

***Mrs. Woolf and the Servants.*** By Alison Light. 2007. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009. 400 pp. \$30.00 cloth; \$20.00 paper.

While we often associate women working in shops, factories, and offices with modernity, Alison Light's book *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* reminds us that livery-clad women de-boning chickens and dusting banisters in homes were significant players not just in modern life but in literary modernism. Although written to be accessible to a popular audience, Light's book navigates modernism's uncharted domestic territories in ways that echo the critical rigor of recent academic studies focusing on domestic themes, such as Christopher Reed's *Bloomsbury Rooms* and Victoria Rosner's *Modernism and the Architecture of Modern Life*. In providing biographies of servants who came in and out of Virginia Woolf's life, *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants* begs us to include domestic labor within the scope of women's social history. She declares boldly in her preface that "the history of service is the history of British women" (xv). The largely untold story of British domestic service, Light writes, is "about mutual—and unequal—dependence but . . .

also about social differences, about class feelings and attitudes which were generated and sustained by women at home and indoors rather than by men in their workplaces" (xiv). The recurrent presence of servants in Woolf's fiction, letters, and autobiography signals the extent to which Woolf herself was preoccupied with the British industry of domestic service. While Woolf often problematizes her own relationship to servants—wanting to reject the anti-democratic nature of Victorian service relations as much as she did the "angel in the house"—she also expresses unbridled frustration and anxiety about servants, with reference to her privileged class status. Situating Woolf's representation of her domestic service in light of changes that were occurring in the industry itself, Light provides a balanced context for Woolf's stormy and self-critical relationship to the domestic service industry. Light thus suggests how domestic labor played a profound role in first-wave feminist and modernist assessments of sociality, affect, domesticity.

Light effectively extends the social contours of her study by situating Woolf's lifelong relationship to servants, primarily Sophie Farrell, Lottie Hope, Nellie Boxall,<sup>1</sup> and Mabel Haskins, in relation to institutions which shaped the discursive tenor of the modern service industry. For example, in her first two chapters, "A Family Treasure" and "Housemaids' Souls," she pairs Virginia's childhood cook Sophie Farrell with Julia Stephen, Virginia's mother, and a Bloomsbury servant, Lottie Hope, with Edith Sichel, the philanthropic matron or "slummer," whose private school in Hambleton Village was the orphan Hope's first home.

As Farrell was a lifelong attendant in Stephen households, Light's initial chapter allows her to explore how attitudes toward servants changed cross-generationally—and also how they did not change. As "old retainer," Farrell reciprocated the Victorian doctrine of mutual dependence to which Julia Stephen clung and that Woolf both inherited and found deeply troubling. In addition to giving elaborate biographies of servants, Light also provides us with close readings of documents that have not often been of interest to the literary historian.<sup>2</sup> While correspondence between Farrell and her mistresses (Julia and Virginia) suggests obedient devotion, Light complicates the effusive language of the letters through an explication of their nuances and exigencies. Woolf's anecdotes about Farrell reflect ambivalence toward Victorian servants' functions as maternal surrogates and servile subordinates. Producing a variety of new insights about Woolf's ideas about class, the maternal, and sentiment, Light juxtaposes analyses of Sophie's life with astute readings of literary domestics in Woolf's novels, including *The Voyage Out* and *The Years*.

In marked contrast to the matronly Sophie Farrell, Lottie Hope, the parlourmaid and cook discussed in Chapter 2, was a modern servant girl, whose lipstick, bright stockings, and rebellious spirit were sources of intrigue and amusement for Woolf. By tracing Hope's personal history as a student

