifier of servants' ethnic difference, which fed their employers' racial prejudice, not only against Indian servants, but against the race they were perceived to represent, regardless of whether they were Hindus or caste-less Muslims or Christians:

We are now almost crazy about our table attendants. They are so impertinent and give me so much trouble that I declare I feel inclined to kill them all, the beasts! ...As to ever liking the country, that is quite out of the question. One feels quite differently now, even I who have been so short a time here, now begin to see the creatures one has to deal with. I think they are a nasty, stinking, dirty race and nothing more can be said of them.¹⁰³

Dress and display

Elizabeth Collingham has shown how, as the emphasis of British involvement in India shifted from orientalist to anglicist principles, Anglo-Indians' dress altered. The

¹⁰¹ Edward Braddon, *Life in India*, p113.

¹⁰² Letter, 10 March 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210 OIOC.

¹⁰³ Letter 19 Dec 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210 OIOC.

flamboyant costume of the nabob gave way to the more sober and standardized suit that identified the sahib, reflecting clothing trends in England. In this way Anglo-Indians came to wear metropolitan identifications literally on their sleeves, distancing themselves through their clothing from 'oriental' influence.¹⁰⁴

Sartorial interests extended beyond Anglo-Indians' own attire to that of their servants, although beyond the cummerbund and turban, Anglo-Indian writers rarely discuss imposing a uniform on their servants, though there are references to liveries for *jhampannies* (footmen). Mary Hobhouse claimed her husband's were 'about the most sensational jhampannies in Simla, being clothed in maroon and two shades of yellow. One gentleman here (Mr Haliburton) has got up his as sailors, with the name of the house on their caps. This is quite an 'idea,' and I envy him'.¹⁰⁵

Concern with servants' attire in advice manuals seems to have focussed on cleanliness. The author of *Morning Hours in India* claimed that it was 'a positive insult to his master and mistress for any servant to enter their presence in soiled clothing. Household servants should invariably be required to wear their cummerbund, when in attendance on their master or mistress'.¹⁰⁶ However, despite the emphasis on sartorial simplicity and cleanliness rather than oriental grandeur in advice manuals many Anglo-Indians noted the clothes worn by their servants and appear to have enjoyed the spectacle of 'a turbaned sultan-like creature behind every chair'.¹⁰⁷ In the 1830s Julia Maitland described 'beautiful barefooted peons, with handsome turbans, strutting' behind '[s]ome old Anglo-Indians' who 'think themselves too grand to walk in their gardens without their servants'.¹⁰⁸ Such enjoyment continued throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1870s, Mrs Mitchell noted her bearer's clothing with approval:

He was clad in cool white; a fresh-starched calico coat, loose trousers, which looked like a petticoat, a flat turban, and a bright scarlet shawl wound round his waist in numerous folds. This garment is called a cummerbund, and the bright bit of colour had the happiest effect. As we entered he made a profound salaam - the very picture of a servant!¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ See E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, pp60-66 for further discussion of this process.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Hobhouse *Letters from India*, p126.

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth Garrett, *Morning Hours in India*, p30.

¹⁰⁷ 'A Lady' [Julia Maitland] *Letters from Madras*, p24.

¹⁰⁸ 'A Lady' [Julia Maitland] *Letters from Madras*, p25.

¹⁰⁹ Mrs Murray Mitchell, *In India: Sketches of Indian Life and Travel from Letters and Journals*, p69.

Although many employers bemoaned the fact their Indian servants did not behave like English servants, they enjoyed their Indian servants dressing in a manner that reflected their 'Indianness'. The 'rows of swarthy domestics, clothed in spotless white, who stand like so many statues behind their masters' chairs'¹¹⁰ contributed to the colonisers' sense of imperial magnificence and superiority, even throughout the period when efforts were being made to anglicise some Indians. Perceived as 'sultan-like' creatures, the servants arguably symbolised the subjugated Orient, disciplined by English authority.

Dynamics of the servant/employer relationship in India

Although the uprising of 1857 does not seem to have resulted in a major shift in employer/servant relations in India, attitudes towards servants do reflect the growing ambivalence amongst Anglo-Indians about the difference of Indians from English people that pre-dated and appeared to be confirmed by the events of 1857. Anglo-Indians had always seen servants as inferior, but they came to be an increasing source of complaint and were frequently said to manifest the barbarity of 'the Indian', both before and after the uprising of 1857. The fact that there does not seem to have been any great shift in attitudes towards servants before and after 1857 may be due to the peculiar intimacy and ambivalence of the servant/employer relationship. Some servants were loyal to their employers during the uprising, risking their own lives for those of the families they served; others turned on their employers. Since many employers already mistrusted servants, perhaps those who betrayed their employers simply confirmed pre-existing ideas about the untrustworthiness of servants and facilitated the mapping of those ideas onto the character of 'the native'. As for those who were loyal, their loyalty could be seen in the context of ties to the family, developed through service, which overrode other allegiances to native community or kin.

The apparent increase in complaints about servants during the nineteenth century may be due to the fact that as the century progressed, more women travelled to India and wrote about their experiences of Indian domestic life. Nevertheless, as Anglo-Indians moved towards developing a less 'indianized' way of life, so they noted with

¹¹⁰ Mrs Murray Mitchell, *In India: Sketches of Indian Life and Travel from Letters and Journals*, p136.

disapproval their servants' intrusion into that life.¹¹¹ There appears to have been growing uneasiness well before 1857 with the proximity of servants to English individuals and families in India. The openness of the Anglo-Indian bungalow as compared to the metropolitan house meant that employers and servants could not avoid encountering one another.¹¹² Also, the necessary bodily intimacy between employer and servant was complicated by, and enhanced, perceptions of racial difference. The physicality of the Indian servant's presence was thus more invasive than his English counterpart's, which many employers, such as Emma Roberts, found very irritating:

None of the inferior domestics keep themselves, as in England, in the background...and in Bengal, where the lower orders of palanquin-bearers wear very little clothing, it is not very agreeable to a female stranger to see them walk into drawing-rooms, and employ themselves in dusting books or other occupations of like nature.¹¹³

Frederick Shore 'had bells hung in all the rooms in the house, after the English fashion' in order to ensure some kind of privacy for his wife and himself, and he described the servant as a 'sort of spy, and by no means an inattentive observer of all that passes in the private apartment of his mistress'.¹¹⁴ This statement suggests that Frederick Shore and his wife felt threatened not only by their servant's intrusion but also by the fact he was male – as well as being described as a 'spy', he is described as an 'observer' of his mistress – a voyeur. Similarly, Dr Riddell claimed that '[c]uriosity...is another of his [the native's] peculiarities...They...endeavour to find out all that concerns you'.¹¹⁵

The proximity of servants could extend from being an irritation to being a threat for some memsahibs, particularly during the uprising of 1857. Minnie Wood, in a letter to her mother written during the uprising, wrote that '[o]ne has to put up with so much now from one's servants. They are most insolent, and think nothing of telling

¹¹¹ The word 'indianized' is E.M. Collingham's.

¹¹² See E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, pp 99 – 102 for a discussion of the implications of the organisation of the bungalow for private life in India.

¹¹³ Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindoostan, with sketches of Anglo-Indian society*, I, (London, 1837) pp7-8.

¹¹⁴ Frederick John Shore Collection, 23 December 1833, MSS/Eur/E307/5 OIOC; Frederick John Shore, *Notes on Indian Affairs*, II (London, 1837) p513.

¹¹⁵ Dr R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book*, p9.

you that soon we shall all be in the service of the King of Delhi'.¹¹⁶ Another factor may also have been the isolation felt by many Englishwomen in India. For many women, opportunities for female society would have been very limited. Sequestered in their homes, with little company other than servants whose difference they felt so keenly, many women must have felt very isolated and very vulnerable, which may go some way to account for their mistrust of their servants.

As in England, the threat some employers felt from servants was often articulated in terms of their influence on children.¹¹⁷ However, the threat servants posed to children was generally not seen as a physical one. Indeed, in advice manuals, Indian servants are recommended for their devotedness to and 'unwearying patience and gentleness' with children.¹¹⁸ Rather, the danger tended to be articulated in terms of a threat to children's identity as English, rather than as a concern for their physical well-being. The author of *A Domestic Guide to Mothers in India* warned mothers to beware of their 'native servants' who, if allowed too much contact with English children would 'instil all kinds of poisonous ideas into their young minds. Being heathens themselves, they see no harm in teaching them all the dogmas and obscenity of their religion'.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, according to this author, the 'native servants are very fond of [deception]; and if children are left much to them, we see them grow cunning, deceitful and tellers of falsehoods'.¹²⁰ Similarly, Elizabeth Garrett advised that, in India 'great patience is needed in training our children in habits of truthfulness. Their surroundings, alas! are generally a hindrance, rather than a help in such lessons'.¹²¹

Parents were also counselled to make sure their children's linguistic development was not tainted by their acquiring native dialects from servants 'as with the language they are almost certain to imbibe ideas and knowledge most prejudicial to them in every way'.¹²² According to Florence Marryat 'the conversation of the natives, as a rule, is too filthy to be imagined, which always gave me a great horror of permitting

¹¹⁶ Letter, 22 July 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210, OIOC.

¹¹⁷ See Elizabeth Buettner's discussion of children and servants in her *Empire Families*, pp 36-45.

¹¹⁸ [Maud Diver] A Lady Resident, *The Englishwoman in India* (London, 1864) p61. For further examples see Elizabeth Garrett, *Morning Hours in India*, p72; An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments*, p47; Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management*, p46; Mrs Murray Mitchell, *In India: Sketches of Indian Life and Travel from Letters and Journals*, p68.

¹¹⁹ 'A Medical Practitioner', *A Domestic Guide to Mothers in India* (Bombay, 1848) p49.

¹²⁰ 'A Medical Practitioner', *A Domestic Guide to Mothers in India*, p62.

¹²¹ Elizabeth Garrett, *Morning Hours in India*, p112.

¹²² [Maud Diver] A Lady Resident, *The Englishwoman in India*, p106.

my children to pick up the Tamil language from their ayahs'.¹²³ Nevertheless, despite the dislike of English children having contact with 'heathens', employers were often reluctant to hire Christian servants. Several employers seem to have thought Christian servants were opportunistic, professing Christianity only to gain some advantage. As 'Lady Resident' recommended to her readers:

as much as possible, secure for your servants a set of unmitigated heathens. Converts are usually arrant humbugs; Catholics little better; indeed, the domestics who have robbed and cheated us during our sojourn in India, have with one exception been Christians and I have resolved never to engage another knowing him to be "master's caste".¹²⁴

As Nupur Chaudhuri has suggested, this response to Christian servants may have been due to the fact that sharing a common faith may have brought servants too close to their employers for comfort.¹²⁵ Although many employers seem to have been irritated by their servant's difference, difference was perhaps more comfortable than similarity, particularly in matters of faith. Mrs Mitchell's comment in one of her letters lends support to this interpretation:

The bearer is a Christian, and an old servant of Mr D.; a small, keen-eyed, dark Madrassi, with a towering mass of white turban, and full of springy activity. It is nice to have a Christian servant; but this man looks perhaps rather too clever.¹²⁶

However, it seems important to note that not all employers felt threatened by their servants. In the 1830s Julia Maitland described one servant's attentions to his mistresses as follows:

Then creeps in, perhaps, some old wizen, skinny brownie, looking like a superannuated thread-paper, who twiddles after them for a little while, and then creeps out again as softly as a black cat, and sits down cross-legged in the verandah till "Mistress please to call again."¹²⁷

¹²³ Florence Marryat, "Gup" Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character, p55.

¹²⁴ [Maud Diver] A Lady Resident, *The Englishwoman in India*, p55.

¹²⁵ Nupur Chaudhuri, 'Memsahibs and their Servants in Nineteenth-century India', *Women's History Review*, 3, 4, 1994, p552.

¹²⁶ Mrs Murray Mitchell, *In India: Sketches of Indian Life and Travel from Letters and Journals*, p69.

¹²⁷ [Julia Maitland] 'A Lady', *Letters from Madras*, pp18–19.

While her words and tone are both patronising and racist, Julia Maitland also ridiculed the lazy and indulged ‘real Indian ladies’ who ‘lie on a sofa, and, if they drop their handkerchief, they just lower their voices and say, “Boy!”’ and there is no sense her servants pose any threat to her.¹²⁸ Rather, she sees them as infantile, ‘like babies in their ways’.¹²⁹

Often male bearers would undertake the duties of childcare, indeed, it was widely seen as a part of their duties to look after the children, once they had reached a certain age. Nupur Chaudhuri, in her article ‘Memsahibs and their Servants in Nineteenth-century India’ argues that:

Since domestic jobs were perceived in Britain as women’s work, in the eyes of the memsahibs these Indian male domestics were placed in the domestic sphere that belonged to women. The inability of these indigenous men to extricate themselves from menial household work marked them as inferior to British male servants and placed them on a level with British female servants.¹³⁰

However, the relationship between memsahibs and their male servants was more complex than this statement suggests. Chaudhuri suggests that there was some kind of equality between English female and Indian male servants, but it would in fact seem that it was their gender and racial difference to English female servants that was problematic for mistresses, and that this problem was not resolved by their being ‘placed on a level with British female servants’. While it seems to be true that many Englishwomen saw Indian as inferior to English servants, this seems to have been less to do with their being men doing ‘women’s work’ as it was to do with their being perceived as lower class male Indians who had access to the private lives of their employers. Their maleness added to the threat of their ‘otherness’.

Chaudhuri’s argument also does not leave space for male servants’ resistance to mistresses’ control, which seems to have been articulated around a resistance to their authority on the basis of their gender. For example, women often state that they have problems being understood by the servants and that they need their husbands to dictate their orders to ensure they are obeyed. Minnie Wood wrote in a letter to her mother that ‘I quite dread book-keeping as I have no power over the servants...& the

¹²⁸ [Julia Maitland] A Lady’, *Letters from Madras*, p18.

¹²⁹ [Julia Maitland] A Lady’, *Letters from Madras*, p21.

¹³⁰ Nupur Chaudhuri, ‘Memsahibs and their Servants in Nineteenth-century India’ p553.

accounts I have to get my husband to translate every morning' while Maud Diver claimed that 'One bad trait...is the frequency with which they disregard the comfort and convenience of ladies, often their express orders, unless most directly enforced by the master'.¹³¹ Similarly, Mary Hobhouse wrote in 1872 that 'tis difficult to make the male servants respect womankind'.¹³²

Male servants' resistance to female authority is also a recurring theme in many of the transcripts of interviews, held in the OIOC's oral archives, with people who had lived in India. Edith Dixon remembered the bearer in her house 'would have thrown me to the jackals, if it lay between saving [me] andthe little Lordship my small brother'.¹³³ Women's willingness to use their husbands to bolster their authority may suggest they tacitly acknowledged their male servants' implicit challenge.

While it does seem to be case that servants were frequently characterised as childishly immature, servile, stupid, dirty, indolent, dishonest and likened to animals, I have not seen substantial evidence of them being feminized or described as effeminate in the same way as middle-class so-called '*baboos*' were, as we might expect if they were perceived as on a level with female servants. Elizabeth Garrett, in her advice book *Morning Hours in India*, wrote that:

After the child is three or four months old he should be carried by the bearer. The child will feel much safer than in a woman's arms...Hindoo bearers become much attached to the children of whom they have care, and take a great pride in their young charges. For boys, after they are six or eight months old, they are undoubtedly the best nurses.¹³⁴

The reference to the strength of the male, as opposed to the female servant, and the implication that male children are better cared for by one of their own sex suggests that the male servant can bring usefully masculine qualities to the role of 'nurse', rather than that he is feminized by it. Furthermore, the figure of the threatening servant was not always a vindictive female. In 1883, during a period of social unrest, the Magistrate of Howrah, E.V. Westmacott, wrote in a report to the Lt.-Governor of Bengal: 'I do not suppose the *Baboos* who are agitating and leading the anti-European tendencies of Government are likely to indulge in rape or murder of Europeans, but I

¹³¹ March 10 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210/A, OIOC; [Maud Diver] 'A Lady Resident' *Englishwoman in India*, p60.

¹³² Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India 1872 – 1877*, p9.

¹³³ Edith Dixon, MSS.Eur.T26, OIOC Oral Archives.

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Garrett, *Morning Hours in India*, p80.

see very clearly what is the outcome of the *Baboo* agitation, when translated into language, intelligible to themselves by natives of the lower classes'.¹³⁵ The threat here is articulated in terms of the 'lower classes'' (by which he means servants, having previously referred to their increased 'insubordination') potentially rampant male sexuality. Of course, genteel masculinity was supposedly characterised by restraint, but these were native servants under discussion and therefore not genteel. While English female servants were also seen as posing a potential sexual threat, it was figured in a significantly different way. The perceived weapon of English female servants was temptation, rather than aggression, which was a characteristic associated with the masculine psyche. This is not to say that ideas about gender do not play their role in structuring the way in which Indian servants were characterised, simply that the way in which they worked was complex and ambivalent. It was not simply that because they did so-called women's work, they were on a level with female servants in England. As the nineteenth century progressed it appears that in England, domestic service was increasingly seen as an unmanly occupation. This perception does not seem to have been true in India.

Infantilising tendencies

The idea that Indian servants were effectively children endured throughout the nineteenth century; in the bible of Indian housekeeping, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1898), the authors claimed that '[t]he Indian servant is a child in everything save age'.¹³⁶ They went beyond simply describing the Indian servant as a child and suggested he or she 'should be treated as a child'.¹³⁷ To this end, the authors claimed that in training their servants, they 'adopted castor oil as an ultimatum in all obstinate cases, on the ground that there must be some physical cause for inability to learn or remember'.¹³⁸

The description of Indian servants as children also resonates with the notion that the servant/employer relationship in Britain was ideally paternalistic. Advice manual writers recommended caring for one's Indian servants in a paternalistic way in order to inspire loyalty. Provided one was kind and firm with them 'they will prove in

¹³⁵ Rivers Thompson to Ripon, *Ripon Papers: Letters of Rivers Thompson*, vol 54, 17, June 1883.

¹³⁶ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, p2.

¹³⁷ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, p2.

¹³⁸ F.A. Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, p3.

many little ways, by many little actions, many little attentions, that they fully appreciate your kindness, and endeavour, in their way, to repay it. In being kind, draw the line, do not overdo it...do not allow them to mistake kindness for weakness'.¹³⁹ This echoes the attitude expressed by the author of a British manual who claimed that 'Servants – as well as children- require to be managed with *kindness* and *firminess*. The greatest "kindness" we can exercise towards them is to endeavour, by a mild rein, to keep them in the path of duty'.¹⁴⁰ Certainly many employers had close and affectionate relationships with their servants, particularly with bearers and ayahs. After her bearer supported her when her mother died, Lady Wilson wrote to a friend: 'Of the sympathy shown us in times of sickness and sorrow by those of our own household, most Memsahibs can speak with feeling...sometimes such things mean a great deal to us'.¹⁴¹

However, with Indian servants the idea that they were dependents within a household was problematic. While styled as children in their attitudes and behaviour, they were not dependent within the household in the same way as English servants were. First, they were mostly male. Second, they were often married with families of their own, who often lived within the compound and who were dependent on them. Third, they were culturally different to the English in so many ways. As Minnie Wood described to her mother:

Your servants with their families live in your compound in mud houses & pens, but that is all, you do not feed them or have anything to do with them, only allow 1 hour & a half each day for their Khana or dinner which is the only meal of which they ever partake & as to touching anything from off our table, that is unheard of, they generally have the same thing, rice or lentils, over & over again each year.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, the Indian servants are repeatedly referred to both angrily and with affection as children, in texts ranging from household manuals, to missionary writings and personal letters and diaries. Such a construction provided a way in which mistresses could reassure themselves that they were not only superior to, but also authoritative over their servants, a way of denying their dependence on the servants,

¹³⁹ Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management*, p43.

¹⁴⁰ 'A Practical Mistress of the Household' *Domestic Servants As They Are and As They Ought to Be* (Brighton, 1859) p4.

¹⁴¹ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, pp284 –285.

¹⁴² Letter to her mother March 27th 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210/A, OIOC.

which was certainly a source of frustration for many mistresses. Anne Wilson described feeling 'baffled impotence' after her first experience of Anglo-Indian housekeeping.¹⁴³ Minnie Wood described her frustration in a letter to her mother:

As regards Servants my life has been worried out by Ayahs, I have had no less than four, since my arrival in Jhelum & am not yet suited, they are a thousand times worse than English Servants, you I am sure would never stand them, they perfectly spoil one's temper for they are such fools without a grain of sense & yet to do without them is impossible.¹⁴⁴

Viewing servants as children was common amongst employers in England as well as India, but in India the attitude took on a different tone. In England servants' childlike status was enshrined in the law, where they were defined as dependents, rather than employees. The fact that most English servants were young women enhanced the idea that they were childishly vulnerable. In India, however, this was not the case. As well as being represented as infantile, they were frequently described as if they were domesticated animals: often frustrating, sometimes threatening, occasionally amusing and generally dumb. Julia Maitland claimed her servants 'lie on their mats, strewing the floor like cats and dogs,' while Florence Marryat employed a similarly derogatory and reductionist metaphor: 'there is something in being driven by a human (but anything but humane) monkey...which is distasteful to a mind prejudiced in favour of English customs and manners'.¹⁴⁵ Even Mary Hobhouse, usually sympathetic, claimed her servants were like 'dogs or children in the way they respect any personal order'.¹⁴⁶

Arguably, by describing their servants as children or domesticated animals, mistresses were trying to neutralise the sexual and physical power of the male servants, circumventing the problem of their gender and rendering them as theoretically powerless and dependent (while allowing the possibility they were inherently sinful). In this respect the common habit of calling an adult male servant 'boy' is revealing. Also, likening servants to children discursively connects them to helpless, simple females and also to slaves, without making an explicit comparison

¹⁴³ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, p5.

¹⁴⁴ Letter March 1857, Letters of Maria Lydia Wood, MSS/Eur/B210 OIOC.

¹⁴⁵ [Julia Maitland] A Lady' *Letters from Madras*, p35; Florence Marryat, "Gup" *Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character*, p14.

¹⁴⁶ Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India*, p40.

that could demean the notions of femininity that structured the identity of the memsahib.

Efforts were made to anglicise mainly high caste Indians, redefining them according to metropolitan standards as 'native gentlemen', differentiated from lower class Indians through their respectable 'English' education and collaboration with the ruling bureaucracy.¹⁴⁷ Despite this, most Anglo-Indians also saw all Indians as alike, racially inferior to the British and in constant need of reminding of their inferiority. Julia Maitland bemoaned the 'rudeness and contempt' with which native Indians were treated by their British rulers, writing that '[t]hese natives are a cringing set, and behave to us English as if they were the dirt under our feet; and indeed we give them reason to suppose we consider them as such'.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Mary Hobhouse described Indians as 'slavish people, all whose habits and instincts, good or bad, seem of a servile nature'.¹⁴⁹ Some Anglo-Indians sanctioned violence as a means to keeping the native servants in line. 'Of course,' stated an editorial in *The Pioneer*, 'cuffs and stripes, and all kinds of corporeal maltreatment are recognised in India by Indians as well as Europeans, as more in accordance with the natural fitness of things than such phenomena would be thought in Europe'.¹⁵⁰ Admittedly, many Anglo-Indians, such as Mary Hobhouse, found the use of violence unnecessary and offensive:

This behaviour to natives is one of the things that make one a little sick here sometimes. I read quite a commonplace report of an officer the other day, whose servant had not filled up his lamp sufficiently with oil. He sent for the man, who was unwilling to come, and then twice threw a knife at him, and the man was severely wounded and taken to hospital – the officer fined fifteen rupees. 'In the very same paper was a letter saying, 'India was going to the dogs since the enactment by which servants were allowed to bring actions against their masters'.¹⁵¹

In July 1876 a case took place in which a *syce* (a groom/footman – a lower servant), having failed to bring a carriage to the front door of his English employer's house on

¹⁴⁷ Susan Bayly 'The Evolution of Colonial Cultures: Nineteenth Century Asia' in Andrew Porter (ed.) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. The Nineteenth Century*, p452; Robin.J. Moore, 'Imperial India, 1858 – 1914' in Andrew Porter (ed.) *The Oxford History of the British Empire. The Nineteenth Century*, p431.

¹⁴⁸ [Julia Maitland] 'A Lady', *Letters from Madras*, p20.

¹⁴⁹ Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India*, p 64.

¹⁵⁰ Editorial, Wed July 19 1876, *The Pioneer*.

¹⁵¹ Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India*, p129.

time, was beaten by his employer and subsequently died. The employer, Mr Fuller, was sentenced to a fine of thirty rupees. Concerned by the leniency of the sentence, Lord Lytton, then Viceroy, issued a Minute in which he expressed disapproval of Anglo-Indians' inclination to control their servants with violence, and at the Courts' tendency to punish such offenders lightly.¹⁵² According to Mary Hobhouse this raised

a howl of indignation from the Anglo-Indian press, who all look upon beating as the right and proper way of treating servants. One man writes this morning to say, 'I wish Lord Lytton would tell me what I am to do when my servants bring breakfast a quarter of an hour late'. We, Arthur and myself, always say 'what would you do if an English servant was at fault?' but this is considered a ludicrous and inappropriate sentiment.¹⁵³

Although beating servants was generally frowned upon in Anglo-Indian society, many Anglo-Indians believed it occasionally unavoidable, and certainly understandable. This contrasts the situation in Britain, where the highly publicised cases of cruelty to two servant-girls in the mid-nineteenth century provoked a general public outcry and prompted the passage of the Apprentices and Servants Act in 1851. The fact that Indian servants, as well as being Indian, were also usually male was probably relevant to their employers' belief that they sometimes needed physical chastisement in order to show them who was boss. As an editorial in the *Pioneer* stated in response to Lytton's Minute: 'the truth is...that there is hardly a large household in India which could be kept in decent order by strictly legal means' and advised 'every European here' to 'take care that he never strikes a servant in a way that can possibly have more than a superficial effect'.¹⁵⁴ Florence Marryat suggested that Anglo-Indian employers were driven to violence by their servants' lack of appreciation of how lucky they were:

their usual behaviour is so aggravating that, however much I may condemn, I cannot wonder at any one losing control of their temper when with them; but in general they serve you well as long as it suits their convenience to do so, and when it does not no amount of past kindness and indulgence will secure you from the effects of their ingratitude.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² This case is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

¹⁵³ Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India*, p252.

¹⁵⁴ Editorial, July 19 1876, *The Pioneer*.

¹⁵⁵ Florence Marryat, "Gup" *Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character*, pp31-32.

Furthermore, those people (including the government) who did disapprove of violence tended to do so not because beating servants was bad for the servant as much as it brutalised the employer and was 'so injurious to the honour of British rule, and so damaging to the reputation of British justice in this country'.¹⁵⁶

The characteristics of Indian domestic servants

In England deference rituals recommended by advice manual writers such as Mrs Motherly, together with the directive that servants should be neither seen nor heard, combined to reduce servants to an existence in which their value was defined only by their fulfilment of a service role. Indian servants underwent similar processes of depersonalisation but in their case, these processes were connected to the construction of racial stereotypes, as we shall see when we look more closely at the opposition to the Ilbert Bill. John Kaye's remark provides an example of extreme depersonalization: 'one is wont to get wondrously indifferent to these black automata, and after a few months one learns to think of them no more than of the chairs and the tables'.¹⁵⁷ This was not entirely true. Employers thought about their servants a lot, particularly about their irritating or invasive characteristics. Certain characteristics were associated with some of the different servant roles. For example, the *khansamah* (table servant) was seen as a cheat, who 'carries on an avowed system of plunder' and whose dishonesty was incurable.¹⁵⁸ '[I]t is manifestly hopeless to attempt to reform the khansamah' wrote one correspondent to *The Englishman*, 'He has been spoilt beyond redemption by a long and undisturbed career of plunder and must be lopped off from our household establishments like a rotten branch'.¹⁵⁹ Bearers, however, were generally characterised as 'a hardworking and very trusty class of people'.¹⁶⁰

Servant occupations in India were associated with the hierarchy of caste (even relationally for Muslim and Christian servants who could perform 'untouchable' tasks) and it may be the case that English ideas about servant character had absorbed some caste prejudices. Many of the negative characteristics attributed to servants in England, such as tendencies to dishonesty and to taking illicit perquisites, were also

¹⁵⁶ 'Moffusilite', Letter to *The Englishman*, 26 July 1876.

¹⁵⁷ John Kaye, *Peregrine Pultuney; or life in India*, II (1884) p141.

¹⁵⁸ Letter, *The Englishman*, April 23 1883.

¹⁵⁹ Letter, *The Englishman*, April 21 1883.

¹⁶⁰ Dr R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book*, p8.

attributed to Indian servants. Rather than being confined to servants however, they were cited as evidence of inherent defects in Indian native character. For example, 'A Lady Resident' claimed from her experience with servants that 'a native never speaks the truth except by accident, and really this is hardly an exaggeration'.¹⁶¹ Similarly, Dr Riddell generalised from a discussion of servant character, claiming that '[c]unning and double-dealing characterise the Native and are some of his principal faults'.¹⁶² Florence Marryat went further, claiming that '[b]oth men and women are inveterate liars and it is impossible to place dependence on anything that they say'.¹⁶³

It is important to note that such generalisations were not always negative. Many employers testify in letters and manuals to servants' loyalty and in particular, to their kindness when their employers fell ill. Dr Riddell wrote that '[i]n sickness they will take the greatest care of you, doing for you services that a European seldom ever will', while Lady Resident claimed the 'extreme lightness and delicacy of touch which characterizes the native, makes the ayah often a very great comfort'. Bertie Maynard wrote in a letter home that he found 'the servants very good when one is at all unwell'.¹⁶⁴

Some writers even spoke out against Indian servants' poor reputation. The author of *Indian Outfits* suggested that 'grumbling against servants is a national fault amongst us' and claimed that new arrivals in India 'will be told that natives are everything that is bad and cannot be trusted'.¹⁶⁵ However, she advised that she had 'seen a good deal of native servants, and I know no reason why, from my experience of them, they should not be trusted quite as much as others of their class'.¹⁶⁶ Mrs Eliot James similarly claimed that new arrivals in India would be led to 'believe that, of all the race of servants, Indian ones are undoubtedly the worst' but advises her readers not to 'judge too hastily'.¹⁶⁷ In her view 'we might have been singularly fortunate in our dependents. Certainly I am inclined to think – nay more, I firmly believe – that the native race are grossly belied'.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, despite her defence of Indian servants Mrs Eliot James still equates 'the native race' with 'the race of

¹⁶¹ [Maud Diver] 'A Lady Resident', *The Englishwoman in India*, p59.

¹⁶² Dr R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book*, p9.

¹⁶³ Florence Marryat, "Gup" *Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character*, p36.

¹⁶⁴ Dr R. Riddell, *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book*, p8; [Maud Diver] 'A Lady Resident', *The Englishwoman in India*, p53; Katherine Lethbridge (ed.) *Letters from East and West*, p 24.

¹⁶⁵ An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments*, p49; p46.

¹⁶⁶ An Anglo-Indian, *Indian Outfits and Establishments*, p47.

¹⁶⁷ Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management*, p43.

¹⁶⁸ Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management*, p43.

servants', suggesting that she doesn't think of Indians in any other capacity and elsewhere in her book she reinstates the prejudice that native servants 'tell stories' because 'tis their nature to'.¹⁶⁹

By generalizing pejoratively about Indian character from their experience as mistresses of Indian servants, Anglo-Indian women could make a claim to personal authority over their households. They could also claim agency in the imperial venture, implicitly endorsing the moral legitimacy of British colonialism as progress towards civilisation. However, alongside generalizations, there were variations in attitudes towards Indians. Although generalized and negative ideas abounded and experience interacted with public discourse to reinforce them, encounters with Indian servants being part of this experience, I feel it is simplistic to suggest that a widely disseminated and effective idea of 'the Indian in general' was drawn from memsahibs' relationship with their servants. As I hope I have indicated, within a broad context in which anything English was considered to be superior to anything Indian, there were variations and contradictions in responses to Indians, including servants. Certainly there were general ideas about Indian servants that interacted with ideas about 'native character', but the one did not necessarily produce the other.

The relationship between servants and employers was fraught with tension. Even employers who valued and defended Indian servants evidenced some prejudices, which were similar to those expressed by others who apparently hated their servants. Elizabeth Collingham has suggested that the new attitude of the British towards India diverged into two behavioural trends – put crudely, the conciliatory and the condemnatory.¹⁷⁰ However, I would argue that this distinction oversimplifies the responses of Englishmen and women to Indians. One of the distinctive features of the writings of Anglo-Indians on India is the variability of their responses to their Indian servants, even while references are made to a homogeneous 'native character' in the descriptions of servants. For example, writers of manuals and letters often testified to the general dishonesty of Indian servants and then recommended some of them for their trustworthiness. Anglo-Indians were aware of such variability and new arrivals could be confused by the inconsistency in the advice they received. Mary Hobhouse wrote in a letter that 'Mr C's dictum as to these servants is 'Trust them entirely and look into nothing yourself'; and the same evening Mr W. said to me, 'look into

¹⁶⁹ Mrs Eliot James, *Indian Household Management*, p43.

¹⁷⁰ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, pp56 – 59.

everything; be firm and patient – never indulgent’’.¹⁷¹ Shortly after her arrival in India, Anne Wilson also noted the range of opinion, and tentatively drew her own general conclusion: ‘Servants differ greatly in different parts of the country, and their employers’ opinions of them as a class vary as widely, ranging from enthusiasm to despair. Take them as a whole, I think I find them as yet distinctly trying’.¹⁷²

I would suggest that the dependence of Englishwomen, particularly those white women living isolated lives in the *mofussil*, on their Indian servants, and the inscrutability of the culture to which those servants belonged was a source of confusion for employers in India. Despite the derogatory reductionism which writers employed to justify putative English superiority, the ambivalence of their writings bears witness to such confusion. The dark skin of Indian servants, their caste system, their habit of squatting and sleeping in the afternoon, their ‘oriental’ dress, their language, their gender; such features contributed to an ambivalent idea of Indian character. ‘I realise that I am face to face with a sphinx who is not dumb, but who remains an eternal enigma’ wrote Anne Wilson revealingly in one of her letters home.¹⁷³ The writers of letters and manuals interpreted what they saw of their servants in the context of a country that mystified them, and thus produced ambivalent, racialised notions of the Indian character for an English readership. Employers’ ambivalence towards their servants is a concern of the following chapter, which considers what went on ‘behind closed doors’ in households in England in the nineteenth century.

