

CHILDREN BELOW STAIRS: ORIGINAL SIN AND VICTORIAN SERVANTS

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There is no surer mode of making our servants unworthy of our confidence and the companionship of our children, than by thus holding them up, even in our lesson-books, as reprobates and outcasts. (Kaye 102)

Victorian servants, we are told by their employers, behaved very badly indeed. Middle-class writers of periodical essays, household manuals, and religious tracts publicly deplored the misdemeanours committed below stairs. Servants lied to their masters, giggled behind their mistresses' backs, talked back and out of turn, played hooky, and shirked their chores. In 1853 for example the *North British Review* declared: "They are very prone to play the part of spies—listeners at doors, and readers of letters not their own" (qtd Kaye 107). *London Society* and other periodicals agreed: "Dishonesty is, we must all admit, the rule, and not the exception among our domestic servants" ("Domestic Philosophy" 123). Protests against rude and rebellious servants became both familiar and shrill enough to inspire Athol and Henry Mayhew's popular 1847 satire of servant mischief and employer outrage, *The Greatest Plague of Life*.

Servants, in short, behaved like bad children in need of a good spanking, a parallel explicitly drawn by the same class of writers. Hence the *London Society* article concludes: "[Servants] are often sour and savage, and more spoiled than the children themselves" ("Domestic Philosophy" 124). Periodical writers frequently compared servants to children in a variety of contexts and to make a variety of points. Caroline Stephen, for example, explained the petulance of servants with reference to child psychology: "With dependence comes a sensitiveness to slight indications of manner which amounts almost to instinct, as we often notice in the case of children" (1052). Another female writer, annoyed with her male colleagues for having the gall to defend housemaids against tyrannical mistresses, snapped: "Men should not write about [servants], because they do not understand them, just as they should not write about babies" ("On the Side of the Mistresses" 459). The equation between insubordinate servants and naughty children was stable enough to be reversed: if bad servants were like children, then bad children were also like servants. As *Tinsley's Magazine* lamented in 1872: "A disobedient boy or a pert girl are quite as refractory and evil-disposed as a bad servant" ("Of Service" 705). And when bad servants and bad children get together, watch out for the evil engendered between them: "[Servants] are full of little slynesses, and often 'act a lie' . . . before the little creatures, so prone to original sin, who quickly take up the same cue" ("Domestic Philosophy" 124).

The image of a spoiled child "so prone to original sin" was only one of several ideas of childhood invoked by Victorian writers on household management. The consensus among cultural critics and social historians is that Victorian culture was informed by three distinct ideas of childhood: evangelical, following Augustine and

Calvin, in which the child is born with an original sin that must be purged; utilitarian, following Locke, in which the child is born as a *tabula rasa* primed for a rational education; and Romantic, following Rousseau, in which the child is born with an original innocence that indicts the fallen social world. There is little consensus, however, about how Victorian culture mediated and managed those three competing ideas. Robert Pattison for example contends that children in nineteenth-century English literature are “vehicles through which the question of man’s fallen state is discussed, and their appearance brings with it a heavy supposition that the issue will be decided in favour of the view held by Augustine” (93). Robert Polhemus on the other hand stresses the nineteenth-century Romanticisation of the child, culminating in “the Victorian and modern wish to see the time of childhood as a bastion against the dangers and troubles of the grown-up world—a paradise at the beginning instead of the end of life” (595). The tension between these two opposed arguments has in turn been resolved differently by different critics. Lawrence Stone takes the controversial position that the philosophical debate marks a class difference. Unlike the bourgeoisie and gentry, “the lower-middle classes never accepted the Lockean view of the child as a *tabula rasa* upon which society could imprint its image, much less the Rousseauesque theory that he is born naturally good” (468). Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, taking a more conciliatory position, diffuse the tension by noting that “Evangelical and Enlightenment traditions, despite their differences, focused on children’s character as the basis for reforming society” (343).

