

Emily Allen

“Help Wanted: European Views of Domestic Servitude and Equality in the Northern United States, 1819-1860”

After touring the United States, Englishwoman Sarah Maury stated “*Servitude is a far more vile estate than Slavery.*”<sup>1</sup> Maury recorded this remark as she reflected on her travels in the United States in 1845.<sup>2</sup> After observing the state of domestic service around the country, she concluded that it was much worse than the slavery in the South. While this comment is one of the most shocking statements made by the European ladies writing travel narratives, it was not the only one portraying the negative aspects of domestic servitude in the United States between 1819 and 1860.

European women’s travel narratives provide an opportunity to observe the dynamics of the relationship between American domestic servants and their mistresses. The content of these narratives is diverse. Susan Bassnett, in her “Travel Writing and Gender,” describes how the gender of the authors affected their perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Bassnett explains that women’s accounts were very detailed and tended to describe relationships between people.<sup>4</sup> A major theme was the comparison of their lives at home and on the road.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Carl Thompson notes the differences between genders. Women tended to write about domestic details such as food preparation, child care, and laundry. They included information on the condition of life for

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Mytton Hughes Maury, *An Englishwoman in America* (London: T. Richardson & son, 1848), 196.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Mytton Hughes Maury was the English mother of eleven children, who after nursing nine of her children through the whooping cough in the winter of 1844-45 was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted (cii-ciii). Left in a state of “nervous depression,” Maury was recommended sea travel to the United States to recuperate (ciii). Beginning her journey in April of 1845, Maury toured the Northern, Southern, and Western regions of the United States, falling in love with it and recommending it to all (1). cii-1.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Bassnett, “Travel Writing and Gender,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 225-241.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

women they visited, fashions, social roles, and their legal and political status. Men, contrarily, rarely commented on the cultural aspects of life.<sup>6</sup> Other authors, such as Shirley Foster, note the confusion European women had when observing the American obsession with domestic life.<sup>7</sup> Agreeing with Foster, Susan Imbarrato describes how women's writing is a great source for understanding early American customs and manners.<sup>8</sup> These limited studies make it evident that the travel narratives are a valuable source for studying domestic servants in the United States during this period.

In reading their observations concerning domestic servants, European women's sense of superiority over Americans becomes evident. The travel literature of European women touring the United States between 1819 and 1860 allows a view into American homes. The travelers were generally very judgmental of not only American domestic servants, but also their mistresses. Through each step of hiring and, then, keeping a domestic servant, the travel narratives note the friction caused by equality. This process included the finding, hiring, managing, and assessing of servants. In the end, the narratives illustrate the European sense of superiority, they claim to be better equipped to handle the difficult servants of the United States. The descriptions and comments provided in female European travel accounts in the northern United States, illustrated how the American concept of equality affect domestic service.

The emerging middle class during the nineteenth century influenced the development of domestic service in the United States. Jeanne Boydston is among many historians who have

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 186.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Foster, *Across New Worlds: Nineteenth-Century Women Travellers and Their Writings* (Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 119-120.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Clair Imbarrato, *Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), 23.

addressed this issue. In her book, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, she explains what life was like for women as they transitioned from the classic colonial home to the middle-class home after the Market Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Women did not remain idle; Boydston notes, with “the exception of wives in wealthy families, turn-of-the-century women in all places and of all groups in the Northeast also provided much of the daily maintenance required to keep a household operating. Most women cooked for their families—sometimes with help, often without it.”<sup>10</sup> There were always difficulties with hiring domestic servants, including training them in the routines, habits, and expectations of a household.<sup>11</sup> In addition, servants often left to find better employment elsewhere, creating the need to retrain employees. However, for many women, servants became a necessity as daughters of middle-class families, were often at school. Additionally, an increased emphasis on the importance of maternal care meant that women were compelled to spend more time with their children, utilizing servants to do the majority of the household work.<sup>12</sup> By the antebellum period, many middle-class wives employed domestic help. This often included a woman to cook, sew, iron, and help with cleaning.<sup>13</sup> Boydston describes:

Among middle-class families, the most common arrangement was to hire a cook or washerwoman (the two jobs were sometimes combined) on a fairly regular basis, and to employ additional help as needed (and as able) for special projects, such as the much-dreaded spring cleaning (when women might be hired to

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<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Other authors on the subject of the emerging sense of domesticity amongst women of the middle class include Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: the family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Boydston, *Home and Work*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> Boydston, *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Boydston, *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Boydston, *Ibid.*, 77.

whitewash as well as to clean) and during the wife's convalescence following childbirth.<sup>14</sup>

While Boydston illustrates a life where of women who only hired help when it became a necessity, Faye E. Dudden in her *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America*, focuses on the transition to hiring greater numbers of domestic help later in the nineteenth century. Dudden discusses the transition from “help” to domestic servants. Her study focuses more on the position of the servant girls than the middle- and upper-class women who hired them. In the colonial period, girls generally worked part-time and were hired just as extra help during the period around childbirth or during spring cleaning. Hired girls often embraced ideas of liberty and equality in the United States making them equals with their employer; they refused demeaning work as well as to work only when they wanted.<sup>15</sup> There was also often a close relationship between employees and their employers.<sup>16</sup> This changed, however, as a greater need for domestic service emerged when the middle class appeared in the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>17</sup> Middle-class women in their domestic spheres preferred to devote their time to church and charitable work, a “newly enlarged view of maternal duties,” and their social lives. In addition, daughters were pursuing education and training in the accomplishments of a lady for longer, removing them as a source of help in the domestic sphere. Therefore, servants were needed to do the extra work and were less intimately involved with the family.<sup>18</sup> The servants in these households were crucial to the function of the home, yet their usefulness and quality was

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<sup>14</sup> Boydston, *Home and Work*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Dudden, *Serving Women*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

controversial. European women visiting the United States during this period not only observed these domestics, but expressed the opinions about them.