¹⁷¹ Mary Hobhouse, *Letters from India*, p49.

¹⁷² Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, pp10 –11.

¹⁷³ Lady Wilson (Anne C. Macleod) *Letters from India*, p87.

Chapter 3

Behind closed doors: the operation of the servant-employer relationship in the English private sphere

Running a household in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even a modest one, took considerable work. Servants' labour was essential to the smooth functioning of a huge number of households, from the aristocratic country pile to the simple farmhouse, and from the upper middle-class townhouse to the humbler artisan's home. As Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink and Holden have written 'the majority of the population had the experience of either having been 'in service' [or] living in a household with servants'.¹ This was particularly true for women, who were designated the custodians of the domestic sphere in the nineteenth century. As was discussed in chapter one, domestic service was the largest employer of women throughout our period, and the second largest employer of men and women after agricultural labour. The relation between servant and master and/or mistress was fundamental within the Victorian social world.

Servants and their employers conducted their relations within households in ways that followed broad conventions linked to status, but there were important variations from household to household. While the law set out basic principles for an employer's responsibilities and advice manuals outlined rules of conduct for employer/servant relations, the way the relationship actually operated within homes was varied. A range of factors interacted to influence how servant/employer relations and obligations were differently structured within households across the period. These factors included the social status and gender of the employer, the gender of the servant, the age of the servant, the number of servants in the household, the location of the household, the architecture of the household, wider discourses relating to servant-employer relations and perhaps most importantly the personal proclivities of the employer. However, despite variation broad themes do emerge. The unique intimacy and mutual dependence of the relationship between servants and their employers produced not only the variation in experience but also the similarities across households. Certain areas of tension surface and resurface in memoirs and

¹ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, p158.

letters throughout the period, and are the result of asymmetries of power and knowledge embedded within the servant-employer relationship. It is the private side of this relationship with which this chapter is concerned.

The master-servant relationship had long been an intrinsic part of the English social world. However, the late nineteenth century saw a shift in the social certainties that had underpinned its structure. Franchise extensions in 1867 and 1884 responded to claims to masculinity, morality, property in labour, independence and rights to citizenship articulated by working-class men. Feminists and socialists, amongst others, challenged pre-existing notions of social hierarchy and its meanings, using the expanding press to reach increasingly literate audiences, thanks to the late nineteenth century expansion of educational provision. Their discursive challenges to normative class and gender structures prompted shifts in liberal and conservative political ideologies, as party politics adapted to compete for millions of new votes. Developments in science, the publication of the findings of social investigators and the demands of imperial wars highlighted health, poverty and the fitness of the British race as issues of public concern. Alternative employments began to become available for increasingly educated young lower- and working-class men and women, both in Britain and in its expanding empire. Political and social theorists developed new ideas about work, race, gender relations, class and social responsibility. Through these changes, British society developed new social hierarchies.

The writers of advice manuals, journal and newspaper articles and novels, as well as public speakers and local gossips, articulated refined ideas about what constituted propriety and respectability in the second half of the 19th century. These ideas were associated with the rules of ‘Society’, but had an impact well beyond its boundaries. Membership of ‘Society’ was structured by formalized behaviours such as the rituals of calling, At Home and chaperonage.² These rules embodied the belief that a certain social order was central to civilization. Servants’ work was central to the performance of such rituals. Servants maintained the spaces and the ‘elaborate physical plant’ in and with which the rituals took place.³ Servants were also active in the execution of social rituals as they ferried cards between callers and so on. Furthermore, servants’

² See Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles. Society Etiquette and the Season* (The Cresset Library, 1986) Chapter 3.

³ See Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles*, p88.

position as excluded observers of their employers' elaborate social performance enhanced both their difference and their employers' sense of the moral value of their own behaviour, in that observance of it taught the servants about respectability.

The wider articulation of ideas about respectability and propriety, such as the notion that one should keep to a strict timetable for meal times, work times, social times and so on, constituted an ongoing effort to consolidate new social hierarchies in a period of rapid social change. Defining appropriate relations between servants and employers was a functional part of this process. However, the interdependence that characterised the relationships between servants and their employers complicated distinctions of status difference, even while the overt meanings and the physical aspects of the servant-employer relationship pointed towards the closure of social boundaries. This was because the master-servant relationship involved work and intimacies that implicitly challenged structures of social difference. The servant was the outsider in the family home. The servant was the lower-class resident of a middle-class house. She worked in the sacred domestic sphere for a wage. She was an individual with a character who performed personal tasks for her employer and upon whom her employers depended. All these differences were dependent on culturally constructed social categories, which were subject to change over time.

Defined as dependents in a range of discourses from the legal to the religious, servants' difference from the families whose lives they maintained was crucial within the structure of the relationship. Servants' difference was given meaning through the concrete practices of their employment – the work they did day in and day out - and through the operation of certain ideas, rituals and behaviours connected with that work. Nonetheless, it was in the constant effort to achieve the closure of social boundaries through enforcing difference of dress, differences in movement and behaviour that employers' anxiety towards their servants was most visible. It was in the areas where the limits of acceptable behaviour for servants were defined, that the artificiality of their difference, and deference, was most psychologically challenging. Tensions echo in the records left by both servants and employers over issues of dress, of honesty, of childcare, of obedience, of sociability, of secrets. This is not to say that servants could not have genuinely affectionate or straightforward relationships with their employers, but that the dynamics of power and dependence that characterised the relationship tended to complicate it.

As Davidoff *et al* have argued, it is at times hard to precisely define which direction dependence flowed in some relationships between servants and employers, and where the boundaries of family inclusion lay.⁴ Categorical ambiguities were exactly what employers were trying to address in the insistence on behavioural rituals that distinctly differentiated between family member and family employee. Rituals exist to substitute tangible differences for intangible similarities. Behavioural rituals, learned from childhood by both employer and servant, situated the servant and employer in a specific kind of relationship. The structure of this relationship was in line with wider thinking about gender and class relations and served the purpose of shoring up not only the employer's individual authority but also that of the class she/he saw herself/himself belonging to, at the same time bolstering the security of that belonging.

As the nineteenth century progressed the separation of work from home, the withdrawal of women from labour, even within the home and the drawing of tighter boundaries around who was, and who was not, to be included in the family were fundamental features of the development of a definitively middle class ideal of respectable domesticity. The ideology of separate spheres discussed in chapter one gave moral weight to the process by which domestic life was secluded. Within this ideology home became 'the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division', clearly distinguished from the busy and brutal outside world.⁵ Home was the site of the family – increasingly narrowly defined – which became ideally a morally, rather than economically productive unit.

The moral ideology of separate spheres intertwined with more prosaic motivations behind the separation of private and public spheres. The exclusivity of the notion of privacy was linked to affluence. Only the financially successful could really afford to seclude their family through devices such as designating certain rooms for entertaining, or using servants to undertake domestic labour and to mediate between family members and guests or tradespeople or lower servants.⁶ For a lot of families strictly separate spheres remained little more than an ideal to aspire to. However, there were other ways through which the worlds of labour, money, dirt, disorder and

⁴ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, p161.

⁵ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 1864 (pocket edn, London, 1906).

⁶ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p24.

sweat could be differentiated from the ‘temple of the hearth’, not least through the architectural organisation of a house. Although in 1851 many more middle class families lived over the shop or right next to their place of work than did not, the trend towards a separation of working from family life was clear.⁷ In the second half of the nineteenth century, houses were increasingly designed to suit domestic, rather than business, purposes, with rooms designated for specific activities such as entertaining, dressing, eating and so on.⁸ A part of this process was the shift towards employing servants to do the work that in earlier decades might have been done by kin.

The domestic house became more commonly a place of conspicuous consumption, the site of the display of affluence that secured and denoted a family’s social status within a carefully graded hierarchy. The need to display wealth in order to establish social status resulted in a proliferation of furnishings, decorations, trinkets, valuables and even rooms within houses, all of which required considerable labour to be kept clean and tidy according to the dictates of ‘respectability’. This display was not only for the benefit of visitors to the house, but also reflected the family’s status back to its members. Portraits and large ornate mirrors in which the family sat surrounded by the paraphernalia of gentility literally served this purpose.

Embedded in the expulsion of, or at least effort to fence off, working from domestic life was the powerful notion that the domestic sphere was rightly the preserve of women who should have as little to do with earning or labour (excluding childbirth) as the family could afford. Respectable middle-class masculinity in the nineteenth century necessitated an entirely dependent wife and family. A non-earning wife indicated an affluent family and a family in which the wife could delegate household work entirely to servants was doing very nicely indeed. Affluence, and the domestic lifestyle it afforded, underpinned class status, as the advice book writer Sarah Ellis indicated when she stated that ‘gentlemen may employ their hours of business in almost any degrading occupation and, if they have the means of supporting a respectable establishment at home, may be gentlemen still’.⁹

The link between affluence, domesticity, class and gender also resulted in the definition of degrees of femininity. The ideally domesticated mistress took on a function that the ideology, constructing her role as ‘Angel of the House’ to use

⁷ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes*, pp231-2.

⁸ Vanessa Parker, *The English House in the Nineteenth Century* (Historical Association pamphlet, 1970) p20; John Tosh, *A Man’s Place*, p21.

⁹ Sarah Ellis, *The Women of England* (London, 1839) p331.

Coventry Patmore's trite phrase, has failed to disguise. As Davidoff has written, 'the wife-mother-house-mistress image often merged with the physical symbol of the house so that it became difficult to visualize the woman as having a separate identity from the house; in a sense she *became* the house'.¹⁰ To serve this illustrative function, both mistress and home ideally should be free from the polluting taint of work and its associated dirt and disorder. Ladylike lily-white hands could only belong to those women who didn't use them for cleaning, cookery and childcare. In this way domesticity became a prism through which femininity was classed and classing. Although the ideal was hard to achieve, within a culture that linked affluence to morality and rights to status, the need to approximate the ideal could be pressing, particularly for those who felt the insecurity of their status. However, the private and public spheres could never be kept absolutely separate. The 'outside' world of labour, money and dirt got into even the most secluded households, usually through the back door via the medium employed specifically to keep it at bay – domestic servants.

Hiring and the cash nexus

Despite, or rather, because of the gendered and classed distinction between the domestic and outside worlds, paid work was important within a middle-class home. All the trappings of respectable domesticity, not least the filth it produced, required constant attention. If the mistress would be socially compromised by such work, and the master emasculated by it, then the labour of domestic servants was a necessity, not only materially to maintain a household, but also to protect servant employers from the unpleasantness of life in a rarefied environment that suited their social pretensions.¹¹ Employing a domestic servant was seen by many who desired to be thought of as middle-class as a way of indicating such status. Lilian Westall remembered that in her first 'place' her employers 'didn't seem to have much money themselves; he was a clerk of some sort, but they liked the idea of having a 'nurse-maid' and made me buy a cap, collar, cuffs and an apron. Then the mistress took me to have a photograph taken with the children grouped around me'.¹² Servants occupying certain roles indicated degrees of status difference within the 'middle-class' category. For example, as with *jhampannies* in India, as the nineteenth century

¹⁰ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p52.

¹¹ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p24.

¹² Lilian Westall in John Burnett (ed.) *Useful Toil*, p216.

progressed, liveried footman tended to occupy an ornamental rather than a functional role. According to John Burnett ‘when streets became safer and transport easier in Victorian times the footman’s place became very much a sinecure and he degenerated into an ornamental parasite’.¹³ Certainly Louisa Bain seems to have seen the employment of a footman as a snobbishly ostentatious display of status, noting in her diary in the summer of 1869 that

This afternoon to our astonishment we had a visit from Mrs Smith-Bosanquet: what could have possessed her to show us such an uncalled for civility? She made herself very agreeable, and we were amused by her footman setting open our gate, but the coachman doubted whether the drive would accommodate anything so sublime as one of the Squire’s carriages, so she had to walk up to the door.¹⁴

The systems by which servants came to their places were largely informal. Though respectable and reliable registry offices for servants did exist, these tended to be seen as a last resort by potential employers as they carried a reputation for attracting the lowest quality of servant, or being a front for pimps.¹⁵ Servants and employers did advertise in newspapers in increasing numbers as the century progressed and many employers hired girls from institutions such as workhouses, orphanages and industrial schools – the ‘bargain basements for servants in the nineteenth century’.¹⁶ However, diaries, letters, autobiographies and remembrances suggest that it was also very common for servants and employers to find each other through personal networks. Edith Hanran knew her first employers because ‘[a]ll my sisters – four sisters – went to the same job when they first left school’.¹⁷ Hannah Cullwick found a place on one occasion because a fellow servant, Ellen, ‘knew of a couple just married & on their tour for a month as wanted two servants - the sister was to engage ‘em’.¹⁸ Jane Carlyle sometimes found girls through her friends, claiming on one occasion to be ‘under great obligations to Geraldine’s old Miss Darby, for having hunted up this girl and taken much trouble to ‘suit me’ in a situation that was really very desolate, my

¹³ John Burnett (ed.) *Useful Toil*, p14.

¹⁴ Louisa Bain’s Diary, August 14 1869, in James. S. Bain, *A Bookseller Looks Back. The Story of the Bains* (London, 1940).

¹⁵ Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, pp 47-48.

¹⁶ Prochaska, F.K ‘Female Philanthropy and Domestic Service in Victorian England’ p82.

¹⁷ Edith Hanran, interviewed by Paul and Thea Thompson for ‘Family Life and Work Experience before 1918’, Essex University Oral Archive.

¹⁸ ‘Hannah’s Places’ Box 98 (14) Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

state of weakness at the time considered'.¹⁹ On another occasion Jane engaged 'a little girl of the neighbourhood...She is known to me as an honest, truthful, industrious little girl'.²⁰

Clergymen and tradespeople could also be useful in communicating information about places between servants and employers.²¹ Hannah Cullwick described meeting a potential employer at 'a Revd Clark's, who turns out to be a friend of Mr Borland's'.²² Indeed, in a letter to the *Times* in 1863 a 'Clergyman's Wife' argued that 'clergymen, school teachers, &c' had a social responsibility to 'impress upon the young the advantages of service and the miseries of improvident marriages'.²³ In such a formulation service became more than a job: it was the means by which young working-class girls could be saved from themselves.

The demands of the domestic ideal in which the middle-class family lived in cosy seclusion necessitated servants' segregation from the rest of the household. Because servants worked, they contradicted the ideology that dictated that respectable middle-class femininity and the domestic sphere should be defined by freedom from the taint of work and the cash nexus. There were ways in which the effect of this taint could be minimized in relation to the employment of domestic servants. If married, the master of the house was responsible for hiring and firing servants; establishing or ending a contract with an individual was necessarily his responsibility for both legal and ideological reasons. However, it was usually the mistress of the house who determined when and which servants were engaged or dismissed. This separation of duties ensured that the lady of the house remained unsullied by the 'business' of hiring and firing, while the master did not need to concern himself with the 'feminine' issues of domestic management. Also, some commentators suggested that employing servants was a philanthropic act: mistresses were constructed as having 'a duty towards them of helping them to become *useful* women'²⁴. This was a duty essential not only to the future welfare of the servants themselves, but also to 'the

¹⁹ Letter to Thomas Carlyle, 2 September 1850 in J.A. Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol II (London, 1883) pp129–130.

²⁰ Letter to Mrs Russell, 20 October 1862 in J.A. Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol III, p131.

²¹ Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Maidservant*, pp44–45.

²² 'A Servant's Life: 1866-1872' Box 98 (17) Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

²³ 'A Clergyman's Wife', Letter, *The Times*, 30 November 1863, p10.

²⁴ Lady Baker, *Our Responsibilities and Difficulties as Mistresses of Young Servants* (London, 1887) p5.

comfort and well-being of our whole domestic life, which in England lies so much within doors'²⁵. This formulation appears to have been specific to the metropole. I have seen no evidence of servant employing being constructed as a philanthropic act of national significance in India. Rather, managing an Anglo-Indian household was constructed as part of the process by which the British consolidated their imperial power through control of the native. Nevertheless, in both cases, the power dynamic of the servant-employer relationship was crucial in situating subordinates, whether racial or class, endorsing the authority of their 'superiors' for a greater purpose – national or imperial security.

The formulation of servant-employing as philanthropic duty elided the fact that service constituted paid labour within the home.²⁶ Jane Carlyle preferred to think that her servants cared for her out of a natural sense of respect and love rather than because they were paid. In one letter to her husband she described being tempted to re-engage a favourite, though incompetent, servant: 'I am glad ...that I had the fortitude to resist her tears and her request to be taken back as cook...Still it is gratifying to feel that one's kindness to the girl has not been all lost on her, for she really loves us both passionately'.²⁷ In another letter, she claimed that 'my maid nurses me with an alacrity and kindness that could not be bought with any money'.²⁸ Though it is unlikely that the maid would have been such a good nurse if she were unpaid, her acting in the capacity of nurse answers a need in Jane that necessarily could not be included in the terms of a contract. Jane's requirements of her servants included an unspoken request that they serve not only her physical, but also her emotional demands. In a sense, Jane's servants were paid to pretend they weren't paid.

Domestic servants were engaged to perform tasks for which they received remuneration. The gender division of labour in dealing with this was usually clear-cut. In her diary Louisa Bain, the wife of a London bookseller discussed the problem of her servants' wages:

²⁵ A Mistress and A Mother, *At Home* (London, 1874) p3.

²⁶ This was problematic for menservants' masculinity. For menservants, their status as dependents prevented them from completely achieving adult male status as their exclusion from franchise extensions in the late nineteenth century indicated.

²⁷ Letter to Thomas Carlyle, 17 September 1860 in J.A. Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol III, p61.

²⁸ Letter to Thomas Carlyle, 24 September 1847 in J.A. Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol II, p9.

This evening have had a talk with my maids, Carah and Emma, and find that they neither of them wish to leave me, but think the wages so much less than they could have elsewhere. Emma had £12 in her last place and Carah has been offered £16, while I only give ten and twelve guineas. As I know Papa will not give more I propose allowing them ¼ lb. of tea weekly, this will be equal to £1:6:0d. per annum each, and with sugar, and 1/-s. per week Beer money which they have always had, will bring their wages up to what they will be content with, so I hope we shall have no change till they both marry.²⁹

Mrs Bain is in a position where it is up to her to negotiate with her servants, but within financial parameters set by her husband (Papa). Mrs Bain manages the process by which the servants remuneration is arranged, but is unable to alter the cash payment they receive other than through substituting goods for cash. Though it was not unusual for servants' wages to be supplemented in this way, Mrs Bain has no control over the servants' actual wage, despite the fact she is clearly balancing the household budget carefully and perhaps has greater knowledge of its workings and the demands on it than her husband. It was not ideal for a middle-class wife or daughter to be involved in the cash nexus in the home, although of course many women were. For Mrs Bain, as a married 'lady', to have dealt directly with the cash payment of servants' wages was inappropriate to her class and gender status. However, Mrs Bain was able to pay her servants 'in kind', in a manner in which they might have been more commonly remunerated for their work fifty years earlier. In Mrs Bain's case, we may be seeing evidence of the tension caused by the transition to different, capital based kinds of payment relations, with older forms of payment persisting under the guise of men controlling money. This change matched the shift towards more formalised employer-servant relationships in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The issue of commissions and perquisites was a tricky one for nineteenth century servant employers. Seen as a traditional entitlement by servants, employers often complained that it constituted theft. Indeed, in February 1865 there was 'considerable excitement in Leeds, chiefly among the working classes of various grades, owing to a female servant having been sent to the borough gaol and imprisoned therein for having purloined some 2lb of dripping...when Mrs Chorley [her mistress] charged her with purloining the dripping she claimed it as her perquisite'. Eliza Stafford, the

²⁹ Louisa Bain's Diary, 31 January 1863, in James. S. Bain, *A Bookseller Looks Back. The Story of the Bains*.

cook in question, became a working-class heroine. According to *The Times*, while Dr Chorley was ‘frequently mobbed in the streets, and was assailed with vituperative exclamations of a threatening character...[l]arge placards were posted throughout the town, calling upon the public to give Mrs Stafford a joyous oration when she came out of gaol’. In the end, on leaving the gaol, Mrs Stafford slipped away to Scarborough at an earlier hour than expected by the crowd, so instead they went to Dr Chorley’s house ‘and one of them carried a long pole, at the top of which was fixed a doctor’s bottle and an old dripping pan’.³⁰ A riot ensued at which several of the demonstrators were trampled and a policeman broke his wrist. In this case the tension over the right to a perk spread beyond the confines of the private sphere and became an issue of public and class concern.

As with Mrs Bain’s method of paying her servants in kind, Eliza Stafford’s case points to the existence of an economy which did not revolve around cash and which the local community felt bound to defend. The furore over Eliza Stafford’s case shows how shifts in ideas about economic relations could create tension around notions of appropriate behaviours for servants and their employers, and how these tensions could resonate with wider class antagonisms.

Drudgery, dependence and the tensions of intimacy

The following sections consider the tension between the variable demands made on servants by their employers and servants’ ideas about the limits of acceptable expectation. These sections draw on evidence from a range of households: from households with a single servant, to households employing two or three servants, to households with staffs numbering twenty or more. It seems important to stress that it was only in the houses of the very wealthy that a large domestic staff was employed. The vast majority of households rarely employed more than three servants and frequently less than that. Clearly none of these households can be taken as representative of generalities of experience. Rather, my aim is to illustrate the way in which the intimacy of the servant-employer relationship engendered varied possibilities for the conduct of employer-servant relations.

³⁰ 23 Feb 1865, *The Times*.

Drudgery

19th century English households were organised in accordance with social rules that were understood as underpinning ‘civilization’. These rules and rituals were not questioned; observing them constituted a duty, not a personal choice. Elaborated ceremonial behaviours surrounded major life events such as birth, marriage and death, but also the more quotidian routines of calling and dining. As was mentioned earlier in this Chapter, servants were central to the performance of all these rituals. For example, servants admitted callers to the house, announced guests in order of precedence, and used specific manners in serving meals. Servants cleaned and ordered the spaces in which their employers observed rituals both social and personal, such as the parlour, the dining room and the bathroom. The material work servants did gave their employers the time and appropriate space to act their own parts in the social play.

The link between the rules and rituals structuring ‘Society’ and ideas about what constituted ‘civilization’ justified an elaboration of daily living that produced much domestic work for servants. Household work in our period was highly labour intensive and required strength and stamina. As Leonore Davidoff and Ruth Hawthorn have shown, a jug of bath water weighed around 30lbs and would often have been carried up many flights of stairs.³¹ Without the modern appliances we have come to take for granted today, the tasks of scrubbing floors, beating carpets, blackleading stoves, cleaning windows, preparing food, hauling coal and water up and down stairs, tending fires and polishing wood, silver and brass, not to mention being constantly available to the family to run errands, answer doors and perform any other personal services they considered necessary could constitute drudgery indeed.

For the maids-of-all-work, or general servants – by far the most numerous category of servant throughout our period – who frequently worked alone in households up and down the country, the work could be backbreaking. General servants were expected to perform all the formal duties and chores that in a larger household might be performed by two or three servants, with only the occasional assistance of a charwoman or ‘step-girl’, if that.³² The following extract from the diary of Hannah Cullwick, which describes a day in her life as a maid-of-all-work in

³¹ Leonore Davidoff and Ruth Hawthorn, *A Day in the Life of a Victorian Domestic Servant*, p78

³² Frank E. Huggett, *Life Below Stairs*, p106.

1860 gives some indication as to how hard general servants were expected to work, even in houses where more than one servant might be employed. Hannah would usually rise at around 6.30 am and rarely got to bed before 11pm:

Saturday 14 July Opened the shutters & lighted the kitchen fire. Shook my sooty things in the dusthole & emptied the soot there. Swept & dusted the rooms & the hall. Laid the hearth & got breakfast up. Clean'd 2 pairs of boots. Made the beds & emptied the slops. Clean'd & wash'd the breakfast things up. Clean'd the plate; clean'd the knives & got dinner up. Clean'd away. Clean'd the kitchen up; unpack'd a hamper. Took two chickens to Mrs Brewer's & brought the message back. Made a tart & pick'd & gutted two ducks & roasted them. Clean'd the steps & flags on my knees. Wash'd up in the scullery. Clean'd the pantry on my knees & scour'd the tables. Scrubbed the flags around the house & clean'd the window sills. Got tea at 9 for the master & Mrs Warwick in my dirt, but Ann carried it up. Clean'd the privy & passage & scullery floor on my knees. Wash'd the dog & clean'd the sinks down.³³

Hannah had been doing heavy physical work since the age of twelve. At the age of thirty she stood almost 5 feet eight inches tall, weighed eleven stone and the girth around the bicep of her right arm was thirteen and three quarter inches, a quarter inch thicker than the girth of her neck.³⁴

The work required of servants could vary widely. It is likely that this added to the sense of the relation between servant and mistress or master as being of a very different order from that between employees and employers in other trades and professions. There were no fixed hours and for many mistresses and masters of smaller households, no fixed limits to the work expected of a servant. In farming households, the servants were often expected to work in the dairy. One Norfolk servant remembered having to help with the butter making, standing on a stool because she was too small to reach the churn, after which she

had to wash up all the pans...It was then getting well into the afternoon, and it was time for their tea and mine. I got their tea ready in the dining-room and mine in the kitchen. When I had finished tea and washed up, there were faggots of sticks to get for the fire in the morning. Then

³³ '1860' Box 98 (13) Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

³⁴ 'Hannah Cullwick. Servant of all work. Her dimensions at the age of thirty'. Box 110 (18) Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

I had to go all round the fields to collect the eggs, then see they were all clean and rolled in paper to take to the market.³⁵

Similarly, Catherine Bailey's day began at 6am with milk deliveries. After she had had a cup of tea she 'had to take the milk out, in cans, round the village green. Cold weather, frosty, snow, or whatever it was, I had to go...Not in a big hand cart, or anything, they were the milk cans. Used to cut my poor little fingers'.³⁶ Catherine was employed in the household of a butcher around the turn of the century, and alongside her usual cleaning, dairy and childcare duties which filled her day until 9 pm, she was also required to 'make pork cheese, at 10, 12 o'clock at night, for the butchers, and the lard'.³⁷

Though the employment of residential indoor menservants was in long-term decline in England throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, a significant number of households did employ males in a single-handed capacity alongside female servants, though their numbers were far less than in India, where service was dominated by men. Kitchen-boys, foot-boys or hall-boys were at the bottom of the male servant hierarchy and might be expected to undertake a range of tasks such as cleaning boots and waiting on other servants and the family. Of his days as a foot-boy in a local squire's house in 1870 William Lanceley remembered he had to rise at 6am and

light the servants' hall fire, clean the young ladies' boots, the butler's, housekeeper's, cook's and ladies'-maids', often twenty pairs altogether, trim the lamps (I had thirty-five to look after, there being no gas or electric light in the district in those days), and all this had to be got through by 7.30; then lay up the hall breakfast, get it in, and clear up afterwards...My day's work followed on with cleaning knives, house-keeper's room, silver, windows, and mirrors; lay up the servant's hall dinner; get it in and out and wash up the things, except dishes and plates; help to carry up luncheon; wash up in the pantry; carry up the dinner to the dining-room and, when extra people dined, wait at table; lay up the servants' hall supper; clear it out and wash up. This brought bedtime after a day's work of sixteen hours.³⁸

³⁵ Anon, 'My First Job', essay kept at Essex County Record Office quoted in Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p60.

³⁶ Catherine Bailey, interviewed by Paul and Thea Thompson for 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918', Essex University Oral Archive.

³⁷ Catherine Bailey, 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918'.

³⁸ William Lanceley, *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* (London, 1925) in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p187.

In some households an older single-handed male servant might be kept alongside female servants. Aged 30, William Tayler said in the 1830s of his place with the widow Mrs Prinsep that he was ‘the only manservant kept here’ though there were also ‘three maidservants, very good quiet sort of bodys’.³⁹ Such a servant could combine the roles of footman and butler.⁴⁰ William Tayler, though entitled ‘footman’, did such work in the Prinsep household – alongside cleaning knives and taking care of the lamps he ‘opned the door when any visitor came...layed the cloth for dinner, took the dinner up at six o’clock, waited at dinner’ and accompanied his mistress when she went out. He seemed generally happy with his position, but still expressed a desire for ‘rather more liberty’, describing a servant’s life as being ‘something like that of a bird shut up in a cage. The bird is well housed and well fed but is deprived of liberty, and liberty is the dearest and sweetest object of all Englishmen’.⁴¹ Perhaps because of, and for, his gender security, William Tayler happily told his female employers off when he felt they made unreasonable demands; in one diary entry he writes:

Been out with the carriage this afternoon with Miss P. She kept me out longer than she aught to of done, therefore I gave her a little row for it. I hope it will do her good. I served the old lady the same way the other day and it did her a deal of good, and I have no doubt that it will act the same in this case.⁴²

It is important to acknowledge that William Tayler wrote his diary in 1837, earlier than most of the other servants evidenced in this chapter. The liberty he took in chastising his employer may have been unusual and may have been because his employer was a woman. It is hard to imagine William Lanceley, who described being six months in one master’s employ ‘before he [the master] spoke to me [Lanceley]’, telling his employer off.⁴³ However, Tayler’s experience does indicate the variable possibilities for servant’s self-expression in the servant-employer relationship.

³⁹ Jan 31st 1837 in Dorothy Wise (ed.) *Diary of William Tayler, Footman, 1837* (London, 1962) extract in John Burnett, *Useful Toil*, pp175-6.

⁴⁰ Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p88.

⁴¹ December 30th 1837 in Dorothy Wise (ed.) *Diary of William Tayler, Footman, 1837*, extract in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p185.

⁴² May nineteenth 1837 in Dorothy Wise (ed.) *Diary of William Tayler, Footman, 1837*, extract in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p182.

⁴³ William Lanceley, *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p189.

Dependence and independence

The fact that there were technically no limits to what a master or mistress could demand of a servant meant that tensions often arose over employers' expectations. Servants had little formal bargaining power but as many mistresses were aware, they had the ability to disrupt a household very effectively if they felt their employers had gone too far in their demands.

The division of roles between servants could lead to frustration when a servant was required to do anything extraneous to his or her usual duties. Jane Carlyle complained about this after helping Lady Ashburton to dress some dolls, which were to be gifts for local children at Christmastime in 1851:

The very footmen won't *carry the dolls* backwards and forwards! When told to bring one they simply disappear and no doll comes!- I remarked on this with some impatience yesterday, and Lady A. answered, "Perfectly true, Mrs Carlyle – they *won't bring the doll!* – I know it as well as you do – but what would you have me do? – turn all the servants men and women out of the house on account of these dolls? For *it would* come to *that* – if I made a point of their *doing anything in the doll line!* Perhaps it would be the right thing to do – but then what should we do next week without servants when all the company come?" Such is the slavery the grandest people live under *to what they call* their "*inferiors*." ⁴⁴

The phrase 'to what they call their inferiors' suggests Jane recognises the superficiality of servants' deference, while the use of the word 'slavery' points towards the potentially powerless dependence of employers on their servants. It is important to note that Jane Carlyle was ambivalent to the point of jealousy about Lady Ashburton, with whom Thomas Carlyle was fascinated. In a letter to Helen Welsh Jane wrote bitterly that 'her Ladyship's will is become the law of this house! – even her *whims* are as imperative as the ten commandments!'⁴⁵ In the letter to Mrs Russell quoted above, Jane uses her opinion of Lady Ashburton's relationship to her servants as a way of having a dig at Lady Ashburton herself. The unsaid implication is that the less grand Jane is not enslaved to the whim of her domestics. In this sense

⁴⁴ Letter 6 December 1851 in Leonard Huxley (ed.) *Jane Welsh Carlyle: Letters to her Family, 1839-1863* (London, 1924) pp353-4.

⁴⁵ Jane Carlyle, Letter 7 November 1846 in Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (Cambridge, 1977) p227.

Jane and Lady Ashburton's different relationships with their servants were a part of the way Jane understood the relationship between herself and Lady Ashburton.

Some people appear to have thought that refusals by servants to undertake certain tasks were the result of a kind of snobbery on the part of servants. William Lanceley certainly expressed snobbish attitudes in his memoir, writing that there was 'a quotation among old servants on the good breeding of the old aristocracy' which ran 'You may break, you may shatter the vase as you will/But the scent of roses will cling to it still'. Another quotation described 'our new society': 'You may rub up and polish and dress as you will/But the style of the plebian clings to him still'.⁴⁶ Lanceley had worked up through the ranks of service in upper class households and his prejudices probably reflected those of his employers. But it also seems likely that this was part of the way in which he invested meaning in work that was taken for granted and even demeaned within wider society. As Hannah Cullwick wrote in 1864: 'the lowest work is honourable in itself & the...drudge is honourable too...But how often poor servants have to hear the scorn & harsh words & proud looks from them above her which to my mind is very wicked & unkind & certainly most disheartening to a young wench'.⁴⁷

In Lanceley's quotations, the inability of 'new society' to escape its distasteful 'plebian' origins, while 'good breeding' would always smell of roses to a servant's experienced eye, both evinces a snobbery and a sense of power suggesting the servant stands outside this class relationship and can judge it. By distinguishing between types of employers in this way, servants assume a position as arbiters of class. Lanceley gives this quotation as a saying 'among old servants' – therefore experienced, knowledgeable servants. In both quotations the employer is represented through the metaphor of household work – it is the servant's work that disguises 'plebian' origins. In this way the servant can invest meaning, agency and independence into his position. The quotations also imply servants in 'better' households associate themselves with their employers' status, using it to endorse a service hierarchy outside the household, between households. Hannah Cullwick's diaries and accounts of her life suggest that the status of an employer might affect the value of a servant's character. At one point she describes an offer of a place being

⁴⁶William Lanceley, *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p192.

