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Mistress and Maid: Homoeroticism, Cross-Class Desire, and Disguise in Nineteenth-Century
Fiction

By Kirsti Bohata

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MISTRESS AND MAID is curiously intimate yet bounded by class. Employers and their servants are caught in a dynamic of dominance and submission, in which they practice mutual surveillance. Yet the relationship may also evoke models of loyalty, devotion, and the possibility, in fiction at least, of female alliance. On the comparatively rare occasions that servants feature at all in Victorian fiction, these dynamics lend a homoerotic dimension to the cross-class relationship between mistress and maid.¹ The positions of mistress and maid bring two women together under the same roof while separating them by class, thus providing a framework for a fictional exploration for yearning, desire, unrequited love, or sometimes union. Alternatively, a queer relationship may be obscured by the guise of employer and servant. Indeed, the mistress-maid stories discussed here often involve masquerade in some form, including cross-class and cross-gender disguises.²

In the late nineteenth century, women writing about same-sex desire use servants and mistresses to explicitly articulate or encode love between women in their fiction. Amy Dillwyn's little-known, quasi-autobiographical, novel Jill (1884) is a paradigmatic fiction in which same-sex desire is represented through a story about cross-class disguise. American short stories by Sarah Orne Jewett ("Martha's Lady," 1897) and Constance Fenimore Woolson ("Miss Grief," 1880) also adopt the relationship between mistress and maid to explore the rewards and frustrations of same-sex love and desire, while Edith Wharton's ghost story, "The Lady's Maid's Bell" (1902), offers another example of the homoeroticism of the mistress-maid dynamic. The homoerotic tropes used by these authors – such as surveillance and voyeurism, passionate loyalty, and chivalric service – were, however, anticipated in earlier texts not explicitly, and perhaps not self-consciously, concerned with

articulating same-sex desire, including short fictions by George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell as well as some sensation novels. As Sharon Marcus has argued in her study Between Women, “mainstream femininity” could be “openly homoerotic” (3). Following Marcus’s theoretical distinction between the sexual and the erotic, this essay does not propose that all the texts discussed here are “secretly lesbian,” rather that the mistress-maid relationship as it appears in fiction is often “openly homoerotic.” At the same time, however, I argue that some texts undoubtedly use cross-class homoeroticism more purposefully to encode or directly represent exclusive love and desire between women.

Conduct manuals for employers and servants acknowledge the potential for cross-class intimacy in order to forbid it. Maids are enjoined to respect the “natural barrier” between themselves and their employers (Motherly 22). Mistresses are reminded that they must refrain from familiarity and the manuals cast aspersions on the intelligence and breeding of ladies who stoop to fraternise with the domestics.³ Class distinctions and a proper distance must be maintained for the sake of social order and patriarchal domestic harmony. Indeed in Victorian fiction Anthea Trodd notes that “a good relationship between wives and servants . . . is suggestive of criminal intrigue” (108). The presence of servants in the middle-class home provoked all kinds of anxieties including concern about their potentially corrupting influence, particularly on juveniles in their care.⁴ Nursemaids were suspected of imparting bad habits and poor morals to children, while lady’s maids could be associated with extra-marital sex, illegitimacy, and prostitution (Gillis). As a group, female servants were seen as sexually available and morally suspect and, towards the latter part of the century, prostitution, lesbianism, and domestic servants were directly linked in (and through) French literature, journalism, and European sexology. In *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) Richard von Krafft-Ebing repeated the claims of the journalist Ali Coffignon as evidence to support the contention that the “vice” of lesbianism in Paris “is, of late, quite the fashion, – partly owing

to novels on the subject, and partly as a result of excessive work on sewing-machines, the sleeping of female servants in the same bed, seduction in schools by depraved pupils, or seduction of daughters by depraved servants” (430), although this claim was omitted in the enlarged twelfth edition. Much earlier in the century, in 1840, Thomas Laycock warned that sharing a bed with “teachers or servants ran the risk of ‘exciting the passions’” (qtd. in Marcus 18). While in 1846, Anna Jameson, art historian, feminist, and writer, advised that a girl pupil and her governess sharing a bed might result in “mischief” (177). Although “mischief” is a word Jameson uses frequently and not therefore necessarily or most obviously in reference to sexual danger, she is certainly warning against too much familiarity. And it is precisely this kind of unorthodox familiarity and levelling of class boundaries which is transformed into homoerotic subtext in the literature under consideration here.

