

Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism, and Violence Between Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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This is a literary study of the servant problem, a problem that endlessly bothered employers and moralists, and has recently emerged in a rather different sense to worry scholars too. Virginia Woolf observed that we would understand great lives far better if we remembered domestic struggles, the scrubbing, carrying and labours of one maid to hold back cold and dirt. While speaking the class prejudices of 1931, Woolf was also prescient. *Domestic Affairs* joins other attempts to reinstate the servant after a long absence from literary, social and economic histories.

Straub investigates relations between servants, masters and mistresses in a (short) 18th century, running from Daniel Defoe to William Godwin. Alert to questions of gender, sexuality and identity, she argues that complaints about servants intensified during the period; their insubordination, disloyalty, independence and ability to corrupt the household became the focus of new anxieties, with far-reaching effects. Novels and conduct literature struggled to contain or resolve a series of paradoxes that were created by servants' increasing economic and social autonomy. Mobility, agency and maturity, giving notice, getting money and having sex, came up against older models of service as an uncomplicated state of childlike, emotional dependence. What was it to live in a family? Who was the servant? How could employers be sure of their domestics' toil and affection?

The servant problem, Straub suggests, was as much about intimacy as about class. In the making of the modern family, servants (or rather, literary versions of them) were fundamental to the working out of ideas about desire, domesticity and gender. And because they were servants, inequality and difference came along

too. The passions that drew Mr B— to Pamela or led Caleb Williams to spy on Mr Falkland fall into place as cultural responses to seismic shifts in the political and economic landscape of 18th-century Britain. When Mrs Brownrigg beat an apprenticed child to death in 1767, popular accounts resorted to the language of sadomasochism not household economy. Conflicts over labour thus shaped modern understandings of sexual and gender identities; an erotics of power infused domestic negotiations and toil.

What we have here, therefore, is not a discussion of servants' economic roles or their experiences, but an account of the cultural work done by representations of them. Straub follows in the steps of Bruce Robbins in arguing that far from being the disembodied scene-setters who made beds, brought tea and laid fires preparative to the main drama, servants were constitutive of social order and integral to broader historical developments from which their contribution has been subsequently lost. Spliced into this is a more recent scholarship on identity, including Dror Wahrman's proposition that a fixed, essential 'modern self' emerged during the late eighteenth century. Wahrman (not Wahlman as he is consistently called in the book) enables Straub to relate domestic service to earlier concepts of identity as fluid and malleable, not class-bound, and to see relations between masters and servants shaping new ideas about family, gender and sexuality.

The six chapters are arranged chronologically. The first introduces the argument and its place in literary criticism. Michael McKeon's *Secret History of Domesticity* is central; historical moorings are chiefly provided by Bridget Hill and J. Jean Hecht. Chapter two relates changes in the organisation of domestic service to published advice directed at servants and masters. Service had long been a life stage, entered in early years and left behind upon social and economic maturity. Even when this pattern no longer held, many still thought of servants occupying a position in the household analogous to children, with both groups subject to the authority of a master and requiring instruction and moral guidance. According to Straub, the servant problem developed when the model assumed (and propagated) by the likes of Defoe at the beginning of the century or Sarah Trimmer in later decades, encountered a new breed of decidedly adult domestic servants, motivated by pay and perks, and in the occupation for life. Conduct literature, itself the product of expanding urban markets for print, increasingly exhorted servants to give up economic independence for the superior charms of affectionate relations with their middle-class employers and the prospect of participating (unequally) in their cultural values. Contented dependence supplanted older stories of financial reward and social mobility. As paternalism crashed into contractual relations, those troubling paradoxes around the servant's place in the family condensed into fears of sexuality. Female domestics attracted sexual attention or, worse, exploited it; predatory and anarchic male domestics threatened family order above and below stairs. Male servants, however, shared an assertive heterosexual masculinity with their masters, whereas women came to be seen as victims of their inescapable sexuality. The servant problem became a problem of ordering work, sex, childhood and emotion.