⁴⁷'A Maid of All Work's Diary 1864' Box 98 (15) Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

retracted by one would-be mistress because of the nature of Hannah's current place of employment: 'when she found it a lodging house & the Missus *not* a lady she didn't like to take me, for I got a letter saying I sh'd not suit her'.⁴⁸

Refusing to do certain jobs may also have been a way in which the work that was done by servants could be brought to their employers' notice. In the extract from Jane's letter quoted above, which describes Lady Ashburton's predicament with the dolls, Lady Ashburton acknowledged her dependence on her servants. The servants refused to do 'anything in the doll line' and that refusal made clear their necessity to their mistress 'when all the company come'. In this case servants refusing to do a job forced their mistress to contemplate the effect of bending them to her will and she realised her need for them. To avoid unpleasantness William Lanceley advised employers to 'explain as fully as possible the duties they are expected to undertake, and don't add, 'Of course, you may be called upon for some other little things'. Most servants will take that as something you don't care to speak about'.⁴⁹

Servants also gave meaning to the work they did by investing pride in a job well done. Some even saw their responsibility to the things they cared for as being as important as their responsibility to the people they served. An aged housemaid who had worked in the same household for thirty years was

always proud to relate that for twenty-five years she had been in charge of the best dinner service and nothing had been broken or chipped. She would allow no one to handle the plates and dishes, but washed and wiped them herself and she alone would carry them to the dining-room door and wait there to bring them back to the housemaid's pantry where they were washed.⁵⁰

There were several ways in which domestic servants could revenge themselves on employers they felt badly treated by. Spoiling food was one method, though it could go horribly wrong, as Eliza Smalley discovered when she put some mercury in her mistress's coffee in revenge for having been falsely accused of killing a fowl. 'I did not think it would have killed her, I only thought it would have made her badly,' Eliza told the constable who arrested her.⁵¹ One cook claimed that '[s]ervants that feel

⁴⁸ 'A Servant's Life, 1866-72' Box 98 (17) Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

⁴⁹ William Lanceley, *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p191.

⁵⁰ William Lanceley, *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p187.

⁵¹ 15 November 1850 *The Times*.

they're being put upon can make it hard in the house in various ways like not rushing to answer bells, sullen dumb insolence and petty irritations to make up for what you're not getting'.⁵² Jane Carlyle was irritated by such behaviour in one of her housemaids, who took

a position in the House which was quite preposterous; domineering towards the cook, and impertinent towards me! picking and choosing at her *work* – in fact not behaving like a *servant* at all, but like a *lady*, who, for a caprice, or a wager, or anything except wages and board, - was condescending to exercise light functions in the house, *provided* you kept her in good humour with gifts and praises.⁵³

Servants could also vote with their feet, leaving situations where they were unhappy. Catherine Bailey left her first place after a week: 'I couldn't do it, it was too heavy for me' she remembered.⁵⁴ One of Jane Carlyle's many servants, when her housekeeping skills were criticised 'declared "it was to be hoped I would get a person to keep my house cleaner than she had done; as she meant to leave that day month!"'⁵⁵ Another of Jane's servants left her in the lurch, provoking the following outburst, in which Jane expressed both her sense of powerlessness through a reference to 'a Negro eating pumpkins' and the common preference for country girls, who had a reputation for docility and obedience, as servants:

my maid Elizabeth whom I had allowed to get the upper hand with me, lead [*sic*] me such a devil of a life after Mr C's departure, that I finally convinced myself I should be better as a Negro eating pumpkins than the so-called *mistress* of that young person – and so I gave her notice to quit at the end of the month, whereupon she would not wait till the end of the month, but rushed off in a day! leaving me with no servant, a house in a most "abnormal" condition, a visitor (Miss Jewsbury) expected for some days, and my own health all "gone to smithers" – But so long as one keeps alive one struggles thro better or worse, so, now, so now I have got things straight again, or nearly so, and have realized myself a country-girl for a servant, who

⁵² Margaret Powell, *Below Stairs* (London, 1968) p156.

⁵³ Letter 20 October 1862 in Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p147.

⁵⁴ Catherine Bailey, interviewed for Paul and Thea Thompson 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918'.

⁵⁵ Letter October 1856 in Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p142.

has a temper as sweet as barley-sugar, but knows no more of cooking than an unfledged dove.
And I am trying to teach her, God help me!⁵⁶

Their employers expecting too much and taking what was done for granted riled many servants. William Lanceley highlighted this, also pointing towards the servant's possession of privileged knowledge within the household when he claimed that 'Ladies who are constantly finding fault with their servants, and pouring out their woes over five o'clock tea, would not feel flattered if they heard the remarks passed on them by the very people who so sympathized with them when relating the same'. Lanceley went on to threaten that, '[i]f overheard by servants, they, in their turn will not fail to put the establishment on the black list and warn others not to go after a vacant situation there.'⁵⁷ The possible existence of such a 'black list' was a pre-occupation of many letters from servant employers to *The Times*, as we will see in the next chapter.

Servants could also mark the limits of acceptable behaviour by leaving places where they felt their right to a personal life or expression of personal identity was overly restricted by their employer. This may have been the case with Linda Wilson, a servant in the employ of Mr Claxton, a farmer of Stoke Holy Cross, Norfolk. In February 1857 Linda absconded with 'nine 10 L notes belonging to her master, and having adopted male attire succeeded in getting quite away'.⁵⁸ The girl assumed the character of 'a "fast" young man' and 'travelled twice by railway from London to Edinburgh, and laid in a liberal supply of clothes, two church services and other books'.⁵⁹ Eventually she landed up in Great Yarmouth, where, 'still playing the part she had undertaken, she incurred a considerable tavern bill, bought cigars, and indulged in the usual diversions of youth'.⁶⁰ It wasn't long before she was apprehended by police on a charge of robbing her master, when it was discovered that 'the foolish girl had dissipated nearly all her ill-gotten money'.⁶¹ Though we can only speculate as to what drove Linda Wilson to behave in this way, it would seem that she sought freedom and fun that would have been denied to her as a girl, and especially as

⁵⁶ Letter 19 Sept 1850. Townsend Scudder (ed.) *Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle to Joseph Neuberger 1848 – 1862* (London, 1931) p16.

⁵⁷ William Lanceley, *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p192.

⁵⁸ *The Times*, 5 February 1857 p6.

⁵⁹ *The Times*, 5 February 1857, p6.

⁶⁰ *The Times*, 5 February 1857, p6.

⁶¹ *The Times*, 5 February 1857, p6.

a servant girl in 1857. It seems safe to say that the ‘usual diversions of youth’ in which she apparently indulged would certainly not have been usual for most young farm skivvies.

Religion was often problematic – to ensure religious conformity many employers insisted on servants’ attendance at family prayers. This could cause difficulties when a servant’s religion was different to that of her employer. Henry Mayhew interviewed a Catholic ex-servant who had left service partly because her employers ‘was always running down my religion, and did all they could to hinder my ever going to Mass’.⁶² Servants also left places because they were not allowed to dress as they pleased in their time off. ‘Dress is another bogey’. Wrote William Lanceley, ‘Most servants have sisters and brothers in business houses, especially those whose homes are in London, and they like to meet their own kin on something like the same footing...although [one household] was a most comfortable place, two years was about the longest servants stayed in it. They left for no other reason than the restriction in dress.’⁶³

Abandonment by a servant could be of significant inconvenience to an employer as Jane Carlyle noted: ‘I shall have to be training a new servant into the ways of the house (when I have got her) at a season of the year when it will be the most uphill work for her and me’.⁶⁴ Where leaving constituted a breach of contract, employers could and some did take their servants to court. This was another way in which the content of the ‘private sphere’ could leak into the public world, as the limits of acceptable behaviour in the employer-servant relationship were put to public judgement in the theatre of the courtroom.

The tensions of intimacy

From the moment she woke in the morning to the moment her head hit the pillow at night a domestic servant’s time belonged to her employer. As Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink and Holden have written ‘[t]he personal control of the servant’s labour and time singled out the relationship and coloured the contract, as did the intimate nature of the work, caring for the bodies and the personal possessions of the employer and

⁶² Peter Quennell (ed.) *Mayhew’s Characters* (London, 1951) p149.

⁶³ William Lanceley, *From Hall-Boy to House-Steward* in John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p192.

⁶⁴ Letter October 1856 in Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p142.

household'.⁶⁵ This intimate work could and often did involve more than just cleaning duties. Servants could have more intimate knowledge of the bodies of the family members they worked for than family members had of each other. Contrasting the physical distance maintained between servants and employers in the dining room or the parlour, in the bedroom or the bath servants shared a bodily intimacy with their employers that did not necessarily undermine their sense of social difference. Indeed, the physical differences between servants and employers were most evident at these moments. Differences in skin tone, in size and in smell did much to enhance, rather than collapse, difference.

In many households servants performed emotional work, sometimes relieving members of the household of the emotional stress of dealing with children or ageing relatives, and in other cases providing emotional support to neurotic mistresses. Rose Allen was told by one would-be mistress that her 'duties would include sitting with your work in the room when Mr Bennett has the gout; I hardly ever do, he's so violent, and he requires someone at such times whom he can scold and abuse as he likes'.⁶⁶ Gertrude Lloyd leaned heavily on one of her nursemaids, Charlotte Scott, who according to Gertrude was 'such a superior, nice, quiet girl'.⁶⁷ Charlotte came to replace nurse Mary Cottrill who left after two and a half years with the family. Gertrude parted with Mary 'with not much regret for though fond of Baby, she spoils him, and is no comfort to me personally'.⁶⁸ Though the nurse is ostensibly engaged to care for the baby, it is her failure to provide comfort to her mistress that irks Gertrude.

Jane Carlyle often attempted to draw emotional sustenance from her relationship with her servants, though only rarely with any long-term success. Jane seems not to have known how to negotiate the boundaries between the servants' and her own territory. Several of her servants were frustrated by her 'interference' and gave notice. As well as noting her servants' appearance, as seems to have been fairly common amongst mistresses, Jane also noted whether they were 'clever' or not and spoke of slow or dim-witted servants with contempt, referring to one as a 'helpless, ill-trained, low-minded goose' and another as an 'Old Half-Dead Slowcoach'.⁶⁹ Jane seems to

⁶⁵ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, p165.

⁶⁶ Rose Allen, *Autobiography of Rose Allen* (London, 1847) pp98–99.

⁶⁷ Gertrude Lloyd, 'Biography of Gerald Braithwaite Lloyd', 30 July 1888.

⁶⁸ Gertrude Lloyd, 'Biography of Gerald Braithwaite Lloyd', 29 July 1888.

⁶⁹ Letter 27 July 1852 in Alexander Carlyle, *New Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* (London 1903) p 38; Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p128.

have wanted her servants to be more than employees – she enjoyed the intimacy of her relations with her servants and relished their grief when she was especially sick and their gratefulness when she was kind to them. Nevertheless, she expected them to know their place, as she showed in the remark she made in a letter written after a trip away from home: ‘ I arrived yesterday, much in the state I expected, but also with a little ‘monarch of all I survey’ feeling, which was compensation ‘for much’! In my life I think I never did so enjoy giving orders and being waited upon as last night, and being asked what I wanted and getting it!’⁷⁰

Jane remained childless throughout her life and this fact may not be irrelevant in her apparent need for some kind of emotional connection with her servants. One girl in particular, Charlotte, she described as ‘quite a jewel of a servant. Far more like an adopted child than a London maid-of-all-work’.⁷¹ This turn of phrase points towards the paradox at the heart of Jane’s relationship with Charlotte: on the one hand Charlotte was a servant Jane has employed to do work in her household. On the other Jane saw her as a surrogate child, and it is this, rather than her domestic skill, that made her ‘a jewel of a servant’ in Jane’s eyes.

In fact, despite Jane’s enjoyment of the household having ‘something of the sound and character of a nursery’, Charlotte’s ‘born tendency to muddle’ meant she lasted only three years in the house.⁷² Though Jane continued to regard her with affection and kept in touch with her long after she left Cheyne Row, Charlotte’s inefficiency as a servant outweighed her value as ‘adopted child’. In one letter Jane wrote that ‘Charlotte, poor foolish thing! is still hanging on at her ‘mother’s’.⁷³ By putting the word mother in inverted commas Jane implies that Charlotte’s mother isn’t real. Is this what Jane desires? Perhaps the fact Charlotte already had a mother of her own meant that Jane could never really occupy that role in Charlotte’s life and this meant her relationship with Jane could never be wholly satisfactory.

At other times Jane enjoyed being mothered by her servants. In one letter to her husband she described her new servant as ‘a good nurse, very quiet and kindly, and with the sense to do things without being told. I have not had my clothes folded neatly

⁷⁰ Letter 2 October 1847, J.A Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol II, p11.

⁷¹ Letter September 1852 in J.A Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol II, p387.

⁷² Letter 8 December 1860, J.A Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol III, p67.

⁷³ Letter 19 October 1860, J.A Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol III, pp63-64.

up, and the room tidied, and my wants anticipated in this way since I had no longer any mother to nurse me'.⁷⁴ Servants were often a comfort to Jane during her frequent illnesses:

I took quite ill in the middle of the night – colic and such headache!...If it had not been for Fanny's kindness, who, when all else that she could do failed, fairly took to crying and sobbing over me, I think I must have died of the horror and desolation of the thing...It is over now, however, that bout, and I should be thankful to have held out so long....Fanny is the best comfort I have had, so willing to flyover the moon for me and always making light of her discomforts.⁷⁵

Servants were also useful in marital relations. Jane Carlyle trusted her servant's reports of her husband's welfare more than those from him, writing in a letter while away from home that '[m]y stay is determined by the accounts I get of Mr C from himself, and (still more dependably) from my housemaid Maria'.⁷⁶ Releasing women from the concerns of childcare, cookery and cleaning meant they could concentrate on being good wives, though the continued popularity of brothels and the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases suggests not all men concentrated so hard on being good husbands. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the men of some households used their servants sexually. Some servants, like Sarah Jenkins of Llanelli who was seduced by her employer's son, entered into such relationships in the usually vain hope that it would lead to marriage.⁷⁷ Other servants were raped or assaulted, like Philander Kerry, a Stowmarket servant whose employer, the shopkeeper Edward Rust, ordered her to fetch water for him to wash, then undressed and confronted the girl who was in the bedroom, making his bed. Rust 'used the prerogatives of a master' to create a situation that would normalise his sexual appropriation of her; Philander's work, particularly bathing her master, involved such bodily intimacy that the step from demanding personal to sexual service was an easy one for her employer to take.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Letter 17 September 1860 in J.A Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol III, pp60-61.

⁷⁵ Jane Carlyle, Letter to Thomas Carlyle, September 1852 in J.A Froude, (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol II, pp183 –186.

⁷⁶ Letter 14 August 1862 in J.A Froude (ed.) *Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, vol III, p111.

⁷⁷ Russell Davies, 'In a broken dream: Some aspects of sexual behaviour and the dilemmas of the unmarried mother in south-west Wales 1887 – 1914', *Llafur* 3 (1983) p26.

⁷⁸ Case cited in Shani D'Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage. Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women* (London, 1998) p89.

Servants were often very young girls. The 1871 census shows that nearly one in three housemaids was under age twenty and in many households servants were isolated from support networks of friends and family. Placed in the 'private sphere' and legally defined as dependents of their master, the formalities structuring other relationships between employers and employees were absent in the master/servant relationship. This made servants particularly vulnerable to employers who believed their rights as master included helping themselves to their servants' bodies. Employers who behaved in this way took absolute possession of their servants' bodies - having employed them, they behaved as if they owned them. Though this is rarely spoken about other than in the context of the courtroom, it is likely that it was not an infrequent occurrence.

Intimacy can lead to insecurity, particularly when an intimate is not completely trusted. Servants possessed intimate knowledge of their employers' lives and bodies, working as they did within the most private areas of the private sphere. Most employers appear to have known little about their servants' personal lives; in letters and memoirs mistresses rarely mention a servant's family or friends, unless the mistress is inconvenienced by them falling sick or wishing to marry a servant. Nevertheless, this is not to say that employers were not aware of their servants' connections to other worlds. In fact, masters and mistresses were very aware of such connections and were rather afraid of them. Indeed, it is arguable that it was this fear that in part drove employers' enforcement of rituals of deference and strict rules of behaviour for servants. Even though employers had an apparent monopoly on overt power, the asymmetry of knowledge in the relationship was weighted in the servant's favour, and knowledge, as we know, is power.

Although servants were necessary to middle-class lifestyle and self-image, the shift towards a specifically middle-class secluded family existence meant that servants could be seen as alien within the house, representing a dangerous conduit to the world outside. Thackeray described such fears in characteristically emotive language:

In your house and mine there are mysteries unknown to us. I am not going into the horrid question of 'followers'. I don't mean cousins from the country, love-stricken policemen, or gentlemen in mufti from Knightsbridge Barracks; but people who have an occult right on the premises: the uncovenanted servants of the house; grey women who are seen at evening with

baskets flitting about area railings; dingy shawls which drop you furtive curtsies in your neighbourhood; demure little jacks, who start up from behind boxes in the pantry... Then again those *servi servorum* have dependents in the vast, silent, poverty-stricken world outside your comfortable kitchen fire, in the world of darkness, and hunger, and miserable cold, and dank, flagged cellars, and huddled straw, and rags, in which pale children are swarming.⁷⁹

Anthea Trodd has noted that in Victorian crime novels in the second half of the nineteenth century, servants 'appear as spies and blackmailers, or as witnesses, exposing to the outside world through their distraught behaviour the secret their employers are capable of concealing'.⁸⁰ Employers' fears could be justified. Jane Carlyle described one of her many maids as an 'Austrian Spy' when she caught her 'listening at the door; and the second morning I came upon her reading one of my Letters! And in every little box, drawer and corner I found *traces* of her prying'.⁸¹

Servants' relationships with their own families and followers were a source of particular tension for employers. Some employers were afraid of the privacy of the family being breached by gossip leaking from the house through the medium of servants. For example, Jane Carlyle was careful about what she said in front of one of her servants 'knowing that she carried everything to her Mother'.⁸² For other employers, external loyalties to family or friends always had to come second to loyalty to the family. Whether this was simply a result of employers' lack of consideration or part of a conscious effort to enforce an order of priority onto servants that would ensure the employer's control is not clear. Whatever, Hannah Cullwick was denied permission to visit her dying parents. Her account of her 'Places', written in 1872, poignantly reads: 'So I never saw them again, for they died of a fever just a fortnight 'twixt each other & my Missis wouldn't let me go. They died on the same day and at the same hour as one another, only a fortnight between – on a Saturday at ten o'clock in the morning'.⁸³ Hannah was fourteen years old. Harriet Rogers, housekeeper at Erddig in Wrexham, found it difficult to visit friends, something the

⁷⁹ W.M. Thackeray, 'On a Chalk-Mark on the Door', *Roundabout Papers* (London, 1876) quoted in Anthea Trodd, 'Household spies: the servants and the plot in Victorian fiction', *Literature and History* 13, 2 (1987) p178.

⁸⁰ Anthea Trodd, 'Household spies: the servants and the plot in Victorian fiction', p178.

⁸¹ Jane Carlyle, Letter 27 July 1852 in Alexander Carlyle, *New Letters and Memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p38.

⁸² Letter January 1863 in Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p151.

⁸³ 'Hannah's Places' Box 98 (14) Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

latter found frustrating, as the following extract from a letter received by Miss Rogers indicates:

So often have we looked forward to the pleasure of your visit but as often as we have looked we have been disappointed and for what reason? First because Miss Rogers had not the courage to ask Mrs Yorke for a week's leave. All things seem impossible, until an effort is made, and as we said when we were speaking about this subject, the longer you remain satisfied with so little liberty the longer you shall be... We have made up our minds that if you do not come and see us, we will never call again.⁸⁴

Followers were a great problem for employers. They represented another connection with the world beyond the house and family and advice books recommended that servants' meetings with followers be carefully regulated. Many employers specified that no followers were allowed and breaking this rule could cause significant upset. For example, the future wife of the second Philip Yorke of Erddig noted in her diary that her father was outraged on finding their cook speaking to her suitor at the back door.⁸⁵ For an employer in a settled household followers were a potential nuisance – a servant who married a suitor would either leave service, or if she or he stayed in service would have a demand on her or his time that might inconvenience the employer, as was the case with Louisa Bain's neighbours:

Our neighbours, two maiden ladies, have for some time had the wife of their man as a temporary cook, and the other evening the good woman was thoughtless enough to give birth to a baby which was not expected for some time. After a few days the old ladies left home on a visit, leaving the invalid to recover at her leisure, and as both man and wife are great favourites they will be inclined to overlook the liberty taken by the mother and child.⁸⁶

Advice manuals and articles expressed a general concern that followers could lead a servant down a vice-ridden path to disaster for both servant and family. It was feared by many that servants would make unfortunate matches and end up in unhappy marriages or worse, that they might bring misfortune into the house by allowing thieving ne'er-do-wells and seducers over its threshold.

⁸⁴ Letter from J.C. Maddocks to Harriet Rogers, 28 July 1861, quoted in Merlin Waterson, *The Servant's Hall. A Domestic History of Erddig*, p85.

⁸⁵ Merlin Waterson, *The Servant's Hall. A Domestic History of Erddig*, p85.

⁸⁶ Louisa Bain's Diary 22 October 1874 in James. S. Bain, *A Bookseller Looks Back. The Story of the Bains*.

Jane Carlyle's sense of outrage and violation on discovering that one of her servants, Mary, had given birth to an illegitimate child in the crockery pantry while Carlyle was taking tea in the next room 'with Miss Jewsbury talking to him!!! Just a thin small door between them!' is palpable.⁸⁷ It is unclear whether Jane was more outraged by the illegitimate birth or the fact that it happened in the room next door to the one in which Carlyle was entertaining a guest. Perhaps, to the childless Jane, there was a sting in the fact that her servant had, by having a baby in the house, brought her fecundity and external sexual life into it. It is evident that more than anything, Jane was upset by the deception. She was angry at her exclusion from knowledge of these events until a much later date and deeply hurt and humiliated by the by-now-obvious falseness of her servant's affection for her. 'Now, my Dear,' she wrote to her friend Mrs Russell,

if you had seen the creature Mary you would just as soon have suspected the Virgin Mary of such things! But I have investigated, and find it all true. For two years I have been cheated and made a fool of, and laughed at for my softness, by this half idiotic-looking woman; and while she was *crying* up in my room, moaning out: 'What would become of her if I died?' and witnessing in me as sad a spectacle of human agony as could have been anywhere seen; she was giving suppers to men and women downstairs; laughing and swearing – oh I can't go on. It is too disgusting!⁸⁸

In this quotation Jane's sense of vulnerability in relation to her servants is clear. Mary has betrayed Jane's trust and it is this, rather than the scandal of illegitimacy, that has upset Jane the most. Once again it is clear that in Jane Carlyle's case the needs of the mistress included more than just a demand for physical service.

'Class pride and discomfort with the cash nexus' may have contributed to employers' preference for their servants to be as segregated as possible.⁸⁹ Servants' very presence in the household constituted a point at which the domesticated and working worlds could bleed into each other. As such, their work had to be routinised so that it caused as little disruption to the family as possible. Servants moved through the houses they worked in differently from their employers. They entered and exited the house through different routes; they used different staircases; they slept in rooms

⁸⁷ Letter 12 Nov 1864, Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p156.

⁸⁸ Letter 12 Nov 1864, Alan and Mary McQueen Simpson (eds.) *I Too Am Here. Selections from the letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, p156.

⁸⁹ John Tosh, *A Man's Place. Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, p47.

that should, according to one advice book writer, be minimally furnished to 'resemble the homes of their youth, and to be merely places where they lie down to sleep as heavily as they can'.⁹⁰ Lilian Westall remembered such a bleak bedroom:

My room was in the attic. There was a little iron bed in the corner, a wooden chair and a washstand. It was a cold, bare, utterly cheerless room. At night I used to climb the dark stairs to the gloomy top of the house, go over to my bed, put the candle on the chair, fall on my knees, say my prayers, and crawl into bed too tired to wash.⁹¹

Anthea Trodd has noted that in Victorian novels, a servant out of place in a house could signal a disruption to the order of life. She gives the example of Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* in which the maid Rosanna's 'distracted appearances in places where servants should not be, such as the library and the billiard room, offer the most visible clue to the mysterious derangement of the household'.⁹²

Leonore Davidoff has suggested that domestic servants protected their employers from defilement, by dealing with the rough, dirty and polluting elements of life.⁹³ However, even as they roughened their hands keeping the house clean, servants could also be seen as carriers of pollution as they mediated between dirt and cleanliness, indoors and outdoors, the working and the middle classes. As Davidoff points out, 'those closest to defiling and arduous activities were, whenever possible to be kept out of sight. In great houses their very existence was denied'.⁹⁴ In the household of the tenth Duke of Bedford, to 'cross his path, unless he wished to see you, was little short of a crime, and any of the women servants who met him after twelve o'clock in the day, when their duties might be supposed to be done,' could be dismissed as a result.⁹⁵

In the minority of more affluent houses the domestic work would be divided between a number of different servants, whose roles were distinct, complementary and organised according to a strict service hierarchy, which an ambitious servant would aim to climb. According to John Burnett, this hierarchy was 'an exact copy of the order of precedence 'above stairs'; an unwritten code, it presumably originated in aristocratic households and spread by example to become the accepted pattern in

⁹⁰ Mrs J.E. Panton, *From Kitchen to Garrett* (London 1893).

⁹¹ Lilian Westall in John Burnett (ed.) *Useful Toil* p216.

⁹² Anthea Trodd, 'Household spies: the servants and the plot in Victorian fiction', p182.

⁹³ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, pp 24-5.

⁹⁴ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p25.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p24.

Victorian times, doubtless approved by employers as inculcating a proper respect for rank and authority'.⁹⁶ In households such as this the physical work of the lower servants protected even the upper servants from defiling activities. Lower servants would deal with the scullery, the slops and the chamberpots, the degradation associated with such activities contributing to the sense of their lowly status. The upper servants then mediated between the lower servants and the family.⁹⁷ As Mrs C.S. Peel has written, the head servants:

were regarded by the under-servants, shut away in their own quarters and never permitted to be seen in the front part of the house after the family and their guests had left their bedrooms, almost as kings and queens. Only the head servants, body servants, and those in attendance on the sitting rooms, or dining room, would be even likely to know their employers by sight.⁹⁸

Servants' contact with family members needed to be controlled, particularly with regard to children. The polluting influence of a servant could include influencing children's behaviour and attitudes in ways unapproved by the child's parents. In her diary Gertrude Lloyd described feeling 'horrificed' at her 'little gentle boy' who was 'lately so very disobedient & speaks rudely to me & very to C & puts his tongue out & called Miss Taylor here "old Fatty"!... Emma (cook) at home teaches him to say all sorts of queer things, she goes out to him in the garden and plays with him'.⁹⁹ Charles Dickens articulated anxiety about the influence servants could have on children in his essay 'Nurse's Stories' in which he stated: 'if we all knew our own minds (in a more enlarged sense than the popular acceptance of that phrase), I suspect we should find our nurses responsible for most of the dark corners we are forced to go back to, against our wills'.¹⁰⁰

As in India domestic servants' intimacy with the children they served was threatening to some employers. It is likely that a part of the resentment expressed by women such as Gertrude Lloyd was caused by their fear of being usurped by the servant. Gertrude wrote rather wistfully about the time she spent with her one and a half year old son: 'I have him from 7.15 to 45 in our bed & downstairs from 9.40 to

⁹⁶ John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil*, p150.

⁹⁷ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p25.

⁹⁸ Mrs C.S. Peel, 'Homes and Habits' in G.M. Young (ed.) *Early Victorian England* (London 1934) pp81-2 quoted in Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p24.

⁹⁹ Gertrude Lloyd, *Biography of Gerald Braithwaite Lloyd*, July 1890.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Dickens, 'Nurse's Stories' *An Uncommercial Traveller* (Oxford, 1958).

10.30 & again from 2 till 2.45 & then he comes in the drawing room from 5.15 to 5.45 when he is undressed - so altogether I see plenty of our son and heir'. The time totalled 2 hours and 35 minutes out of an entire day. The baby spent the rest of the time with his nursemaid. This is indicative of the intimacy of the position nursemaids occupied, and of their functional role in family relations, which in itself may have produced ambivalence in mistresses. Insecurity about parenting is clearly expressed in Gertrude's diary. Of course, other mistresses welcomed a servant acting as intermediary between them and their children. Lucy Hitchman, nursemaid to Louisa Yorke's children, wrote to tell her absent mistress that she and the children were 'pleased to hear how much you are enjoying your visits',

I hope you will be as pleased with your little son, when you return he seems to have grown, even in the short time of your absence, he walks all the way along the nursery passage now from one nursery to the other & so carefully just like a little bird, using his hands to balance his little self instead of wings.¹⁰¹

Rather than express bitterness or ambivalence that she was missing out on her children's' first steps, Louisa Yorke seemed very happy with Lucy's care of her sons, writing in her diary: 'We like Lucy, the nurse, so much. She is young, only 26, but so careful with the little boy'.¹⁰²

While many middle-class families would not have employed a maid specifically as nurse, servants' diaries and reminiscences show that childcare was very often a part of the housemaid or maid-of-all-work's duties. Interaction with servants was an important way of socializing children into their gender, class and 'racial' identities. Servants referred even to young children as 'Master' or 'Miss' and were required to use subservient body language with them. Children's physical closeness to servants highlighted the bodily differences between servants and family members in ways that endorsed the notion that social difference was something inherent or God-given.

Hannah Cullwick frequently noted in her diary of 1860 when working for the Jackson family as a maid-of-all-work that she 'took the children in the garden' and

¹⁰¹ Undated letter from Lucy Hitchman to Louisa Yorke, Erddig MSS/D/E/2831, Clwyd County Record Office, Hawarden.

¹⁰² Louisa Yorke's diary 30 July 1903, Erddig MSS D/E/2816, Clwyd County Record Office, Hawarden.

‘took care of the children & put them to bed’.¹⁰³ Even while distancing rituals were employed to shut the other servants out of the inner sanctum of the family, the maid’s influence was ever-present within the relationship between middle-class parent and child. It is perhaps even possible to argue that the maid’s role was fundamental to the identities of middle-class mothers, fathers and children and to the process of the relationship between them. The work of the nursemaid and the release it afforded parents was necessarily implicated in the way in which their roles were gendered and classed.

Masters and mistresses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries certainly bore a general suspicion towards their servants’ possession of intimate knowledge of the family and its foibles. They felt threatened by their servants as a potential conduit, polluting the family with the dirt, disorder and degradation of the world beyond the family, and releasing into that world the secrets and knowledge gleaned from their intimate work within the house. If servants’ difference, their connections to other worlds, their loyalties to their own friends and families were perceived as liabilities for their employers, the enforcement of strict rules in some households constituted an effort to secure control over servants and their links to areas potentially beyond their employers’ power. Servants were expected to be quiet and to express their subservience through their body language. Catherine Bailey remembered of her first place that her mistress wouldn’t let her maids ‘work together. She would not. Didn’t like talk, you see.... You couldn’t be alone and talk. Never left you alone, you know. You mustn’t talk’.¹⁰⁴ Such a rule could exacerbate feelings of loneliness in young domestic servants such as Stanley Wilson Bailey, who recalled

the loneliness, I mean to say every night you was put in a special back room you see and – you had nobody to speak to, you had no – I mean you was treated as a boy you know. You were shoved up in a corner. There was no – there was no companionship. And a boy in those days wanted a companionship. So I scarpered. Yes. So did me sister, she was sent out to service. One

¹⁰³ 15, 18, 29 July 1860 in ‘1860 A Few Fragments’, Box 98, Munby Collection, Wren Library, Trinity College, Cambridge University.

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Bailey, interviewed by Paul and Thea Thompson for ‘Family Life and Work Experience before 1918’.

of the big nobbs up in Stamford Hill... My sister was sent up there, she come – she come home after a week.¹⁰⁵

Catherine Bailey was one of two maids employed in the household of a butcher, and the mistress worked alongside them both. The gendered and classed ideal of the non-working mistress who managed, rather than worked in, the household was little more than a dream for many wives. This tension between the ideal and the reality may have contributed to the often ambivalent and sometimes downright hostile and even abusive attitude mistresses could exhibit towards their servants, evidenced in a steady stream of court cases throughout our period.

However, more frequently, mistresses' need to endorse their power and superiority over their servants manifested in the enforcement of rules of behaviour for them. These rituals of deference worked towards establishing the employers' authority over their servants, while marking the difference between the domestic and working worlds. The rationale underpinning these rituals was linked to the concept of 'Society' and the duty to uphold the practices of what was perceived to be the civilized world. Certain etiquettes, such as the rituals of dining and mourning, constituted the implementation of these beliefs. Servants were central to this process, both in terms of their physical work and the performance of submission to their employers that shaped the way in which that work was done. For example, servants remained silent while a family dined, moving forward to the table to serve food or respond to demands, speaking only when spoken to, keeping eyes downcast and bodily movements minimal while they completed their tasks. Even in modest households such rituals were observed insofar as possible.

Rituals of deference were about class and gender distinctions, and the relations of power those distinctions represented. By behaving in servile ways, domestic servants gave their employers a sense of superiority regardless of their individual quality of character. 'The superior was thus guaranteed a minimum of deference even if he was 'alone' in his own home, i.e. with only his servant or servants':

Servants stood when spoken to and kept their eyes cast down, they moved out of a room backwards, curtsied to their betters and were generally expected to efface themselves; doing

¹⁰⁵ Mr Stanley Wilson Bailey, interviewed by Paul and Thea Thompson for 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918'.

their work and moving about the house so as not to be visible or audible to their employers...In the street, servants, male or female, walked a few paces behind their master or mistress.¹⁰⁶

But the idea that servants should be invisible contradicted with their usefulness in the process by which a household displayed its status. In India the dark colour of native skin compared with the paleness of the Anglo-Indian marked out who was the master and who the servant. In Britain uniforms provided a resolution to the problem. Uniforms distinguished the servant from the family not only for the purpose of establishing the employers' authority, but also for the benefit of any visitor to the household, while also making servants look the same as each other, interchangeable, on display in much the same way as the furnishings.¹⁰⁷ The notion of a uniform for servants had been in development from the early nineteenth century and by the 1860s there was a recognized uniform for female domestic servants.¹⁰⁸ This was, as Catherine Bailey remembered, 'a print dress and a white apron and cap. Then in the afternoon it was a black dress, little starched apron and cap'.¹⁰⁹

In a similar way to the common custom of changing a servant's name to something that was easy for the employer to remember, uniforms undermined servants' individuality. A servant's personality was problematic for mistresses, if debates in newspapers over servant 'characters' are anything to go by. Discomfort with servants' expression of individuality through dress was linked to their connection to other worlds, as it pointed towards an alternative existence for servants, an existence outside the household that did not revolve around, nor was primarily loyal to, the house and family, but concerned the servant's own pleasure. By dressing as they pleased in their time off, servants threw off a persona adopted for work and insisted on by their employers, and took on one of their own choosing. This told masters and mistresses that their servants were not completely controlled and suggested that the deference shown during working hours was bought rather than a genuine expression of subordination. Some servants attempted to adapt their uniforms by adding ribbon or lace to their caps – a practice frowned upon by advice book writers like Mrs Motherley who advised servants that a 'gaudily-dressed servant looks, at best, like a

¹⁰⁶ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, pp 24; p112.