The iconoclastic James Kincaid interprets such critical disagreement as a sign of the symbolic ambivalence of the child figure itself; he exhorts us to “think of Victorian culture and Victorian constructions of children as shifting, various, and mysterious” (63). Like Kincaid, I am concerned with the competing constructions of childhood in nineteenth-century culture. However, whereas he analyses the way that Victorian discourses of sexuality appropriated and exploited the child figure, I wish to examine how a particular class discourse—the discussion of household management—mobilised different ideas of childhood at different times to consolidate middle-class social power. This essay must therefore begin with a caveat: it imposes only a provisional narrative on what is in fact a hopeless snarl of conflicted ideas and opposing images developed in these discussions of household management. Rather than unravelling the snarl the essay isolates the major strands of thought contained therein and identifies the social dilemmas and ideological contradictions that necessarily prevent those ideas and images from being unravelled.

The equation of servants with children and thus with the curse of original sin was common enough that Charles Dickens could joke ironically about it in *All the Year Round*: “Happy Eden, where our first parents waited on themselves! With the fall came sin, and death—and servants—into the world” (79). But the equation was no joke to most commentators, who struggled to recast a volatile and threatening class relation as a more stable moral and familial relation. Servants introduced the twin spectres of class difference and alienated labour into the middle-class home, creating a host of ideological conflicts for their masters and mistresses. As Davidoff and Hall have argued, “contradictions between familial forms and market relations crystallised in domestic service” (390). The wage-labour of servants who scrubbed floors and dusted furniture

implicitly belied the idea of the home as Ruskin's "place of peace," proof against the economic vicissitudes of the marketplace; the class tensions that fuelled domestic disputes explicitly called into question the separation of spheres that underwrote middle-class cultural authority.

The equation of servants with children therefore helped to neutralise their class difference by incorporating servants provisionally within the family, as family, thereby restoring the ideological fiction of the enclosed home. "Except the relation of parent and child," rhapsodised J.H. Walsh in 1859, "nothing can be more beautiful than that sometimes existing between the employer and the employed" (218). The association of servants and children actually antedates the Victorians; Phillipe Ariès has argued that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries servants and children together constituted the "living, noisy heart of the big house" with its extended familial, social, and occupational network (396). By the nineteenth century, however, the idea of the family had constricted to a core unit of parents and children that firmly excluded servants. The Victorian conflation of servants and children is therefore both anachronistic and paradoxical: to maintain the separation of domestic and economic spheres middle-class writers invoked a period of history in which that separation did not yet exist.

Furthermore the association of servants with spoiled, savage, and evil-disposed children allowed middle-class householders to exhibit and exercise their moral authority over housemaids and footmen. If employers "stand in the relation of parents to [servants]" (Kaye 105), then those employers have a parental duty to intervene in the private lives of their servants and to discipline them according to middle-class standards of conduct. "Servants, like children, require to be treated with firmness and kindness" announced M.A. Baines in her 1859 manual on *Domestic Servants, As They Are and As They Ought to Be* (4). In texts like this one that spelled out strategies for turning bad servants into good ones, social oppression was legitimised as a moral obligation.

And so, even as more and more employers and servants alike understood domestic service as a form of contract labour, many middle-class writers continued to insist that servants should be treated as members of the family—and therefore be disciplined as such. In her study of nineteenth-century domestic service Theresa McBride argues that "the influence of the middle classes was paring away the remnants of paternalism, rationalising domestic life and transforming the master-servant relationship into an employer-employee relationship" (33). All the more striking, then, that middle-class writers invoked that paternal relation as a rhetorical device even as it slipped away as a social reality. In 1833 the *Penny Magazine* tentatively suggested that "domestic servants should, if possible, be so treated as to be made to feel themselves part of the family" ("Domestic Servants" 326). In 1861 *Temple Bar* argued more forcefully that masters and mistresses "take the place of their absent parents, and watch over them with something of parental solicitude" ("Management" 555). And in 1886 Lady Amy Susan Baker insisted: "You and I ought to be a mother, not only to our own little ones, but also to the whole household" (4). In each of these and other articles what Caroline Stephen called the "motherly influence" (1055) of the mistress both enforces and effaces the social power of middle-class employers.

The association of servants with children was compelling enough that even writers who criticised the abuses of employers often did so without abandoning the metaphor.

In 1864 for example *Temple Bar* defended the personal liberty of servants by arguing that “a little wholesome neglect is as good for the servant of an admirable mistress as for the child of an anxious mother” (“Maid v. Mistress” 50). The “motherly influence” that masks social power remains unquestioned here even if the servant enjoys an extra day off. Only rarely, in the most liberal arguments, was the metaphor itself directly challenged; for example an 1865 *Chambers’s Journal* writer pointed out that “children must often be thus drilled, but intelligent men and women resent minute supervision” (“Servants” 243). More often, however, servants were understood to require the same supervision as children to save them from themselves: “Entire liberty is no safer for the generality of children than it is for [servants], whose moral and mental training has not been such as to fortify them against the evil consequences” (“Philosophy of Help” 301).