Chapter three turns to case studies: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and the disappearance in 1753 of Elizabeth Canning, an 18-year old London servant. Richardson, Straub argues, constructed an alternative to the female servant as either greedy whore or seduced innocent. Pamela is financially prudent and morally autonomous. She struggles to preserve herself (and her property) from the sexual advances of a master who comes to appreciate her qualities through reading her letters; he marries her. Pamela is 'both an object of desire and a loving intimate' (p. 48). Richardson's solution to the servant problem resonated with the emergent middle-class family and its ideology of domestic femininity. Literacy and sensibility dissolved tensions around class and sexuality; they promised social order, erotic connection and ethical responsibility. This was a radical 'third way', as novels and plays written in response to *Pamela* demonstrated. The female servant's agency, her ability to share her employers' moral universe and the possibility of crossing social divisions, were sticking points that made it difficult to leave the binary stereotype behind. *Anti-Pamela* literature presented the servant whose sexuality was in thrall to material self-interest, whose lust was amoral, and whose literacy was not the means to display a developed moral sense, but a sign of duplicity. When Elizabeth Canning reappeared after an absence of two months, the same issues transformed an essentially humdrum affair into the focus of intense legal and public interest. It was an opportunity seized by many pamphleteers to revisit questions about the character of the servant. Was she a truthful victim or a crafty schemer, who concealed the signs of venereal disease and illegitimate pregnancy; was she a child-like

innocent or sexual operator? The truth of Canning, unlike Pamela, proved impossible to determine, not least because fiction negotiated class and household relations in ways that a London domestic could not. The lives of both women, however, confirmed the centrality of sexuality to eighteenth-century thinking about servants. The servant problem had merged into broader questions about female power and desire.

By now the themes of *Domestic Affairs* are well-established. Affectionate intimacy between servant and master appeared to resolve the servant problem, but it did so by transmuted social and economic tensions into a (hetero)sexual charge. The fourth chapter pairs Defoe's novel *Roxana* (1724) with Elizabeth Brownrigg to probe relations between mistress and servant. Again intimacy promised to smooth over conflict, drawing the female servant into the family under the moral guidance of the mistress, but again it had distinctly troubling implications. Some of these recycled old complaints about maids who sowed disharmony and colluded in conjugal infidelity, but others had a much more contemporary economic context. In *Roxana*, Defoe depicted a transgressive relationship between mistress and servant who disregard all social obligations in their relentless pursuit of material gain. Straub reads the central relationship between the two women as a tale of emotional excess and interdependence in which violence against children ensures domestic efficiency. Cruelty is the link to Brownrigg who took on young female apprentices for the premiums paid by parish and charity officials, and was hanged for the murder of one of them. For Straub, Brownrigg and her victims made visible the suffering inherent in systems of poor relief and charity which institutionalised the economic exploitation of the children of the poor; they revealed the extent to which social problems of poverty and family were re-cast – and disguised – in terms of sexuality. Popular imagination transformed the struggles of lower middle-class existence, the desperate enforcement of social difference in cramped households and the impossibility of reconciling models of domestic management with realities of labour, into stories of individual sexual perversion and gender transgression. In this sense Brownrigg was a scapegoat for Britain's economic transformation, while representations of her case expanded the connections between sexual pleasures, however deviant, and domestic service.

The remaining chapters deal with men. If *Pamela* suggested a third way of thinking about the female servant's sexuality, cross-class eroticism had rather different implications for the male domestic: homosociality, not homosexuality, emerges as key to this aspect of the servant problem. In chapter five Straub moves up the social scale and returns to a subject she has investigated before, the theatre. Chapter four featured the economically vulnerable households of the lower middle classes; chapter five is the domain of liveried servants in the larger, differentiated establishments of the metropolis in the early to mid century. Straub juxtaposes the disruptive presence of footmen in the London theatre against representations of servants on stage. At the same time that their rights to a place in the audience were curtailed, she argues, dramatists dealt with the sexuality of their fictional counterparts. The theatre presented new forms of lower-class masculinity – an ideal of conjugal heterosexuality that all Englishmen, even servants, could enjoy or a homosocial bond between master and man; it also depicted a very different version of degraded, vicious life below stairs. As footmen rioted in the gallery, a culture war erupted over rights both to public space and to control the story about domestic service. These developments were not restricted to Drury Lane, but encapsulated broader struggles over aristocratic privilege, labour and loyalty, which were evident in a contemporaneous campaign against 'vails', or the practice of tipping servants. A prerequisite that many domestics regarded as a customary right, opponents took as evidence of male servants' insolence and greed. According to Straub, in exchange for conflict, economic agency and self-assertion, servants were offered a naturalised form of manliness which they could perform through affectionate, loyal – and deferential – service: Jonas Hanway was unsubtle in naming his ideal servant Thomas Trueman. The footman was to be domesticated through sharing the cultural values of the middle-class family. But in common with other resolutions of the servant problem, it generated loose ends: was the servant's emotional allegiance to his own family or his employer's; was affection or heterosex the male domestic's dominant passion; how was marriage to be accommodated within a lifetime of service?

