

Domestic Affairs: Intimacy, Eroticism and Violence between Servants and Masters in Eighteenth-Century Britain. By Kristina Straub. Johns Hopkins University Press. 2009. ix + 223pp. £29.00.

This valuable study explores the place of the domestic servant in eighteenth-century British literature and the Georgian imagination. It begins with an examination of the contemporary moral debate over the 'servant problem'. Commentators from Daniel Defoe to Sarah Trimmer tussled with this thorny issue and offered prescriptive advice on how best to forge and maintain appropriate relations between employer and servant. Kristina Straub ably analyses this literature and exposes the multiple anxieties and challenges confronting servant/employer relations as a consequence of the expanding economy, changing social mores and shifting ideas about identity. Defoe, voicing concerns which could be seen to foreshadow sentiments sometimes heard over the growing consumerisation of Higher Education today, feared that apprentices had become 'too much like consumers, with the power to take their business elsewhere' and were no longer willing to submit to moral and practical instruction like children, deeming themselves 'too high for Reproof and Correction'(p.20). Controversies raged over questions of money, mobility, dress, duties, age, marriage, loyalty, discipline and insubordination. As Straub makes clear, at the heart of the 'servant problem' were issues not merely of economics, capitalism and contract, but also of identity, power, natural rights, family, affection, sexuality, paternalism and independence. Taking the lead outlined in Naomi Tadmor's work, this study wholeheartedly re-positions servants as an integral part of the family-household, and illuminates the corresponding potential for affection and agency, as much as antagonism and conflict, that arose between employee and employer within shared households.

The central chapters of this book primarily focus on the trials and triumphs of fictional servants and employers. The sources range from canon staples such as Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Defoe's *Roxanna* (1724) and Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), to lesser known works such as Fielding's *Adventures of a Valet* (1752) and a purported memoir, John MacDonald's *Memoirs of an Eighteenth Century Footman* (1790). Straub intersperses her analysis of these works with references to a few factual snippets, such as the debate over servants taking vails (tips from visitors to the household); footmen rioting over access to the

upper gallery in Drury Lane theatre; and a few notorious court cases of the period, such as the 1767 case in which midwife Elizabeth Brownrigg was convicted of the torture and murder of her female apprentice. One of the central themes which Straub traces running throughout this material is a preoccupation with the nature of servants' sexuality, which as she points out, went to the heart of their identities as victims or villains, pawns or players, wards or independent adults. Crucial questions about what female servants wanted and how male servants might balance the tension between a shared masculine culture which celebrated male heterosexual dominance over women and their own required subordination to male and female employers, were unpacked on the page and stage. As such, Straub argues that the discourse surrounding the 'servant problem' illuminates a central phase in the formation of new theories of identity, gender and sexuality. Straub certainly makes a compelling case for the notion that Georgians found servants 'good to think with', to borrow a phrase from Claude Lévi-Strauss, and there is much to recommend and enjoy in these discussions.

Although it is perhaps unfair to expect a literary scholar to pay attention to the wider historical context and historiography to the same degree that a historian might, if there was any element of this study that was a little disappointing it was this. Though extremely well positioned in terms of the cultural and literary theory surrounding this topic, with the work of Michael McKeon offering a key contextual grounding, there was very limited engagement with recent historical work. This was a regrettable omission. For example, Tim Meldrum and Carolyn Steedman's work, which uses sources such as court and parish records to explore the lived experience of eighteenth-century servants, might have offered some useful points of comparison. Did the 'levelling energy' of domestic affairs which Straub makes much of (p.188) exist outside of the printed page, for example? Greater reference to the non-fictional world of the eighteenth century might have enabled a clearer sense of what was simply entertaining fantasy and what reflected a kernel of recognisable truth and reality. Similarly, a clearer sense of how the sources were chosen and some discussion of how representative this selection actually was might also have been beneficial in evaluating the prevalence and influence of the ideas detailed here.

Greater engagement with germane historical works might also have enabled the interesting arguments raised to be explored in greater depth and with more specificity. Straub concludes

her study with a chapter focusing on the purported memoir of a footman, John Macdonald who changed employer twenty-eight times between 1747 and 1779. Straub argues that each move was ‘always related to his sexual, social or financial independence’ (p.179). This line of analysis is not pursued but cries out for contextualisation in terms of Matthew McCormack’s arguments about the centrality of independence to eighteenth-century ideals of masculinity, particularly amongst those of the middling sort. Clearly male servants were unable to enjoy liberty from obligation or freedom from the influence of others in the same way that their masters might, and in the manner which McCormack has outlined. But it is an intriguing idea that footmen and other male retainers might also have been staking a claim to that exclusively masculine virtue of independence through their insistence on rights, such as the entitlement to dictate the terms on which they would sell their labour and to whom. It would have been fascinating to see this context explored and to see whether the capacity for autonomous action was also a defining feature of masculine identity amongst those whose station precluded the possibility of absolute independence. Similarly intriguing questions might also have been explored in regard to national identity, sexuality, homosociality and politeness via reference to the work of Michele Cohen, Tim Hitchcock and Philip Carter.

One final note with the potential to unsettle the historian was the repeated use of the term ‘class’ to describe social rank from as early as the 1720s. Indeed, Straub goes so far as to suggest that a gender-based vision of masculinity emerged to replace a class-based one in the mid-eighteenth century (p. 130). This might trouble historians on two counts. Firstly, those familiar with the work of Dror Warhman (mistakenly cited as Wahlman throughout) and others, might find the use of the term ‘class’ so early in the eighteenth century somewhat problematic. Secondly, those familiar with the work of Alexandra Shepherd and other historians of early modern masculinity, might find it rather surprising to suggest that no gender-based vision of manhood existed before this period.

Such inter-disciplinary quibbles aside, this is a very interesting and welcome study. Straub’s research takes servant/employer relations beyond the confines of labour history and the history of social struggle, and clearly demonstrates the wider relevance of this subject to investigations of identity, gender, sexuality, family and even love and affection. Eighteenth-century novelists and playwrights depicted a fictional world and at times one that delighted in

fantastical inversion. Yet as Straub has shown, the complexity, richness and fluidity with which they portrayed servant/employer relations also made it abundantly apparent that they were depicting more than mere economic or contractual arrangements. In highlighting the variability, intricacy and at times intimacy of such interactions Straub has opened up a valuable new avenue of enquiry into the world of the Georgian domestic servant. It will be exciting to see where it leads next.

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