Even as the equation of servants with children helped to resolve certain ideological dilemmas in middle-class culture, so the same equation inevitably produced other problems. It is all very well for servants to be like children, and even for children to be like servants, but some difference between working-class servants and middle-class children must be retained, otherwise social difference is not just effaced but erased—an ideological effect just as unacceptable as the collapse of separate spheres. Thus even Caroline Stephen, who recommended “the ideal of service according to which the mistress of a family stands more or less in the place of a mother to all the members of it,” insisted immediately that less is more: “I do not mean of course that a mistress can feel towards all her servants as if they were her own children” (1054). J.W. Kaye also qualified the argument: “What we desire is to make our domestic servants cheerful, contented members of our families, and yet withal good servants” (100). The essential difference between working-class servants and middle-class children must remain at some level. However, given that the whole point of equating them in the first place was to conceal class difference in the home, that difference must again be displaced into the field of moral relations—but now to be emphasised rather than obscured.

To analyse this manoeuvre we must examine the other two ideas of childhood that emerge in discussions of household management. Servants, while child-like, were also in charge of children, and middle-class commentators invoked the utilitarian Lockean notion of a malleable and impressionable child as they instructed employers how to instruct servants how to bring up boys and girls properly. These child-care instructions were exhaustive, encompassing every possible form of behaviour. One excellent example of Victorian micro-management comes from the famous Mrs Beeton: “When teaching [the child] to walk, and guiding it by the hand, [the nurse] should change the hand from time to time, so as to avoid raising one shoulder higher than the other” (1013). Far more important than the child’s posture, however, was his or her mind: nursemaids and other servants were called upon to ensure that this *tabula rasa* was inscribed correctly. Beeton continues: “Nursemaids would do well to repeat to the parents faithfully and truly the defects they observe in the dispositions of very young children. If properly checked in time, evil propensities may be eradicated” (1014). Servants were repeatedly reminded of their awesome responsibility for the child’s behavioural and psychological development. *The Nursery Governess* (1845) warned for example that “nothing is insignificant that takes place in the nursery: every look, every

action, every word, is under the observation and imitation of the child" (xiv). Another excellent example of Victorian micro-management comes from *The Nursery Maid* (1877) specifying the servant's role in toilet-training the middle-class child:

Be careful never to use indecent words and expressions. Children must speak of their natural wants, and you must make inquiries and attend upon them. If you do this delicately, the children will want very little more instruction. Always take them apart from the rest, and, if you have both boys and girls in the nursery, never allow them to express their wants aloud, or in any way to expose their persons before each other. Even where there are only girls, this care is desirable. But, on the other hand, you must be exceedingly careful that the delicacy which is so desirable to be attained should not be forced upon children so as to make them attach any interest to such circumstances, and thus perhaps lay the foundations of a real indelicacy. (65)

This is the kind of double-bind (delicate, but not too delicate) that makes Victorian instructions to servants so much fun to read, so long as you are not a servant.

Entrusting their impressionable children to servants of course made middle-class parents very nervous, and the household manuals carefully documented all that can go wrong with children in the care of servants. "Not an improper word or look should be spoken or exhibited before children, who are more apt generally to learn the wrong than the right" said one 1858 manual for servants (Oram 22). Ann Taylor's *Present of a Mistress to a Young Servant* (1816) had already offered the same advice: "If unripe fruits, and trash, are so hurtful to [children's] bodies, the foolish stories, and improper conversation, which they sometimes hear, are injurious to their minds, in a much greater degree" (118). As Roslyn Jolly has argued, middle-class "concerns about servants and fiction were . . . directly entwined: in the fear that servants could harm children by telling them stories, specifically ghost stories" (109). Dickens may have delighted to recall and retell his nurse's stories of Captain Murderer, but the author of *The Maid of All-Work* (1877) was not amused:

There is one practice in which I have known servants indulge for their own convenience, so cruel, so detestable in every way, as to deserve to be called a crime. I trust you will never have such a weight upon your conscience. You might almost as well know yourself guilty of a murder. I mean the practice of frightening [a child] to make [him] quiet. . . . He will be subject to fancies all his life, even if he seems to grow up into a strong man. (77)

According to these writers then the mental health of the middle classes rested in the hands of servants: "I am disposed to think that many cases of insanity are engendered, if not produced by infantile depression" ("Domestic Philosophy" 124).