While there were a number of European authors publishing travel accounts between 1819 and 1860, they focus on such a wide variety of subjects that only a few relate to this study. The travel narratives take many forms: letters, journals, and detailed accounts written on their return home. Just as diverse as their style, the authors came from across Europe. They include women from England, France, Sweden, and Hungary. The motivation behind women's travels in the United States varied from prescriptions for better health to financial relief. Motivation for the publication of their work varied from financial aspirations to advocating against American slavery. While there are many accounts describing the domestic slave of the South, these have been excluded for the purpose of focusing this study on the free domestic servants found in the northern states.<sup>19</sup> Around forty European narratives exist describing the United States between 1819 and 1860. The eleven used in this study were selected because of their detail on free domestic servants in the North.

Travel accounts in the United States in the Early Republic and antebellum periods make it clear that finding servants was not an easy task. Women looking to hire encountered a scarcity of workers, race issues, and a dysfunctional hiring process. The lack of workers for domestic

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<sup>19</sup> Routes were quickly established by which the average person could travel. A journey might begin in Halifax, Nova Scotia, or New York—depending on the preference of the traveler. From there, they would travel to Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Charleston, Cincinnati, Buffalo, Niagara, and New Orleans, using the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers when necessary. The introduction of the steam-ship for cross-Atlantic travel in 1838 revolutionized voyages. The average thirty days on sails (up to forty with bad weather) turned to twelve. “Corduroy roads” were incredibly rough and sometimes people would get jolted into each other if not out of the conveyance. Hotels and other lodgings were often lacking for women in the United States, especially in rural areas. Overall, travel was not an easy feat, but many women persisted and left behind records of the world they observed (Foster, *Across New Worlds*, 71-85).

employment created a multitude of problems for the American middle class. When Swedish Fredrika Bremer talked to a housewife in New Upsala, Wisconsin, she quickly learned about the troubles many American women encountered.<sup>20</sup> The American explained that obtaining help in the West was incredibly difficult due to the sheer lack of people looking to work as domestic servants. Bremer noted, “They must either pay for labor at an enormously high rate—and often it is not to be had on any terms—or they must do without it.”<sup>21</sup> Bremer highlighted complications faced not only in the West, but across the United States. The pool of applicants often varied from geographical region to region.

Other visiting Europeans explained the racial division within certain regions. While visiting in 1827, Englishwoman Margaret Hall described domestic workers in Philadelphia as “universally black or ‘yellow,’ as they call those who have some mixture of white blood in them.”<sup>22</sup> In a more comprehensive account, Hall’s fellow Englishwoman Frances Wright went into even greater detail recounting the regionalism of race within domestic service.<sup>23</sup> In a letter home, she noted that the cities along the Atlantic coast primarily hosted Irish servants and a

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<sup>20</sup> Frederika Bremer was a Swede famous for her writing and description of the United States. Unlike many European travelers, she generally stayed in the homes of Americans rather than hotels, allowing her great insight into American homes (Frederika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America*, trans. Mary Howitt (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1858)).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

<sup>22</sup> Letter XI, Margaret Hunter Hall to Jane Hunter, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1827 *The Aristocratic Journey: Being the Outspoken Letters of Mrs. Basil Hall Written During a Fourteen Months’ Sojourn in America 1827-1828*, ed. Una Pope-Hennessy (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931), 151. Margaret Hall was the British elite who accompanied her husband Basil Hall on a tour for pleasure travel through the United States from 1827-1828 along with her baby and its nurse.

<sup>23</sup> Frances Wright was an Englishwoman motivated by the American idealism of liberty and equality who traveled in the United States to pursue these ideals. She was often upset by the European travelers who partook in American generosity and then mocked it in their publications. She published her letters in an attempt to combat these generally negative views. Frances Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America; In a Series of Letters from that Country to a Friend in England, During the Years 1818, 1819, and 1820. By an Englishwoman* (New York: E. Bliss and E. White, 1821); Foster, *Across New Worlds* 73.

small number of British servants. According to Wright's account, they were not pleasant people. The Irish were described as, "poor, dirty, and ignorant." This sentiment was especially evident among English visitors, who often had preconceived biases. Wright had a low opinion of the Irish as she continued to describe them with adjectives such as "thoughtless improvidence" and "simplicity."<sup>24</sup> But Wright had hope for the Irish, believing that, "after a year or two, [they] will sometimes recover their good humour and good manners, and become civil, though never again servile domestics." Ethnic and racial stereotypes diminished the already thin applicant pool. The large Irish population became not only a crucial source of workers, but a controversial one.

