Domestic Service in the Industrial Age: The Significance of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell's Literary Servants

Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell. Julie Nash. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 130pp.

Reviewed by Jessica Hindes, King's College London

<1> Julie Nash's book makes a useful contribution to the growing body of criticism on the subject of literary servants, offering persuasive close readings of a number of works by both the authors she tackles. However, despite the strength of these readings (in which lies the main virtue of her work), Nash can seem overly cautious, using her examples to illustrate existing opinions about Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell rather than offering a new perspective on either woman's body of work. *Servants and Paternalism* highlights some underemphasized moments and dynamics in the books of both authors, and offers a cogent argument on the importance of servants to Victorian women's economic and political engagement; but either Nash's critical restraint or the work's neatly segregated structure prevents this set of well-drawn readings becoming more than the sum of its parts.

<2> Nash's Introduction provides a broad historical background to "The Great Age of Servants, which spanned the eighteenth century through the Edwardian age" (1). Recognizing the social changes that this substantial period encompassed, Nash highlights the problems encountered by an age increasingly devoted to supporting the rights of the individual in dealing with an institution founded in the social paternalism of previous generations. For Edgeworth and for Gaskell, women whose employment of household staff placed them on the front line of relations with the working classes, engagement with these issues was inevitable. Nash's emphasis on the middle-class woman's role as employer, a role that linked her to the political economy of which women were putatively ignorant, is a useful one, though her argument about the "false dichotomy of public and private realms" (2) feels slightly over-played. Surely there are few critics or historians still arguing that Victorians genuinely enacted a total separation between their domestic and economic or political lives.

<3> In any case, the central link that Nash proposes between the two women on whom she writes is this shared, ambiguous position as female employer within a patriarchal hierarchy – for "paternalism is inherently linked to patriarchy" (14). Both women were fascinated by the social changes they saw taking place around them. Both of them, too, found themselves rendered

complicit, through their middle-class status and traditional social roles (Edgeworth the notoriously dutiful daughter, Gaskell an exemplary wife and mother), with the system that Nash suggests their natural sympathy for progress would otherwise have led them to condemn. The similarities justify Nash's juxtaposition of the two authors, promising illuminating parallels, though these are underemphasized in the structure that separates the women (and their respective political and domestic fictions) into separate chapters.

<4> The ambivalence that Nash recognizes in both Edgeworth and Gaskell's familial roles links them closely to the servants whose significance Chapter 2 explores in more detail. Though Nash's close readings contain most of the book's original thought, this is an excellent overview of the nineteenth-century middle classes' complicated relationship with their household staff. Nash emphasizes the servant's symbolic status, as emblem of the middle-class home; a woman with a servant elevated herself above the working classes simply by locating herself on the right side of the employer/employee divide. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson have written on the servant's role as representative of the streets, invading the walls of the Victorian home;(1) Nash's emphasis on the servant's inevitable link to questions of political economy leads her to similar conclusions. Servants were necessary accoutrements in the homes of the wealthy, but their access to the private lives of the family they served loaded them with dangerously intimate knowledge. Paranoid about the personal secrets that might be concocted or revealed, the middle classes found themselves (unconsciously?) conspiring "to paint the servant class as dishonest" (28), creating a set of negative stereotypes that only reinforced the fears associated with servants' constant presence in the home. However, Nash goes further than Chase and Levenson in emphasizing that this lack of privacy affected the servants as much as the families for whom they worked: "employers of servants took an active interest in the personal lives of their domestics" (21); "lack of liberty … defined servants' lives" (23). The increased distance between employee and employer associated with industrialization did not reflect the servant's position inside the family home.

<5> Chapter 3 deals with Edgeworth's domestic fiction, arguing for its analysis through a political lens. Nash explores Edgeworth's use of the servant stereotypes examined in the previous chapter but suggests that, on occasion and particularly towards the end of her career, she was able to offer an alternative and more complex model for servant-mistress relations. Like her peers, Edgeworth was not above the use of caricature, creating servants who are models of adoring loyalty (Nash notes that *Belinda* [1801]has Mr Vincent's servant Juba share a name with Vincent's dog) and making others flamboyantly corrupt, embodiments of the worst aspects of human nature. However, Nash suggests that despite these appeals to the most negative stereotypes of domestic servants, Edgeworth elsewhere demonstrates the potential for a more complex dynamic. In a persuasive study of Lady Delacour's servant, Marriott, Nash emphasizes the misplacement of Belinda's prejudices against her and argues that Edgeworth can be seen to demand "a new, more familial and egalitarian relationship between mistress and maid" (51). I was intrigued here by the reasons why this might apply to women's servants, particularly about the parallels between the situations of the two social groups; but this was an instance where Nash's reluctance to make bold critical claims left me frustrated.