Equally frightening to middle-class parents was the possibility that servants might pollute their child's speech with traces of working-class dialect and accent. "The

diction of a nurse is also of serious importance to the children under her care,” advised *The Servants’ Practical Guide* (1880); “if she is an uneducated woman, she mispronounces and miscalls almost every word she utters, and the children, with all the quickness of childhood, contract habits of speech which are subsequently difficult to overcome” (117). Similarly *The Duties of Servants* (1894) warned: “Vulgarisms of speech taught by a nurse can, by constant care, be counteracted and corrected by a governess or mother; but a broad country dialect, once acquired, clings to a child, and gives a very disagreeable twang to the voice, which no after-instruction can remedy” (106). Victorian parents expressed some alarm that their nannies and nursemaids were drugging the children with Godfrey’s Cordial and similar opiates (Berridge 103-04), but the parents were at least as worried about these other, more subtle forms of poisoning.

The above examples already begin to suggest how quickly Locke’s rational argument becomes Rousseau’s moral argument. If servants can so easily damage a child’s physical abilities and mental capacity, then surely they must be equally likely to corrupt the child’s moral faculties. Ann Taylor warned in 1816 that “children had even better be disfigured, or crippled, through the carelessness of a servant, than be made wicked by her example” (118). The same logic informs discussions of children and servants throughout the century. “It is so with all the moral qualities,” announced the *Servants’ Practical Guide*; “every bad quality in the nurse is reproduced in children with painful accuracy” (118). And at the end of the century newly available metaphors of technology enhanced the scientific credibility of what was ultimately a moral argument:

Children are prone to copy and to take impressions from those with whom their infantine days are spent; and as it is their nurse with whom these days are passed, they derive all their impressions from her, if they are not living photographs of her; her violence of temper is reproduced in them with startling fidelity, any act of duplicity or underhand manœuvring is noted, remembered, and acted upon, on the first occasion, and untruthfulness in children, if traced to its origin, would often be found to have originated in an untruthful nurse. (*Duties of Servants* 105)

It turns out that the child is not so originally sinful as we had thought; in fact the origin of the child’s sin turns out to be the servant who hustles her vulnerable charges into moral turpitude. The working-class servant ends up shouldering the burden of original sin on behalf of the middle-class child who may then be figured as a Romantic innocent, and whose innocence is visible and verifiable only to the extent that servants are assumed to corrupt it. Bad servants, or servants assumed to be bad, therefore allowed the Victorian child to become “aestheticised, idealised, and fetishised as a repository of civilised value” (Polhemus 595). The symbolic power of the innocent child, invoked so frequently by middle-class culture to redeem and legitimate the brutalities of industry and empire, itself depended upon certain forms of class violence that were no less real for being rhetorical.

Servants and children are therefore both equally aestheticised and fetishised, but the more demonised the servant, the more idealised the child. In an 1863 article entitled

“A Chapter on Servants,” *Sharpe’s London Magazine* carried this argument to its logical extreme. Recounting her interview with a servant girl who had left her previous place because “they had four children,” the writer expresses her shock and horror:

Perhaps as I gazed at the girl’s hard features, and marked her shifting eyes, some inward dread of that fearful fiend, stalking through our streets, urging mothers to strangle babes of a few hours old, came across me, and I declined receiving her. . . . Children are sometimes little plagues, especially to those unaccustomed to them; but to give up your very daily bread—the honest bread of honest labour—because there is in your heart a hatred of childhood! Why, there must be something terrible in the breast that harbours such a feeling, and, harbouring, does not try, at once and for ever, to expel the unfeminine demon. (156)

Here the servant becomes so monstrous that she seeks to murder children not just corrupt them. The interviewer ignores the justice of the maidservant’s complaint (the more children in the house, the more difficult for her to keep the house clean enough to satisfy her employers) and instead seizes the opportunity to reinforce the crucial symbolic opposition between evil servants and innocent children.