The bias against the Irish was expressed in many of the European travel accounts. They believed the Irish had adopted to the ideas of American equality and liberty. While visiting Indianapolis, Englishwoman and Lady of Queen Victoria's Bedchamber, Amelia Murray wrote,

Two hundred thousand starving Irish have come to this country, and in their ignorance they assume the airs of that equality which they have been induced to believe is really belonging to American society. . . . Ladies don't like their helps to say they 'choose to sit in the parlour, or they won't help them at all, for equality is the rule here.'<sup>25</sup>

According to Murray and many of her contemporaries, the Irish thought they should be treated as

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<sup>24</sup> Frances Wright to Unknown, April 1820, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 339.

<sup>25</sup> Amelia Murray to Unknown, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1855, Amelia Matilda Murray, *Letters from the United States, Cuba and Canada* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Company, 1856), 323. In her book *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers*, Jane Robinson gives a brief description of Amelia Murray. Murray sailed to the United States in 1854 to study botany and social issues. As the Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Victoria, she was greeted by wonderful hospitality wherever she went. Her collection of botany, fish and fossil samples was successful, but her journey was problematic. Murray concluded that American slavery was good and became outspoken about her opinion on the subject in her best-selling book. As the queen's lady of the bedchamber, Murray had overstepped her position and was dismissed from court for her anti-abolitionist sentiments. Murray spent the rest of her life quietly in retirement (Jane Robinson, *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2001), 145).

equals even at work, a notion that was difficult to fit with domestic servitude. Not all the European women were negative towards the use of Irish domestics. British Mary Duncan wrote,

Whatever may exist in the interior, the difficulty with respect to servants is fast vanishing away on the seaboard, under the amazing influx of Irish people. In general, they make capital servants. They are quick at learning, obliging, and cheerful; and, if you but light on such as are trustful and honest, or which there are many, you will be very well off.<sup>26</sup>

Duncan seems much more enthusiastic than most of her European counterparts. The major complaint against the Irish was their reliability induced by the concept of equality in the United States.

Though supportive of the Irish people in general, Mary Duncan greatly disliked the Irish Catholics. Duncan described a, American woman who was having troubles with her Catholic servants becoming so involved with their church they were often absent. The English travelers especially recorded negative views of Catholic servants, noting that not only were they constantly involved with their church, but that the priests controlled their every move. Duncan expressed concern that Irish Catholic servants would give away all the family secrets in confession.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Duncan found that, “one, otherwise suitable domestic is dismissed after another, with the resolution that no priest shall regulate the affairs of your family. The process goes on, and at last the wearied mistress gives in, and punishes herself no more by sending away useful helps.”<sup>28</sup> This problem with servants became so common, the mistress had

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<sup>26</sup> Mary Grey Lundie Duncan, *America as I found It* (New York, R. Carter & Brothers, 1852), 221. Mary Duncan was a British authoress who came to the United States as a tourist seeking to observe the American lifestyle (Ibid., 11-24).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 221

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 222.



to give up in favor of mediocre service.

Many negative sentiments were also held towards free-black domestic servants who lived along the Atlantic Ocean in the North. Their troubles, according to Wright, were, “indolence, and an occasional tendency to intemperance and petty dishonesty.”<sup>29</sup> Shirley Foster, in her book *Across New Worlds: Nineteenth-Century Women Travellers and Their Writings*, notes that European women often held negative views of Native Americans and African Americans. The literature created by these travelers generally were filled with primitive views of these people groups.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, the European travelers often stereotyped the free black population as childish and buffoonish. Historian Susan Bassnett also notes in her article, “Travel Writing and Gender,” that there was often a strong sense of philanthropy in the European narratives as they advocated against slavery, human rights abuses, etc.<sup>31</sup> While many authoresses claim to be abolitionists, they still maintain debasing views of free blacks.

The free-black population working in domestic service was greatly affected by differing ideas of equality. According to Hungarian Theresa Pulszky, the Irish were not the only ones who were insolent. She noted in her journal while visiting Albany, New York,

All complained of the great difficulty of getting servants; coloured people are scarce, whites work on their own account, and even the blacks say often when asked to come as a help: “do your business yourself.” The feeling of equality pervades this State so much, that people do not like to work for wages.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Letter XXVI, Wright to Unknown, April 1820, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 340.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, *Across New Worlds*.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Bassnett, “Travel Writing and Gender,” 228.

<sup>32</sup> Ferencz Aurelius Pulszky [and Theresa Pulszky], *White, Red, Black: Sketches of Society in the United States During the Visit of Their Guest*, Vol. 2 (London: Trübner and Co., 1853), 147. Theresa Pulszky toured the United States with her husband, the Hungarian politician Ferencz, or Francis, Pulszky. Their co-authored work, published under Francis’s name, included many journal excerpts that Theresa recorded during their journey in the United States.

The idea of equality also affected free blacks. While Pulszky noted a sense of equality among free blacks, other travelers recorded the poor situation of the free African-American domestic servants, who were just above slaves in the social order and looked down upon by many. Amelia Murray stated, “With all my love of liberty, if I was of the black race, I should much prefer being a slave upon one of the Southern plantations than any free black man or woman I ever met within America.”<sup>33</sup> After having visited New Orleans and many of the northern states, Murray concluded that the working conditions of slaves were, in her mind, preferable to the inconsistent and poor living conditions of a free black in domestic service.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, African Americans involved in domestic service faced many more challenges than other races competing for domestic positions. The European writers did not praise the free-black domestic servants, even while some of them sympathized with the plight of slaves. While many of these women may have claimed to be anti-slavery, they still retained racist attitudes towards the African-American population.