¹⁰⁷ Like Liz Stanley I take 'uniform' to include 'hair, speech and demeanour' Liz Stanley (ed.) *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick* (New Jersey, 1984) p32.

¹⁰⁸ John Burnett (ed.), *Useful Toil* pp 171-2.

¹⁰⁹ Catherine Bailey, interviewed by Paul and Thea Thompson for 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918'.

coarse and vulgar lady'.¹¹⁰ Louisa Bain associated her housemaid's appearance with her personality, remarking in her diary that the maid had 'a large crinoline that almost sweeps one into the ashes. Have suggested to her that it is too large for our small rooms and hope she will reform it, but I fancy people with such crisp, wavy hair as she has are generally obstinate'.¹¹¹

The nostalgic image of the faithful retainer or nanny permeates many memoirs. There were employers who looked on their servants as family members, but the experience of Nora Blewett, who used to 'love being with my mistress there in the daytime. Cos she used to chat away as if she was my mother to me,' was rare.¹¹² Though it is true that the labour that domestic servants undertook was never seen as 'proper' work, largely because it was done by women within the domestic sphere, and was not formally regulated, I have seen little evidence to suggest that servants were ideally seen as members of the family by their employers. The definition of who should be included in 'the family' was a shifting and troublesome one through the nineteenth century.¹¹³ Servants were ideally dependents of the household and its master. They were a part of the household in that they worked for the family and the family was responsible for feeding and training them. Ideally service would prove a useful preparation for young lower class girls' marriage, teaching them useful skills and their place within a social hierarchy. Within the context of an ideology that constructed the orderly domestic sphere as the heart of morality, it is possible that employers saw themselves as encouraging the working class towards suitably respectable and subservient roles through teaching working class women those roles as servants before they married. Certainly, the *Sydenham and Penge Gazette* of 1892 was sure of the natural order of relations between servants and employers, claiming that 'the highly educated class or "head" of the social body should occupy itself in doing *its* proper work of *thinking* for the welfare of the hands and feet that serve it'.¹¹⁴ The problem was that those hands and feet often seemed to have minds of their own.

¹¹⁰ Mrs Motherley, *The Servant's Behaviour Book* (London, 1859) p87.

¹¹¹ Louisa Bain's Diary November 1865 in James. S. Bain, *A Bookseller Looks Back. The Story of the Bains*.

¹¹² Nora Blewett interviewed by Paul and Thea Thompson for 'Family Life and Work Experience before 1918'.

¹¹³ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, p160-1.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, *The Family Story*, p166.

Servants' willingness to enter into dialogues with their employers over the terms of their dependence is considered in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Domestic dialogues: negotiations over servant selfhood

A popular Victorian saying claimed ‘Servants talk about People; Gentlefolk discuss Things’¹. One thing that is certainly true is that servants were one of the foremost ‘Things’ ‘Gentlefolk’ discussed at great length throughout our period. In newspapers, journals and books, servants were a topic of unceasing interest to nineteenth century commentators. Servants’ opinions were not frequently featured in newspaper correspondence columns (though this may have been a result of editorial bias, rather than a reflection of an unwillingness on the part of servants to write in to the papers), nor are there a large number of books published in the nineteenth century that were authored by servants. However, servants did sometimes reply to criticisms of their work and character, a fact rarely noted by historians.

The fact that servants were able to and did express opinions regarding their role in a public forum, such as the pages of a newspaper, is significant. Though servants employed informal networks of communication as we saw in chapter 2, informing each other of places available and places to avoid amongst other things, they had little access to a public voice. By writing to newspapers, they could enter into a public and even national dialogue with the employing class, counter criticisms and make arguments both individually and as representatives of the ‘servant class’. That their letters did not appear with the regularity of their employers’ complaints is perhaps not as important as the fact that they appeared at all. Where servants bringing cases of assault against their employers were challenging the absolutism of their employers’ authority and arguing for servants rights as human beings, in the correspondence columns of *The Times* servants were able to make arguments for their rights as employees and suggestions as to the best ways for an employer to ensure his or her servant was willing and competent. This section will consider some of the debates over servants and service that surfaced in nineteenth century texts and will examine servants’ intervention in those debates.

¹ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Gloucestershire, 1990) p128.

Newspaper correspondence

Newspapers were perhaps an obvious choice of forum for servants to engage in debates over their role and character. After all, throughout our period the first few pages of many newspapers, both local and national, were filled with advertisements placed by servants looking for places, or by employers looking for servants. Many servants would have been familiar with the papers for this reason. This section considers occasions when servants and service were under debate in the correspondence columns of *The Times* newspaper between 1850 and 1914. *The Times* was the newspaper of the elite (middle class and upwards). Its stance was generally conservative with a small ‘c’, though its editors prided themselves on their impartiality. Though not as widely read as other papers of the time, with a circulation in the 60,000s in the 1880s as compared with the *Daily Telegraph*, which had a circulation of 300,000 at the same time, it did publish the letters of domestic servants and their employers across our period, as well as editorials on ‘the servant problem’.² Servants may have chosen to write to *The Times* precisely because it was an elite newspaper; the majority of its readership almost certainly consisted of servant employers. In a paper servants would have seen their employers reading, the correspondence column of *The Times* was a place where servants could be sure that members of the servant employing class would see their opinions.

Most letters by servants tended to be written in response to negative criticism of them in other correspondence or editorials. In the 1870s local newspapers published a number of letters, which were apparently stimulated by efforts amongst some domestic workers to unionise. The letters were often entertainingly written, sometimes infused with indignation, sometimes with resigned pessimism, sometimes with biting wit. The letters from employers were also varied. Some wrote in defence of servants and some wrote in complaint but nearly all had ideas about how to address the enduring ‘servant problem’ – the nature of which shifted as our period progressed. These ideas often revolved around assumptions about servant character and employer responsibility that referred to wider and changing notions of gender and class difference.

² George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate (eds.) *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (London, 1978) p120.

On the 17th of December 1850 *The Times* reported a speech made by Mr Wortley, Recorder of the Central Criminal Court, at the commencement of the December sessions, in which he drew attention to the large number of charges of robberies by servants. He suggested that there was ‘a very good remedy in the hands of employers themselves, and that a good deal of this class of crime was occasioned by not taking proper care to inquire into the character of persons taken into service, and by not giving proper remuneration to the servants for their services’. Paying them wages that were ‘totally insufficient to enable them to support themselves’ he argued, meant that ‘the consequence almost necessarily was that they were compelled to resort to the expedient of plundering their employers in order to eke out a subsistence’.³

The next day the editorial in *The Times* ran a blistering attack on Mr Wortley. Choosing to entirely ignore Mr Wortley’s suggestion that servants were not paid enough, and that this might drive them to steal, the writer of the editorial took the opportunity to express a specifically middle-class distaste for domestic servants. The writer claimed to ‘protest, with all the force of the deepest conviction, against the truth of these assertions’ and argued that Mr Wortley’s words appeared ‘calculated to do so much mischief that it cannot be passed over without remark’.⁴ The following paragraph quotes from this editorial:

We do not address ourselves now to the highest or to the humblest classes of society. The highborn lady...is not in a condition to appreciate the miseries of which we are about to speak. So at the social antipodes the wife of a workman or the artisan who merely hires the occasional Betsy to look after the children while she is steaming the potatoes for her husband’s dinner, or washing out with her own hands the family stock of linen, is...equally removed from the annoyances inflicted by domestics on their employers. We speak of the average run of London households, in which two, three, or four servants are kept, and we appeal to every mistress of a family in London if it be not true that a very considerable portion of the waking hours of her life is spent day after day in the midst of turmoil and vexation arising from the conduct of her servants. The kindlier and more gentle her nature the greater the annoyance she is doomed to endure...She begins by submitting to trickery and negligence of every kind. Advantage is taken of her gentleness of temper until at last she is fairly exasperated into action, and driven... to consider the “kitchen” as a hostile power, which must be dealt with by a strong hand. If

³ Recorder’s Speech, *The Times*, 17 December 1850.

⁴ Editorial, *The Times*, 18 December 1850.

otherwise, filth accumulates...everything fragile in the house is shattered to atoms...the dinner is late; and the cook drunk...or wasteful, or a thief, or *en rapport* with a policeman.⁵

Note the stress on mistresses being pushed to use a ‘strong hand’. This is interesting given that in the previous week, the shocking details of the case of Jane Wilbred, a pauper servant who was starved and physically abused almost to death at the hands of her middle-class employers, were brought to the attention of the public in the pages of both national and local newspapers. Earlier that year, newspaper editors had been preoccupied by a similar case, in which another young pauper servant, Mary Ann Parsons, who had worked in a farming household in Devon, had died after suffering systematic abuse from her master and mistress. These two unfortunate girls caught the sympathies of a press and public horrified by the girls’ treatment and the leniency of the sentences received by their abusers. There was also much meditation in the newspapers on how such tragedies could be avoided in the future, with calls being made for legislation to protect ‘that unfortunate and helpless class’ – young servants.⁶

Nevertheless, in the article quoted above, the mistress was constructed as maligned and abused, pushed into severity towards her servants by their dishonesty and laziness. Furthermore, it was later asserted by the editorial writer that the majority of servants were ‘as well off as any class of the labouring community’, a dismissive statement that implied that the situation of servants need not elicit any special concern, despite the concurrent case of abuse, and which established a clear difference between the ‘labouring community’ and the employing class.

The article sparked off a rash of letters to the *Times*. Almost all of these letters appeared in *The Times* after a letter was published by ‘JW’, a ‘humble servant’. ‘JW’ openly acknowledged the power of the newspaper, pointing out that ‘an article in *The Times*, well pointed and wittily expressed, is more forcible than a homily’.⁷ He sought to use the newspaper to express the ‘hope that the 200,000 may not be branded with the crimes of the 20’ and to articulate the point of view of servants.⁸ ‘JW’ claimed his opinion was representative of that of other servants, writing that

⁵ Editorial, *The Times*, 18 December 1850.

⁶ Letter, *The Times*, 13 December 1850.

⁷ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

⁸ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

Many of my class feel, like myself, aggrieved by an article in this day's *Times*, that seems to reflect on our whole body (which in this metropolis exceeds 200,000), and the gist whereof is not calculated to elevate our character in the social scale, much less to smooth the asperities that lie in the path of domestic servants.⁹

'JW''s letter is interesting because it does give an alternative perspective on the nature of servant's dependence. He does not make an argument for more formality within the employer-servant relationship, or even for more wages, but asks for more respect for servants. 'I feel and know that a good master makes a good servant – a bad master cannot have one,' he wrote, 'good places...retain their servants, and the domestics are rarely ungrateful or unattached to their superiors'.¹⁰ Although this sounds very much like the kind of statement the more benevolent employers might have made, 'JW''s perspective on the nature of his role was rather different to that which his employers might have expected. Cynical and frustrated, 'JW' clearly was not stupid, nor blind to the limitations imposed on him by his role. He pointed out the exacting standards to which many servants had to conform in order to secure places: 'the first postulate is, that the applicants, in proof of steadiness, must have lived some years (at least) in his or her last place; that they are sober, honest, diligent, capable, cleanly, orderly, and civil. I will not here speak of being also healthy, young or even good-looking'.¹¹ He went on to ask:

in what other position these qualifications are indispensable? Yet after all these superhuman qualifications, to what end are they attained and preserved? – why, to obtain a bare subsistence, in many cases, 5L a year, but generally nothing, for futurity, whilst that futurity is wholly dependent upon the happy continuance of their qualities in the estimation of their employers.¹²

In this statement 'JW' not only highlighted the unique requirements of service as compared with other forms of employment and the paucity of the financial reward, he also pointed towards the vulnerability a servant's dependence on his or her employer's goodwill entailed. 'JW' went on to expand upon this theme, arguing that because a servant needed a good 'character' in order to get another place, and the employer wrote that 'character' at his or her discretion, employers effectively

⁹ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

¹⁰ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

¹¹ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

¹² Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

controlled a servant's livelihood, and particularly controlled a servant's ability to express an independent opinion:

Is it not notorious that a stray look, mayhap in a moment of excitement or irritation, gives offence to a master or mistress, or that even the best regulated domestic may be betrayed into a word of retort? If so, the servant's irritability is an immitigable fault, whilst the objurgation of an angry master or mistress is but a passing cloud of temper...I feel confident that no one will assert that simply because a servant gives a reply in a case of aggravation, where he is right, and he simply asserts that right, he should be on that account ejected from his calling, and become an outcast in the world.¹³

'JW' was arguing that the relationship between servants and their employers should be a reciprocal, interdependent one. He was asserting what he saw as his right as a servant to some measure of independence of mind and to some leeway in the regulation of his behaviour. He was asking for servants to be treated with respect and promised that if a servant were so treated by his or her employer, the employer would be rewarded with greater attentiveness on the part of the servant. 'JW' seemed to think that the servant-employer relationship should ideally be a properly reciprocal one, and implied that in fact, in many houses the emphasis was on control rather than mutual regard. By writing to *The Times*, he was able to express the opinion he felt denied in his role as a servant.

The correspondence from employers of servants exhibited ambivalence towards servants in terms of their 'character'. Ambivalent attitudes were also evident in employers' letters in relation to the degree to which an employer was responsible for a servant. Some people responded in defence of servants, such as John Davis, Ordinary of Newgate Prison, who wrote that 'good female domestic servants are a class as highly meritorious and as undervalued as any class in the community'.¹⁴ However, his praise was qualified; in his experience the 'larger number of female servants committed and convicted of dishonesty at the Central Criminal Court are poor Irish girls' who were 'lamentably short of clothing' and yet 'too often fond of fine and tawdry dress'.¹⁵ This need for clothing, combined with the paucity of the wages they received, drove them to steal. Although the overall tone and argument of

¹³ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

¹⁴ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

¹⁵ Letter, *The Times*, 20 December 1850.

Mr Davis's letter is supportive of Mr Wortley's point of view – indeed, he explicitly sides himself with the Recorder, claiming that Wortley had 'merely spoken for the public good', Davis reconstitutes a common ethnic prejudice alongside a gendered assumption that as females, it is a love of dress that results in these servant girls stealing. Nevertheless, Davis makes it clear that these girls steal because they are poor, rather than because they are servants. By contrast the editorial writer at *The Times* saw the problem as one specific to servants. In a second article the leader argued that

thousands among them who would shrink from appropriating a stray half crown do, nevertheless, day after day abstract the property of their employers in other shapes. We do not speak of the wanton and criminal waste that cripples the means of so many families, but of the straightforward pilfering of property other than money, &c... We repeat it most emphatically, there is a very low conventional standard of morality among the bulk of domestic servants throughout London upon certain points.¹⁶

This attitude was implicitly supported in a letter from 'A Mistress of London Servants' who argued that the servant-keeping classes were extremely careful about who they hired and that it was 'preposterous' to suggest that servant employers risked their property by paying minimal wages. Having absolved the employing class of any blame, she went on to suggest that robberies by servants couldn't be due to those servants being Irish because '[s]o great indeed is the caution of the housekeeping community with regard to servants, that they will actually have nothing to say to the inhabitants of the sister isle but exclude them altogether from their service'¹⁷. The remaining implication of the letter was that servants stole because they were dishonest; like magpies, it was in their nature to thief.

On the same day, incidentally Christmas Eve, a letter written by 'One who has not been plagued with his servants' was published in *The Times*. This letter offered a slightly different perspective on the issue. The author reintroduced the idea articulated by Mr Wortley and Mr Davis, that 'the misconduct in domestic servitude' was largely 'attributable to the employers themselves'.¹⁸ However, while he acknowledged that 'hiring upon an uncertain character' and 'unreasonableness of masters in their

¹⁶ Editorial, *The Times*, 21 December 1850.

¹⁷ Letter, *The Times*, 24 December 1850.

¹⁸ Letter, *The Times*, 24 December 1850.

behaviour to and exactions from servants' were reasons for problems in the servant-employer relationship, for this author 'the root from which a great amount of evil arises' was 'the lamentable indifference of masters to the behaviour and conduct of their servants'.¹⁹

This author raised the issue of employer responsibility beyond the need to provide sufficient remuneration for domestic work to ensure servants didn't pilfer from the household. 'Fathers are held responsible for the behaviour of children; do masters consider themselves responsible for the behaviour of their domestics, or that their own personal respectability may be compromised by the general character of their servants?'²⁰ In asking this rhetorical question, the writer invoked a comparison with the responsibilities of the parent-child relationship to remind readers of the responsibilities the employer bore in relation to a servant's dependence. The relationship between servant and employer, in this formulation, went beyond the transaction of work for wages and was implicated in the construction of the identities and 'character' of employer and servant alike. For this letter writer, the employer's role included teaching servants their place, ensuring the establishment and maintenance of the display of differences associated with the intersection of class and gender. The failure of employers to do this resulted in difficulties:

A female domestic is engaged, and, besides other requisites, she is expected to be neat and clean in her person; but it does not stop there only; she may dress as she thinks proper; ape the habits and style of her mistress, and, upon 10L or 12L per annum, flaunt in her silk, veil, parasol, &c, the fine lady to market, to church or to an evening visit. What is station in life to her? She has as good a figure, is as straight in the back, and dapper in the waist, and perhaps has as pretty a face as her mistress; why should she not adorn her person to the utmost? And, moreover, she may catch a sweetheart. What check, I would ask, is ever exercised in restraining that universal female foible of dressing beyond their means, and above their natural station in life?²¹

Several assumptions underpin this statement: that servants are flighty, lusty and as women, they are victim to a dangerous love of clothes. Furthermore, in this formulation, servants neither understood nor appreciated the important meaning of the distinctions between women associated with class. To them class was ephemeral,

¹⁹ Letter, *The Times*, 24 December 1850.

²⁰ Letter, *The Times*, 24 December 1850.

²¹ Letter, *The Times*, 24 December 1850.

something that could be breached with silk, parasol and fancy airs and graces. Of course, class is ephemeral as the writer cleverly implied – its distinctions must be policed and maintained, which is exactly what the writer was claiming was part of the employer's responsibility. He went on to argue that this disrespect for class difference was sometimes encouraged by well-meaning mistresses, who continued the once common custom of giving servants hand-me-down clothing:

it is a most common custom that the half-worn out dresses of the mistress are handed over to the domestic, - that dresses whose original cost was probably the wage of half a year's servitude should bedizen the person whose daily subsistence is dependent on daily toil, - or even worse than this, that encouragement should be held out by employers to their servants to dress as smart and fine as possible.²²

The love of dress was a problem identified by several correspondents. While it was generalised as a female characteristic, in this debate it was suggested that servants were particularly prone to resort to dishonest and even criminal acts in order to satisfy their dress habit and that this habit was peculiar to servants as it was cultivated by employers who continued the custom of giving servants cast-off clothing. This had the doubly undesirable effect of giving servants ideas above their station, and inducing them to dishonesty so that they could fund an aspirational lifestyle.

As 'One who has not been plagued by his servants' wrote, 'where the dress exceeds what the wages will provide they [servants] must rob in some way or other their employers, and those employers may thank themselves for having, perhaps unwittingly, been the cause thereof'.²³ In this assumption, an idea about gender – that women find fine clothing irresistible - intersected with a pejorative notion associated with class – that the poor will rob to get what they can't afford – and with an interpretation of the effects of the lifestyle of a servant – a young girl constantly surrounded by finery and beauty will succumb to the idea that she too can be fine and beautiful – to produce an explanation for domestic thefts that while agreeing that employers were responsible, entirely circumvented the question of wages. Perhaps it was uncomfortable for employers to think about wages in relation to domestic work because the domestic sphere was supposed to be free from the taint of the cash nexus. Perhaps, in emphasizing the employer's responsibility to teach servants their place,

²² Letter, *The Times*, 24 December 1850.

²³ Letter, *The Times*, 24 December 1850.

this writer was trying to find a solution to the problem that did not compromise the ideal of secluded domesticity and did not threaten to upset the status quo of gender and class difference.

‘One who has not been plagued by his servants’ was not alone in his opinion that employers carried a responsibility to regulate their servants’ conduct. Subsequent letters to *The Times* articulated variations on his theme. One writer claimed that as domestic servants ‘are not selected, as a class, from the better educated, so it appears to me unreasonable [to expect them] to be free from the errors and vices common to the class from which they have emanated’.²⁴ He had a benevolently paternalistic solution to this problem of class-based depravity:

In proportion, however, to this want of education, so ought greater attention to be paid, where practicable, to remedy such defects, and to endeavour to improve their moral and social position; and where the attempt to effect that object is really and fairly made by heads of families and an anxiety shown for the welfare of their servants, I do not think that the complaint will be at all general, that they are found difficult to manage or ungrateful for kindness afforded.²⁵

Another letter writer emphasized the need for mistresses to keep tight control of servants. Claiming that servants were ‘creatures liable to all the temptations which youth, poverty, imperfect education and undisciplined minds expose them to’, she argued that ‘the knowledge that the eye of a mistress, just and kind, but intolerant of falsehood, concealment, and all the “permitted degrees” of dishonesty, and resolute to know the works and ways of all beneath her roof and rule, was always upon them’ would constitute ‘remedies of the evils we complain of’.²⁶ This letter reprised the notion articulated by other letter writers that because of the combination of their class background, which predisposed them to dishonesty, and the nature of their role, which placed them in the way of temptation, servants were likely to succumb to that temptation and therefore needed to be carefully monitored by their employers. Furthermore, in this letter the writer argued that ‘[o]ther demoralizing influences arise out of the mischievous sensitiveness now in fashion....So much is done to confuse the notions of right and wrong, to efface the great landmarks of justice, and to enfeeble

²⁴ Letter, *The Times*, 28 December 1850.

²⁵ Letter, *The Times*, 28 December 1850.

²⁶ Letter, *The Times*, 3 January 1851.

and pervert the moral judgement of the people'. This is interesting given that Jane Wilbred's case was in the newspapers at the time and that calls were being made for legislation that would enable Poor Law officers to inspect households employing pauper girls in order to ensure they were free from physical cruelty. Is the 'mischievous sensitiveness' to which this writer refers, what the writer sees as a potential effect of the Wilbred case? Does the writer mean that servants will take advantage of sympathetic attitudes to their vulnerability, while the employers' ability to punish could be restricted?

As the letters progressed, the debate shifted from the question of whether servants were paid enough, to a focus on what were constructed as inherent characteristics that predisposed servants to steal. From these constructs, letter writers developed recommendations for action on the part of employers. The mistress or master in these formulations was constructed as a guiding paternalistic force. The recommendations reconstituted the idea of the master/mistress/servant relationship as a reciprocal one, structured along lines of dependence and obligation, rather than a transactional one between employer and an employee. On first reading, the motivation behind these letter writers' arguments can be interpreted as pecuniary: they do not like being told they do not pay enough for servants and they do not want to have to pay more. Given the centrality of domestic service to the lives of so many people in mid nineteenth century society, the arguments made in these letters were also about defending the form of a relationship that was fundamental to nineteenth century class and gender identities and the differences that structured them. In his speech about employer-servant relations, quoted earlier, the Recorder of the Central Criminal Court explicitly highlighted the problematic cash nexus. In doing so, he pointed to a source of instability at the heart of middle-class servant employers' ambivalent attitude towards their servants. Through writing these letters, which all avoided the question of money, employers publicly constructed the idea of service as a relationship structured by 'character', dependence and reciprocity rather than wages paid for work done.

So, intermittently through our period, letters would be written in to *The Times*, or editorials would appear that addressed one or another of the facets of the rather amorphous 'servant problem'. Sometimes there was no apparent external stimulus for these letters or editorials. In fact, the sense is often of an ongoing discussion that periodically bubbled up into the pages of the newspaper. Some letters by servants

appear to have been spontaneously written, in order to highlight issues they believed to be important. For example, in January 1853 a 'Married Butler' wrote in to *The Times* with a complaint about 'the custom of separating married servants, partially or entirely, from their wives'. He claimed the custom was

an evil the effects of which can be little known to the rich and great...The more trustworthy the man is the more he feels the degradation and injustice of this custom. Hence they may desert the employment they are best qualified for to seek a precarious subsistence in some other way than domestic service preferring the meanest fare, with the privilege of sleeping at their own homes, to comparative luxury without it...where it is possible, do not justice, religion and morality require it?²⁷

In this letter the author asserted his masculinity and his right to independence, invoking justice; it was his right as a married man to sleep with the family of which he was head. He showed that he saw his role as a domestic servant as a job, and a job that he would leave if his employers did not respect his rights as a man. Perhaps most importantly, through writing this letter, the author sought to draw the attention of the 'rich and great' to what he saw as a degrading and unjust system for a manservant to live under. He was making a public argument for his rights as a man within the terms of his employment. Similarly, in May 1859 *The Times* published a letter from 'A Married Man' who also complained that he had been 'told that, being married I am of no use'.²⁸ He went on to point out that this meant that either he would be forced to leave service, or to lie and pretend he was unmarried. Like the 'Married Butler', 'Married Man' was using the correspondence column of *The Times* to articulate his grievance publicly: 'I think that ladies and gentlemen should consider how poor servants, married, are to live and live honest and truthful; and I hope this letter may open the eyes of the gentry and teach them to be charitable to those that strive to get and honest living'.²⁹

Male servants wrote the letters considered above. As has been discussed elsewhere in this thesis, service was ideally work that working-class girls did before they got married. Located in the domestic sphere, service did not compromise a poor girl's gender identity, indeed it was often argued that service constituted excellent training for the domestic duties faced by a working-class wife. For a man though, combining

²⁷ Letter, *The Times*, 26 January 1853.

²⁸ Letter, *The Times*, 9 May 1859.

²⁹ Letter, *The Times*, 9 May 1859.

the indices of masculinity, which included maintaining a wife and children, with the residential dependence of domestic service was problematic, as these letters suggest. Perhaps simply taking the opportunity to articulate their grievance in this way would have boosted these menservants' sense of their right to a degree of mental and physical independence from their employers.

Occasionally, an editorial or a letter could provoke a correspondence debate. This happened early in 1864 when *The Times* carried an editorial comment on the giving of false characters to servants. A couple of days later, a letter from someone styling himself or herself as 'Truth' appeared in the correspondence column under the title 'Servants and their Characters'. The writer of the letter claimed to write 'in the interests of society at large, to call attention to a subject of deep interest to all classes'.³⁰ This writer had many complaints about servants. Most of these were elaborations on the themes underpinning the arguments of the earlier letter writers considered above. 'Servants nowadays,' according to 'Truth', 'do not care either to obtain or to keep places where there are any restrictions as to dress, or as to hours for going out, or where regular attendance at church is required':

The love of dress and finery among servants is quite a mania. They will by preference go to places where the work is hard and the wages low, but where they are allowed to be out late and to dress in an unsuitable and indeed, ridiculous manner. They care not how this mania is gratified. So long as the money can be had to be smart, it matters not how it is got. Often, of course, honesty suffers, and when this happens character is gone. When finery has been purchased, some opportunity for displaying it must be found, and I'm quite sure of this, that many a poor girl who now receives shelter in one of the refuges would never have had to seek such a home had it not been for love of dress and late hours.³¹

'Truth' was making the familiar argument that the love of dress and going out to which servants were supposedly particularly prone could lead them into vice. However, the subtext was about her discomfort with servants evading control and expressing their individuality and independence. This became clearer as she developed her complaints. According to her, servant register offices were '[a]nother crying evil of the day' and existed to 'cause as many changes as possible in every household' because every time they found a servant a new situation they received a

³⁰ Letter, *The Times*, 13 January 1864.

³¹ Letter, *The Times*, 13 January 1864.

fee. This meant that servants who were 'comfortably settled and quite satisfied with their places' were tempted to change their places by the registry offices offering them new situations with 'higher wages and more liberty'. Servants exercising their right to change jobs appeared to unsettle 'Truth'; she did not like the idea of service working along market principles.

'Truth' was also annoyed by the fact, according to her, that there could 'be no doubt in the mind of any person of experience that servants are as a class sadly devoid of principle and religion'. In relation to this, 'Truth' claimed that not only was there a widespread practice of giving false characters amongst servants, but also that London servant clubs had 'arranged a system of communication between servants which is perfectly marvellous' and that the 'name of any lady or gentleman who dares to speak the truth as to the faults of any servant is posted at these clubs, and to their houses no servant will on any account go'. She claimed to have known of a few incidences where employers had refused to give bad servants good characters and 'so great was the malice of servants with whom they had been obliged to part for misconduct which could not be concealed that they were forced to live in hotels or to go abroad for a time until the subject had been forgotten'.

The dependence of the employer on the servant irritated 'Truth'. It was because she needed servants that their independence, requirements and desires were problematic for her. As we will see, the idea that servants maliciously clubbed together against employers reflects the anxiety expressed by servant employers in India, particularly during the Ilbert Bill controversy, that Indian servants might be in league against Anglo-Indian employers. Such anxiety was linked to the intimacy of the relation and the asymmetry of knowledge embedded in its structure. Servants had intimate knowledge of their employers while employers often knew little of their servants' private lives. In India the anxiety this produced in employers was mapped onto the differences associated with race; in England it intersected with a gendered notion of class difference.

What of the mistresses of these difficult servants? 'Surely, the wives and mothers of England cannot be indifferent on such a subject as this. Wherever distress or sorrow comes, there they too are found, gentle, sympathizing, self-forgetting. Surely, then, they cannot see unmoved this serious evil within their doors' wrote 'Truth'. In referring to 'the wives and mothers of England' she meant the servant-employing class. Her words echoed those of *The Times* editorial of 1850, which conjured the

tired and maligned mistress, driven to distraction by her evil servants. Nevertheless, like many of the earlier letter writers, 'Truth' saw the resolution to the problem as in the hands of those mistresses. 'Dress is one of the vices of the present day,' she opined, 'and it is one of the favourite follies of women...I am sure there would be fewer refuges required if ladies would dress less extravagantly themselves, and at all events insist on plain servant-like dress among their servants'. Until ladies undertook such action 'there can be no improvement in those who ought to look up to us for an example'.³²

Two days after the publication of the letter by 'Truth', a letter was published in the newspaper that articulated a servant's perspective. Written by X.Y.B, it is not entirely clear whether the author was a servant or not, but nevertheless she or he referred to the experience of an 'old servant friend of mine', and argued that 'ladies frequently refuse to give characters to servants when the servants do not suit them...Being themselves dissatisfied with the capabilities of a servant, they think they had better say nothing about them, without reflecting that by such a course they are ruining their characters and prospects'.³³ 'X.Y.B' thus directly contradicted 'Truth's argument that servants procured false characters, arguing that it was servants who were most frequently wronged by mistresses and pointing out the vulnerability of servants to the whim of their employers. 'X.Y.B' made curious use of the word 'character' in the above quotation. It is not clear whether she meant 'reputation' or 'reference'. Denial of character meant literally denial of testimonial, but 'X.Y.B' implied that the ramifications of such a denial involved loss of moral reputation or good qualities – the things that distinguish an individual. As a result of being denied a character a servant could lose out on a 'role' in another household. Her previous employer effectively owned her 'character'.

On the 28th of January another letter by 'Truth' was published, in which she illustrated her earlier remarks regarding servants' so-called 'love of dress' with an example. 'Truth' claimed that she had offered a place to a kitchenmaid at a wage of 18/ per year with tea and sugar and then made her 'usual stipulations as to dress – viz :- That my servants did not wear flounces on their dresses or flowers or feathers outside their bonnets: that they wore white caps, and were required to attend church

³² Letter, *The Times*, 13 January 1864.

³³ Letter, *The Times*, 15 January 1864.

regularly'.³⁴ The girl to whom 'Truth' had offered the place apparently replied by letter, writing:

I think everything is very clean, but I have one thing to name – that I have always been acustom to black caps; and I am sory to tell you that is one falt, that is all I have to name. If you alter this I should like to fill your place. I have been accustom to noblemans' kitchen, and understand my dutys. I think your serves would sute me very well. I am sory to make any complaints but if it not your wish to alter this, I think I had better decline it.³⁵

Assuming this letter was genuine, it seems the girl was stipulating her own terms within the contract of her employment. She was prepared to accept most of her potential employer's conditions but would only take the job if one particular requirement of her own - a right to wear her cap in the colour she preferred - was respected. In articulating her demand in this way she invited 'Truth' to negotiate with her. 'Truth' responded with annoyance. The 'effusion' she wrote, 'needs no comment from me'.³⁶ Nevertheless, her indignation got the better of her: 'The tone of the letter is more as if "A.B" were engaging me than the reverse. I have only to add that this is by no means an isolated case', she wrote.³⁷ This statement suggests that the problem for 'Truth' is not to do with the servant's 'love of dress', as she claims, but is about the fact the servant has her own 'stipulations as to dress' and does not think it unreasonable to state them. It is difficult to imagine a servant in 1850 attaching such a condition to her acceptance of a place. Such an attitude is evidence of an increased willingness amongst servants to make demands as employees in the later nineteenth century – a willingness, as we shall see, that was to result in servants' efforts to unionise less than a decade later.