Chapter six develops these themes through Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1740), *Adventures of a Valet* (1752), Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1767) and Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). Each novel negotiated the male domestic's problematic sexuality and the forces of connection and difference, aggression and affection that

shaped relations of service. Joseph Andrews transcends emasculating dependence by exchanging the role of footman for that of husband. As a 'natural' quality, heterosexual masculinity and authority over women is something that all men can share. The anonymous author of *Adventures of a Valet* depicted an irredeemable world of sexual predation, escape from which led to not to marriage, but chaste retirement in a household based on sibling affection. Smollett imagined a situation in which the levelling tendencies of virility were contained by Clinker's affectionate loyalty for his master. In Godwin, Straub finds an author who recognized the tensions and contradictions for what they were: a structural outcrop that required political, not personal, remedies. At the same time, Godwin anatomised the intensity and violence of the master/servant relationship, how inequality, intimacy and emotion eroticized power relations. He stripped away others' attempts to resolve the servant problem through heterosexual masculinity to address a cultural desire for male bonding that went beyond social obligations into deep, and troubling psychic processes. In the absence of any alternative social resources or relationships, Caleb Williams is destroyed.

Straub concludes with John MacDonald's *Memoirs* (1790) which were published ostensibly as the work of a literate footman. Whatever the text's provenance, it runs through the stereotypes of 18th-century male servants: their materialism, self-interest and robust sexuality. MacDonald's sexual adventures, like those of his fictional predecessors, created a bond with his masters; he too exchanged service for marriage and independence. But MacDonald's self-fashioning, his strong sense of autonomy and his ability to cross class, were possible, Straub suggests, because of cultural developments earlier in the century. Imagining masculinity and femininity as universal human traits smoothed over class divisions, but thinking about this in the context of labour and household relations also meant dealing with the effects of levelling in hierarchical establishments. Intimacy was both a solution and a problem; so was social distance. And through these dynamics modern sexual and gender identities were deeply impressed with the conditions of 18th-century service, inequality and non-biological families.

I've summarised the chapters at some length, partly because Straub's argument requires detail to pin down themes of love, intimacy, eroticism and homosociality. The book is strongest in drawing out tensions and paradoxes in representations of the master/servant relationship, the dynamics that suffused 18th-century conduct literature with warnings about sloth, dirtiness and tale-bearing, and tied their authors into knots when considering whether servants' duties of deference, humility and obedience outweighed their obligations to god. In tracking social problems across several registers, Straub does more than suggest the conventions with which novelists worked. The book reminds us that whatever law or sociology suggests, domestic service and household were suffused with emotion. It confirms the violence embedded in social relations. *Domestic Affairs* gives an account of how people imagined the early-modern family and the answers they found when confronting its apparent crises.

In focus, therefore, the book complements research into everyday experience, but I wonder whether the weight of literary argument is quite carried by the historical material. Although Straub goes further than Robbins who thought historical accounts not 'pertinent to the larger issue of how literary functionality is linked to society itself' (1), her study still feels rather thin. Historians can't quite help noticing a disjunction between very sophisticated textual interpretations and rather less sophisticated historiography. It is almost as if canonical literary texts – the *Pamelas* or *Joseph Andrews* – command a matching series of canonical histories. Thus we get Hecht and Hill predominating as points of reference over Tim Meldrum's much more extensive (and recent) study of domestic service in metropolitan households. Refer to Laura Gowing's work on a slightly earlier period, and suddenly the significance of touch or corporeality leaps out from 18th-century thinking about domestic servants.(2)