Finding enough servants was a difficult task, but balancing the racial composition of a staff was even more challenging. The best way to minimize intra-staff friction was to hire one race. Frances Wright advised those planning to hire free blacks, “to employ them exclusively.”<sup>35</sup> Duncan described a discussion with a Scottish housekeeper who refused to work with her Native-American counterpart. The former housekeeper told Duncan, “ ‘of the ignorance of my young countrywoman, who, when first came, would have dined with the colored people if she

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<sup>33</sup> Amelia Murray to Unknown, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1855, *Letters from the United States, Cuba and Canada*, 274.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>35</sup> Wright to Unknown, April 1820, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 340.

[the Scottish housekeeper] had not been there to rescue her from such a disgrace.’ ” Upon further questioning, the housekeeper explained, “ ‘She was a native American, they all knew better than to associate with *such*; keep them at a distance—if you give them an inch, they will take an ell [a measurement of about eighteen inches].’ ”<sup>36</sup> In the example given by Duncan, the Scotswoman refused to treat her Native American co-worker civilly. Interestingly, while the Native American may have been looked down upon, Frances Wright viewed her as a valuable servant. She wrote, “The native American, when he [referring to the race as a whole] can be obtained, makes a valuable domestic.”<sup>37</sup> Later, she noted that with Native-American servants she never, “met with an uncivil word; but I could perceive that neither would one have been taken; honest, trusty, and proud, such is the American in service; There is a character here which all who can appreciate it, will respect.”<sup>38</sup> Even though the Native-American servant may have done good work, racial diversity among the staff could cause problems.

The process of actually locating a potential employer was almost as challenging as the scarcity of workers. Englishwoman Frances Trollope left a detailed account that illustrates the difficulties American women faced in hiring help.<sup>39</sup> She lived in Cincinnati, Ohio two of her three years before returning to England.<sup>40</sup> In her *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Trollope

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<sup>36</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 213-14.

<sup>37</sup> Wright to unknown, April 1820, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 340.

<sup>38</sup> Wright to unknown, September 1819, *ibid.*, 166.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Robinson gave a brief biography of Frances Trollope in her book, *Wayward Women*. In 1827, Frances accepted the invitation of her friend Frances Wright to join a commune for the rehabilitation of slaves in Tennessee called Nashoba. Trollope took her children to the settlement, which was located near Memphis, Tennessee. Frances then moved to Cincinnati, after discovering Nashoba was in poor shape, and established a bazaar of game rooms, concerts, a library, and other education spots. This failed, so Trollope wrote a book of her travels. She travelled from Baltimore to Niagara preparing for the work and it became a bestseller. She enjoyed travel for the sake of travel and made long trips with her family around the world. She died at the age of 83 in Florence, Italy. Robinson, *Wayward Women*, 197-8.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Fussel, *Norton Book of Travel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 295.

provides a detailed account of her struggle to find and keep servants.<sup>41</sup> She reported that,

The greatest difficulty in organising [*sic*] a family establishment in Ohio, is getting servants, or, as it is there called, “getting help,” for it is more than petty treason to the Republic, to call a free citizen a *servant*. . . . A kind friend, however, exerted herself so effectually for me, that a tall stately lass soon presented herself, saying, “I be come to help you.” The intelligence was very agreeable, and I welcomed her in the most gracious manner possible, and asked what I should give her by the year.<sup>42</sup>

Trollope’s experience illustrates the common practice of obtaining servants through one’s friends. Duncan described that, as they did in England, the Americans used an employment service to search for servants. The British had a Register, which was a location where servants could be found and hired. The American equivalent was the Intelligence Office. Duncan concluded that not everyone at the Intelligence Office was of the quality people looked to employ.<sup>43</sup> Few potential employers in the United States used the service, as there were many more reports of people finding work or employees by other means. Sarah Maury described two situations, one in Connecticut and the other in New York, where domestics relied on their priests to recommend them.<sup>44</sup>

There are numerous instances when girls asked women travelling in the United States if they needed domestic help. Mary Duncan described some of the people she met,

The numerous strangers who are driven to extremities before they find situations adopt methods of seeking them, which are startling and new to visitors in the country. I have been repeatedly stopped in the streets of New York with the

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<sup>41</sup> Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: H.W. Bell, 1904).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 227.

<sup>44</sup> Maury, *An Englishwoman in America*, 196.

question, “Do you want any help?” followed up with, “Well, then, do you know any family that does?”<sup>45</sup>

Later, Duncan related the story of a desperate Irish woman going door to door asking for work.<sup>46</sup>

On another occasion, Duncan asked one of her supplicants what type of work she could do. She wrote,

[In] Springfield, Mass[achusetts], a very respectable looking middle-aged person addressed to me the same inquiry. Being desirous of knowing if really good servants adopt such a method, I inquired what place she desired to occupy. She replied, that she had acted as cook, and as laundress, in some of the best houses in the neighborhood.<sup>47</sup>

In all these instances, potential domestics sought employment. With this lack of formality within the American process, the prospective employer was often at a disadvantage because the employees could make their own demands as they were in such high demand.