On the same day as the second letter from 'Truth' was published, servants found an unlikely defender in the editorial writer of *The Times*. The writer acknowledged that the servant/employer relationship was a problematic one, writing that '[t]roublesome servants are one of those sources of annoyance in the little everyday matters of life which vex and irritate us', but that nevertheless 'we are very apt to exaggerate the extent of the mischief'.³⁸ This writer had little sympathy for ladies

³⁴ Letter, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

³⁵ Letter, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

³⁶ Letter, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

³⁷ Letter, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

³⁸ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

who 'represent themselves ...as almost helpless, obliged to put up with the annoyance of incessant change and anxiety in their households, and appear to consider servants little better than a necessary evil'.³⁹ In the view of the writer of this article, most of the faults claimed by correspondents such as 'Truth' to be specific to servants were 'either follies common to all classes, which are as troublesome, but as capable of control, in servants as in any others, or they are merely effects of the mischief complained of, and not its causes'.⁴⁰ Employers were responsible for their servants' conduct because

the character of servants must largely depend upon the training they receive in the households where they are placed. Good masters and mistresses will, as a rule, make good servants, and keep them; and when a mistress is in a perpetual state of discomfort with her servants she is generally as much to blame herself as they are.⁴¹

This attitude stands in bald contrast to that expressed in *The Times* editorial fourteen years earlier, when it was written that 'Happy indeed the favoured few who have succeeded in securing good servants, or even one good servant, after many years of trial'.⁴² In 1864, the editorial writer asserted servants' equal humanity, arguing that '[s]ervants are but human nature, and require as much care and consideration in their management as any other persons with whom we are brought into constant intercourse'.⁴³ He pointed out that employers' distrust bred dishonesty in servants, as by being mistrusted they lost self-respect 'like any other persons'.⁴⁴ He also highlighted the inequality of power in the relationship as a source of legitimate grievance for servants, writing that if 'servants could let us hear their side of the question, we are disposed to think they would have nearly as much ground of complaint on these scores against their masters as their masters have against them'.⁴⁵ In his view, the 'circumstances of the relation are naturally to the disadvantage of the servant' and employers often treated their servants as 'mere machines to do a certain amount of necessary service...without any consideration for a servant's natural

³⁹ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴⁰ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴¹ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴² Editorial, *The Times*, 18 December 1850.

⁴³ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴⁴ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴⁵ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

prejudices and tastes'.⁴⁶ An example of this was when masters and mistresses restricted a servant's freedom to socialise with friends and sweethearts, not realising that 'it is as hard for them as for any one else to give up a moderate amount of intercourse with their own class'.⁴⁷ According to the editorial writer, if masters and mistresses paid a little more attention to their servants' personal proclivities, then they would enjoy better service. Indeed in their role as 'master' or 'mistress' it was their responsibility to set the tone for the relationship:

Of course, domestic service must necessarily imply a considerable curtailment of personal liberty, but we believe that servants would be perfectly willing, as a rule, to obey even harsh regulations if they found their masters willing to consider their wishes wherever it was possible; whereas, on the other hand, if a servant finds her master regardless of her comfort and natural wants, it is but human nature if she becomes regardless of his. The fault, however, generally begins with the master, and at all events, as the better educated and more influential of the two parties, he ought to take the lead in the exercise of good feeling.⁴⁸

The editorial writer was not suggesting that masters and servants were equal within the relationship. Rather, he was arguing that benevolent paternalism on the part of masters and mistresses would result in them receiving better service. That this attitude, which so contrasted with that expressed in editorials a decade earlier, should be articulated at this time is perhaps not surprising when we consider that women were beginning to organise in trade unions in other trades through this period.⁴⁹ It is likely some employers felt apprehensive about the implications of such shifts in thinking about women and work and wanted to mitigate the infiltration of such ideas into thinking about domestic service, hence the emphasis on reciprocity and benevolence rather than hours of work and wages in this apparent defence of servants rights. Certainly, for this writer and as we shall see, other correspondents to *The Times*, a major source of tension was the issue of how money should work in the relationship between servants and their masters and mistresses. Indeed, in this editorial the writer argued that the 'worst feature of the relation upon which so much of the comfort of all rests' was the operation of the cash nexus within that relation.

⁴⁶ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴⁷ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴⁸ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁴⁹ The editor had not changed – the paper was under the control of John Delane from 1841 to 1877.

This, according to this writer, had become an evil in all employer/employee scenarios:

It is the unfortunate tendency of the day to separate the interests of employer and employed. Masters in all trades and professions get to look upon their servants too much in the light of mere instruments for the production of a certain amount of work at a certain expense, and the employed inevitably come to regard their masters only in the light of a sort of mine from which by sufficient labour they can extract a certain amount of money.⁵⁰

According to the editorial, this was bad enough when it infected relationships between employers such as builders and their workmen but it was particularly ‘painful that it should exist, as it nearly always does, between the inmates of the same household’.

This dislike of the cash nexus manifesting itself in relationships within the private world of home was not unusual during our period. As we have discussed elsewhere, the home was the place of family, ideally free from the taint of cash, the payment of which defined ‘work’. In this writer’s view, the notion that the amount and quality of domestic work done should relate to the amount paid for it was ‘a disease that feeds upon itself, and it is harder to cure the longer it lasts’.⁵¹ He saw it as undermining mutual confidence and amicability in the relationship between servants and their employers, resulting in mistrust and misery all round. Nevertheless, the remedy was in the employers’, rather than the servants’, hands:

if master or mistress can acquire their confidence by treating them with trust, consideration, and kindness, he or she may call out all the good there is in them, and exercise almost any influence over them... servants are neither angels nor machines, but human beings, and they must expect to have to treat them with the same consideration and patience as they are forced to exercise towards any other inmates of their household. In this, as in every other office of life, it is generally a bad workman that complains of his tools.⁵²

The use of a metaphor of a tool for a servant is interesting here. Even while the editorial writer asserted servants’ humanity, the use of this metaphor effectively stripped servants of it. It is reminiscent of the use of the word ‘hands’ to describe

⁵⁰ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁵¹ Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

⁵² Editorial, *The Times*, 28 January 1864.

factory workers and gives us the sense of the master working on a greater project, the construction of a definitively civilised way of life, the servants constituting the apparatus with which he achieves his aim.

C. Norton also wrote in defence of servants in a long letter that argued strongly that servants were often mistreated by ungrateful employers: ‘As long as servants are treated as mere living machines, to execute for us tasks we cannot perform ourselves, our relations with them must be defective and unsatisfactory’.⁵³ Norton also focussed on the cash nexus as a problematic issue in the relationship between masters, mistresses and servants, claiming employers used it to avoid a ‘kindly relation’ with their servants, who gave much more than they were remunerated for either in cash or in kind:

it is not an exaggeration of the alien and unnatural position servants occupy in some houses, as if they were a different race of beings from those who employ them. “Well,” the answer is, “they *are* aliens and strangers, hired in and paid for their service.” True; but how much is given that you do not pay for? The pretty young girl goes to her opera or ball, and she is dressed by another pretty girl or respectable old servant. It is their duty, it is “paid service;” but it is not paid service that makes them sincerely hope, when she returns, that it has been pleasant; that she has “enjoyed herself” with the innocent gaiety of youth. It is not paid service that makes “baby” almost as important in the eye of the numerous household, as in the eye of his doting mother...All these things, and the pride in the successes and sorrow for the disaster of “the family,” have nothing to do with “paid service” but with the quick, kindly, natural instincts of the human heart – instincts as easily awakened in our servants as in any other set or section of the community.⁵⁴

The reference to servants as ‘a different race of beings from those who employ them’ points towards British society’s development of a heightened awareness of racial difference and its possible meanings in the 1860s. Scientists and social commentators were elaborating racial hierarchies and defining inherent characteristics belonging to ‘the Negro’, ‘the Indian’ and of course, ‘the Englishman’. It is possible that the sense of a common humanity shared by servants and employers alike, so lacking in the earlier discussion of servant character in 1850, was stressed by both *The Times* editorial writer and C. Norton in 1864 as a by-product of new thinking about race. The commonality between English people, even of different classes, was highlighted by

⁵³ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

⁵⁴ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

the difference between the English and other supposedly inferior races. Thus, a point obliquely made in this quotation was that domestic servants, despite being strangers in the household, were of the same race as their employers, understanding and sharing the family's joys and sorrows. Therefore, it was not acceptable to treat them in the same way as one would treat a member of a different race. In this way racial hierarchy was implicitly endorsed. Such was the pervasiveness of racial thinking in ideas about British society in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Like the writer of the editorial featured in *The Times* a few days earlier, C.Norton believed that it was masters and mistresses who carried the responsibility for any problems within their relationships with their servants. Norton also argued that the 'love of dress' and other faults associated with domestic servants were characteristics learned by servants from their employers. Speaking about crinolines, Norton asked

is the servant girl who persists (as *Punch* pictures her) in opening the door to the sweeps dressed in that enormity, a whit more ridiculous, in fact, than the young lady stooping to enter her carriage with her real corporeal frame, slender and central as the tongue of a bell, set within the balloon circuit of her expanded petticoat, or the portly and well-dressed mother of a family, who, lifting her little one to her lap, lays it fondly down on a sort of concealed gridiron, covered with silk and muslin?⁵⁵

Similarly, Norton believed that servants could not be expected to live sober and honest lives if their employers did not do so. If masters and mistresses wanted good and faithful servants, then they had to treat them with kindness and set them a good moral example, else they would end up with servants who did nothing but 'ape the exterior luxury and apparent frivolity around them'.⁵⁶ Norton thus made an assumption about the malleability and suggestibility of servant character; it is as if servants do not have any real character or personality of their own, but are constructed almost entirely by their employers. In Norton's letter even while servants are defended, they are somehow reduced.

Other letters to *The Times* demonstrated that servants not only had individual personalities, they also had their own ideas about the problems between masters, mistresses and servants and how they could be resolved. On the same day as C.Norton's letter was published, a letter from a servant, 'P', was also published in the

⁵⁵ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

⁵⁶ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

correspondence column of *The Times*. This servant began her letter by claiming a right to speak about servants as a result of her long experience in service and then went on to discuss servants' dress. Like the editorial writer and C.Norton, 'P' saw the problems with servants' dress as largely the responsibility of the employer. However, in 'P's' eyes it was not because employers set a poor example, but because they preferred to hire servants 'that are smartly dressed than they do them that come plain and neat, and that is one of the reasons that servants are dressed so smart'.⁵⁷ 'P' also pointed out that some ladies 'go quite to the extreme the other way':

I lived with a lady some years who would not let any of her servants (with the exception of her own maid) wear any crinoline in the house or out, and made them wear caps tied under their chin, like old women. Of course, young servants don't like that, and will not stay long in such a situation, because other servants laugh at them.⁵⁸

In this letter 'P' drew attention to servants' need for some recognition by their employers of their femininity and the fragility of their young egos. While they were servants, they were still young girls, and disliked ridicule as much as anyone. 'P' highlighted the fact that there was a person inside the servant's costume; the employers' needs did not necessarily entirely define the servants' existence, other things were also important to them. 'P' made this point explicitly later in her letter, claiming that 'masters and mistresses as a general rule don't speak kind to their servants' and advising employers that they should:⁵⁹

be kind to their servants, and not treat them as mere machines, only to get as much work out of them as they can for the money they pay them, and think, although they are beneath them, they are fellow creatures, and have the same feelings as they have. Then they will find they will soon get good servants.⁶⁰

Like the editorial writer and C.Norton, 'P' mentions money in a negative way. It seems that in 'P's' view, the degree to which servants are remunerated is not equivalent to the work expected of them. Because there was no standard wage for servants and no fixed hours of work, an employer could conceivably work a servant

⁵⁷ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

⁵⁸ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

⁵⁹ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

⁶⁰ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

as many hours as he or she liked, for as much money as he or she cared to pay. The servant could of course reject or leave a place, but that was the extent of her bargaining power. Though for 'P' being treated with kindness would appear to go a long way towards mitigating her dissatisfaction, in the later decades of the nineteenth century we hear increasingly loud complaints about hours of work from servants in some parts of the country. With the advent of increased educational provision and the possibilities of other forms of employment for women emerging, servants had more choices available to them and this may have made them feel more confident about making demands of their masters and mistresses. Nevertheless, for servants in areas such as Wales, where there was little other work available for women, such complaints were rare.

'P' also pointed out that it was servants lack of free-time, rather than an inherent ungodliness, that made it difficult for them to attend church regularly, whether because they were working on Sundays, or because they were loath to spend the hour or two they had free on a Sunday sitting in church. Once again, 'P' drew attention to the fact that a servant was not necessarily satisfied with the household being her whole world, as some employers may have assumed:

a young girl leaves home to go in service either as underservant in a large family or a small family...When she gets to her situation she finds she has to work from early in the morning until late at night, on Sundays hardly time to go to church once. There are scores of places in London where servants do not go a hundred yards from the house from month to month. You can hardly blame a servant when she gets another situation, and gets time to go to church, that she goes for a walk in the Park instead.⁶¹

On the 6th February 1864 a letter from 'A Butler' appeared in *The Times*. 'A Butler' flatly contradicted 'Truth's' assertions that there was a scarcity of good servants. He acknowledged that he had 'no doubt many of your correspondents have suffered all the annoyance of which they complain – ah! and will continue to do so until doomsday'. However, in his view this was not because of some inherent immorality in servants, rather it was because employers were not prepared to accept that they had to pay for quality. According to 'A Butler', 'many employers keep establishments quite beyond what they can legitimately afford, and expect more than can in reason

⁶¹ Letter, *The Times*, 2 February 1864.

be expected'. Employers commonly parted 'with a good, respectable servant in whom they can, do, and may confide, for the sake of a paltry 1l or 2l a year'. This view of the relationship between cash and service differed from those articulated by the editorial writer, C. Norton and 'P', who all seemed to think that kindness would mitigate servants' dissatisfaction with pay. On the contrary 'A Butler' clearly thought that there was no substitute for a fair wage.

'A Butler' asserted servants' right to combine if they so wished, claiming that 'surely servants have an equal right with any other class to do so'. Also, like 'JW' fourteen years earlier, he highlighted a servant's vulnerability to the whim of his or her mistress, arguing that the root of evil was not so much servants supplying false characters as mistresses withholding true ones for petty reasons:

Is there no such thing as a false character against as well as on behalf of a servant? Ask many a wretched "bookmaker" hanging about "The Corner," or, still worse, many a fallen woman pacing the cheerless streets on a winter's night; and they will tell you one word or so omitted from the scented note of an angry mistress to an inquiring one has been their ruin.

This image is effectively evocative. The miserable state of the 'bookmaker' and the 'fallen woman' contrasts with the apparent innocuousness of the 'scented note' to highlight the vicious effects of a mistress's, perhaps momentary, malice. It is subversive in that it gives an alternative explanation for a servant's descent into vice to the usual one of a servant's 'love of dress' or lack of morality leading them down the path of ruin and regret. Furthermore, it is an explanation that places the blame for a servant's 'fall' squarely at the feet of unfeeling, unthinking mistresses. In this formulation, the servant is not so much fallen, as pushed. The medium of the newspaper made it possible for 'A Butler' to suggest such a possibility directly to members of the servant employing class, implicitly chiding their selfishness in only thinking of how the problem of 'character' affected them.

In 'A Butler's' view, it was the lack of independence resulting from the need for a character that led to servants seeking work in other kinds of employment, as well as the increased availability of other occupations in the late nineteenth century.

In such circumstances is it to be wondered at that servants are anxious to find some other employment as soon as possible where, if there is more labour and fewer comforts, they are not so dependent on the caprice of an individual? There are now so many ways open to a man of

activity, industry and honesty by which a living may be obtained that the subject is worth the consideration of employers.⁶²

The fundamental element of manliness for the Victorians was independence.⁶³ ‘A Butler’ does not seem so worried about the potential loss of his character as he is annoyed by his dependence on ‘the caprice of an individual’. By referring to a servant as a ‘man of activity, industry and honesty’, he invokes other important features of ideal Victorian masculinity, making it clear that he is a man before he is a servant, and that these ‘manly’ qualities could suit him to other forms of employment apart from service.

It was not simply the link between domesticity and femininity that precipitated the decline in numbers of menservants through the second half of the nineteenth century. The increasing availability to working class men of a range of occupations in which a man could be independently engaged was also crucial. A dependent male could really never achieve adult masculinity in the eyes of nineteenth century society. Male domestic servants were not necessarily feminized by the kind of work they did. After all, as was discussed in chapter 2, a gender division of labour operated within domestic service, with outdoor work being seen as men’s work. In our period, this division intensified precisely because menservants refused to risk being feminized by doing women’s work.

As Davidoff and Hall have shown, manliness and domesticity were not mutually exclusive.⁶⁴ In Tosh’s words the ‘Victorian ideal of domesticity was in all respects the creation of men as much as women. ‘Woman’s sphere’ was a convenient shorthand, not a call to exclusivity’.⁶⁵ Indeed, dominant discourses rooted in evangelicalism defined a ‘manly’ man as one who involved himself with domestic life. However, in order to be ‘manly’ this domestic life had to take place in a man’s own home, with his own family. A male domestic servant was always subject to, and a dependant of, the head of the household for which he worked. The male servant’s obligation to the employer’s family complicated his ability to enjoy a family life of his own, which frustrated his claims to adult masculinity. It is no coincidence that alongside sons living at home, soldiers living in barracks, lunatics, paupers and

⁶² Letter, *The Times*, 6 Feb 1864.

⁶³ See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes*, *passim*.

⁶⁴ See Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes*, *passim*.

⁶⁵ John Tosh, *A Man’s Place*, p50.

women, male domestic servants were excluded from the franchise extensions of 1867 and 1884. All these groups shared the characteristic of dependence on another individual or institution. It is easy to see how male servants might increasingly have regarded their line of work as compromising their masculinity, as state and society refused to acknowledge their status as citizens, full adult men, while awarding that right to other working-class males.

On the 30th March 1864 the final intervention in the epistolary debate begun by 'Truth' was published. It was from a servant calling himself 'West End'. His letter was generally in agreement with that written by 'A Butler' in terms of the issue of characters, arguing that servants 'are often refused characters from the whim or caprice, or – why mince the matter, Sir? – the unfeeling hearts of their employers'.⁶⁶ 'West End' supported this argument with an anecdote from his own experience, in which he described how one of his employers had refused him a character simply because he wanted to leave her service and she wanted him to stay. 'West End' claimed that it 'never entered her head that I was a free agent and could have an opinion of my own about going or staying'.⁶⁷ 'West End' thus highlighted the tension between the self and the role of servant that all these servants' letters point towards.

'West End' went on to write generally about the vulnerability of servants to their employers' whims and suggested employers follow the example of a 'venerable judge' who, on receiving a character for a servant he planned to engage, decided to enquire into the character of the servant's last employer, in order to determine whether the servant's character was likely to be honestly written. Asserting servants' human equality with their employers, 'West End' sought to appeal to employers' consciences, writing that 'it would be well for many a poor, houseless, homeless fellow-being were ladies and gentlemen to take a hint from the good old judge before they shut their doors on a poor creature whose only fault may have been a trifle easily explained away'.⁶⁸ He closed his letter by suggesting that the matter was one of serious social concern, commenting sharply on the selective philanthropy of mistresses and implying (like 'A Butler') that it was the uncharitable nature of many mistresses that drove girls onto the streets. In this way 'West End' linked into

⁶⁶ Letter, *The Times*, 30 March 1864.

⁶⁷ Letter, *The Times*, 30 March 1864.

⁶⁸ Letter, *The Times*, 30 March 1864.

contemporary misogynist discourses on the hypocrisy of ‘dutiful’ ladies; in the following quotation his dislike of middle-class women is clear:

if the gentlemen who have done so much at the “midnight meetings” would strike at the root, or at least a great root of the evil, they would get up a crusade against the hard-hearted mistresses who have driven many and many poor girls to be what they never would have been had they been treated with a more Christian spirit. I would advise gentlemen to begin with “the sense of duty” ladies. They are always doing hard things from a duty, they say, they owe to society; always straining at the gnat, but quite as often swallowing the camel.⁶⁹

Domestic servants’ unions

As was discussed in chapter 2, from 1850 the number of men in service was in decline, partly as a result of the increased availability of alternative occupations for men in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though the number of women in service was not in decline as such, there was a slowdown in the rate of expansion of female service from the 1870s and female servants seem to have been increasingly willing to complain publicly (if anonymously) about their conditions of work. This may have been a by-product of developments in ideas about women’s and workers’ rights from the 1840s onward. In the 1870s women were organising in increasing numbers to campaign on a range of issues such as the Contagious Diseases Acts and the right of married women to retain property, as well as suffrage. These early feminists were by no means a united movement, but they were growing in number and vociferousness. Though often divided by class, some of them were concerned with women’s rights as workers.

There was a general price rise in the 1870s, with trade recession setting in by the mid 1870s.⁷⁰ The early 1870s also saw an expansion of trade union activity, as groups of previously unorganised workers, such as builders, railwaymen, gasworkers, labourers and agricultural workers (whose situation, in terms of the paternalism and dependence structuring their working lives, was not dissimilar to that of servants) began to make efforts to establish unions.⁷¹ All over Britain women workers in

⁶⁹ Letter, *The Times*, 30 March 1864.

⁷⁰ Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions. An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement* (London and Tonbridge, 1977) p85.

⁷¹ Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p83.

various trades began to involve themselves with unions in increasing numbers in this period, some with more success than others.

Domestic servants were not very successful at establishing unions, but this was not for want of trying, nor does it mean that their efforts are not worth the consideration precedent in a union set up by Edinburgh maidservants in 1825.⁷² Living and working in the houses of their employers with very little free time, opportunities to meet and discuss unionisation were limited for domestic servants. Also, the patriarchal nature of the relationship between master or mistress and servant was a hindrance to effective union organisation. For example, in April 1872 domestic servants in Dundee met with a view to establishing a union. Despite 'numerous attendance' letters 'expressive of the regret of the writers because of the inability to be present were read – almost all assigning as the cause of their non-appearance that their mistresses had stated that they would lose their characters if they did so'.⁷³ According to a report in the *Dundee Advertiser* this vulnerability was a motivating factor in the Dundee domestic servants' intention to establish a union. 'Some humorous remarks were made' according to the article in the *Advertiser*, 'as to the stringency with which mistresses inquired into the character of their servants':

It was pointed out that they were perfectly omnipotent in their control of their servants' career, and it was urged that it was high time that the domestic servants should form themselves into an organization.⁷⁴

Other points of grievance raised at this preliminary meeting included servants' lack of free time and the unreasonable hours they were expected to work. Using the language of rights, the servants contended that they

were entitled to have a half-holiday weekly and a free Sabbath every fortnight...it was strongly argued that no labour should be performed on Sunday except what was absolutely necessary...on Sabbath there was usually special cooking, and that hence a great amount of labour was entailed on the servants which they did not experience on other days of the week; and that Sabbath, therefore, entailed an amount of drudgery which was unbearable.⁷⁵

⁷² For details of the Edinburgh Maidservants Society see Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, pp32-33.

⁷³ *Dundee Advertiser*, 20 April 1872.

⁷⁴ *Dundee Advertiser*, 20 April 1872.

⁷⁵ *Dundee Advertiser*, 20 April 1872.

By implying it was inappropriate to perform domestic labour on a Sunday the servants used the language of Sabbatarianism (the movement against working on Sundays, which was likely to be particularly powerful in Scotland) not only to underscore their point about hours of work generally, but also to subversively construct domestic work as proper work.

The other major source of complaint centred on the issue of dress and mistresses' efforts to determine what servants wore, despite the fact that they paid for their own clothing. In this, as in the complaints over the issue of characters, the servants were protesting against the totality of the control mistresses attempted to exert over them: 'The stipulations as to what should be worn in the way of dress and jewellery were also considered, and it was thought the mistress had no right to interfere with their apparel in any way so long as it was paid for'.⁷⁶ Again, the servants believed they were entitled, as women who had earned the money to pay for their clothes, to make an independent decision as to what those clothes would be like. It is hard to imagine this happening in the mid-nineteenth century. Though servants' tendencies towards customizing their clothing had long been a source of grievance for employers, a group of servants combining and openly complaining about their employers restricting their ability to dress as they pleased was novel in 1872. These servants seemed prepared to go further than simply writing letters to the newspaper in order to get their employers attention.

The objections outlined above were elaborated upon in a subsequent meeting on April 26 1872, which was reported, apparently verbatim, in *The Dundee Advertiser*. At this meeting the servants resolved to form the Dundee and District Domestic Servants Protection Association and appointed a President, a Treasurer and a Secretary. In discussing their demands, the servants repeatedly stressed that their strength lay in combination. As one speaker said there was 'no use for one doing it and not the rest'.⁷⁷ Their major grievance concerned the hours they were expected to work. One speaker declared that 'I really wonder why mistresses can think their servants are able to do what they expect of them. I do believe they actually think we are not made of the same material!' and her comment was met with roars of laughter and assent.⁷⁸ The chairwoman, in her summing-up speech, drew a direct comparison

⁷⁶ *Dundee Advertiser*, 20 April 1872.

⁷⁷ *Dundee Advertiser*, 27 April 1872.

⁷⁸ *Dundee Advertiser*, 27 April 1872.

between service and slavery, claiming that the hardships suffered by servants drove them to steal. She did not appear to see the union as an antagonistic organisation, but one that, by campaigning on behalf of servants, would improve the lot of mistresses too:

It is a mistake, I say, for anyone to argue that slavery only exists abroad...We have been "slavered" too long – at any rate, enough; and I am astonished that servants have stood the treatment they have received for a long time back. (Applause) How servants have been able to do the work which has been taken out of them on the food they have received I cannot understand, but the treatment they have got has led them, I believe, often to take what was not their own and what they really had no use for (Applause) ...I am sure that there would be happier homes for both mistresses and servants if the latter were more generously dealt by and treated with more confidence (Applause).⁷⁹

The editorial writer of the *Dundee Advertiser* first highlighted the potential implications of the organisation of servants. According to this writer even the threat of a servants' strike was 'enough to strike terror into households where the work could not be carried on without them' and he painted a vivid and sarcastic picture of domestic disaster if 'a general stoppage of work by the cooks, housemaids, nurserymaids, laundrymaids, and tablemaids' was to occur, relating the issue directly to wider ideas about workers and women's rights:

No fires lighted, no breakfast ready, the lobby not swept, the doorsteps not washed, the children screaming for nurse who won't come, the dirty clothes on the floor of the washhouse untouched, the meat and vegetables likely to remain in the larder uncooked, the cook presiding at a mass meeting of other servants in the kitchen, the tablemaid declaring the time has come to turn the tables on the stiff necked generation upstairs, and the housemaid waving a sweeping brush and insisting on "No Surrender!"...The mistresses had better beware. They have long had the upper hand; but can they refuse to admit Women's Rights? The great question between Capital and Labour now has to be settled between the Parlour and the Pantry, the Drawing Room and the Kitchen, Madame and Mary. Clarissa and the cook must come to an amicable arrangement, or "all the fat will be in the fire".⁸⁰

Within a few days of the servants first meeting, many local and even national newspapers had picked up the story. The tone of many of the articles was surprisingly

⁷⁹ *Dundee Advertiser*, 27 April 1872.

⁸⁰ *Dundee Advertiser*, April 23 1872.

sympathetic to the servants. For example, *The Newcastle Chronicle* applauded the Dundee maidservants' efforts, claiming that the 'great movement among all classes of workers for better terms with their employers has shown itself in a new field... We heartily wish this plucky movement success and it will be interesting to mark its progress'. However, the *Chronicle* also wondered if the 'labouring "lords of creation", who already have their Unions and restricted hours' would 'come to the rescue of this fair combination of the kitchen against bad temper and unreasonableness in the parlour'.⁸¹ The language used here evokes chivalry. The implication is that the Dundee maidservants need the manly support of unionised working men in order to achieve their aims.

The *Bradford Observer* argued that girls in 'large towns like Bradford' compared the restrictive dependence that characterised the average servant's lot with the relative freedom of the factory worker, resulting in 'a great dearth of servants. Poor girls born in the district naturally prefer a life of independence and good earnings to the servility of domestic service'.⁸² Furthermore, the attractions of factory work tempted girls who had been hired from the country away from jobs in service: 'it often happens that as soon as the girl from the country has been able to look about her and observe the elevated position of the factory girl, she gives her mistress notice and at once flies to the mills'.⁸³ According to the *Bradford Observer*, the advent of unionisation amongst servants could be advantageous to both the 'hirer and the hired' as it would 'raise the condition of the domestic servant', making the profession more attractive for young girls and thus solving the problem of servant shortages⁸⁴. The newspaper even suggested that the temerity of the domestic servants might be inspiring to the 'timid clerk' who might 'take courage after this display of bravery on the part of some of the humblest of the weaker sex'.⁸⁵ This association of the clerk with unmanly weakness relative to the 'weaker sex' points towards the future definition of secretarial work as women's work.

The *Leeds Mercury* was less supportive of servants' unionising. According to the *Mercury*, poor relations between mistress and maid were almost universal, arguing that 'the household which knows of no difficulty in the matter of servants... is the rare

⁸¹ *The Newcastle Chronicle*, 24 April 1872.

⁸² *The Bradford Observer*, 24 April 1872.

⁸³ *The Bradford Observer*, 24 April 1872.

⁸⁴ *The Bradford Observer*, 24 April 1872.

⁸⁵ *The Bradford Observer*, 24 April 1872.

exception to the rule'.⁸⁶ The writer of this article claimed that servant numbers were generally declining because 'the middle classes are to some extent reaping the consequences of their own want of gratitude and forethought' as girls chose 'better wages and shorter hours...[and]...an infinitely greater amount of personal liberty' as 'machine hands' rather than as domestic servants.⁸⁷ However, in this writer's opinion, the quality of servant had also deteriorated: 'Not only are the young girls who are to be seen in the houses of the poorer members of the middle classes far more independent than their predecessors ever ventured to be; but they are fonder of dress and less ready and able to work than servants of former days'.⁸⁸ The solution to the problem lay in women learning how to cook and clean so that they would not be so dependent on servants: 'With all our anxiety for the "higher education" of women, we have a sneaking kindness for that which will enable them in an emergency to make a home comfortable by their own exertions'.⁸⁹ This notion echoed the idea, expressed in an article in *The Times* just over a decade earlier, that increased education for women made the middle-class girls poor mistresses, and the working-class girls poor servants:

Intellectual have taken the place of domestic pursuits, and the upper and middle classes no longer exercise that constant supervision over their household affairs which they used to do. It is regarded as beneath their dignity, and they are incompetent for it; for the highest ambition of a young woman is that which she least of all qualifies herself for – namely, to become a wife. Many influences have operated to change the character of domestic servants. There is the asserted growing insubordination and love of independence on the part of the rising generation; the larger demand for women in other employments as well as in this; the love of change and locomotion generated by the increased facility of communication; and the multiplied temptations to gaiety which prove so attractive to the young. But the school itself, it is said, by a too ambitious course of instruction, often tends to raise girls above domestic service while imperfectly fitting them for it.⁹⁰

In this article higher education for women was made responsible for 'the servant problem' and the servant problem was given as indicative of wider social ills. The writer implied that higher education and increased opportunities for other kinds of

⁸⁶ *The Leeds Mercury*, 24 April 1872.

⁸⁷ *The Leeds Mercury*, 24 April 1872.

⁸⁸ *The Leeds Mercury*, 24 April 1872.

⁸⁹ *The Leeds Mercury*, 24 April 1872.

⁹⁰ *The Times*, 20 September 1861.

work were not only eroding the institution of service, but also the institution of marriage. Young women were increasingly unqualified for what should be their 'highest ambition'. Their lack of qualification showed in their inability, or unwillingness, to focus on managing their households, or working in the households of others. It was implied in this letter that women should not be educated, not because they were intellectually incapable, but because the effect of their being educated pressurized the order of servant/employer and even marital relations.

The antagonistic attitude expressed by this writer towards these shifts in womanhood was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century and in relation to domestic servants, could become tangled with hostility towards the increasingly assertive working class. For example, a letter written to the *Surrey Comet* when servants in Surbiton threatened to strike suggested the servants' demands for better pay were illegitimate because they didn't do skilled work, and associated the servants' and wider working class agitation with the ill effects of too much education disrupting the proper order of society:

since education has been introduced amongst the poorer classes, their heads are full of nothing else but striking for higher wages, and now this monstrous thing has even spread to the domestic servants of our households. Why, the servants of this present time are not to be compared with those of twenty years ago, and may I ask what do they want? Do they want paying by the hour, the same as skilled mechanics? It is my opinion, and the opinion of others, that the working classes of the present day are ruining the country.⁹¹

Other newspapers highlighted the potential mass power of domestic servants. For example, an article in the *Daily News* suggested that domestic servants, by virtue of their sheer numbers and their importance in Victorian households, could force truly radical change if they wished:

Domestic servants are a powerful body. In number they are far superior to the householders who send members to Parliament and get our laws constructed for us. If they were suddenly to rise, and demand and obtain direct political representation, it would be hard to say what surprising results, such as no advocate of women's suffrage has ever dreamed of, might be reached.⁹²

⁹¹ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 20 July 1872.

⁹² *Daily News*, 25 April 1872.

Servants' potential power was figured as threatening in the *Saturday Review*, which described the organisation of servants as a 'domestic cyclone' that would sweep the country.⁹³ The advantage for 'London housekeepers' was that they had had 'fair notice' of it moving towards them, and they had time before it arrived to 'consider how they should meet it, and to lay their plans accordingly'.⁹⁴ Certainly, servants in other parts of the country supported the efforts of the Dundee maidservants. At a meeting of menservants in Leamington, 'Cheers were given for maids of Dundee'.⁹⁵ Having seen a report in *The Times* on the Union, some servants calling themselves 'Southern Sisters' wrote to the *Dundee Advertiser* to 'urge them [the Dundee maidservants] on in this work'. Making a claim to equality with their employers, they used a comparison with slavery to highlight the exploitative conditions under which they worked, asking, 'why should we be treated as slaves? Are we not all of one flesh and blood?'.⁹⁶ Other commentators were rather more sceptical about the likelihood of the Union succeeding in achieving its aims, let alone spreading throughout the country. *The Spectator* painted a dismal, though probably accurate picture, claiming that 'the girls will be beaten of course, but even if they succeed they will be worse off than London Lodging house servants, who at all events sell their health for good round profits'.⁹⁷

Though the Dundee maidservants union was short lived, it appeared in the news fairly frequently throughout its existence, with reports and commentary on its progress appearing in publications ranging from *Punch* to the *Pall Mall Gazette*. By June, though, enthusiasm for the union appeared to be fizzling out. An article appeared in *The Times* which claimed that 'the terrors which this movement have inspired may now be shaken off, and the maids of Dundee, like many other personages who have created unnecessary commotion, are likely to suffer a total eclipse'.⁹⁸

Lack of support may have been significant in the failure of the Dundee union. The precarious terms of a servant's employment, their isolation within households, their lack of freedom and the conventions of loyalty and obligation that structured their relationships with their employers meant that combination was difficult for them. As

⁹³ *Saturday Review*, 27 April 1872.