Anxiety (or excitement) about cross-class relationships was not confined to relationships between ladies or girls and their domestic servants. In Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London, Seth Koven discusses the erotics of crossing class boundaries, including the adoption of cross-class disguises by middle class investigators. Intrinsic to “slumming” – the practice of philanthropy and tourism in the slums – is an element of homo/erotic desire. According to Koven, a complex erotic subtext is present in the attempts to form a “cross-class sisterhood and brotherhood” (183) espoused by some philanthropists as well as in the suggestions of illicit sexual acts that were central to the sensational exposés of undercover journalists who went slumming. Given the importance of masquerade in some of the mistress-maid stories discussed here, it is worth highlighting that cross-class disguise was a central (and sensational) element of slumming, where middle-class men and women “went dirty” in order to get closer to their subjects. Such transgression of class boundaries (sartorial and spatial) had a pronounced sexual dimension, becoming associated with the illicit sexual acts uncovered by masquerading journalists, or the sexual

suspicion surrounding philanthropists such as Dr Barnardo. Koven delineates an “erotics of dirt” (183) in cross-class relations, noting contemporary suspicions about the motives and purity of middle- and upper-class interest in the great unwashed. By the end of the nineteenth century, cross-class intimacy between men was closely associated with homosexual scandal, with such high profile cases as the Cleveland Street brothel scandal in 1889 and Oscar Wilde’s trials in 1896 (Robb 26, 35-39; Koven 72). In a different vein, Edward Carpenter and others would frame their homosexual relationships with working-class men in terms of a utopian rapprochement of the classes. Nor were the motives of female philanthropists beyond suspicion, with the (female) author of The Ascent of Woman (1896) censuring an “abnormal attraction towards the gutter” and questioning whether “women’s interest in her own sex ‘is due to an impulse of morbid curiosity or to a genuine humane sympathy’” (Koven 223).

Aside from the maintenance or transgression of class boundaries, other elements of the relationship between mistress and maid lend themselves to homoerotic interpretation. Sharon Marcus, following Roland Barthes, understands “the erotic as an affective valence defined by intensity, obsessiveness, theatricality and pleasure. . . . Erotic relationships involve intensified affect and sensual pleasure, dynamics of looking and displaying, domination and submission, restraint and eruption, idolization and humiliation” (114). The hierarchical separation between mistress and maid, with its necessary dominance and subservience, the opportunities for voyeurism and surveillance, and the importance of ritualised performance, is central to the homoerotics of this relationship as depicted in the literature considered here.⁵ The primary aim of the lady disguised as a maid in Amy Dillwyn’s novel, Jill, for instance, is to “observ[e] this girl [her mistress], whose character had interested me and excited my curiosity” (Dillwyn 92; vol. 1, ch.10). Accordingly, the “maid” thinks nothing of eavesdropping, reading private letters, and otherwise spying on her mistress.

Differences in social class are largely neglected by Sharon Marcus in her study of homoeroticism, friendship, and same-sex desire, Between Women, and she does not discuss the relationship between mistress and maid. Nevertheless, servants have a supporting role in at least two of the major areas which Marcus identifies as “openly homoerotic”: fashion and flagellation. Indeed, “female servants” are described whipping “girls and young women” in the extensive discussion about disciplining girls (139), while a pornographic “birching” text, The Merry Order of St Bridget, is narrated by a servant via a series of letters to her female friend.⁶ The maid, Marcus notes, “spends as much time describing clothing as she does recounting flagellation scenes” (144). Such an interest in fashion was important: lady’s maids had to fashion their mistresses’ dress and hair into the required models of femininity. Lady’s maids were expected to be competent dress-makers and milliners and Isabella Beeton enjoins a good lady’s maid to “study the fashion-books with attention, so as to be able to aid her mistress’s judgement in dressing, according to the prevailing fashion . . .” (Beeton 943, para. 2263) – thus presumably gazing at the very same fashion plates Marcus describes as objectifying the female form for other women’s erotic pleasure.⁷

The cross-class relationship between mistress and maid is treated in different ways in the stories considered here: unrequited yearning, chivalry, spiritualised erotic desire, female marriage, and jealous power struggle are all represented.⁸ A strong element of secrecy or disguise is often central to the stories, although this again operates in different ways. For instance the assumed roles of mistress and maid may be a suggestive misreading of a female partnership as in Constance Fenimore Woolson’s short story “Miss Grief,” while in Dillwyn’s Jill, the servant who is secretly in love with her mistress is in fact herself a lady in disguise, foregrounding class affinity and difference as central tropes in the novel. But in all the texts discussed here, it is the existence of a real or perceived class difference which translates into an imbalance of power (and sometimes a suggestive gendering of roles –

servants tend to be gendered masculine) thus eroticising the relationship between two women, even as desire is sometimes frustrated or deferred.

A striking early example of mistress-maid intimacy is the female marriage at the centre of Elizabeth Gaskell's story, "The Grey Woman" (1861). In several elements, it is paradigmatic of later depictions of cross-class eroticism. The servant has agency, she is gendered masculine, and there is a key moment when familiarity replaces formality and the terms of the mistress-maid relationship are transformed. Disguise is central to the story, including cross-class disguise, an element important in other mistress-maid stories.

"The Grey Woman" is the story of a vulnerable young lady, Anna, who is saved from a murderous husband by her servant Amante. The maid dresses as a man and the lady is disguised as a lower-class woman. Amante herself is a resourceful figure of strength, "tall and handsome" (302; portion 2), who is sometimes masculine and sometimes maternal to Anna's frightened child or shrinking bride. They pass themselves off as a tailor and his wife and set up house together until Amante is murdered. As Julie Nash observes, "neither character expresses any wish to revert to previous positions with regard to gender or class" (69).