Another aspect in the American domestic hiring system was the absence of ways to verify the employer’s character. The lack of references in the hiring process astonished many Europeans—especially with people being hired off the streets. Pulszky described her astonishment as she asked a New York housewife, “ ‘But do not the masters think it very unsafe,’ I remarked, ‘to take people who have not the recommendation of steady characters? If those who leave service for any petty reason could not find employment again without considerable difficulty, they would take good care not to run away.’ ” The New York lady replied, “ ‘No doubt that this would be a check,’ answered the lady, ‘but then there is the

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<sup>45</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 227-28.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

difficulty of getting servants—the demand is larger than the supply.’ ”<sup>48</sup>

Because of the lack of people willing to work as domestic servants, American women had to learn to be content with whomever they could find. The necessity of finding someone to work eliminated the need for references as there was simply no other option. Poor Frances Trollope went through at least four girls without knowing their backgrounds, the last of which frightened her into insisting recommendations for all future workers. While her maid, Nancy Fletcher was away, a visiting friend notified Trollope of Nancy’s tainted background as “the most abandoned woman in town.” Terrified, Trollope fired Nancy once she returned. Trollope concluded this incident by writing, “This adventure frightened me so heartily . . . I would not take any more young ladies into my family without receiving some slight sketch of their former history.” In addition, she stopped hiring American girls and only employed European servants.<sup>49</sup>

With few workers, who knew they were in high demand, the management of domestics became increasingly more difficult. Middle-class women were at the whim of servants, who demanded more favorable terms. For European women, the American idea of equality had become a problem in the dynamics between mistress and domestic servants.

The final and most crucial part to securing a servant in Europe was the contract; this, however, was not a common practice in the United States. Frances Trollope illustrated this situation clearly. When she attempted to hire someone in Cincinnati for a yearlong contract, the employee refused on the grounds that she wanted to be married soon or go to school. In addition, the servant wanted her mother’s slave to help her do her work. Trollope agreed to the conditions

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<sup>48</sup> Pulszky, *White, Red, Black*, 79.

<sup>49</sup> Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 57

anyway, writing, “I agreed to the bargain, of course, with all dutiful submission.”<sup>50</sup>

Theresa Pulszky believed the relationships between servants and their mistresses were complex. She described two aspects: one, the formal compact and, the other, the relationship. Pulszky acknowledged that there would be disappointments in both aspects, but that the best workers honored the commitments they made.<sup>51</sup> This was an overly optimistic outlook. The Europeans pointed out that the problem was the lack of contracts in this business relationship. This left employers at their servants’ mercy. Duncan described an incident where a cook left without notice, leaving their employer to locate a last minute replacement.<sup>52</sup> Frances Trollope faced a similar problem. The girl she had hired without a contract became upset after Trollope and her daughters refused to share articles of clothing. Finally, when Trollope declined to loan her money for a silk dress, the young girl replied, “ ‘Then ’tis not worth my while to stay any longer.’ ”<sup>53</sup> The servant left after only two months and Trollope was short on help for the foreseeable future. Trollope again found difficulty in the lack of a contract with her next servant, Charlotte. Charlotte became upset that she did not get to eat at the family dinner table. Trollope explained,

I gave her very high wages, and she staid [*sic*] till she had obtained several expensive articles of dress, and then, *un beau matin*, she came to me full dressed, and said, ‘I must go.’ ‘When shall you return, Charlotte?’ ‘I expect you’ll see no more of me.’ And so we parted. Her sister was also living with me, but her wardrobe was not yet completed, and she remained some weeks longer, till it was.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 52.

<sup>51</sup> Pulszky, *White, Red, Black*, 231.

<sup>52</sup> Duncan, *America as I found it*, 212.

<sup>53</sup> Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 52-3.

<sup>54</sup> Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 54-5.

Trollope was frustrated with the flippancy of the girls as they came to work without a contract, allowing them to leave at a whim. Without contracts, employers in need of servants were often forced to comply with their decisions.

The organization of the American household surprised European visitors as unconventional. The visitors were most impressed by the willingness of middle-class women to share a portion of the work, and confused by the lack of social hierarchy within the household. Not only did mistresses manage their servants, they also participated in much of the housework. Mary Duncan, noted how one American lady worked within her own household. In her usual sarcastic tone, Duncan mocked Scottish ladies in her comparison with the American middle-class women. She wrote:

The simplicity with which intelligent and lady-like women go about their affairs at home [in the United States], gave me never-ceasing pleasure. Persons of the same rank in Scotland lend a hand in domestic matters on occasion, as they do in American, but they do it secretly, as if ashamed. You may live in the house, and never suspect that the lady washes a cup, or arranges the dessert or the tea-cakes, and never see her apron. While the American, emancipated from the ceremonies and thraldoms that wind themselves by degrees around our social systems, puts on a sensible apron, that covers her all round, takes her pretty oaken pail with its shining brass hoops, her swab (a miniature of the implement with which the sailor washes his deck) and her tray, and begins operations on the breakfast table, inviting you not to withdraw, but chat with her while she puts all straight—it being Monday, her maids are in the laundry. This is common sense, and most enjoyable, putting all parties at ease. This result was produced most effectually, and in a naïve manner, on our first visit to an elegant mansion in the hill country.<sup>55</sup>

The American woman, free of strict social customs, who unashamedly worked in her home

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<sup>55</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 219-20.



refreshed Duncan. On another occasion, Duncan noted that the lady of the house did the dishes in front of her guests because the servants were on their Saturday holiday. Duncan admired a woman who was not afraid to get work done herself.<sup>56</sup> Duncan was not the only European traveler to notice this about American women. Hall's description of a woman working in her home was more sympathetic than empowering. She noted that the housewife was never sitting in her parlor as her guests arrived; "after ten minutes or a quarter of an hour's delay the lady appears, draped for the occasion. I think this may in part arise from the want of good servants, which makes it necessary for the ladies to assist in many menial offices, particularly in cooking."<sup>57</sup> Hall pitied the Americans who were forced to take on a good portion of their own housework.