⁹⁴ *Saturday Review*, 27 April 1872.

⁹⁵ *Dundee Advertiser*, 30 April 1872.

⁹⁶ Letter, *Dundee Advertiser*, 7 May 1872.

⁹⁷ *The Spectator*, 27 April 1872.

⁹⁸ *The Times* 11 June 1872.

Lewenhak has written: 'Like the small women's societies fostered by the Women's Trade Union League, the various unions of agricultural workers, of dockers, gasworkers, and others received middle-class help' and though it is true that '[n]o amount of middle-class encouragement ...ever created a union', the aid of other unions or of middle-class supporters could have gone some way towards mitigating the disadvantages faced by domestic servants attempting to unionise.⁹⁹ The Dundee maidservants do not have appear to have received any such support, as a rather irritated letter to the *Dundee Advertiser* from the Secretaries of the union indicated:

It has been mockingly suggested that we might do worse than try to get the engineers amalgamated with us matrimonially. Now, had they come forward to assist us there might have been some fear of us being captivated with their manliness; but as it is, there is no fear of any such thing. But, we have done pretty well, so far, without their help; and if they mean to hold back like cowards and see the weaker sex fight it out for themselves, let us hope we will still be successful.¹⁰⁰

This letter used language that would not have been out of place at a suffrage meeting. The servants asserted their strength by sarcastically caricaturing their feminine weakness. In caricaturing female feebleness, the letter writers also scornfully caricatured manliness. This made the servants' subsequent use of the notion of traditional gender roles, in order to berate the male unionists for failing to help the maidservants, even more effective. The engineers' unwillingness to support the nascent servants' union was given as an indication of the engineers' lack of masculine bravery. The women, however, intended to 'fight it out for themselves'.

Unfortunately, despite their apparent determination, on this occasion their efforts were to be unsuccessful. By June 1872, few servants had signed up as members of the union, though more had been enquiring about it.¹⁰¹ The Secretary and Treasurer were unwilling to accept office unless they could receive a guarantee that their salaries would be paid, presumably because they would have to give up their jobs in order to administer the union, but of course few members meant little funds.¹⁰² The Dundee Trades Council taking the domestic servants 'under their sheltering wing' marked the

⁹⁹ Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions*, p 84.

¹⁰⁰ *Dundee Advertiser*, 8 May 1872.

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 11 June 1872.

¹⁰² *The Times*, 11 June 1872.

demise of the union.¹⁰³ According to *The Times* this had happened because the Dundee Trades Council ‘were of the opinion...that the servants were unfit to manage their business’.¹⁰⁴ However, *The Times* also described the Dundee Trades Council as an ‘effete body’, suggesting that it itself was not competent to manage the servants’ interests.¹⁰⁵ Removal of authority over the union from servants themselves could have done little to inspire confidence in would-be members that their interests would be properly acknowledged and represented. It is not surprising that at a meeting held by the Council ‘only six or eight maids attended’, in stark contrast to the ‘numerous attendance’ described at earlier meetings.¹⁰⁶ If in its earlier stages the domestic servants had received guidance and support, perhaps the future of the Dundee and District Domestic Servants’ Protection Association would have been different.

Despite the failure of the Dundee union, it had a knock-on effect as servants in other parts of the country began to consider organisation. In Leamington a meeting of menservants was held on the 29th of April 1872. Mainly coachmen, gardeners and stablemen, the Leamington servants complained about their long hours of work, poor pay and the separation of married couples. They ‘unanimously adopted’ a resolution to form ‘a union of butlers, gardeners, grooms, footmen and porters’.¹⁰⁷ The following day, a meeting of menservants was held in Kensington. In June 1872, washerwomen in Norbiton went on strike to protest at their low wages and long working hours, given the relative affluence of their employers. They combined with the washerwomen of Surbiton and held two open air protest meetings, which were reported in the *Surrey Comet*. Following this, domestic servants in Surbiton and Kingston wrote letters to the *Surrey Comet* throughout the summer of 1872 in which they complained about their working conditions and threatened to unionise.¹⁰⁸ ‘If a strike is thought necessary, all those who wish bravely set to work with hearty goodwill as the tub thumpers did’ wrote one correspondent, given confidence by the washerwomen’s protest, while another suggested following the Dundee servants example:

¹⁰³ *The Times*, 11 June 1872.

¹⁰⁴ *The Times*, 11 June 1872.

¹⁰⁵ *The Times*, 11 June 1872.

¹⁰⁶ *The Times*, 11 June 1872; *Dundee Advertiser* 20 April 1872.

¹⁰⁷ *Dundee Advertiser*, 30 April 1872.

¹⁰⁸ *Dundee Advertiser*, 30 April 1872; *Surrey Comet*, June, July, August 1872; See also John Pink, *Country Girls Preferred* (Surbiton, 1998) p61 for analysis of the *Surrey Comet* material.

if a strike be contemplated among the domestics of Surbiton they should set about it in a proper way, as our sisters did in Dundee. Call a meeting, but not at a public house – like out friends the washerwomen – there draw up their resolutions with regard to a half a day every week, extra hour on Sunday evenings, followers allowed, their dress etc. and let them be laid before the mistresses of Surbiton.¹⁰⁹

The complaints of the servants of Surbiton and Kingston were similar to those made by the Dundee maids and the servants who wrote into *The Times* in 1864. In all cases they revolve around issues of freedom of choice, independence and wages for work. Perhaps this is why a recurrent motif in all these cases is comparison of a servant's situation with that of a slave, whose existence was defined by the denial of freedom, independence and remuneration for work.

Wages were an issue for the Surrey servants. In one letter a servant complained about low wages and the fact that of a servant's annual wage of 'between £7 and £12...half that amount is needed for print dresses and indispensable cap'.¹¹⁰ 'Another of your Readers' argued that servants would happily do plenty of work provided the remuneration was fair: 'Servants do not mind hard work if they are paid well for it'. He or she added that 'no good servant would leave a good place foolishly', making it clear that employers carried some responsibility when good servants gave notice.¹¹¹

A major source of grievance for the servants writing to the *Surrey Comet* was the amount of free time allowed them. 'A Footman' objected to cooking on Sundays, asking 'is it right that there should be so much Sunday cooking, shall the domestic servant never have her Sunday rest?'.¹¹² 'A Domestic Servant' claimed that servants should 'feel that they have something to look forward to more than continual drudgery'.¹¹³ 'A Cook of Surbiton Hill' described that drudgery, contrasting it with the pleasantness of life 'upstairs':

I dare say you...have felt how oppressive the heat has been during the past week or two out of doors; but just fancy being indoors, over a blazing fire all day, and sometimes till late in the evening, how awful it must be! I can assure you it is, and none but those with strong constitutions can stand it. This goes on day after day, week after week, the same old thing. It is very nice to hear our young mistresses playing the pianoforte and singing upstairs while the

¹⁰⁹ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 6 July 1872.

¹¹⁰ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 29 June 1872.

¹¹¹ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 29 June 1872.

¹¹² Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 6 July 1872.

¹¹³ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 29 June 1872.

mistress of the dripping pan – herself almost dripping – is preparing their dinner. There is a certain amount of consolation in the music, but there would be more if I could only think that those above considered those below a little more. For this slavery – for it is nothing else – I am rewarded by being let out one evening in each week from 7 til 9 – a whole two hours – and on Sundays the same.¹¹⁴

Freedom of choice over what they did in their free time was also a common theme of servants' letters. Servants disliked their out-of-work activities being dictated by their employers. For example, for 'A Domestic Servant', the fact that on a Sunday 'we are sent out with strict orders to go straight to church and back' was an unfair infringement on her right to decide how she spent her free time. The rule enforced by many employers, that servants should not spend time with 'followers', was similarly resented. Speaking of footmen, 'E.M.A', a nurse, asked, 'When are they to see their young ladies?...if ladies were not so strict about 'no followers allowed' they would have less cause to find fault with their servants, let all, even the poor Surbiton footmen join saying 'Britons never will be Slaves'.¹¹⁵

The other common theme of the Surrey servants' letters was the argument that, in the words of 'A Footman', 'if we were treated with more kindness, masters and mistresses would be treated with more respect'.¹¹⁶ 'Another of your Readers' asserted servants' human equality with their employers, claiming that

if some ladies shewed a little more consideration for their servants, and treated them as though they were of the same flesh and blood as themselves, and not as though they were some kind of animal created expressly for their convenience, there would be less dissatisfaction amongst not only servants in Surbiton, but in general.¹¹⁷

Another servant believed that by being kinder to servants employers could neutralise the threat of combination: 'I think the best way to put down strikes is to deal kindly with searvants [sic] for no servant that have a good mistress will wish to strike and by doing so searvants strike would be cleared out of the distrack [sic] of surbiton'.¹¹⁸ The notion that being shown kindness by their employers could mitigate servants' discontent demonstrates the degree to which ideas about reciprocity and benevolence

¹¹⁴ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, July 1872.

¹¹⁵ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 6 July 1872.

¹¹⁶ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 6 July 1872.

¹¹⁷ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, 29 June 1872.

¹¹⁸ Letter, *Surrey Comet*, June 1872.

were embedded in servants' relationships with their employers, undermining claims to workers' rights. The intimacy of the relationship meant that a kind word could go a long way, even while servants complained about wages and threatened to strike. The protest of the Surbiton and Kingston servants seemed to have died out by the end of August. Perhaps their employers heeded the servants' complaints.

Some historians have suggested that 'domestic service was almost untouched by the growth of trade unionism' because 'the conditions of effective association were all lacking for the domestic servant' and 'in an occupation so rigidly authoritarian and hierarchical there was little sense of common purpose or common injustice'.¹¹⁹ It is certainly true that almost all efforts on the part of servants to unionise before the First World War failed. However, domestic servants were touched by the developments in thinking about workers and women's rights, whether through community grapevines, reading the newspapers or contact with family and friends, or else they would not have made any effort to organise. It is easy to forget that although servants lived and worked in the households of their employers, many, if not most, of them maintained contact with the other worlds of family and community. Through these networks, servants would have been aware of shifts in thinking about employer-employee relations.

As Pamela Horn has written, although there was no effort to establish a servants union between 1872 and 1891, from 1891 to 1914 there were at least three separate attempts by domestic servants to combine.¹²⁰ In June 1891 the London and Provincial Domestic Servants' Union came into being, with the slogan: 'By our Industry we Live. Unity is Strength' and a number of its twelve member committee were butlers, cooks and ladies' maids, including its secretary, who had been a butler.¹²¹ It held its first meeting a year later, in June 1892 and registered its rules the following November.¹²² As well as demanding higher wages and fewer working hours, the union proposed to set up registry offices and to tackle the problem of characters.¹²³ Nevertheless, in the preface to the rule book, the union leaders made clear they did not see themselves as radical labour leaders:

¹¹⁹ John Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p169.

¹²⁰ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p180.

¹²¹ Details of the London and Provincial Domestic Servants' Union are taken from Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p178-9. I went to the PRO to look at the material cited by Horn but was unable to locate it.

¹²² Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p179.

¹²³ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p179.

It is the desire of this Union to work in an educational way to raise the standard of domestic servants, and to endeavour to bring back the good feeling which formerly existed between servant and employers, and further wish it to be thoroughly understood that the Committee do most strongly object to the strike policy of ordinary trade unions.¹²⁴

It may have been the case that without such a disclaimer, the servants union would have garnered no middle-class support. Nevertheless, despite its non-militant approach, servants did not flock to join it. Horn argues that this was because the isolated and hierarchical nature of domestic service did not lend itself to labour organisation, and because servants were afraid of losing their characters and their places, which seems more likely.¹²⁵ The union's membership remained small throughout the six years of its existence, reaching a peak of only 562 in 1895. In 1898 the London and Provincial Domestic Servants' Union was dissolved.¹²⁶ In 1910 however, another Domestic Workers Union was set up in London, while in Glasgow Jessie Stephen organised a union demanding higher wages, two hours' free time per day, and regular days off each month. Due to good publicity, many employers in Glasgow honoured the claims for free time and pay rises.¹²⁷ However, membership of the Scottish union remained small. Stephen eventually found herself blacklisted by Glaswegian employers and registry offices and ended up travelling to London to join the Union there, working for a family who had 'no objection to engaging a trade unionist'.¹²⁸ However, despite the best efforts of Jessie Stephen and her fellow unionists, the London union also failed to recruit many members and was wound up in 1918, before the end of the war.

The record of domestic servants' trade unionism may seem to read as a record of failure. However, the efforts to unionise served as a 'barometer of discontent' and helped to alter the nature of the 'servant problem' as perceived by the employing class.¹²⁹ By the 1890s, articles were being published in journals that were concerned less with the paucity of good servants, than with the means by which girls could be

¹²⁴ Quoted in Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p179.

¹²⁵ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p179.

¹²⁶ *Membership of Trade Unions, 1892-99, PP, 1900, LXXXIII.*

¹²⁷ Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions* pp181-2; Pamela Horn *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p179.

¹²⁸ Jessie Stephen quoted in Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p180 Details of Jessie Stephen's career are taken from Horn.

¹²⁹ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*, p180.

persuaded to become and remain servants and how best to resolve the tendency towards mutual antagonism in the mistress/servant relationship. Many of these articles argued that domestic service should be put on a more formalised footing: girls, and even mistresses, should receive proper training, should work fixed hours and should even live out, coming to the houses in which they worked on a daily basis.¹³⁰ Even while the servants' unions failed to recruit members, the alterations in working conditions that servants increasingly demanded were being reconstituted by middle-class commentators as ways both of decreasing the likelihood of successful servant unionisation and of improving the tenor of servant/employer relations without disrupting the social order. Of course, many servants continued to work in dismal conditions for little pay and less consideration, and many others left service when they got the chance, preferring regulated work in munitions factories to servility in a middle-class home. For some servants though, the articulation of their feelings about their work and themselves in the public sphere of the courtroom, the newspaper and the union meeting provided not only an opportunity to challenge the ascription of servant identities by employers, but also an opportunity to mark what servants themselves saw as the limits of acceptability in the servant/employer relationship.

¹³⁰ See for example 'A Domestic College', *Englishwoman's Review*, July 15 1890 pp293-299; 'A Few Thoughts about the Technical College at Newnham-on Severn' *EW*, July 15 1890 pp293-299; Ellen.W. Darwin, 'Domestic Service' *Nineteenth Century*, 28, 39 (August 1890) pp286-296; John Robinson, 'A Butler's View of Men-service' *Nineteenth Century*, 184, 31 (June 1892) pp925-933; Mrs E. Lewis, 'A Reformation of Domestic Service' *Nineteenth Century*, 191, 33 (January 1893) pp127-138.

Chapter 5

Assault and abuse: the limits of acceptable behaviour

In earlier chapters, some of the subversive ways in which servants could resist the totality of their employers' authority were discussed. Servants' connections to other worlds, whether to working-class friends and family in Britain or to native society in India, could appear inscrutable and threatening to their employers. This was despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that, especially in India, these connections were essential to the functioning not only of the household, but also the empire. Servants mediated between above and below stairs, public and private, domestic and marketplace, native and colonial, working and middle or upper class, administering much of the essential traffic between these interdependent sectors and cultures. The work they did day in and day out – cleaning, dealing with visitors and tradespeople – was necessary in order to mark the boundaries between the household and the world.

Although the balance of power in the servant-employer relationship was weighted in the employers' favour, in both India and in Britain the dependence of the employer on the servant created a space in which small acts of servant resistance were possible. Offended servants could spoil food, deliberately fail to hear or understand instructions, spread gossip and generally sabotage the smooth running of the household. However, such methods constituted revenge, rather than justice. At times, a servant or an institution representing servants' interests would seek public sanction as to what a servant's rights were and where the limits of acceptable behaviour on the employers' part should be drawn. Domestic servants stood in the dock in nineteenth-century courts in both India and Britain, often on charges of petty larceny or breach of contract and not infrequently on charges of prostitution, infanticide, concealment of birth and even murder. However, they also occasionally brought prosecutions against their employers, most commonly for assault. This section considers some occasions when employers in India and in Britain stood in the dock, prosecuted by servants, or by other authorities on behalf of servants.

Assault and neglect

As part of the evangelical drive to reform manners in the early nineteenth century, ideal respectable living entailed a retreat from physical violence. Judicial and official tolerance of a widening definition of violent behaviour diminished through the course of the nineteenth century in both Britain and India. Self-control was coming to be seen as a defining characteristic of Englishmen in both metropole and colony.

Whereas the 'relationship between many Anglo-Indian masters and Indian servants in the early nineteenth century appears to have been characterized by casual brutality', as the nineteenth century progressed such behaviour was, at least publicly, seen as damaging to the authority of the British in India.¹ Advice manuals published from the 1840s onwards advised Anglo-Indian employers to be firm with their servants without resorting to physical chastisement, which was increasingly seen as 'un-British and unlikely to yield the desired result'.² Elizabeth Collingham has suggested that violent behaviour 'threatened the principle of racial separation which was the hallmark of the process of anglicization' as it created an inappropriate 'intimacy between the Indian and his assailant'.³ Advice manuals published in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century do not tend to mention the issue of physical chastisement at all, perhaps because it was (erroneously) assumed that masters and mistresses would not be inclined to strike British servants, or perhaps because in Britain, racial consanguinity between employer and servant made the use of physical chastisement less problematic.

In courts in Britain, as the nineteenth century progressed, judges were 'increasingly seeking to set more stringent standards of self-control, refusing to tolerate kinds of violence supposedly accepted elsewhere'.⁴ Nevertheless, a master's right to 'discipline' and 'chastise' his dependents was still legally endorsed in Britain. In 1845, the case of *Turner v. Mason* established that it was 'a master's province to regulate the conduct of his domestic servant' as he saw fit.⁵ The provision here is somewhat ambiguous; 'regulation' can take a range of forms from physical and

¹ E.M.Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p109; p110.

² Mary Procida, *Married to the Empire*, p91. See for example J.H.Stocqueler, *The Handbook of India, a guide to the stranger and the traveller, and a companion to the resident* (1844) p198.

³ E.M.Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p110.

⁴ Martin.J.Wiener, 'The sad story of George Hall: adultery, murder and the politics of mercy in mid-Victorian England', *Social History*, 24, 2 (1999) p190.

⁵ Cited in Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Domestic Servant*, p113.

verbal punishment to material deprivation. This ambiguity in the servant-employer relationship became problematic in cases of abuse, because in order that a verdict might be reached it was necessary to define the limits of an employer's jurisdiction over his or her servant and to mark the boundary between legitimate physical punishment and offensive violence within the servant-employer relationship. The Apprentices and Servants Act of 1851 made no mention of physical abuse in its provisions; it merely endorsed a servant's dependent status by making employers legally obliged to supply 'necessary Food, Clothing, or Lodging' to servants under the age of eighteen. Thus, unless they were prosecuting their employers for failure to provide food, clothing or lodging as minors, if servants sought redress for physical abuse, they had to bring cases of assault for prosecution.

In India, domestic servants do not appear to have had any specific employment rights. The master-servant relationship was covered by breach of contract and breach of trust laws, which covered employer/employee relationships generally and which protected the employer rather than the employee.⁶ Also, the servant, like any British subject, had a right to freedom from assault under the Indian Penal Code.⁷ Indian servants did sometimes bring cases of assault against their employers. This appears to have happened with greater frequency in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, perhaps as a result of a greater willingness on the part of Indians to assert rights, which was linked to increasing nationalist political activism at this time.

Cases of assault brought by Indian servants against their employers did not carry the same sensational value for the Indian press as the abuse of servant girls did in British papers. In India, cases of assault brought by servants tended to feature as small entries in the 'Police' columns in Anglo-Indian newspapers, when they featured at all. In Britain, the details of cases involving the maltreatment of servant girls were often sensationally entitled with statements such as 'Disgusting Cruelty' or 'Gross Case of Cruelty'.⁸ The most shocking cases in Britain probably found their way into these newspapers because of their sensational value. Almost every year between 1850 and 1910, two or three cases, invariably involving servant girls, were warranted sufficiently newsworthy to appear in the pages of *The Times*. The records of local

⁶ See *Legislative Acts of the Governor General in Council Vol I, 1834-1851*, IOR/V/8/117 OIOC; *Legislative Acts of the Governor General in Council Vol III, 1859-1861*, IOR/V/8/119 OIOC.

⁷ See Act XLV of 1860, Chapter XVI in *Legislative Acts of the Governor General in Council Vol III*, IOR/V/8/119 OIOC.

⁸ *The Times*, 12 February 1857; *The Times*, 20 September 1856.

newspapers suggest that less sensational prosecutions by servants were not an infrequent occurrence at petty and quarter sessions. The cases of abuse of servants appearing in the pages of the British national dailies in our period were extreme, and cannot be taken as representative of the experience of most domestic servants. However, mapping the extremities can illustrate underlying contests relevant to the spectrum of 'appropriate' relations between employers and servants. Comparison with media treatment of cases of assault brought by Indian servants adds another dimension to this spectrum, showing how the legitimacy of violence within the employer-servant relationship was differently figured in metropole and colony.

In many of the cases in Britain, an employer's brutality was precipitated by some perceived failing on the part of the servant to fulfil his or her work duties. Servants' work could involve a wide range of tasks from scrubbing the floors to cleaning the silverware and from lighting the fires to bathing the children of the family. Rules of respectability dictated that servants' work was done according to a strict timetable punctuated by daily events such as mealtimes and visiting times.⁹ For a general servant working alone, getting everything done on time could be difficult. Hannah Cullwick would rise at dawn and was rarely in bed before eleven pm. Failure to keep to the timetable could compromise the family's respectable status and result in punishment for the servant. In 1851 Hannah Hinton was beaten 'because she had not got the fire lighted at 7 o'clock in the morning'.¹⁰ In 1852 Elizabeth Malcolm was beaten because she was 'stupid and slow'.¹¹

Other servants were punished for disobedience. Fanny Square Keys' mistress hit her because 'she did not do something she was told'.¹² Emily Fox was beaten because 'I was not strong enough to carry the boiler'.¹³ Similarly, in India an employer's perception that a servant was failing to fulfil work duties could provoke violence, though the work differed. Indian servants' tasks were usually more specific as household tended to have bigger complements of servants. For example, separate servants would be employed to cook, wait at table, fetch water, provide personal service, clean the floors and pull the fans. Breakdowns in communication, or the perception of disobedience, laziness or dishonesty could provoke an employer's

⁹ Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles*, p35.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 13 January 1851.

¹¹ *The Times*, 11 November 1852.

¹² *The Times*, 20 September 1856.

¹³ *The Times*, 12 March 1866.

anger. In 1883 a cook in Calcutta brought a case of assault against her mistress, claiming that her mistress had ‘assaulted her with clenched fists’ when she had declined to ‘cook seven or eight dishes for a party of visitors...saying she was unable to prepare same alone’.¹⁴

In smaller households in Britain, the family and the servants could not avoid sharing space and work, which exacerbated tensions, sometimes resulting in violence. Servants’ work involved the physical performance of submission. As the advice manuals discussed in Chapter 1 indicate, employers expected their servants to be seen and not heard. Ideally they kept their eyes downcast, backed out rooms, curtsied or touched their cap to their employers. A servant on her knees, face close to the floor she was scrubbing, assumed a physical position charged with meanings. Her posture denoted subservience, possibly sexual as well as social, which may have increased her vulnerability to physical abuse. In the case of Susan Russell, whose mistress, Ann Radcliffe, was charged and found guilty of grievous bodily harm at the Central Criminal Court in 1868, the violent presence of the mistress while the servant works is striking. In her testimony Susan, the only servant in the household, described

cleaning a grate in a bedroom about 2 o’clock [on Sunday], and the prisoner entered the room. She was then kneeling, and the prisoner kicked her behind, being cross that she had not cleaned the stove before that time. Her master was in the room at the time, and sent her home at once.¹⁵

Susan Russell also described being assaulted by her mistress while cleaning saucepans and on another occasion while cleaning knives. In cross-examination the servant described having been ‘well treated up to August last, and the prisoner then began to treat her ill. She used to complain of her being dirty’. However, Ann Radcliffe’s violent behaviour towards her servant appears to have taken place over three days. The mention of the master of the household in Susan’s testimony is interesting in this context as he appears to have protected her, or at least to have removed her from violent situations:

On the previous Friday the prisoner boxed her ears and her master sent her downstairs. Her master went out, and after that she was cleaning some saucepans in the kitchen, when the

¹⁴ *The Englishman*, 14 July 1883.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 29 February 1868.

prisoner poured some water into a teacup from a kettle on the hob and threw it over her neck, which it blistered, and also her bosom.¹⁶

In these cases the authority of an employer to 'regulate' a servant extended into a right to physically chastise a servant for not doing a job well. Indeed, in many of the cases, the employers justified their actions by drawing attention to the servant in question's faults and upheld their right to punish as they saw fit. For example, Mr John Pemberton argued that his servant 'was deceitful and given to lying, and had other evil propensities' and defiantly claimed that 'whatever censure ...the world might pass on him, he...would inflict corporal punishment on the girl whenever he thought she deserved it'.¹⁷

As in Britain, Indian servants were expected to keep to a timetable of work, and to respond promptly, appropriately attired, to their employer's calls. The formalised service of meals or teas, as a moment when Indian servants' and Anglo-Indian employers' notions of appropriate behaviour could differ, was a potential flashpoint. A servant's failure to do work on time or with the requisite degree of deference or decorum could be used by Anglo-Indian employers as defence for their action. On August 3 1883 a case was heard at a Calcutta Police Court in which a servant accused his employer, Mr Jones, of assaulting him when he pressed a demand for his wages. Mr Jones admitted striking the servant, but claimed that this had happened not because the servant demanded payment but because the servant 'neglected to bring him his tiffin, on which he remonstrated with him. The latter, however, became very insolent, whereupon he slapped him'.¹⁸ Mr Jones was fined Rs 2, a nominal punishment which points towards the ambivalence surrounding what kinds of behaviour were understood by Anglo-Indians to be legitimate within the relationship between Anglo-Indian employer and Indian servant.

Although violence towards natives was generally frowned upon in India, anecdotal evidence suggests that physical chastisement of servants continued to be fairly common throughout the nineteenth century. As Elizabeth Collingham has written, 'British sensitivity to the slightest hint of a challenge to their dignity or authority meant that they frequently met any act which suggested insolence with physical

¹⁶ *The Times*, 29 February 1868.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 11 November 1852.

¹⁸ *The Englishman*, 4 August 1883.

violence'.¹⁹ According to Florence Marryat, native servants 'usual behaviour is so aggravating that, however much I may condemn, I cannot wonder at any one losing control of their temper when with them'. She described feeling

the keenest sympathy with the action of an officer in our regiment, who, aggravated at the slow and solemn manner in which a young Mussulman in his employ was carrying a pile of plates from the luncheon-table out at his back door, jumped up, and regardless of the fate of his crockery, gave the tardy domestic such an energetic kick that he sent him flying, plates and all, down a flight of some dozen steps, into the garden, vastly astonished, I have little doubt, at the unexpected impetus which had been given to his footsteps.²⁰

The casualness with which Marryat described this act of aggression and the way in which 'the fate of the crockery' was implied to be more significant than the injuries the servant might have sustained in falling down the steps suggests such behaviour on the part of Anglo-Indians was tolerated more in India than it might have been in Britain. It was usual for Anglo-Indian employers found guilty of assault against native servants to receive lenient sentences.²¹ For example, in July 1876 Mr Hutchinson, a Calcutta broker, was found guilty of assaulting his servant and was fined Rs 20 as punishment for his crime. In the spring of the same year a Mr Fuller, an English Pleader at Agra, caused the death of his *syce* by striking him on the head and knocking him to the ground. It was claimed that the *syce* had suffered from an enlarged spleen, which had ruptured when he fell and caused his death. Fuller was fined only Rs 30 as punishment.²² By contrast, in February 1868 at the Central Criminal Court in London, Ann Radcliffe was sentenced to five years penal servitude for 'cruelly ill-using and doing grievous bodily harm to one Susan Russell' her maidservant.²³

¹⁹ E.M.Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, p143.

²⁰ Marryat, Florence, "*Gup*" *Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character*, pp31-2; p35

²¹ See, for example, Ram Gopal Sanyal (ed.) *Record of Criminal Cases as Between Europeans and Natives for the Last 60 Years* (Calcutta, 1893), in which the author demonstrates that 'the system of administration of justice which has been established under British rule is fairly effective in the vast majority of cases. The impression, however, is widespread that it has not been equally successful in those cases, where Europeans are charged with acts of violence committed upon natives of the country' p2. Sanyal's assertion was subsequently supported by a government report, '*Return showing the number of assaults committed by Europeans on natives and by natives on Europeans in the five years 1901-1905*' File no. 3445, L/P&J/6/781, OIOC.

²² See *The Englishman*, 24 July 1876.

²³ *The Times*, 29 February 1868.

Surprisingly the leniency of the punishment received by Mr Fuller in Agra, in the North West Provinces, did not go unchallenged. On July 15, 1876 a Minute was published in the *Supplement to the Gazette of India* in which the Governor General in Council (Lord Lytton, the Viceroy) criticized the decisions made by the Joint Magistrate of Agra, Mr Leeds, and the High Court, and argued that a fine of Rs 30 was not only an inadequate punishment for Fuller's crime, but one that damaged the reputation of British justice in India. Lytton claimed that Mr Leeds seemed 'to have viewed an assault resulting in the death of the injured man in just the same light as if it had been attended by no such result', evincing 'a most inadequate sense of the magnitude of the offence of which Mr Fuller was found guilty'.

According to Lytton, the offence was that of "voluntarily causing hurt" which was an offence which varied in degree 'from one which is little more than nominal, to one which is so great that the Penal Code assigns to it the heavy punishment of imprisonment for a year *and* a fine of Rs 1000'. In such cases the 'amount of hurt and the amount of provocation' were important factors in determining sentences. In Mr Fuller's case, 'while the provocation was exceedingly small, the hurt was death'. According to Lytton a fine of Rs 30 was wholly insufficient as a sentence. He considered that 'Mr Leeds has treated the offence as a merely nominal one, and has inflicted a merely nominal punishment; and that to treat such offences with practical impunity, is a very bad example and likely rather to encourage than repress them'.

Lytton also took the opportunity to express 'his abhorrence of the practice, instances of which occasionally come to light, of European masters treating their native servants in a manner in which they would not treat men of their own race'. He went on to claim that

This practice is all the more cowardly, because those who are least able to retaliate injury or insult have the strongest claim upon the forbearance and protection of their employers. But bad as it is from every point of view, it is made worse by the fact, known to all residents in India that Asiatics are subject to internal disease which often renders fatal to life even a slight external shock. The Governor General in Council considers that the habit of resorting to blows on every trifling provocation should be visited by adequate legal penalties; and that those who indulge it should reflect that they may be put in jeopardy for a serious crime.²⁴

²⁴ Letter from Arthur Howell, Esq. Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, to the Secretary to the Government of the North-Western Provinces in *Supplement to the Gazette of India*, Calcutta, Saturday July 15 1876, no 31, p763 IOR/V/11/41 OIOC.

This statement, even while it condemned acts of violence towards native Indian servants, constructed them as members of a physically weak race. The European, by implication, was strong and powerful and should use his power to protect, not abuse, his racial inferiors who, owing not only to their powerless position as servants but also to their physical inferiority as Indians, were more in need of protection than men of British origin. In this way the master's role was constructed as a paternalistic one, in line with wider discourses on the ideal structure of master/servant relations in both metropole and colony.

Lytton's Minute caused 'vehement wrath, on the part of the Anglo-Indian community, and elicited from the Anglo-Indian press...a swarm of protests and articles, attributing it to an ill-considered sentimental impulse, profound ignorance of Indian law, and reckless disregard of the majesty of the High Court'.²⁵ These letters and articles revealed the ambivalence of Anglo-Indian employers as to the legitimacy of violence within the servant-employer relationship in India. Almost all letters and articles claimed to agree that 'Nobody has any right to box a servant's ears in this country any more than in Europe' and that the 'brutal and cowardly habit, so common in India, of resorting to violence on the slightest provocation, and often on no provocation at all, is one that cannot be too unsparingly denounced'.²⁶ However, most of the letters and articles then went on to contradict themselves, making excuses for Mr Fuller's conduct and outlining justifications as to why his sentence had been fair under the circumstances. A popular point of view was that since Mr Fuller did not intend to kill the *syce*, and since the blow that killed the *syce* was a probably only a slight one, the *syce*'s enlarged spleen making him vulnerable to any blow, and since Mr Fuller did not know the *syce* suffered from an enlarged spleen, then a fine of thirty Rupees was a fair, even a harsh, punishment. In short, striking a servant wasn't really a significant crime.²⁷

In this vein, an editorial in *The Indian Daily News* suggested that Fuller's crime was not that serious: 'the offence of which Fuller was guilty, resulted quite accidentally from a slight exercise of personal violence'. Rather, according to this editorial, the really significant offence had been perpetrated by Lytton in criticizing

²⁵ Lytton to Salisbury, 30 July 1876, *Lord Lytton. Letters Despatched. 1876* MSS Eur/E218/18 OIOC.

²⁶ Editorial, *The Pioneer*, 19 July 1876; Editorial, *Indian Daily News*, 21 July 1876.

²⁷ See for example the editorial articles in *The Pioneer*, 19 July 1876 and *The Englishman*, 24 July 1876.