Straub's narrative is built around the concept of middle-class domesticity and orientated towards Nancy Armstrong, notwithstanding McKeon's criticism of her model of public and private spheres. Straub makes no claims for the historical accuracy of eighteenth-century representations and does not study the reception of texts, but even so the balance is not quite right. When close textual reading is set in generalised contexts – social transition, contractual relations, poor law and charitable relief – historical complexities get lost. To my mind, a correspondingly detailed sense of the texture of past lives is needed: Amanda Vickery, not Nancy Armstrong. Vickery's study of genteel women also found that awkward combination of sentimental

attachment and firm hierarchy, the unequal power relations, and mistresses baffled and infuriated by their servants' decisions.⁽³⁾ The worlds of literature and quotidian household management, of Pamela and Elizabeth Shackleton, collided. Whether or not they read (and many did), employers and servants were familiar with patterns of domestic service and hiring that don't quite get into this 21st-century analysis. *Domestic Affairs* makes much of a shift from life-cycle to life-time service, but overlooks the legion of women who came by the day to do laundry or other occasional tasks. It was not just the employment contract that mattered, but its specific terms (and here it is a shame that comparisons with slavery are not developed). Masters and servants had a keen understanding of differences between employment for the year, which earned a poor law settlement, or for shorter periods. As Meldrum's research makes plain, the nature of domestic service varied according to household size and activities; London had distinctive social characteristics. What fiction represented or was silent over had precise meanings and implications that Straub could take much further and be more explicit about. It is surely significant that she discusses women in a wider range of households than men, who figure as valets and footmen in larger establishments. Her historical contexts also wobble over poverty and charity. Interest in educating poor children expanded in the early 18th century, not later (pp. 27–9): is this oversight a hint that older historical narratives about economic transformation are driving the argument? General ideas about poverty infused commentary on servants, parish apprenticeship and sexuality. Jonas Hanway, creator of Thomas Trueman, also attempted to order lower-class masculinity and femininity through his charitable endeavours. The Foundling Hospital's dealings with Mrs Brownrigg were not simply the product of its distinctive circumstances, but emerged from a broader philanthropic landscape.

Carolyn Steedman's account of Phoebe Beatson, pregnant in 1802, who gave birth to and raised her illegitimate daughter without marrying the child's father and while working as a clergyman's servant, who bucked the pressures of poor relief, conduct literature and religious instruction, suggests the permeability of structures that in Straub's world seem so adamant in their troubling, inescapable paradoxes.⁽⁴⁾ Gaps, agency and the tendency of ideas to jump registers to become something else, have the potential to talk back to literary discourse. Steedman too has epic historical change – E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* – and the literary canon – *Wuthering Heights* – but is able to do much more with them by reading between the lines and writing through historical and textual detail. By contrast, *Domestic Affairs* is removed from the materiality urged by Woolf.

Straub's choice of sources is conservative. Apart from the *Adventures of a Valet*, the literary texts are canonical. The historical examples – Canning, Brownrigg and MacDonald – are useful, but the selection is not self-evident and at times stretches chronological bounds (over 40 years separate *Roxana* from Brownrigg). How would the argument look if paired with published cases from the Old Bailey or Doctors Commons, or with newspaper reports and jokes, which also informed their readers about domestic life? When parish officials interrogated unmarried but pregnant domestic servants, the households they described were usually less dramatic than those in novels or the Brownrigg material.⁽⁵⁾ A majority of fathers were male servants or labourers, but about 10% were middling-sort. Another group – lodgers – also turn up in the printed literature on adultery; their appearance in the settlement examinations point to the social complexities of the household-family.⁽⁶⁾ Much could be done, therefore, with evidence of plebeian sexuality or questions about the occupation and uses of space, the delineation of personal, social and physical boundaries. On the literary side too, the net could be cast wider. *Pamela* inspired paintings and waxworks, as well as plays. Clues to the master/servant relationship are not restricted to main plots, but can be glimpsed all around. How about *Tristram Shandy*, where the actions of maidservant and manservant around a sash window threaten for a moment to castrate the gentleman? And I would love to see Elizabeth Hands or another plebeian poet put into the argument.

In *The Franchise Affair* (1948), Josephine Tey retold the Canning case as a tale of post-war class politics; Sarah Waters' latest novel revisits Tey in the genre of ghost story. Straub's literary analysis makes her readers think about servants. Her focus on gender and sexuality is welcome, but, for this historian, other dimensions of the servant problem still await exploration.

Notes

1. Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand* (New York, 1986), p. xi.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender 1660–1750: Life and Work in the London Household* (Harlow, 2000); Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2003).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, 1998).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Chelsea Settlement and Bastardy Examinations, 1733–1766*, ed. T. Hitchcock and J. Black (London, 1999).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2001).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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