European women, criticized the lack of hierarchy within the household. Unlike the structured staff of many European households, American domestic servants often viewed themselves as equals with their mistresses. This created a problem because in many situations there was either no one to do the work or supervise. Mary Duncan highlighted this complication when she encountered problems getting her shoes cleaned. A British custom was to leave shoes outside the door at night for servants to collect, clean, and replace. After successive nights without her shoes being cleaned, Duncan inquired to find out why they were unattended, "and was told that shoe-cleaning is counted an office so menial, that it is beneath the dignity of freemen to condescend to such an employment."<sup>58</sup> European women were surprised by basic tasks that American domestic servants thought were demeaning, yet were perfectly normal back

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<sup>56</sup> Duncan, *American as I Found It*, 220-21.

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Hunter Hall to Jane Hall, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1827, *The Aristocratic Journey*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> Duncan, *American as I Found It*, 216.

home. Another example of the unwillingness of servants to do some basic tasks was addressed in Frenchwoman Marie de Grandfort's scathing opinion of American servants and their love of equality.

The domestic servant does not have the same character as that in Europe. The servant, if he is American, carries himself as if he were equal with his master. He demands respect; he regards certain parts of service unworthy of him, as are the qualities of a free man. He is not a servant in the understanding of the word; there are some states where he is not suffered the title: in New Orleans, the free servants call themselves engaged.

A similar organization of the family order in the states make them difficult to govern, strong in their rights, ignorant in their duties, incapable of not one sacrifice for the honor of the state or national interest. He does not fill a job freely.<sup>59</sup>

To Grandfort, American servants believed that they deserved respect as equals to their master. This caused them to refuse to do certain duties deemed below their station. Grandfort believed that this sense of equality and refusal to do some work undermined the concept of servitude. The lack of social hierarchy among staffs at times led to chaos. Margaret Hall experienced this at a dinner in Albany, "There was no head servant, no commanding-looking butler, but a parcel of mulatto lads, anyone and everyone of whom took off the dishes and put them on the table indiscriminately."<sup>60</sup> With no one in charge, the dinner fell into disarray; there was no finesse. The unbalanced power in staffs was clear and the Europeans pointed to the problem being rooted in equality.

Some of the authors, sympathized with those servants forced to live in dismal circumstances. Sarah Mendell and Charlotte Hosmer wondered, "does the Northern mistress

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<sup>59</sup> Marie Fontenay de Grandfort, *L'Autre Monde* (Paris: Librairie nouvelle, 1855), 208-9. My translation.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Hunter Hall to Jane Hunter, September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1827, *The Aristocratic Journey*, 71.

make any effort to elevate her hired servant? She pays a mere pittance, which barely supports her, and then she has to work, without receiving any care or lenity other than that prompted by interest.”<sup>61</sup> Mendell and Hosmer, while comparing northern domestic servitude to slaves, identified two disadvantages of being a servant: low pay and independent living. In slavery, these were taken care of automatically. Mendell and Hosmer, similar to authors such as Sarah Maury, believed that employers treated servants poorly. This was, however, a minority opinion.

While some thought domestic servants were paid little and lived in squalid conditions, many of the travel narratives discussed the high pay and sense of respect domestic servants required. The domestic servants in the United States required the respect of their mistresses. This took a variety of forms, some more conducive to a good working relationship than others. Mary Duncan related the story she heard of a bachelor who, in need of a cook found,

None was to be had, as everybody was as independent and averse to servitude as himself... a damsel compassionated his case so as to propose to “go cook” on condition of being at table with the guests, as she would be no man’s servant, and had never cooked a dinner of which she had not partaken. The terms were gladly accepted.<sup>62</sup>

This was not a common practice. Historian Fay E. Dudden explains that early in the nineteenth century, live-in servants commonly lived with and ate with the family they served.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the dispute over servants eating at the dinner table illustrated the sense of equality many domestic

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<sup>61</sup> Sarah Mendell and Charlotte Hosmer to Unknown, date Unknown, *Notes of Travel and Life: By Two Young Ladies* (New York: Unknown, 1854), 126.

<sup>62</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 212.

<sup>63</sup> Dudden, *Serving Women*, 36.

servants believed they had with their employers.

While some found the demand of respect exasperating, other Europeans considered it healthy. Frances Wright recounted the story of a former servant and the poor situation she found herself in after being fired. Wright inquired how she did with her new employer and the young girl sheepishly replied she stayed only a day. The following dialogue ensues:

“That was somewhat hasty.—They must have used you very ill.” “They doubted my honesty,” and she drew her head somewhat higher as she spoke. “Indeed!” “Yes; the lady herself locked away the plate, and even the silver spoons.” I believe I smiled as I asked, “Was that all, Mary?” “All!” A slight flush crossed her face, as she repeated the word; then, hesitating a moment, she added in a quiet tone, “I am afraid you think I behaved oddly; but I was not used to the sort of thing. The lady told me it was her practice. *Why then, Madam,*” “said I, “*I think we are not assorted. I could not stay in a house where a doubt seemed to be cast upon my honesty; and so I believe we had better part now.*” “And you did part?” “Yes, Madam, I went away directly.” I was glad to learn that the pride of the honest creature was never likely to be tried again.<sup>64</sup>

On this occasion, Wright supported the maid demanding respect for her honesty.