Mr Leed's judgement: 'the Government resolution taken as a whole, constitutes a serious offence against the proper administration of justice in India, and an undesirable reproof of the highest judicial interpreters of the law in the country'.²⁸

The statement that the resolution constituted an 'undesirable reproof' of the judiciary in British India reveals that the concern here was with maintaining the prestige of the British. For the *Indian Daily News* writer, 'the proper administration of justice' presumably meant finding in favour of the Anglo-Indian. The fear underlying such an attitude as that expressed by this editorial writer was probably justified. Native Indian voices were increasingly vociferous in complaining about the injustices embedded in the administration of law in India. An angry letter from Kamala Kanto Ghosh, also published in the *Indian Daily News*, articulated the growing resentment felt by many Indians:

Have you, Sir, ever heard that an Englishman was hanged or transported to the Andaman for murdering an Indian? But I doubt not you have heard of many cases, where Englishmen were found guilty of such foul deeds. Is it anarchy that such acts are being done and overlooked? Are we not men that justice will never be done to us, that our lives will be regarded like those of dogs? Are we not possessed of the same organs, same feelings, with the whiteskinned Englishmen? Why then, Sir, is justice trampled down under feet in such cases? Why then, Sir, you, who pretend to be the defender of justice, remain dumb when such cases occur? The English nation are proud of their civilization, but are these the actions of civilized men?²⁹

Ghosh's claim to equality with Englishmen as a man and his scornful challenging of Englishmen's claim to 'civilisation' reads powerfully. Placed in the wider context of Indian nationalist frustration with racial inequity, the articulate expression of attitudes such as his in the pages of newspapers may have contributed to Anglo-Indians' sense of insecurity.

An article in the *Civil and Military Gazette* argued that the lack of any legislation protecting employers from vindictive servants was the reason employers were driven to violence because 'absence of law as between master and servant provokes occasional manslaughter as no man can manage an Indian household without an occasional blow for acts of which the law refuses to punish'. The article called for a law that would punish 'any wilful neglect of duty on the part of the servant; punish in

²⁸ Editorial, *Indian Daily News*, 21 July 1876.

²⁹ Kamala Kanto Ghosh, Letter, *Indian Daily News*, 25 July 1876. See also the letter from 'Native' in the *Indian Daily News*, 29 July 1876.

fact the provocation to assault as being really the first blow' claiming that the master's right to 'dismissal with power to cut at most 15 days' pay' was 'no remedy'. The author went on to absolve Mr Fuller of blame for killing the *syce* by suggesting that the 'trick of throwing themselves down as the consequence of a blow which would hardly kill a fly is no novelty in India, and probably in this case it was the fall voluntarily inflicted by the *syce* and not the blow which caused death'.³⁰ Despite a nod to humanitarian concerns at the outset, the general thrust of this and other articles provoked by the Fuller case was that in Anglo-Indian households, violence was not only justified, but necessary in controlling a servant, who might otherwise 'absolutely refuse to perform the duties for which he is engaged'.³¹ Such refusals were figured as snubs not only to Anglo-Indians' domestic authority, but also to their imperial authority.

Despite the fact that in cases of assault brought by servants in Britain, the servant's failure to fulfil work duties was often cited as provocation, ambivalence over the justice of convictions and sentences appears much less marked than in India. For example, in 1868 Mary Barry charged her employer Miss Ann Turner with assault. Mary had worked for Miss Turner and her sister for just over a year and had left their employ a couple of months before bringing the charge. In her evidence Mary claimed that she 'ought to have got up at 6 in the morning, but sometimes did not, and when that occurred she was kept without her breakfast and dinner...[her mistress] had repeatedly struck her with a thin cane on her hands and shoulders, giving her two or three blows each time'. However, in cross-examination Mary revealed that she 'was very sorry when her mistress discharged her', which may have suggested to the court that her accusation was malicious. In their defence, the barrister representing the Misses Turner claimed that they had hired Mary Barry after 'seeing the girl and her mother outside St Mary's Catholic Church apparently very poor' and had 'benevolently interested themselves in their welfare' by engaging the girl to work for them:

They used their best endeavours to teach the girl the duties of a domestic servant, and were obliged to use some slight correction. She had never been treated with the least cruelty; her breakfast had been two or three times delayed, but only for an hour or so, and she never went

³⁰ 'Master and Servant', *Civil and Military Gazette*, 22 July 1876.

³¹ 'Master and Servant', *Civil and Military Gazette*, 22 July 1876.

without her dinner...the girl was in better health than when she entered the service, was well-fed and treated, and paid wages...what had been done was for the cleanliness of her own person and a desire to get her out of slovenly and bad habits. It was admitted that on one occasion two or three blows had been given on her shoulders with a light cane. She was slovenly and obstinate and needed correction.

In this evidence Mary Barry's employers assert their right to physically punish the servant they had so benevolently taken on as their dependent and attempted to train. It is suggested that they have fulfilled their responsibility as employers – feeding and paying the girl – but that her failure to fulfil the expectations of her as a willing and obedient servant legitimises their use of physical punishment. However, while the case against them was dismissed, in his closing remarks the presiding magistrate stated clearly that there 'was an idea prevalent...that mistresses had a right to use corporal punishment. In former times such things were permitted, but that fashion had now passed away...it would have been better when they found they could do nothing with [Mary] to have sent her away'. So, although the court sympathised with the Misses Turner's position, the magistrate made it clear that times had changed and employers no longer had a right to chastise their servants' bodies as they might their own child. Rather, they must dismiss her from her workplace as a failing employee. Mary Barry may not have won the damages she sought, but the assertion implicit in her accusation, that physical punishment constituted an illegitimate use of authority had been vindicated. In contrast to the response to Lytton's words in the Fuller case in India, in Mary Barry's case there were no letters to the newspapers, no editorials, no outcry, though it must be noted that the situation may have been different if Mary Barry had won her case.³²

Unlike in India, in Britain cases brought by servants or their representatives often pivoted upon the limits of responsibility and dependence within the employer/servant relationship. Where wages were a flashpoint in the Indian context, food was an issue in almost all the British cases, with most of the servants complaining of receiving scanty or spoiled food and providing details in cross examination of the food they had been given. Emily Fox claimed her employers Mr and Mrs Gumb had provided her with:

³² *The Times*, 7 April 1868.

cold potatoes and cabbage for breakfast, and the same for dinner, and two or three times a week a very little meat. Sometimes I had bread and butter, and sometimes dry bread for tea...The potatoes and cabbage were boiled in quantities which sometimes lasted me a week. They had fried potatoes and bacon for breakfast, and hot potatoes and cabbage and meat for dinner. They had tea and bread and butter. They were kept locked in the safe. My potatoes and cabbage were kept in the same safe. Mistress treated me very unkindly.³³

We can imagine the poor girl's mouth watering as she watched her employers enjoy their food. However, her employers' defence was that, as a pauper, the food she received in their employ 'was equal to that she had been accustomed to have in the union'.³⁴ Similarly, in her case against her schoolmistress employer, Eleanor Houseman testified that she

had porridge for breakfast mixed with charcoal, and sometimes it tasted like cod liver oil. Sometimes she had fish and potatoes for dinner or tea. She never had enough to eat. She was put up into that room because Miss Scott (the prisoner) said she was not fit to be about, and because she used to steal food out of the cupboard or off the table when she was hungry.³⁵

Despite a doctor testifying that the girl was seriously underweight, the defence argued that 'though it was not sumptuous food, it was such, perhaps, as a woman in her position might have to give to a servant'.³⁶ The implication of the defence in both these cases was that the servant's position as a servant defined the terms of her dependence and her employer's responsibility. According to the defence, the servant was not entitled to the same food as the family she lived with and worked for precisely because she was a servant. As a person of inferior status she ate inferior food. The servants, by drawing attention to the distasteful or meagre food they received, were implying they had a right, within the context of their dependence, to decent food. The court was being asked to decide if these terms were reasonable or not.

The most sensational cases frequently involved young pauper servants hired out from workhouses and orphanages. The Guardians of the Poor usually brought such cases. This may be because the stigmatised status of paupers increased the likelihood

³³ *The Times*, 12 March 1866.

³⁴ *The Times*, 12 March 1866.

³⁵ *The Times*, 7 August 1880.

³⁶ *The Times*, 7 August 1880.

of their suffering abuse at the hands of their employers, but it seems more likely that without the family and community support networks available to non-pauper servants, opportunities to escape violent employers were less available to pauper girls. For example, in 1856 a Mrs Grills of Steptoe, South Devon ‘the wife of a respectable farmer’ was charged with, and found guilty of, assaulting her fourteen year old pauper servant Fanny Square Keys, who had been hired from the Kingsford Union to ‘tend the pigs and calves and to look after a little child’. According to Fanny’s testimony she had been repeatedly violently punished by her mistress for trifling faults. However, when visited by the relieving officer, she told him ‘that she was very well treated and liked her place, but she said she did this because she was so much afraid of her mistress’.³⁷ Similarly, sixteen year old Sophia Jarvis, who in 1863 brought a charge of cruelty against her mistress Mrs Mary Langdon Thomas, claimed that she was always ‘in company with one or other of her mistress’s family and therefore had not had the opportunity of running away until the nineteenth of December’.³⁸ With no family to run away to when she made her escape, she went to the Industrial School of St George the Martyr at Mitcham, whence she had been hired. Though this isolation meant that pauper girls were more vulnerable to violence in their places, it may also have meant that abused pauper servants sought redress in the courts, as they could not find a resolution to their predicament other than to turn the authorities charged with their protection.

The greater tolerance of acts of violence towards native servants in India, evidenced by the leniency of the punishments meted out to employers found guilty of assault, and the lack of sympathy for the victims in such cases, as compared with the horror expressed in British newspapers at cases of abuse involving young servant girls in Britain, was linked to the gender and racial status of the servants involved. Physical chastisement of Indian servants was seen as more legitimate than that of British servants precisely because they were Indian. The opinion expressed in *The Pioneer* newspaper that ‘cuffs and stripes, and all kinds of corporeal maltreatment are recognised in India by Indians as well as Europeans, as more in accordance with the natural fitness of things than such phenomena would be thought in Europe’ was not a unique one amongst Anglo-Indians.³⁹ Furthermore, many more Indian servants were

³⁷ *The Times*, 20 September 1856.

³⁸ *The Times*, 15 January 1863.

³⁹ Editorial, *The Pioneer*, 19 July 1876.

male than in Britain; the assaulted male servant did not possess the same vulnerability as the friendless, abused, young servant girl. It seems likely that the maleness of Indian servants, as compared to British maids, underwrote the racial difference upon which the legitimacy of physical chastisement was predicated.⁴⁰

As Shani D'Cruze has argued '[t]he fact that such incidents result in court cases illustrates resistance on the part of servants...and also a sense of outrage – that that specific assault...was contestably an illegitimate use of authority in a society where physical chastisement of dependents (particularly children) was commonplace'.⁴¹ Though D'Cruze is referring specifically to Britain, her statement can also be applied to the nineteenth century Indian context. The process of the court cases represented a kind of negotiation; though the choice to go to court may not have been as rationally thought out as this, in suing their employers, the servants were implicitly asserting that the limits of acceptable behaviour on the part of their employers had been reached, and were asking the court to clarify the ambiguities in what were the servant's and what were the employer's rights within the relationship. Though the servants may have appeared powerless to protect themselves from abuse, the very fact that they brought cases for public judgement in courts constituted a significant challenge to the absolutism of their employer's authority. The fear that servants would use the courts to undermine their employers was a significant anxiety for colonial masters and mistresses. The Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883, in which the stereotype of the vindictive servant was a central theme, is the subject of the following chapter.

⁴⁰ Of course there were female servants in India and male servants in Britain who would have suffered violence at the hands of their employers. However, the majority of servants in India were male in the second half of the nineteenth century and the majority of servants in Britain were female, which would be likely to have affected the way in which the limits of acceptable corporeal punishment were generally popularly drawn in the two countries.

⁴¹ Shani D'Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage. Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women*, p92.

Chapter 6

Domestic servants and the Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883

At a Legislative Council Meeting on the 2nd of February 1883, the Law member of the Government of India, C. P. Ilbert, introduced a Bill to amend the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Indian Penal Code. Within the existing code, selected native colonial officials exercised limited criminal jurisdiction over European British subjects in Presidency towns. The Bill proposed the jurisdiction of these native officials be extended to rural towns (*mofussil*). As was often the case with reformist policy in India, the response to the Bill in the official and the non-official Anglo-Indian community was vehemently hostile. Aspects of the ensuing controversy are the subjects of this Chapter.

The conflict over the Ilbert Bill was part of a long history of clashes between Anglo-Indians and India's colonial administrators over the structure of India's governance. Several scholars have given attention to this particular controversy.¹ Where other scholars considered its effect on racial polarisation and nationalist sentiment, Mrinalini Sinha has analysed the interactive operation of gender and racial ideologies during the controversy, foregrounding colonial masculinity, in order to explore the ways in which these ideologies impacted on imperialist and nationalist politics. Her focus is specifically on the way in which the relational construction of the identities of two elite groups – the western educated middle class Indian and the English gentleman - happened 'in the context of an imperial social formation that included both Britain and India'.²

As Sinha has shown, those western educated Indians who had previously been perceived as the allies of government were constructed as 'unnatural' examples of Indian masculinity; they could not be reduced to a definition of savagery, nor was

¹ See for example S. Gopal, *the Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon 1880 – 1884* (Oxford, 1953); Christine Dobbin, 'The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo Indian Opinion in India, 1883', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, 13, 45 (Oct 1965); Edwin Hirschmann, 'White Mutiny'. *The Ilbert Bill Crisis in India and the Genesis of the Indian National Congress* (Delhi, 1980); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*; Chandrika Kaul, 'England and India: The Ilbert Bill, 1883: A case study of the metropolitan press' in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 30, 4 (1993); Damayanti Datta, 'Ilbert Bill Agitation and *The Englishman*: a study of a colonial society in transition' *The Calcutta Historical Journal*, vol 19-20 (combined 1997-1998); Radhika Singha, 'Nationalism, Colonialism and the Politics of Masculinity' in *Studies in History [India]* 14, 1, (Jan – June 1998).

² Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p2.

there any inclination to elevate them to the ranks of 'civilisation'. The language of effeminacy provided a means to justify excluding western educated Indians from positions of authority in the second half of the nineteenth century on the basis of race, as a 'straightforward defence of racial exclusivity was substituted for a supposedly more 'natural' gender hierarchy between 'manly' and 'unmanly' men'.³ For domestic servants the situation was rather different. As we shall see, class complicated any straightforward definition of Indian men as effeminate.

Sinha foregrounds two elite groups in her analysis. While she gives attention to the way in which discourses of race and gender endorsed the formation of middle class identities, particularly Indian, she gives relatively little attention to the role played in this process by members of the 'lower orders' in India. However, as Radhika Singha has written, Sinha's study does have 'intriguing references to the way in which race insubordination was conceptualised on the terrain of the Anglo-Indian household, in fears of blackmail, social exposure and sexual danger revolving around Indian servants'.⁴

This Chapter focusses on the significance of the relationship between servants and employers during the controversy. It considers the way the servant/employer relationship legitimised women's intervention in the conflict over the Bill and the way it both complicated and underwrote the construction of 'a native character' that was central to the arguments of those opposing the Bill.

Ideas about race, gender and class intersected with ideas about the respective 'natures' of servants and their employers in specific ways during the Ilbert Bill controversy. Servants' identities as lower-class male Indians were (re)inscribed with racialising characteristics specific to their class and gender positions, in relation to middle-class Indians and Englishmen and women, for whom differently nuanced racial characteristics were defined. In the process, ideas about class, gender and service were refined and developed in relation to notions of race. The process was an interactive one. Generalised notions of Indian character were bisected along lines of class, while gender operated in uncertain ways to bolster racialising discourses. However the 'classed' Indians were not discrete discursive entities. Ideas about servants and educated Indians bled into each other, contributing to a racialising

³ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*. p5.

⁴ Radhika Singha, 'Nationalism, Colonialism and the Politics of Masculinity' in *Studies in History* [India] 14, 1, Jan –June 1998 p130.

discourse that situated the Indian in the inferior object position and the Englishman in the superior subject position, thereby justifying England's continued political and economic control of India in the face of increasing doubts as to its legitimacy from Indians and English politicians. The Ilbert Bill controversy was a moment when such processes were taking place in a public and temporally compressed way, and therefore provides us with a 'window' into a complex nexus of interacting discourses and events.

The context to the controversy

The so-called Ilbert Bill aimed to address an 'anomaly' in the practice of criminal procedure following the Code of Criminal Procedure of 1872, proposing that selected native colonial officials in India be given limited criminal jurisdiction over European British subjects in the *mofussil* (rural towns). Before 1872, European British subjects had to be taken to the High Courts in the Presidency Towns for criminal trials. From 1861, only a Justice of the Peace could commit a European British subject to trial in a Presidency town or try him or her locally on petty charges. Natives had been given the right to be appointed as Justices of the Peace in the *mofussil* in 1869 and therefore had the power to commit *mofussil* residents to trial in Presidency towns. The 1872 code brought European British subjects under the jurisdiction of *mofussil* courts for the first time and therefore potentially under the jurisdiction of native Justices of the Peace. However, the non-official Europeans in the *mofussil* were only willing to be brought under the *mofussil* courts' jurisdiction provided they would be tried exclusively by European British magistrates. Thus, in return for being brought under the jurisdiction of *mofussil* courts, European British subjects were guaranteed trial by Justices of the Peace who were also European British subjects.

However, as natives attained positions of increasing seniority in the Indian Civil Service, the anomalies within the 1872 code became clear, particularly after 1877 when native Magistrates regained jurisdiction in the Presidency Towns, but not in the *mofussil*. A native District Magistrate or Sessions Judge could not try a European British subject in the *mofussil*, but would have to refer the case to his European subordinate. Also, native civilians, who as Presidency Magistrates exercised

jurisdiction over European British subjects in the Presidency towns, would be forced to relinquish this privilege if they were promoted to District Officers in the *mofussil*.⁵

In 1882 the Criminal Procedure Code was being revised. For some time it had been clear that there was a necessity for a change to the 1872 code. Due to a fear of serious opposition within the Anglo-Indian community however, the Government had chosen to delay making any change. Early in 1882 a Bengali member of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), Behari Lal Gupta, had suggested that the racial disqualification against native members of the covenanted (senior) branch of the ICS be removed, and Sir Ashley Eden, then the Lt.-Governor of Bengal, approved his suggestion. The Government of India requested the opinion of other provincial administrations in India, which mostly approved the proposal, as did the Executive Council, though there was some significant opposition from some members of the Council of India, of which Lord Ripon, the Viceroy, was unaware due to the Secretary of State's failure to inform him.

Lord Ripon instructed his Legislative Department to draft a Bill incorporating Gupta's proposal.⁶ However, the Bill drafted by Ilbert went beyond the original proposal in that it included not only natives in the senior branch of the civil service, but also various other classes of native civil servants.⁷ Nevertheless, despite the Bill's potentially extensive implication, it was agreed that, at least for a while, jurisdiction over Europeans be restricted to District Magistrates, Sessions Judges and Justices of the Peace chosen from the covenanted Civil Service. Due to the limitations on opportunities for entry for natives very few Indians were actually in the 'covenanted' Civil Service, the vast majority worked within the 'uncovenanted', or lower, branch of the Service. For another ten years, only nine Indian covenanted civilians would qualify for the alteration in jurisdiction.⁸ The Bill was approved by the full Council on December 5 1882 and was ready for the Legislative Council. At this point it didn't excite much response from the press. Discontent with the policies of the Viceroy, however, was brewing within the Anglo-Indian community in India.

⁵ For Ilbert's proposal see *Parliamentary Papers 1884*, vol. 60, p3952. I have mainly used Edwin Hirschmann's account of the details of and the background to the situation, as well as Mrinalini Sinha's synopsis of the legal anomaly that prompted the drafting of the Bill. See Edwin Hirschmann, *White Mutiny: The Ilbert Bill Crisis in India and the Genesis of the Indian National Congress*, pp5-23 and Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p33; pp35-38.

⁶ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p37; Edwin Hirschmann, *White Mutiny*, pp25-26.

⁷ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p37.

⁸ Edwin Hirschmann, *White Mutiny* p26; Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p37-38.

In 1880, Gladstone and the Liberals had beaten Disraeli and the Conservatives at the polls. Gladstone believed that empire required moral justification and that the continuation of British power in India depended on its benefit to the people of India. He had appointed George Frederick Samuel Robinson (Lord Ripon), a man experienced both politically and in terms of India, to the posts of Governor General and Viceroy.⁹ The Charter Act of 1833 and the Queen's proclamation of 1858 had committed the Government of India, in theory, to a policy of racial equality:

We hold ourselves bound to the natives of our Indian territories by the same obligations of duty which bind us to all our other subjects,. . .We declare it to be Our Royal Will and Pleasure...that all shall enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the Law... and it is Our further Will that, so far as may be, Our subjects, of whatever Race or Creed, be freely and impartially admitted to Offices in Our service, the Duties of which they may be qualified by their education, ability, and integrity duly to discharge.¹⁰

However, the preservation of certain privileges for Anglo-Indians in India contradicted such apparently inclusive aims. As Sinha has pointed out, in the second half of the nineteenth century it was increasingly clear to the colonial authorities that 'continued British political and economic exploitation of India depended on the maintenance of certain exclusive racial privileges for European British subjects in India'.¹¹ India was of very real economic importance to Britain. The challenge to Britain's economic dominance from other European nations and the huge increase in Britain's financial investments abroad in the second half of the nineteenth century put the colonial authorities in a difficult predicament, compromised by liberal aspirations and the political and economic exigencies of the moment. Furthermore, educated Indians were beginning to organise politically. By the mid 1870s, politically conscious Bengalis had begun touring India to promote regional solidarity, preparing petitions and agitating in England over the issue of Civil Service appointments.¹² By 1880 their aims had expanded. As Christine Dobbin has noted, through 1883 Bengali papers focussed on the need for changes in the whole constitution of the Indian

⁹ Edwin Hirschmann, *White Mutiny*, pp15 –16.

¹⁰ Proclamation by the Queen in Council to the Princes, Chiefs and the people of India, Nov 1 1858, pp1-3.

¹¹ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p39.

¹² Dobbin, Christine 'The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo-Indian Opinion in India 1883', p93.

Empire.¹³ In an effort to secure the loyalty of the Western educated Indian middle class, Ripon sought to remove some of the existing racial bars against natives through various measures, including the repeal of the Vernacular Press Acts and the passage of the Local Self-Government Act. It seemed that Ripon might be preparing to gratify the ambitions of Indian agitators and fulfil the promise of the 1858 Proclamation, to the chagrin of the Anglo-Indian community who saw such concessions as an attack on their security of status and as the first steps along a route that would lose Britain its Indian Empire.¹⁴ '[T]he hyper-sentimental policy of the present government and its craze for applying English rules and English standards to everything Indian, must infallibly, if persisted in, loosen our hold on the country' stated an editorial in the *Times* in February 1883.¹⁵ Unemployment, strikes and growing political radicalism in England also contributed to a heightened sense of insecurity. Indeed, the *Civil and Military Gazette* claimed Ripon's policies were turning India into a 'theatre on which actors play to Radical audiences in England'.¹⁶

Although the exclusive right of Europeans to be tried by European judges was already limited to criminal trials in rural areas by 1883, it was constructed as a major strut of English power and prosperity in India in the agitation against the Bill. According to a letter to *The Englishman* entitled 'Civilisation vs. Uncivilisation', 'it would be a mad and suicidal policy to entrust the European population, the main stay of the British rule, to native magisterial mercies'.¹⁷ Though internally highly stratified, Anglo-Indian society united in defence of its racial privileges. For Anglo-Indians it was not just prosperity that was threatened by the possibilities of the Ilbert Bill, but also Anglo-Indian identity, which was structured around perceived 'natural' racial superiority, symbolized by the Anglo-Indian monopoly on certain privileges. Gladstone was well aware of this problem, as he indicated in a letter to Ripon:

There is a question to be answered; where, in a country like India, lies the ultimate power, and if it lies for the present on one side but for the future on the other, a problem has to be solved as to preparation for that future, and it may become right and needful to chasten the saucy pride so

¹³ Dobbin, Christine 'The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo-Indian Opinion in India 1883', p93.

¹⁴ Dobbin, Christine 'The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo-Indian Opinion in India 1883', p93.

¹⁵ Editorial, *The Times*, February 4 1883.

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¹⁷ Letter from F.W.S titled 'Civilisation vs. Uncivilisation' in *The Englishman* Feb 16 1883.

apt to grow in the English mind towards foreigners, and especially towards foreigners whose position has been subordinate.¹⁸

The assault upon the Bill began a few days after it was presented at the Legislative Council on February 3. Though the Anglo-Indian press spearheaded the protest, the initial attack was begun by the *Times*, which claimed on the 4 February that the Bill would be extremely unpopular because Mr Ilbert had overlooked 'the deep-seated prejudice of Englishmen, all the world over, against being tried for their lives and liberties by Orientals'.¹⁹ The following day the *Times* continued its attack, arguing that the 'future prosperity of the country' could be endangered if 'Englishmen are made to feel that they are no longer safe in the country districts of India, that they and their belongings will be at the mercy of a court which they neither like nor trust' as '[t]he profits to be gained ... will cease to have any charm for them'.²⁰

The argument that the European's unwillingness to be under native jurisdiction would act as a disincentive to investment in India apparently underpinned the protest against the Bill. However, while widely seen as a challenge to the power capitalists exercised over labour and resources in the interior of India the significance of the proposed amendment took on a range of meanings that reflected a complicated tangle of intersecting racial, gender and class ideologies, identities, relationships and hierarchies in late nineteenth century India.²¹

¹⁸ Letter from Gladstone to Ripon, April 17 1883, in India, *Correspondence with Persons in England, Marquis of Ripon*, 1883, BP 7/5 p64a.

¹⁹ *The Times* Feb 4 1883 According to Chandrika Kaul the metropolitan press came to occupy the role of an 'influential arbiter in the dealings of Britain with her Indian Empire in the late Victorian period' (Chandrika Kaul, 'England and India: The Ilbert Bill, 1883: A case study of the metropolitan press', p413). Many of the metropolitan papers did cover the Ilbert Bill controversy, expressing a diversity of opinion, though most papers opposed the Bill. Whether their readership was interested, however, is another question. The issue had provoked little interest in the Lords in April, 'few peers were present and the ones that were seemed marvellously unexcited and indeed unconcerned' (*Daily News* 10 April 1883), though an apparently fairly well attended anti-Bill meeting was held at St James Hall in June. However, also in June the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* railed against 'how languid is the interest shown by Englishmen at home in a matter which affects their fellows so greatly – and which must by and by affect themselves'. (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, June 5 1883).

²⁰ *The Times*, Feb 5 1883.

²¹ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p33. Employers argued that if the Bill was passed, their authority over their employees would be weakened and the attraction of India to investors would lessen. According to 'Magna Charta' in the *mofussil* 'the respect, almost amounting to superstition, with which the lower classes of natives regards the "sahib logue" is half his safety' Letter, *The Englishman*, March 17 1883. It is also important to note that the anomaly addressed by the Bill made it easier for employers who mistreated employees to escape trial.

Prestige, paranoia and the opposition to the Ilbert Bill

Some contemporaries, including Ripon, believed that a 'cabal' of Calcutta barristers and businessmen initially engineered the agitation against the Bill.²² Anglo-Indians all over India opposed the Bill. Hostility towards it was probably most intense and organised in Bengal and in the tea and indigo districts of Assam and Bihar, where due to the anomaly in the law, Anglo-Indians were 'often able to avoid conviction for acts of oppression' towards their native employees.²³

The Calcutta based *Englishman* newspaper particularly encouraged the protest, providing uncompromising opposition in letters and editorials. A dominant theme of letters to Anglo-Indian newspapers and in speeches and petitions, was that if the Bill were passed Anglo-Indians would lose valuable prestige in the eyes of native Indians. Such a loss of prestige would damage the individual authority of the Anglo-Indian, thus deterring 'the investment of British Capital in the country'.²⁴ The Bill's opponents also suggested that in undermining Anglo-Indians' individual authority, the loss of prestige could have a detrimental effect on governmental control of India, as the '*prestige* of the European is a very valuable aid and strength to the Government in India, and any measure which tends to lower that *prestige* tends to weaken the Government and its hold on the country and the people'.²⁵ According to one correspondent, this would mean that 'the work of civilisation which has been steadily progressing since we became the dominant race in this vast empire will be annulled'.²⁶ In this way, Anglo-Indian opponents of the Ilbert Bill figured their racial privileges as fundamental to the imperial civilising project.

Anglo-Indians' identities as Anglo-Indians, and their connection to Englishness was structured by their superiority over natives, symbolised by their retention of racial privileges and on a microcosmic scale by their absolute control over their

²² See Edwin Hirschmann, *White Mutiny*, p103; Christine Dobbin, 'The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo-Indian Opinion in India 1883', p91.

²³ Raymond. K. Renford, *The Non-Official British in India to 1920* (Delhi, 1987) p211; Christine Dobbin, 'The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo-Indian Opinion in India 1883', p88.

²⁴ Extract from first resolution of public protest meeting in Calcutta, *Civil and Military Gazette*, 6 March 1883, p3.

²⁵ Letter, 30th April 1883, from Colonel W.S. Clarke, Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintie Hills to the Secretary to Chief Commissioner, Assam in *The Local Opinions on the Criminal Procedure Code Amendment Bill* (Calcutta, 1883) p9.

²⁶ Letter from Magna Charta, *The Englishman*, March 17 1883.

households, staffed by adult male native servants. Perceived threats to racial superiority were often evidenced by claims that native servants were becoming insolent. For example, a member of the Viceroy's Council, Gibbs, wrote to Ripon to inform him that he had been told that the feeling against the Bill was 'not really caused by the Bill' but was 'the result of the measures taken during the past three or four years all over the *Mofussil*'.²⁷ According to Gibbs' letter, Anglo-Indians in the *Mofussil* felt 'that the Government are determined to put down the European, and raise the native to the detriment of the former' and that they complained that:

their native servants are not respectful, as they used to be, and that among that class, as well as generally among the great portion of the native urban population, the idea had sprung up, and is openly stated that your Lordship came out simply to "put the native on the gadi" (throne) as they say, and benefit them at the cost of the Europeans.²⁸

In an effort to illustrate the threat posed by the possibilities of the Bill and to 'make the grievance a general one' according to the Head of Police Intelligence in Bengal, the newspapers 'raised the cry of danger to European women'.²⁹ It was not long before the public took 'the bit between their teeth and bolted with the Omnibus' as a member of the Viceroy's Council later wrote to Ripon.³⁰ Women, it was suggested, would be particularly vulnerable to false charges and would have no opportunity for redress if the magistrate were Indian. As one writer to the *Englishman* claimed: 'One's wife may be walked off for an imaginary offence and in like manner become a victim. What would more please our fellow subjects than to bully and disgrace a wretched European woman? The higher her husband's station and the greater her respectability, the greater the delight of the torturer'.³¹

Similarly to Indian women and girls in debates over sati and age of consent, the Anglo-Indian woman in such formulations became a conduit through which colonial masculinity and imperial authority were connected - a passive site for challenges by native men to British rule as represented by the Anglo-Indian man, and also, by

²⁷ Letter from Gibbs to Ripon, March 23 1883, *The Marquis of Ripon. Correspondence with Persons in India 1883*, BP 7/6, p173.

²⁸ Letter from Gibbs to Ripon, March 23 1883, *The Marquis of Ripon. Correspondence with Persons in India 1883*, BP 7/6, p173.

²⁹ Quoted in Edwin Hirschmann, *White Mutiny*, p105.

³⁰ Letter from Gibbs to Ripon, November 18 1883, *The Marquis of Ripon. Correspondence with Persons in India. 1883*. BP 7/6, vol 2, p150.

³¹ Letter, *The Englishman*, February 10 1883.

implication, to his masculinity, of which his ability to protect women was a functional part.

The sanctity of imperial femininity was integral both to the masculinity of Anglo-Indian men and to the security of the imperial project through which various masculinities and femininities were defined, as the enduring nature of myths of Englishwomen raped and abused by wicked and savage Indian men, or rescued by brave Anglo-Indian men in the 1857 uprising indicated. In arguments against the Bill references to essentializing tales of Indian iniquity and English valour emotively illustrated the threat to order the Bill's potential passage was seen to represent and implied undermining prestige in this way somehow dishonoured the mythical defenders of English virtue in 1857. 'Has Lord Ripon no memory of the events of the years 1857-58?' asked 'Indignation', in a letter to the Allahabad based *Pioneer* newspaper, 'They are fresh in the minds of most of us, and I, as the daughter of one who fought bravely and suffered severely then, claim to be heard, not only for myself, but hundreds of my sisters in India'.³²

As Lewis Wurgaft has written 'the emotional meaning of [the] revolt was deeply ingrained in the imperial imagination of post-Mutiny India'.³³ The colonisers felt deeply betrayed and rejected by their Indian subjects in 1857. 'The dread of rejection represented by the insurrection was always present in post-Mutiny India' and rationalised trenchant opposition by Anglo-Indians to any claims by native Indians to rights to independence.³⁴

The Ilbert Bill threatened to emasculate Anglo-Indian men and in the process destabilize colonial control. If it were passed, men would be powerless to protect their women from the law as a weapon wielded by malicious Indians and would thus be unable to fulfil their roles as chivalric Englishmen, representatives of imperial power. Underlying this uneven configuration of race and gender was a fundamental anxiety both to maintain the colonial authority of the English, and the gendered authority of the middle-class Englishman in the face of challenges from educated Indians, English workers and the increasing momentum of feminist activity in Britain. Thus the construction of a potential threat from vindictive natives, initially to the prestige and

³² Letter from Indignation, *The Pioneer*, July 3 1883.

³³ Lewis. D. Wurgaft, *The Imperial Imagination. Magic and Myth in Kipling's India* (Connecticut, 1983) p75.

³⁴ Lewis. D. Wurgaft, *The Imperial Imagination*, p75.

later to the person of the Anglo-Indian woman, was powerful in rallying opposition to the Bill.

That the native threat was often imagined by Anglo-Indians to be posed by the servants employed in Anglo-Indian households was not a matter of coincidence. In India cultural and racial difference complicated the hierarchies of class and gender that structured servant-employer relations in the metropole. As we have seen, many servant employers in India employed much higher numbers of servants than they could have afforded in England. Unlike in England, the majority of servants in Anglo-Indian households were apparently male adults and often lived on the compounds with their own families. Beyond the colour of their skin and their gender, their language, dress, social relations, religious practice and food appeared radically different from that of both their employers and English servants. Anglo-Indians were completely dependent on their native servants. Judging by letters and memoirs, servant employers – especially women isolated in rural areas – felt their servants’ difference acutely.