in Sichel's school for orphan girls, Light exposes the philanthropic origins of British domestic service, how poor orphans and workhouse children were systematically trained to be servants well into the twentieth century. Although Light describes the bleak material and psychological conditions shaping domestics' lives, she also prompts us to consider how servants, like Hope, may have told different stories of modern womanhood, stories that have been largely forgotten: "All her life Lottie Hope was seen as volatile, a person of extremes whose fears and nightmares were unfounded, the strange or wayward products of the 'servant mind.' Lottie fabricated, they all said, she loved to embroider crazy stories but no one wrote them down" (85). In comparing Hope's story-writing to Woolf's and the psychological breakdown of a Bloomsbury servant, Mary Wilson, to Woolf's own volatile mental states, Light expands modern discourses of female creativity and "hysteria" to include Britain's working class. As Light shows in another chapter, "Memoirs of a Lavatory Attendant," Woolf herself was curious about the stories servants would tell but consistently doubtful of her own ability to imagine and transmit those stories.

Not surprisingly, Light returns repeatedly to Woolf's essay "Mr. Bennett and Mr. Brown," in which she declares that "human character" changed around 1910, when the hierarchical relationship between servants and masters—as well as those between husbands and wives, parents and children—became less rigid (193). While viewing servants' attitudes as signaling this modern shift in domestic social relations and literary production, Light's book also demonstrates continuity between Victorian and modern mindsets toward domestic servants—and illustrates how Woolf herself straddled those two mindsets. On one hand, Woolf regarded servants' presence in the modern home as ludicrous, echoing the ideas of modern domestic reformers who urged housewives to depersonalize and professionalize the industry. On the other, Woolf's relationship to her servants—especially to Nellie Boxall—was intensely personal and emotionally charged.

Throughout the book, Light strongly evokes the general social discomfort of domestic service, an industry that brought the lower and upper classes into awkward proximity. Beginning each chapter with imaginative frames, Light recreates a complicated web of feeling underlying modern service relations, often revealing how benevolent doctrines of service are often mixed with disgust. In the beginning of Chapter 2, she writes: "*Behind the security of the nursery and the comforting figure of the old retainer, there always lurked the shadow of the rat-eyed, feral poor*" (82, emphasis in original). The propensity to view the servant as both "the scum of the earth and its salt" (4), she indicates, is a consistent feature of the bourgeois literary imaginary.<sup>3</sup> The contentious and contradictory nature of Woolf's relationship to domestic service is most evident in Light's third chapter, "The Question of Nelly," in which she exposes the heightened power dynamics

and contradictory feelings punctuating Woolf's relationship with her cook Nelly Boxall. While problematizing and ironizing Woolf's self-construal as a victim of Boxall, Light also suggests that she exerted agency, recounting, for instance, how Boxall consistently refused to be fired.

In contextualizing Woolf's diaries within the history of domestic service, Light begins to articulate the tremendous social implications of servants on modern family living and modernist creativity. Perhaps her most important intervention here is that she complicates our vision of the autonomous literary genius. Light reminds us that the rooms housing the female literary imagination had to be dusted. In doing so, she revises our conceptions of modern/ist domesticity, urging us to remember all the various domestic subjects who comprised the social backdrop of literary production. Light resuscitates this reality throughout her book, but sums it up in her preface when she states: "without all the domestic care and hard work which servants provided there would have been no art, no writing, no 'Bloomsbury'" (xvii).

### Notes

1. As Light points out, Woolf significantly uses "Nellie" and "Nelly" interchangeably in reference to Boxall.
2. In her thorough history of nineteenth-century domestic service literature, Barbara Ryan juxtaposes analyses of a similar variety of archival material but in an American context. Like *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*, Ryan's *Love, Wages, and Servitude* exposes affect to be a discourse of primary importance in representations of domestic service relationships.
3. In *A Servant's Hand*, Bruce Robbins explores the formal conventions in depictions of literary servants, arguing that there is historical continuity in such depictions that suggests their ambivalent signification or indeterminate ideological function (51). Light's social history extends Robbins's claim that the domestic is a crucial element of a reproductive economy, one characterized by a somewhat fluid economy of social interactions (193-99).

### Works Cited

- Robbins, Bruce. *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction From Below*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1986.
- Ryan, Barbara. *Love, Wages, Slavery: The Literature of Servitude in the United States*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
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