Others also supported the sense of equality in the mistress-servant relationship. Matilda Houston, another Englishwoman, explained her appreciation for mutual respect between employers and their servants. She believed that servants and masters could see themselves as equals even when one was more prosperous than the other. In addition, she believed they could be amicable acquaintances after a term of service ended—treating each other as equals. She wrote:

The terms of service over, the former master may shake hands with, and converse in familiar terms with his quondam servant, without fear of compromising his-

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<sup>64</sup> Wright to Unknown, April 1820, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 340-41.

dignity, or coming in contact with language and habits inferior or different to his own. Some there must be, whose disposition and frame of mind are dangerously affected by this state of things; who lose the sense of their temporary dependence, in the broad sea of democratic and over-liberal opinions, but these instances, among a serious, methodical, and sensible people like the Americans, are rare.<sup>65</sup>

Houstoun thought highly of domestic equality in the United States. In reality, this view was skewed and was not as rare as she implied. The vast majority of authors explain the difficulty that equality in the United States caused.

Once servants had been working for a person for a while, mistresses were able to assess the quality of their work. The European travelers noticed a few things about the domestic servants in the United States: their work was of low quality and they disliked criticism. Many travel writers noted that servants were lazy and required strict management. Mary Duncan was appalled that servants would not only eat nicer foods belonging to the family while at work, but they would do so even when summoned by their mistress.<sup>66</sup> On another occasion, Duncan was shocked when a party was almost ruined because the nurse decided to “have her ice,” leaving the children to bother the guests when they were supposed to be in bed. Duncan concluded, “That part of the company’s supper would have been spoiled for nurse’s taste if she first put her charges to bed. If this arises from the good-tempered indulgence of the mistress, I venture to think it is carried beyond discretion. If she cannot help herself, there is need for amendment in the order of things.”<sup>67</sup> Duncan was not alone in her criticism of the servants.

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<sup>65</sup> Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, *Texas and the Gulf of Mexico* (Philadelphia: G. B. Zieber & co., 1845), 85-6. Matilda Houstoun toured the United States multiple times for pleasure, using her husband’s luxury yacht the *Dolphin* to travel around the Gulf of Mexico. Shirley Foster, *Across New Worlds*, 74.

<sup>66</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 210.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

Margaret Hall was also disgusted when an American lady described her cook as a child. The American complained she had to wash her cook's face and had to watch over the rest of her servants to the point of exhaustion; "she. . . [was] confined to bed for a week after from actual fatigue of superintending her servants." The American concluded that despite her efforts to maintain order, if any English maid came to her household, she would "lift up her hand in horror" at the sight of the disarray and disorder.<sup>68</sup> This suggests that even the American housewife believed that the European servant was better than their American counterparts. There was a general disgust among Europeans with the laziness of American servants who created chaos in the home. Wright succinctly summarized the opinion of many European visitors, "You will perceive, that a character of this description requires some management. Indeed the same may be said of servants in this country generally."<sup>69</sup>

The European women blamed the poor quality of work being produced by the domestic servants on not only the servants, but also on the lack of organization of the American mistresses. Margaret Hall explained that American parties had a service "many degrees below good English service." The reason why? Hall pointed to the appearance of effort and the sense of anxiety possessed by the American hostess the entirety of the party as the hostess scolds her unruly servants from the head of the table.<sup>70</sup> This comparison to European servants is seen in numerous travel narratives. Sarah Maury held a better view of American servants. She explained that they worked almost as hard as their European equivalents, but they became lazy in the hot weather. In addition, she noted the greatest difference between the two is the sense of freedom

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<sup>68</sup> Margaret Hunter Hall to Jane Hunter, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1828, *The Aristocratic Journey*, 278-9.

<sup>69</sup> Wright to Unknown, April 1820, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 341.

<sup>70</sup> Margaret Hunter Hall to Jane Hunter, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1827, *The Aristocratic Journey*, 147.

the American servants exhibited. This, Maury explained, “is not an invariable habit, and it is in the power of the master and mistress to prevent it by refusing such a privilege when engaging a servant.”<sup>71</sup> Here, Maury blamed the mistress. Margaret Hall explained that one of her acquaintances in the United States wished for the good servants of Europe, having emigrated from France. She gave the example of having to remind her servants six times before they brought tea and refreshments to the drawing-room. Her friend explained the “torment” that American servants caused because they required so much attention to do even menial tasks.<sup>72</sup>

One of the worst aspects of domestic servitude was that they took correction poorly — if at all. In one instance, the mistress asked Pulszky to forgive the poor meal as she blamed her cook having just left without notice. The mistress claimed the cook did it to annoy her because, “I repeatedly found fault with her management.”<sup>73</sup> The sudden departure of the cook was due to the cook disliking the criticism. Pulszky then suggested that the lady and her daughters be more adept to making their meals. In response, she was told “that the servants were so accustomed . . . not to be told of anything, that they would not submit to the slightest reproof, and that, in consequence, she often had to change her cooks from six to ten times in a year.”<sup>74</sup> Apparently, either Pulszky’s acquaintance was a terrible employer or the domestic servants would be corrected. The travel journals provide opinions on how to fix these problems. To Mary Duncan, the difficulty with servants was clear,

If we balance between this style of freedom, and the indolence and refusals to

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<sup>71</sup> Maury, *An Englishwoman in America*, 195.