<6> In any case, this more intimate model of family-servant relations parallels that advocated by Elizabeth Gaskell in her own domestic fiction, dealt with in Chapter 4. Nash uses this chapter to explore women's position on the front line of economic change, their role as managers of a type of staff apparently exempt from developing arguments for decreased involvement between employer and employee. This is the balance between freedom and responsibility alluded to in Nash's Introduction: the conflict between the traditional, Christian obligation to care for those worse off, and a developing tendency to emphasize the working classes' right to determine the course of their own lives, unsupervised. In this chapter, Nash makes it clear where Gaskell's sympathies lie. Governed both by her Christian beliefs and by a natural sympathy for human feelings, Gaskell in her domestic fiction seeks to illustrate the benefits of "mutual dependence" (66). Examples from *Cranford* (1853), from *Ruth* (1853), and from *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863) show the author attempting to defuse the fears associated with servants' excessive proximity by having domestics drawn closer in an extension of the family unit. Nash shows how, within Gaskell's fiction, servants become central to the lives of the families they inhabit, "saviours" (73) whose goodness critiques the conventions associating social with moral inferiority.

<7> This association between low birth and corrupt or ignorant behavior is the subject of Nash's Chapter 5, on Edgeworth's Irish novels. Echoing the clearer distinction made between Gaskell's domestic and her political novels (despite the reinforcing line this draws between public and private spheres), Nash stresses servants' broader political significance in this group of Edgeworth's works. "Edgeworth's most important Irish characters," she argues, "also happen to be servants … the colonized peasants upon whose labour the Irish ascendancy depended" (77). This correspondence between nationality and social position prompts Nash to explore the idea of servants' place being determined by birth, looking at two plots (*Castle Rackrent* [1800] and *Ennui* {1809]) whereby the sons of servants become masters of what have been aristocratic estates. As in her chapter on Edgeworth's novels of manners, Nash traces a development from the earlier work to the later one, finding more hope for the future (and support for a new meritocracy) in the conclusion of *Ennui*. Even here, however, Edgeworth's advocacy for change is not unambiguous. "The alternative to social paternalism, according to Edgeworth's Irish novels, is always complicated, frequently confusing, and often painful" (93): an ambivalent note that sets the tone for the remainder of Nash's book.

<8> Certainly, Nash discerns a similar uncertainty in Gaskell's industrial novels, dealt with in her final full chapter. In these novels, Gaskell advocates for increased proximity between master and worker, a human closeness that can override economic conflicts and prevent the misunderstandings associated with a limited knowledge of personal character: "Gaskell suggests that the master-servant relationship … might serve as a model for the manufacturing community" (97). However, in the industrial novels at least, this model is not always as exemplary as Nash's earlier work on the savior servants of the domestic novels might suggest: increased intimacy brings its own complications. Nash offers a useful and persuasive analysis of Dixon, the Hales' servant in *North and South* (1854-55)*:* a representative of the old service in the midst of the industrial north. Charting the problems provoked by Dixon's too-assiduous care for her rather feeble mistress, Nash brings out Gaskell's sensitivity to the difficulties of this intimate yet supposedly unequal relationship, concluding with a pertinent reminder that for household

servants, often economically privileged over industrial employees, the dissolution of the hierarchy that defined their place was not unambiguously welcome.

<9> Ambiguity and uncertainty is the defining tone of Nash's conclusion, then: perhaps inevitably so, given Edgeworth's and Gaskell's suspension between the demands of their gender, their class, and their natural sympathy for the servants with whom they lived in such proximity. Nevertheless, it leaves this reader feeling slightly subdued. The brevity of this conclusion, in which Nash sums up the observations made in her previous chapters, gives little scope to develop comparisons between the authors and their various works, and prevents her from exploring the difference made by social developments on the work of the two women, "born over a generation apart" (3). That is, although she acknowledges the pace of change at this period, Nash does not discuss how Gaskell's later perspective might have differed from Edgeworth's earlier views. Still, although I had reservations about some aspects of the book's structure, and wished for a little more boldness on Nash's part in drawing conclusions about the women she discusses and in challenging the existing critical opinions which pepper her work, I cannot fault the precision of her literary analysis. Combined with the second chapter's comprehensive discussion of the nineteenth-century literary servant, this analysis forms an informative and helpful book on an under-explored aspect of the work of these canonical authors.

Endnotes

(1)Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).(^)