Wurgaft has suggested that the response of Anglo-Indians to native nationalism in India in the 1880s and 90s:

might be described as increasingly characterised by masochism and paranoia...In the masochistic phase the individual introjects or incorporates the love object in order to ward off a sense of loss; but with the failure of this device he angrily projects the object – and the intolerable feelings bound up in it – onto others. Such primitive mental functioning, under the power of the paranoid delusion, can produce a mercurial shift from a sense of self-sacrifice to a pre-occupation with persecution and betrayal.³⁵

The asymmetry of intimacy in the relationship between native servants and their employers provided fertile ground for the development of such linked fantasies. In their letters to the newspapers many female opponents to the Bill made reference to their loneliness and isolation. For example, ‘C’ described the ‘trials of an Indian climate in the plains; women who see their children sickly and weak’, while ‘Indignation’ asked, ‘Have we not enough to endure in India, isolated as we often are, suffering from the climate, and separated from our children, without the addition of a

³⁵ Lewis. D. Wurgaft, *The Imperial Imagination*, pp75-76.

constant fear of personal attack?’³⁶ However, these women were not alone, since servants whose difference they felt keenly surrounded them. Anglo-Indians were excluded from their servants’ private worlds, the boundaries of which were marked not only by class but also by cultural and racial difference in India, whereas servants transgressed those boundaries, necessarily using intimate knowledge of their employers in their daily work. It is perhaps not surprising that so many Anglo-Indian protests against the Bill articulated the fear that their servants would use the change in law to ‘annoy their employers by dragging them into court’, exposing humiliating details of private life.³⁷ As ‘Dread’ wrote to *Civil and Military Gazette*:

...should domestic difficulties arise, the case must go before the *educated* judge, the man who gets his wives – I suppose I must call them – on trial like his horses; he will have the pleasure of prying into the most private concerns of Europeans and making them the subject of amusement amongst his friends. Anything so puerile as *race prejudice* has nothing to do with the disgust we all feel.³⁸

The domestic sphere was integral to the imperial project and to the identities of the colonizers. Servants, though positioned as subordinates within the Anglo-Indian home, nevertheless had the power to subvert its order and disrupt its sanctity. As such, they were crucial in the uneven and problematic construction of the character of the malicious native that the anti- Ilbert Bill movement perceived would threaten the foundations of British power in India.

The vindictive native

Concerns about the effect of the proposed legislation upon relations between Anglo-Indians and their native servants were expressed in Anglo-Indian newspapers from the outset of the controversy. As early as February 7, the *Times of India* explained the indignation about the Bill in Bengal as due to the fact that ‘almost every mofussil European is a large employer of native labour, and ... almost every question in dispute is one between a European master and a native servant. This in itself is

³⁶ Letter from ‘C’, *The Englishman*, March 14 1883; Letter from Indignation, *The Pioneer*, July 3 1883.

³⁷ Letter from ‘An Englishwoman’, *The Englishman*, March 14 1883.

³⁸ Letter from ‘Dread’, *Civil and Military Gazette*, March 23 1883.

sufficient to account for the vehement opposition'.³⁹ However, it was during March, when Anglo-Indian women began to voice their opposition to the Bill, that servants emerged within newspaper correspondence as a particular site of colonial anxiety in relation to the proposed legislation. In subsequent months, references to servants as a specific concern within newspapers and official documents were less frequent, and tended to be adjunctive to wider anxieties about the maintenance of prestige and colonial control of the native.

In the summer, after some cases in which white women were assaulted by their native servants, servants re-emerged as a potential threat, but in a rather different way to in the spring of 1883 when they figured merely as a potential source of domestic irritation and disruption which would be given free reign by the passage of the Bill. By contrast, the assaults in the summer of 1883 were taken as representative of the effect of middle class native agitation of the 'lower orders' more generally. As the controversy had progressed and Anglo-Indian and Indian responses to the Bill polarised, and the political ramifications of that polarisation intensified, the focus on servants had widened to 'the native' generally, and the native nationalist specifically. One commentator even stressed that it was unusual for servants to attack employers, claiming that one of the assaults had been carried out by 'one of that class of native servants, which as a general rule, is of all classes the most submissive and respectful'.⁴⁰ To this writer it was clear that the assault was 'the immediate result of superior instigation'.⁴¹

The native servant played a functional role in the portrayal of the threat posed to British rule by the possibilities of the Ilbert Bill, particularly in terms of the image of Anglo-Indian women, isolated in the *mofussil*, 'poor things to be worried and harassed every day by their domestic servants'.⁴² H.S. Thomas outlined the proximity of servants to Anglo-Indian women as a significant problem in his statement to the Legislative Council on the Ilbert Bill, claiming that '[a] false complaint lodged by her ayah..., by her tailor that sits daily in her verandah, by any one of the household servants, grooms, or coachmen,... a false complaint may any day subject English ladies...to be tried by Foreigners'.⁴³ Complaints did not necessarily have to be false to

³⁹ *Times of India*, Feb 7 1883.

⁴⁰ Editorial, *The Englishman*, June 26 1883.

⁴¹ Editorial, *The Englishman*, June 26 1883.

⁴² Letter from 'C', *The Englishman*, March 14 1883.

⁴³ *Abstract of Proceedings of the Governor General of India in Council*, XXII, 164-165.

threaten the Anglo-Indian's prestige and sense of security. In a letter forwarded to Lord Ripon, M. Townsend asked:

"Would you like to live in a country where at any moment your wife would be liable to be sentenced, on a false charge of slapping an *Ayah*, to three days' imprisonment, the Magistrate being a copper-coloured pagan, who probably worships the *Linga* and certainly exults in any opportunity of showing that he can insult white persons with impunity."

There is the question in a nutshell. I do not deny that for grave cause it might be worth while to make India an impossible residence for Her Majesty's white subjects, but I think the cause insufficient, more especially as the application of the new system to the soldier's wives, who are likely to slap *Ayahs*, may evoke a furious mutiny.⁴⁴

Even while Townsend asserted that the charge made by the servant could be false, the statement that the proposed change in law would detrimentally affect soldiers' wives 'who are likely to slap *Ayahs*' suggested that whether the charge was false or not was irrelevant. In Townsend's formulation, the freedom of those Anglo-Indian wives who were inclined to 'slap *Ayahs*' to do so was apparently more important in securing the authority of 'Her Majesty's white subjects' than the rule of law.

Englishwomen seized the opportunity to participate in public agitation against the Bill. Some women argued that the passage of the Bill would damage the prestige of English rule, claiming that servants would trump false charges against, in particular, their female employers. They would thus challenge their vulnerable mistresses' authority and force them into an unnaturally public position, tainted with the possibility of humiliation at the hands of an Indian judge. An 'Englishwoman', in a letter to the *Englishman*, advised 'relatives of officials' that 'there are thousands of their countrywomen not so well protected as they are, and who will be at the mercy of unscrupulous servants'. She then claimed self-deprecatingly: 'We women may not be politicians, we may be very illogical, but we surely, some of us, have sufficient knowledge of the position of the English in India to understand that anything that weakens the prestige of our name is detrimental to our safe holding of the country'.⁴⁵ According to one letter writer:

⁴⁴ Letter from M. Townsend to Hughes, March 30 1883, enclosed in Ripon to Hughes, May 7, 1883, *The Marquis of Ripon. Correspondence with Persons in England*. BP 7/5, 1883 p88.

⁴⁵ Letter from 'An Englishwoman', *The Englishman*, March 14, 1883.

In every civilised country woman holds an honourable rank: whatever may be its laws and customs, its women decide the morals... A rank so powerful for good in the vanguard of civilisation conveys to women an indubitable right to be heard regarding any measure which, like Mr Ilbert's Bill, touches their personal respect...It is not pride of race which dictates this feeling, which is the outcome of something far deeper- it is pride of womanhood.⁴⁶

By framing their arguments in these ways women claimed agency in the imperial enterprise, placing the functional role played by the domestic and the construct of white western femininity in the process of 'civilisation' at the centre of the political arguments against the Bill. This was to the chagrin of some campaigners, who thought women's involvement unseemly. Nevertheless, the intimacy of the relation between servants and mistresses and the dangers supposedly resulting from it also made possible the construction of the Englishman as necessary protector of fragile white English ladies. Flora MacDonald juxtaposed such a construct with a definition of native savagery when she luridly appealed to the chivalric instincts of Anglo-Indian men:

Englishmen, try to picture to yourselves a *mofussil* court, hundreds of miles away from Calcutta – in that court a native Magistrate is presiding with the supercilious assurance that a native assumes when he has an English man in his power. Before that man stands an English girl in all her maidenly dignity; she has been accused by her ayah (female houseservant) for revenge of a loathsome crime, a crime that is common amongst native women; the Court is crowded with natives of all castes who have flocked to hear an English girl being tried for an offence; this motley crowd laugh and jeer, and stare that English girl in the face, and spit on the ground to show her the contempt they have for the female sex...It cannot be that Englishmen renowned for chivalry are willing to subject even the humblest of their countrywomen to dishonour.⁴⁷

Unlike those women who claimed the Bill would damage their domestic prestige and therefore hinder the march of civilisation in India, men tended to construct Anglo-Indian women as vulnerable within the home in their arguments against the Bill. The Hon A. Mackenzie in a speech at a meeting at the Madras Chamber of Commerce expressed the concern that an 'ayah who wishes to pay off a grudge against her mistress, has merely to run off to pay any of the Magistrates declared under the powers which this Act will give to have jurisdiction over Europeans, and enter a

⁴⁶ Letter from 'Indignation' *The Englishman*, August 28 1883.

⁴⁷ Letter from Flora MacDonald to *Englishman*, 13 March 1883.

charge of some kind; the mistress will be practically defenceless.’⁴⁸ In a letter to *The Englishman* ‘Magna Charta’ also warned of ‘one probability against which we have not, I think, sufficiently protested’.⁴⁹ This was ‘the fact of European ladies being subjected to the tender mercies of men who cannot understand them and with whom they have no sympathies in common. Indian domestic life, with careless, deceitful native servants, will give great scope for petty intimidation and annoyance’.⁵⁰ The writer of the poem ‘Our Peers’ was on hand however, to reassure vulnerable Anglo-Indian ladies and inform native Indians that ‘each man among us/Would lavish forth his life/The father for his daughter/The husband for his wife/Ere these pure Christian women/To glut some menial’s grudge, /Stand in the dock, the alien’s mock/Before an alien judge’.⁵¹ However, such literary reassurances did not soothe women such as ‘Indignation’, who issued a challenge to Anglo-Indian men’s chivalric instincts, advising ‘those of my countrywomen who are ignorant of the use of firearms to acquire a knowledge of them without delay, so that should occasion arise they may not be found unprepared. It is grievous indeed that a consideration of the necessity for such a precaution should be forced upon us’.⁵²

Later in the controversy, during the summer of 1883, the threat from servants to women was figured as physical, after some cases of assaults on Anglo-Indian women by servants were highly publicised. In the most famous of these cases, in June 1883, the wife of the Public Prosecutor in Calcutta, James Hume, was brutally assaulted. The native sweeper of the household was accused and convicted of the crime. In fact, the Public Prosecutor himself perpetrated the assault when he caught his wife and the sweeper, with whom she had been having an affair for 6 months, together and ‘thrashed his wife till she was half dead’.⁵³ The truth was revealed two years later in a letter from A.O. Hume, a cousin of the prosecutor, to Lord Dufferin, then Viceroy of India. As A.O. Hume wrote, ‘Hume perjured himself, his wife perjured herself... The man [who] was either tho’ a sweeper - a gentleman – or he was guided by his legal

⁴⁸ Speech reported in *Madras Mail*, February 24 1883.

⁴⁹ Letter from ‘Magna Charta’, *The Englishman*, March 17 1883.

⁵⁰ Letter from ‘Magna Charta’, *The Englishman*, March 17 1883.

⁵¹ ‘Our Peers’, *The Englishman*, April 16 1883.

⁵² Letter from Indignation, *The Pioneer*, July 3 1883.

⁵³ Letter from A.O. Hume to Dufferin *The Viceregal Papers of the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava. Correspondence in India, July–September 1885*, MSS Eur IOR Neg 4337, OIOC

advisers who not of the first grade [and] knowing the spate of public feeling recommended him to hold his tongue – made virtually no defence’.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, in 1883 the perjury was taken for truth, and was held up as evidence of the increasing contempt natives held for the English in the face of the Ilbert Bill. It was contended that servants, in these alleged attacks on women, were acting as a result of agitation by the middle class Indian supporters of the Bill. As the Head of Police Intelligence in Bengal wrote in a letter to the Viceroy’s Private Secretary: ‘The agitators in favour of the Bill are a new class of rising politicians, - men whose ways and thoughts are distasteful to older and steadier men...The talk of these men reaches the lower classes and bears evil fruit’.⁵⁵

However, before this, through the spring of 1883, rather than posing a physical or sexual threat, servants feature as those who would use the change in the law to behave in an unacceptably insubordinate way towards their Anglo-Indian employers, both male and female. The claim made by ‘Justice’ that should the Bill be passed ‘even one’s own servants will assert their equality at every turn, in an offensive manner and redress will be out of the question’ and his subsequent call to protest, ‘At this critical time let all Europeans resist to the utmost the Act which would force them into an infamously degrading position’, were common themes within the discourse on the Ilbert Bill.⁵⁶ Apprehension about native insubordination was thus articulated as indignation that servants might assert claims to equality and thereby ‘degrade’ their employers.

When placed in the context of the government’s commitment to the Ilbert Bill and the sense of betrayal Anglo-Indians felt due to the fact that their situation provoked relatively little interest in the metropole, the suggestion that movement towards equality before the law would degrade Anglo-Indians implies they felt insecure about the superiority of their claim to Englishness.⁵⁷ That Anglo-Indians felt that such a minor change in the law would undermine their status in India suggests that their

⁵⁴ Letter from A.O.Hume to Dufferin *The Viceregal Papers of the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava. Correspondence in India, July–September 1885.*

⁵⁵ Lambert to Primrose, July 18 1883, *The Marquis of Ripon, Correspondence with Persons in India*, 1883, BP 7/6, vol 2, pp27–28.

⁵⁶ Letter from ‘Justice’, *The Englishman* March 5 1883.

⁵⁷ Mr Atkins, a railwaymen’s delegate sent to Britain to rally support amongst working men there was regarded by Edinburgh railway delegates ‘as representing a sort of nearly extinct Indian dodo’. *The Englishman*, January 28, 1884 quoted in Christine Dobbin, ‘The Ilbert Bill: A Study of Anglo-Indian Opinion in India 1883’, p94.

seemingly unshakeable confidence in their ‘natural’ racial superiority was weaker than it may have seemed.

Slippages

The threat posed by servants was explained through reference to character traits of ‘the native’ - their ‘inherent deceit and lying character’.⁵⁸ These traits are similar to those apparently exemplified by the middle-class *babu*. However, unlike the *babu* there is no trace of servants being constructed as ‘effeminate’, rather they are styled as vindictive and malicious, driven by the desire to use their knowledge of their employers’ domestic lives as a potential weapon to ‘glut some menial’s grudge’, rather than to gain any political advantage.⁵⁹ Thus a distinction is made in Anglo-Indian arguments against the Bill between the threat posed by what are perceived as middle-class and lower class Indians. Nevertheless, Indians of both statuses are defined as similarly corrupt and we get a sense that the servant is the *babu* without a veneer of education – that the servant exhibits native character ‘in the raw’. Indeed, it was common for Anglo-Indians – particularly women – to make generalisations about native character on the basis of their observation of their servants. In order to get to know the ‘true’ character of natives, one writer challenged Ripon to ‘forego his pleasure trip to Simla this year... engage bearers, kitmutgars, syces and dhobies... and at the end of three short months, let us see if the Marquis hold the same opinion he now does, as regards the moral nature of his beloved Asiatics!’⁶⁰ Similarly, another writer asked:

what does a Governor General know, what can he possibly know of them, seeing them as he does all subservience and meanness, humility and gentleness? We know how gentle a khansama can be, what an adept at spittle licking, so long as he can rob freely; when the robbery is put a stop to, do we not know what an insolent scoundrel he can become?⁶¹

Slippages between ideas about the character of ‘the native’ in general and the distinct identities of Indian servant and Bengali *babu* are further exemplified in the following advertisement, placed as a joke in *The Englishman* in March 1883:

⁵⁸ Letter from F.W.S, *The Englishman*, Feb 16 1883.

⁵⁹ Extract from ‘Our Peers’, Poem, *The Englishman*, April 16 1883.

⁶⁰ Letter from ‘C’ *The Englishman*, March 14, 1883.

⁶¹ Letter from ‘Bengalee G.G’, *The Englishman*, March 15 1883.

WANTED

Sweepers, Punkah Coolies, and Bhisties for the residents of Saidpur. None but educated Bengali Baboos who have passed their Entrance Examination need apply. Ex-Deputy Magistrates (Bengali) preferred.⁶²

At around the same time in March a theatre in Calcutta began giving a musical farce, which 'secured a crowded house'. 'The strength of the piece,' a reviewer wrote, 'lies chiefly in the songs, especially those put into the mouth of *Pir Buksh*, the Commissioner's khansamah, a Bengali patriot and a member of the Local Board, which, with their clever political allusions, brought the house down, and were enthusiastically encored'.⁶³ These are examples of the way in which Anglo-Indians taunted educated Bengalis during the Ilbert Bill controversy. The use of the figure of the servant as the basis of the taunt, suggests that the educated Bengalis were no different to servants, but had aspirations beyond their station. In this way the taunt worked on a class assumption of servants' inferiority, to emphasize a racial assumption of Bengali inferiority. It also suggests that Anglo-Indians couldn't conceive of Indians as other than servants, which is perhaps why they thought that should Anglo-Indians lose racial privileges then servants would assert equality. The status of 'master' was integral to Anglo-Indian identity and masculinity. The possibilities of the Ilbert Bill were perceived to threaten that mastery, hence the concern over the possible insubordination of servants.

The threat Anglo-Indians saw Indian servants as posing was defined in terms of negative stereotypes of Indian servant character, which carried traces of ideas about servants and race developed through an ongoing dialogue with the metropole throughout the nineteenth century. The threat of the bill, while endorsing the validity of women as symbols of prestige, in also revealing their vulnerability, allowed women to maintain their preserve on a contradictory configuration of power and weakness. The suggestion that the Bill would bring unacceptable insubordination to women from servants implied that despite being male, the servant was inevitably inferior to Englishwomen (who were themselves inferior to Englishmen) without his exhibiting the effeminacy that was seen to define the middle class *babu*. The argument that such an attitude from servants posed a risk to empire elevated the

⁶² Joke advertisement, *The Englishman*, March 29 1883.

⁶³ *The Englishman*, March 5 1883.

importance of women and the domestic, putting it at the heart of the imperial venture, while simultaneously suggesting that it was right and proper that Indians be in positions of subservience to British masters/mistresses.

Mrinalini Sinha has argued that the 'strategy of deploying the politics of colonial masculinity against the Ilbert Bill was disingenuous at best: its main purpose was to shift the onus of the debate from a straightforward defence of racial privileges to a question of the fitness of native civil servants'.⁶⁴ Why was this? Why did Anglo-Indians choose not to deploy the argument voiced by the well-known Indianman Fitzjames Stephen, who argued that the British Government of India was 'essentially an absolute Government, founded, not on consent, but on conquest' and that as such Britons had the right to administer law as best suited their interests?:

It [the Government of India] represents a belligerent civilisation, and no anomaly can be so striking or so dangerous as its administration by men who, being at the head of a Government founded on conquest, implying at every point the superiority of the conquering race, of their ideas, their institutions, their opinions, and their principles, and having no justification for its existence except that superiority, shrink from the open, uncompromising, straightforward assertion of it, seek to apologize for their own position and refuse, from whatever cause, to uphold and support it.⁶⁵

C.P. Ilbert suggested Stephen's was 'a doctrine which others had not the ability to put it in words or the cynicism to avow'.⁶⁶ It is conceivable that a lack of cynicism caused Anglo-Indians to balk from such an argument. Anglo-Indians had invested their identities, alongside their money, in the making of India as educative empire and central to those constructed identities was an idea of the Indian, and the Anglo-Indian's relation to him. The Ilbert Bill threatened the balance of power in this relationship.

While some of the motives behind opposition to the Bill were materially self-interested on the part of Anglo-Indians, Anglo-Indians were concerned by more than just the loss of privilege. They were also concerned with what that privilege represented. The arguments against passing the Bill contained the expression of genuine fears about the status of Anglo-Indian identity and this motivated not only

⁶⁴ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p40.

⁶⁵ *The Ilbert Bill. A Collection of Letters, Speeches, Memorials, Articles, &c, Stating Objections to the Bill* (London 1883) p13.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p39.

the deployment of the politics of colonial masculinity as outlined by Sinha, but also the construction of the figure of the malicious servant. This construction provided a character for the Indian, which was complementary to that of the effeminate *babu* – an example of ‘true’ native character against which English probity and the necessity for continued control of India could be defined. As examples of native character, servants defined the uncivilised state of natives. They also stood as a threat to women, to capital and even to empire, against which Anglo-Indian men could stand as chivalric protectors, shoring up both their masculinity and their Englishness. Servants provided an opportunity for women to enter the debate, arguing against the Bill on the basis of their experience as imperial mistresses. It made the argument against the Bill two pronged. Not only were Indian magistrates incompetent and corrupt, but also servants were malicious enough to get their employers into court to face those magistrates. The nature of the service relationship in India facilitated this; Anglo-Indians validated their claims to knowledge of the native through their experience with servants, claiming the Viceroy had no such knowledge. The threat was constructed for the purposes of defeating the Bill, but it was also perceived as real. The fact servants were seen as threatening was, I would argue, a product of the ambivalence Anglo-Indians felt towards them, due to the presence of their otherness within the domestic sphere.

Rhetorical uses of assumptions about servant character were important in the discourses through which the identities of Indians and Englishmen and women were mutually constituted and refined in the controversy. This was always an uneven and contradictory process, racked with ambivalence and uncertainty. However, attention to the particular nature of the servant-employer relationship in India, in relation to the Ilbert Bill controversy, reveals the ways in which specific class and gender boundaries and generalised racisms intersected to simultaneously constitute and undermine homogenous constructions of English and Indian identity.

Conclusion

The relationship between master/mistress and servant was critical in the making of nineteenth century social identities. It interacted with discourses of gender, race and class to simultaneously underwrite and undermine the categorical distinctions through which 'Englishness' and 'Indianness' were mutually constituted in the period. The relationship was key within the development of a structure of feeling concerning 'domesticity' which was expressed in a range of nineteenth century texts. This imperial discourse defined a civilised society as one divided into the classed, gendered and raced constructions that were the 'private' and 'public' spheres. The private sphere, superintended by women, was the place where characters were made and broken, the foundation of empire, the heart of British civilisation. The public sphere, occupied by men, was the place where the important 'work' of business and politics went on.

Domestic servants across the British Empire were instrumental in the maintenance of the distinction between the public and private worlds. They were the magicians of muck; as they scrubbed, polished, scoured, washed, bowed and scraped they helped to maintain the illusion that the home could be a place free of the taint of the public world and helped bring into being a hierarchy of status, in which each household had a place. To employ another metaphor, they were the border police of both metropolitan and colonial households, marking not only the physical boundaries of the house and family, but also the categorical boundaries of class, gender and racial difference. However, in keeping the borders, servants could not help but cross, challenge and even undermine them.

Edward Higgs has drawn attention to the fact that servants were 'employed in the homes of...members of all social classes to perform productive work; caring for animals, making cheese, tending the shop, cooking, cleaning, making fires, fetching and carrying water, helping out during times of domestic crisis and so on.'¹ Higgs is talking about metropolitan households, but the same was true for India. Across metropole and colony though, the productive capacity of servants was not limited to material goods. Servants and their relationships with their employers were also

¹Edward Higgs 'Domestic Service and Household Production' p136.

crucial to the production of gradations of class, gender and racial difference in our period.²

Due to the weight of available material, this study has been primarily concerned with middle-class households and has argued that such households would rarely do without servants. At the same time, it suggests that the idea that the difference between middle-class and working-class status was defined by servant-keeping is overly simplistic.³ In terms of class difference, the difference that was produced through the master/mistress/servant relationship did not necessarily correspond to broad designations such as working-, middle- or upper-class, but rather to power differentials that were linked to subtle degrees of status within those groupings. Similarly, though servants did mark the difference between coloniser and colonised, the specificities of servant/employer relationships in India also marked differences within those categories. The variability of the master/mistress/servant relationship across metropole and colony helped produce different kinds of Englishness, as the way people conducted their domestic lives shaped their position on a spectrum of imperial belonging. For example, on return to England, rumours of Anglo-Indians' allegedly harsh treatment of their servants in Bedford marked them as different from their metropolitan neighbours. According to the *Bedfordshire Times* in 1891 there were 'tales about of 'kitchen hunger' in some houses in Bedford, where the servants have not enough to eat...this is what happens with some of the rulers of our 'great dependency', their ideas of what is necessary to keep up the strength and physique of an English servant being derived from their experience with natives who live on rice and wear scanty raiment'.⁴

Artisans and labourers could hire servants cheaply, or employ kin to do materially productive work, but could also insist on those servants' observance of deference rituals that signified hierarchical difference within and between households. The deference of servants was central to the identity of 'coloniser' in India. As the Ilbert Bill controversy demonstrates, colonisers closely linked control of domestic servants to control of 'the native' more generally. In Britain contemporary commentators figured the effects of the ideas of labour movement on servants as potentially engendering a catastrophe of wide social significance, in their potential for

²Edward Higgs 'Domestic Service and Household Production' p136.

³ See Edward Higgs 'Domestic Service and Household Production' for a discussion of this argument.

⁴ *Bedfordshire Times*, 24 Jan 1891 quoted in Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families*, p236.

undermining employers' authority. Thus, the relationship between servants and their employers produced difference through the materially productive work that sustained 'domesticity', itself a prism of difference, and also through the acting out of difference.

Household manuals recommended routines and rituals designed to ensure a mistress's control of her household and the proper subjection of her servants to the family's whims. Running a household took considerable organisation and relatively few mistresses, certainly in the metropole, could be completely free from household tasks. Nonetheless, domestic servants' labour allowed the release of female family members in households in both metropole and colony from drudgery that would compromise their positions in a classed spectrum of white femininity, without forfeiting household cleanliness and comfort.

Mistresses figured their superintendence of their households as work of national and imperial importance. In teaching servants their places, constantly marking the difference between them and their employers, mistresses saw themselves doing the work of civilisation. In households across India and England servants took on the dirtiest and most unpleasant chores and with them, a mantle of social inferiority in which shifting ideas about gender, race and class were interwoven. However, even while class, gender and racial difference were produced and invested with power through the workings of the master/mistress/servant relationship, the security of those categorical distinctions was being challenged by none other than those individuals whose work constituted an effort to close social boundaries – domestic servants.

Domestic servants crossed and contested the boundaries they upheld both physically and psychically. By their very presence within the home they breached the sanctity of the private sphere as exclusively the place of the family. They crossed between inside and outside, mediating much of the traffic between the public and private worlds. Crucially, domestic servants were paid for their labour. The introduction of the cash nexus into the master/mistress/servant relationship belied the naturalness of the structures of gender, class and race that the relationship underpinned and that organised it. Furthermore, though it was not seen as 'proper' work, in being paid for their work within the home domestic servants brought the cash nexus into the very sphere that was supposed to be, at least in part, defined by its absence.

Male servants complicated any straightforward association of household work with women. In India, the majority of servants were male and the problem of their masculinity was only partly solved by infantilising them. The fear of servants expressed during the Ilbert Bill controversy, both in terms of their potential for violence and in terms of their possible politicisation by nationalists, was linked to their maleness. Male servants' exclusion from franchise extensions in Britain indicates state-sanctioned ambivalence towards any claim they might have made to full adult masculinity. Defined as dependents rather than as employees, to allow them to vote would undermine the indices of masculinity on which citizenship was predicated. By denying male servants this right, law-makers neutralised the challenge such servants' masculinity posed to notions of the private sphere as the woman's place and household work as women's work. It is no coincidence that in our period the numbers of men in service declined. As servants, English men were if not exactly feminised, then neutered.

Though the balance of power was weighted in the employer's favour – the master and mistress after all, had the power to hire, fire and give characters - domestic servants were by no means powerless. Many households were dependent on servants' labour to maintain the family's livelihood and lifestyle; a servant's refusal to fulfil certain tasks was potentially very disruptive to the smooth running of a household, hence the necessity for employers to maintain their authority through insisting on deference rituals.

Employers' need to control their servants in this way was also about power in a different sense. Employers in India and England needed to subject servants in order to maintain their sense of identity. In India controlling native servants was seen as instrumental in the maintenance of British prestige and to Anglo-Indians' sense of themselves as British citizens, working in the service of the British Empire. In both England and India, the power of the master or mistress over the servant was linked to maintaining the imagined hierarchy of status underpinning race, class and gender difference. The imagining of this hierarchy produced ambivalent attitudes in employers towards their servants as it involved repressing the knowledge that the difference between servant and employer was not natural, but man-made. In England, this was particularly difficult when servants moved towards making collective demands for employment rights towards the end of the nineteenth century, while in

India servant employers feared the effect on servants of the claims of Indian nationalists to the right to self-rule and equality with Englishmen.

Servants possessed intimate knowledge of the families they worked for, often more intimate knowledge than family members had of each other. Privy to secrets shared intentionally and accidentally, the possibility of servants communicating their knowledge of the family's private affairs to others beyond the household was a cause of significant anxiety in many masters and mistresses. Many of the court cases considered in this thesis speak of instances when tension spilled into violence, when some of the negative by-products of intimacy, such as jealousy and fear of duplicity, resulted in hostility and injustice. It is also no coincidence that threats of sexual assault against white women by native men were repeatedly figured as being posed by servants 'poised at bedroom doorways, at thresholds of European homes, intruders into the very domestic spaces where they worked, where women were confined, and where white children were reared'.⁵

For servants in both India and England the tensions of intimacy were heightened by asymmetries of knowledge. Masters and mistresses did not have the same access to knowledge of their servants' lives as the servants had of their employers'. In Anglo-Indian households this was particularly consciously felt, as the difference between English and Indian servants was linked into difference of Indians from Englishmen and women. Indian servants, apart from their different skin colour, language, eating and religious habits, were mostly adult males, often with wives and children and lives beyond the household of which the servants' employers had no comprehension. In English households, servants' connection to their own family and friends was problematic for many employers. In households in metropole and colony, fearing betrayal, masters and mistresses encouraged silence; like children, servants were to be seen and not heard. But employers could only insist on silence within the household. Tongues could and did wag in the marketplace, in the park, at the tradesman's entrance, in the courtroom. Furthermore, silencing servants meant not hearing anything of their lives, perpetuating the asymmetry of knowledge that produced such tension on the part of many masters and mistresses.

There was a double axis of power operating in the master/mistress/servant relationship. Employers exercised formidable power over their servants in their

⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, 'Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies' in *The Journal of American History*, 88, 3, Dec 2001 p843.

circumscription of their servant's lives. Meanwhile, consciously or unconsciously, servants possessed another kind of power over their employers, in which they had the ability to betray their employer's trust and shatter the illusion of their superiority. The disregard of servants' point of view has been a problem for this thesis. Accessing the servant voice has been difficult and for India has proved more or less impossible. Masters and mistresses chatter at us from the archives while servants work silently in the background, occasionally coming forward at times of particular pleasure or irritation, visible, but often inaudible.

This study has sought to demonstrate the importance of the master/mistress/servant relationship in England and in India for our understanding of nineteenth century social identities. Rather than compare two distinct and very different sites, I have attempted to juxtapose them, exploring aspects of a relationship that existed within a continuum that included both England and India. In the process of writing this thesis the possibilities for future comparative work in this field have become clearer, as chapter 4 would suggest. One avenue that could be fruitful would be to compare the master/mistress/servant relationship across different colonial sites and even to compare it across different empires. As Ann Laura Stoler has argued 'the imperial politics of intimacies begs for broader comparisons'.⁶

In the case of India and England the different sites lent the master/mistress/servant relationship its particular idiosyncrasies, but the broader dynamics of the relationship developed within the field of imperial domesticity. What it meant to be a master or a servant was constructed across metropole and colony. In both sites the relationship involved quotidian negotiations and struggles over power linked to gendered hierarchies of class and race. The relationship in both sites resonated with similar feelings of tension, fear, frustration and pleasure even while the differences between households in India and in England were plain. According to Stoler, research in other sites of empire, such as into the colonial households of the Dutch and French in Asia and the plantation households of the Old South, suggests that:

anxieties within European colonial communities over intimacies and fear of contaminations by those who performed domestic service were strikingly the same. Those who worked as nursemaids,

⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, 'Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies', p837.

cooks, and houseboys were objects of both fear and desire. In the vulnerable domestic sphere, they were seen to transgress the protected boundaries of the very white homes where their presence allowed for the production of a particular kind of cultural space: the leises, ailments, and sensibilities that defined class privilege and distinctions of race.⁷

Comparing the master/mistress/servant relationship in different sites of empire and in different contexts within those sites could deepen our understanding of the way in which the intimate relation of servant and employer worked to construct tensely classed, gendered and raced identities across the globe, in ways that went beyond the control of colonial states. There are many questions to be answered. How did the servant/employer relationship work in Eurasian households? How was service differently structured in the so-called 'chummeries' occupied by colonial bachelors? What ideas about service and servants did returnees from India bring back to the metropole with them? How did the servant/employer relationship in India compare with the same relationship in other sites of empire? Can we trace the movement of ideas about the relationship through imperial networks and across time? Undertaking such work with attention to the wider imperial context, alongside the historical and geographical specificity of the relationships under scrutiny, could enable us to break down the categories that limit us to thinking in national *or* colonial terms. Such work could bring us to a deeper understanding of the ways in which imperial identities were configured through the intimacies shared by master and servant, ruler and ruled, and the ways in which the contents of 'the nation' and 'the colonial' were variously constructed across time and space.

⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, 'Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies', p842.

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