<sup>72</sup> Margaret Hunter Hall to Jane Hunter, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1828, *The Aristocratic Journey*, 269.

<sup>73</sup> Pulszky, *White, Red, Black*, 1:79.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

work that are born of fullness of bread, conceit, and pride, I suppose the scale will turn in favor of the wholesome though untaught aspirants after the dignity of independence rather than in favor of the pampered minions of luxury.<sup>75</sup>

Always critical, Duncan believed that the servants had used independence to become overly indulged.

The most evident cause for servants' indolence was the hesitancy of mistresses to reproof their servants. Margaret Hall also noted the rarity of a good servant. Unfortunately, servants had the "ease of getting another place" if they happened to get dismissed, meaning "that if you venture to find fault with your housemaid or butler they will tell you that you may suit yourself elsewhere."<sup>76</sup> Hall argued with Duncan that servants commanded their mistresses. The high demand and low quantity of workers combined with ideas of freedom meant that servants could not be admonished.

European women also explained how American domestic service could function better. Their assessments ranged from American women being weak to their poor training. While many times the servants were blamed, many European observers thought the problems with servants was a result of the lack of their mistresses' skill in employing them. Mary Duncan quite critically explained that American women were weak due to their life choices, lack of exercise, and lavish diet.<sup>77</sup> Pulszky commented several times on the lack of education and management skills of the American middle-class woman. She told a friend that the reason servants took advantage of her was because they knew housewives could not do without them. The American lady lacked

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<sup>75</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 217-18.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Hunter Hall to Jane Hunter, September 16, 1827. *The Aristocratic Journey*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> Duncan, *America as I Found It*, 219.



practical lessons in cooking, sewing, and washing.<sup>78</sup>

The final characteristic Pulszky found lacking in the American housewife was that she did not know what she should expect from her servants. Pulszky blamed this on her belief that American girls were home too little and were introduced too early into society, never allowing them to prepare for the cares of a family.<sup>79</sup> The European women insisted that they could handle unruly American domestic servants. Sarah Maury claimed that her experience as an English housekeeper would not prevent her from successfully managing American domestic servants no matter their race or ethnicity.<sup>80</sup> Free with their criticism and confident in their own skills, the European authors illustrated their great sense of superiority over their American counterparts.

Despite their confidence in their own management skills, European women warned their fellow countrywomen not to introduce European servants to the United States. Matilda Houston gave a succinct opinion on the subject, “It is rather dangerous to take English servants to the United States; there are very few, comparatively speaking, whose attachment and good sense are proof against the tempting charms and delusions of nominal equality.”<sup>81</sup> This idea of European servants becoming attracted to the charms of American equality was not held by just Houston. Another observer, Frances Wright, elaborated on why some friends should not even consider bringing servants to the United States. The European servant in the United States would be swept up with ideas of equality and assume airs of importance and refuse to meet their employer’s demands. She elaborated,

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<sup>78</sup> Pulszky, *White, Red, Black*, Vol. 1, 80.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: 232.

<sup>80</sup> Maury, *An Englishwoman in America*, 195.

<sup>81</sup> Houston, *Texas and the Gulf of Mexico*, 86.

Those bred up under it, can perceive and acknowledge the distinctions which education and condition place between the gentleman and the labourer; but those just released from the aristocracies of Europe, finding themselves in a country where all men are placed, by the laws, on an exact level, conceive, naturally enough, that they are transformed from the servants of their employer into his companions.<sup>82</sup>

She admitted there was a slight chance European servantes would not rebel, but noted that nine out of ten times, they would be ruined.<sup>83</sup> The European women placed themselves in a superior position to their own servants and believed that they alone were capable of controlling the American domestic servant. They did not trust, however, their domestic servants with being exposed to the concepts of equality and freedom in America.

The European women found fault with the American process of hiring and managing domestic servants. They blamed equality. This illustrates not only the great difference between European and American societies, but the sense of superiority the European women held over Americans. For the European women, the emphasis on American equality removed the core concept of class on which their Old World societies relied. The disjointed relationships between employers and domestic servants illustrated by the European women highlighted their appreciation for the order of their own societies. Their dislike of American domestic servitude was evident and they further demonstrated their sense of superiority through their harsh criticisms of everyone involved in the American domestic system. By insisting they could do a

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<sup>82</sup> Wright to unknown, April 1820, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 338.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

better job, European women reinforced their sense of supremacy.

European observers concluded that it was equality that made the use of domestic servants difficult in American society. The assertions on domestic servitude provided in travel journals illustrate the class difficulties of both middle-class women and the lower-class women they employed. This struggle of American equality has continued as a sense of friction in American society ever since. While aristocratic ideas caused European women to be critical, they provided a valuable view of American domestic servitude in the early to mid-nineteenth century.

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