Servant Problems

Early on in his study of early modern domestic service in London, Tim Meldrum notes that his subject has acquired a timeliness and a relevance largely absent from the period in the early 1990s when he began the doctoral dissertation on which his book is based. Although it is perhaps an overstatement to suggest that "at the turn of the twenty-first century British society is haunted once more by domestic service" (pp. 2-3), there is nevertheless some truth in the observation that now that a significant minority of middle-class professionals (including not a few academics) employ domestic help for childcare and cleaning, scholarly interest in the history of this occupation has revived. To be sure, in the United States domestic workers—primarily nannies and house cleaners, but also home care nurses and gardeners—are seldom actually called "servants," but this does not entirely disguise the anxieties generated by their employment. The popularity of the "nanny-cam" and other surveillance devices designed to help the middle-class monitor the behavior of its in-home help, especially in the wake of the murder trial in Massachusetts of nanny Louise Woodward, demonstrates that while "servants" may have become "domestic workers," the "servant problem" has not gone away. Now, as in centuries past, this problem—that good, honest servants are hard to find and even harder to keep, and the trials visited on employers by having to deal with servants are many and vexing—has dominated the discussion of domestic service.

Whatever the genesis of the newfound interest in domestic service and domestic servants, it is to be welcomed. As Meldrum points out in this original study, although domestic servants were everywhere in the early modern city, there has been little serious study of domestic service before the nineteenth century. One need only glance at the bibliographic essay that concludes the book to confirm both how shockingly little work has, in fact, been done on domestic service and how terribly outdated most previous work on domestic service now is. Much of this older body of work is limited by the sources on which it relies, generally qualitative or prescriptive accounts of service and servants originated by employers. In contrast,
Meldrum's aim is to provide the servant's perspective on life in service. Also outdated are previous accounts of domestic service that have relied on sociology and on modernization theory and that have overemphasized service's teleology as a narrative of change. For his part, Meldrum both rightly problematizes the strategy of speculating about what service was in the early modern period by arguing from what it became in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and seeks to develop a body of evidence that counterbalances employers' narratives.

This is an ambitious book that aims to re-orient our thinking about domestic service in the early modern period. To realize this ambition, however, is a very complicated task; a task that in the end comes close to overloading this very short book. In Domestic Service and Gender, Meldrum arguably sets out to tackle three major themes. Perhaps the most frustrating thing about the book is that it is brief and its arguments about these themes could stand further development and demonstration. First, Meldrum attempts to paint a picture of domestic service in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that emphasizes the experience of servants, not the observations and anxiety of employers. To accomplish this he makes use of nearly 1500 witness depositions made at the London Consistory Court between 1669 and 1752, where, he argues, both male and female servants were well represented. From these depositions, he outlines a highly compelling and original account of servants' actual work and their workday; their relationships both in- and outside the household; and of the way in which the experience of service varied by gender and the status of a servant's employer. Meldrum's sources, as well as his account, seem to under-represent the "maid of all work" and the humblest households in which she most frequently worked, but this does not go unacknowledged. In fact, despite his contention that the Consistory Court depositions represent a broad range of servants in a variety of situations, a very large number of his most developed examples come from servants who worked for the very affluent. Perhaps his most interesting observations are about the details of what servants actually worked at during their day and his application of this information to arguments about the disaggregation of management and labor, a process he describes as more fragmented and sporadic than usually appreciated, and one in which the "striking contrast to be found is between men and women, and between larger and smaller households, rather than between 1660 and 1750" (p. 182).

Second, Meldrum wants to explore the description of domestic service found in the Consistory Court depositions squarely within the context of recent advances in social history. Indeed, his digestion of historical literatures is impressive and enables him to view domestic service from what appears to be a 360-degree perspective. Using a variety of lenses--among them, the literatures of crime and criminals, marriage and family history, the history of sexuality, the history of work, and the economic history of London--he embeds domestic service firmly into the fabric of a complex society. The consequence of doing so leads him to suggest that not only was domestic service not in turmoil during the period under discussion but that it was in fact fairly resistant to change before 1750. This is most suggestively illustrated in his discussion of the monetary and non-monetary forms of remuneration, where, despite acknowledging the well-publicized employers' campaign against vails, tips, and other forms of perquisites often cited by historians as evidence of dramatic changes in domestic service, he painstakingly refutes the notion of a crumbling "moral economy" in domestic service and demonstrates the persistence of non-monetary payments. Indeed, in this and other aspects of servants' work and lives, he finds a remarkable continuity in experiences over the whole of his period.

However, what almost unbalances this fine and innovative study is Meldrum's third goal.
Here, he wants to take on the assumptions and hypotheses about domestic service and urban households that have heretofore shaped our picture of domestic service's history. In doing so, no generalization about domestic service is spared. Using what he has learned from the Consistory Court depositions, Meldrum considers and rejects ideas about "separate spheres," "managerial mistresses," the "feminisation of service," "proletarianisation," the "moral economy," modernization theory, servants' sexual victimization, and other constructs that have been proposed by previous historians to explain the history of domestic service. Yet, whereas the evidence Meldrum presents to undermine the overarching claims of these prior interpretations seems largely convincing, the doggedness with which he pursues this agenda and the vehement intellectual energy he applies to the task frequently threaten the coherence of the narrative. The effect on the reader is not unlike being a ball in a pinball machine: we are batted from one pin to the next almost in random order. Indeed, the ordering of Meldrum's chapters seems to have been determined more by the interpretations with which he is in disagreement and much less by any strong or independent narrative that emerges from his sources.

Although it is often hard to find, such a narrative does exist. What persisted in service over the whole of Meldrum's period, he argues, were a diverse set of relationships between servants and their employers, most powerfully experienced through and differentiated by household size and gender. In reaching this conclusion he provides few clues to the changes he suggests might have begun to undermine service even before the mid-eighteenth century. He also risks establishing a problem parallel to the "servant problem"--the "employer problem"--in which utterings about one's boss take on a sameness in every generation. Yet consider that if Meldrum were not so interested in silencing employers in favor of servants, but had had his ears attuned to both, he might have heard something slightly different. Still if answers about change are in somewhat short supply, Meldrum demonstrates convincingly that future accounts of domestic servants will no longer be able to take the help for granted.
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