But of course the description of a murderous servant hunting down children while fulfilling certain ideological demands also inconveniently reawakens the spectre of class conflict within the middle-class home. As if to counter this effect middle-class writers often deployed the popular image of the benevolent nurse whose loyalty increases with age: “Then what shall we say of the nurse? Who can contemplate the unselfish devotion of these women to their duties; their renunciation of all liberty and pleasure for themselves; their watchfulness, their self-denial, that their shillings and sixpences may buy a toy for this one, a ribbon for the other, and not be struck with admiration?” (“Housekeeping” 202). In this instance the emotional bond between the servant and the family transcends and eclipses the economic contract; the servant actually gives her wages back to the family in the form of gifts for her beloved charges. The middle-class sentimentalisation of childhood expands so as to include the nurse within a nostalgic vision of a harmonious domestic sphere:

And how many more are there who can never think but with gratitude of the old servant in whose ears we poured out many childish griefs, and above all, of the beloved old nurse, on whose tender and motherly breast we have often shed tears we should have been ashamed to let fall elsewhere, and where we never failed to find the love and sympathy we sought? (Jeune 73)

Innocence is restored not only to middle-class children but also to the servant who tends them and whose breast is now figured as “motherly” rather than murderous. Household manuals addressed directly to servants also enforced this point, admonishing general servants and nursemaids that “the longer you live with children the stronger this

motherly feeling will become, till they will appear almost to belong to you" (*Nursery Maid* 86).

But only "almost." We have seen this ideological bind before: class difference must be effaced but not erased within the domestic sphere. If servants are not ultimately the same as middle-class children, neither are nurses and nursemaids ultimately the same as middle-class mothers. And so the backpedalling begins again. "A mother is helped on by her love for her offspring—is repaid by their well-being," states *The Nursery Maid* (1877), adding that "You cannot feel this as she does" (86). By noting explicitly that the mother's work is "repaid" only in emotional currency, the manual implicitly restores the social difference between the mother and the servant whom she pays with cash. Isabella Cowan makes the same qualification: "The more you are mother-like in your dealings with the children the better, for you are in some degree deputy-mother, but remember only in the place of mother" (47-48). Cowan here responds to a further anxiety that arose when middle-class writers sentimentalised their childhood bond with servants: the fact that Mary Jeune "never failed to find the love and sympathy we sought" from the servant suggests painfully that she might have failed to find it elsewhere—from her mother. Cowan and others therefore insisted on the sacred tie between mother and child, exhorting servants to "obey God's command, and by no smallest hint lessen the children's love and reverence for their mother" (48). And as we have seen, middle-class writers emphasised the harm that ignorant and immoral servants might do to children, a rhetorical strategy that also shored up the middle-class mother's superior moral authority. "There are many, so very many, so-called nurses," warned Mrs Eliot James in 1883, "who go into service in such capacities, that one wonders why there are not even more accidents to children, than those of which accounts are heard and read" (77).

We have come full circle, back to servants behaving badly. We can now see, however, precisely why these representations of servants and children must remain snarled and conflicted. Middle-class culture, founded on the untenable separation of domestic and economic spheres, turned to its images of childhood as an expansive and flexible symbolic field where the ideological dilemmas produced by that separation might be resolved. But such opportunism comes at a cost. Because not only the separation of spheres but also the idea of childhood itself contain inherent contradictions, the resolution of one dilemma necessarily gives rise to another whose resolution gives rise to another, and so on down the line until the first dilemma recurs. Driven and accelerated by middle-class interests and ambition, this circular symbolic logic eventually produces a tangle of ideas so dense that even those writers who critiqued middle-class interests and ambition could not entirely free themselves. At least one middle-class commentator came to the defence of servants and called into question the motives for defaming them:

If our domestic servants be as a class so vicious that our children are to be warned against "familiarity" with them . . . no really good person would ever place so corrupt and so corrupting a set of people about the persons of their children. A really religious person would rather sweep

the floors, and light the fires, and dress the children, than so contaminate the tender minds of the young. (Kaye 102)

However, even this sceptical writer, by holding on to the idea that the young have tender minds to be contaminated, continues to propagate the indispensable ideal of childhood innocence—although without understanding that the slandering of servants is precisely what gives meaning and substance to that ideal. Without bad servants there can be no good children.

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