Feminist and queer readings of this story vary in the extent to which they regard the female marriage as sexual or social, but as Sharon Marcus points out (although not in relation to this story) Victorian marriage signifies more than sexual relations even as it implicitly includes and sanctifies the sexual (Marcus 21, 203). Critics including Rose Lovell-Smith, Michael Hiltbrunner, Julie Nash, Ardel Haefele-Thomas, and Renzo d'Agnillo all read the female marriage as having "homoerotic undercurrents" (Hiltbrunner 3) or being suggestive of "lesbian attraction" (D'Agnillo 48) and several note that Amante means "lover." Elizabeth Steere discusses the nuances of this debate in depth in her chapter on "The Servant as Spouse," in which she reads "The Grey Woman" as sensation fiction. She emphasises the

social while recognising the sexual, arguing that the “trap” of traditional marriage is escaped in the story only “by embarking on a new kind of marriage that flouts every marital convention of the time; it is with another woman, it breaches the boundaries of class and between master and servant, and it is based on terms of equality” (153).

This equality is founded on Anna’s class and Amante’s strength and resourcefulness, for in reality Anna is a dependent, not an equal. When Anna first discovers that her husband is an evil murderer, Anna turns to her maid: “I fell upon her [Amante’s] neck, grasping her tight, till my hands ached with the tension of their hold . . . she took me up in her arms, and bore me to my room, and laid me on my bed” (316). The original manuscript read, “I fell into her arms” which “suggests a more tender . . . embrace” (Steere 145). Maureen T. Reddy reads this scene as “a parodic enactment of a conventional wedding night” (qtd. in Steere 146), and Steere argues the episode marks the beginning of the “successful ‘marriage’ between” mistress and maid (146). That Amante is a surrogate (and rival) husband is emphasised by textual changes made by Gaskell. The words “husband” and “wife” are used repeatedly to emphasise their adopted relationship in the text, while, as Renzo D’Agnillo has observed, Gaskell deleted the use of the word “husband” to refer to Anna’s legal spouse, substituting his name, M. de la Tourelle, instead (51n8). The union between mistress and maid is further marked when Gaskell draws attention to the servant’s change of register from the formal to the familiar and affectionate as she proposes to live as Anna’s husband:

“If madame will still be guided by me – and, my child, I beg of you still to trust me,” said Amante, breaking out of her respectful formality into the way of talking more natural to those who had shared and escaped from common dangers – . . . we will go on to Frankfort. . . . We will still be husband and wife. . . .” (334-35, portion 3)

The proper position of mistress with a quasi-maternal duty towards her childlike servants is inverted here, and Amante demonstrates her affection for the woman she has saved as both mother and husband.

Amante is presented as rival to Anna's legal husband by invoking the (hetero)sexual suspicion surrounding servants alluded to at the start of this essay. The enraged M. de la Tourelle, in hot pursuit of his absconded wife, invents a story to suggest that she has eloped "doubtless to some paramour" (327, portion 3). In this fabricated version of events, which paints him as a wronged man, he implies Amante has facilitated an illicit liaison on behalf of his wife: [my wife] "was accompanied in her flight by a base, profligate woman from Paris, whom I, unhappy man, had myself engaged for my wife's waiting-maid, little dreaming what corruption I was bringing into my house!" (327, portion 3). The irony of this slur on the maid's motives and role is that Amante herself is the "paramour." Indeed, M. de la Tourelle's earlier "jealous[y]" of Anna's "free regard" for her maid is, in some senses, not without foundation, as Anna herself admits that "for a lady of a castle, I became sadly too familiar with my Norman waiting-maid" (303, portion 2).

A maid is perhaps at her most disruptive to heterosexual marriage and family when the "proper" direction of influence is inverted and the maid can command her mistress, as we see to the good in Elizabeth Gaskell's story and in more sinister form in George Eliot's tale "The Lifted Veil" (1859). In Eliot's story, Bertha is united in a conspiratorial alliance with her maid, Mrs Archer, which descends into jealous hatred. Bertha's husband, Latimer is the clairvoyant narrator and a resentful, fearful husband obsessed with surveillance.⁹ Much has been written about this curious and fairly uncharacteristic story, but very little attention given to the female relationship at the dark centre of "The Lifted Veil." For a story apparently concerned with the unveiling of truth the one mystery that remains unsolved, as Helen Small

pertinently remarks, is the nature of the relationship between Bertha Grant, the mistress, and Mrs Archer, her “favourite maid” (Eliot 39; ch. 2).

At the dramatic conclusion of the story we learn that Bertha and Mrs Archer have conspired to poison Latimer. Yet this climactic revelation does not lift the veil on the compelling yet murky bond between these “two unloving women” (Eliot 41; ch. 2). Returned momentarily from death to consciousness the maid accuses her mistress – in an impassioned and vengeful attack – of planning murder. But as Helen Small comments, “[t]here is a puzzling excessiveness about Mrs Archer’s condemnation of Bertha” (xxvi), which seems to be linked to the breakdown of their former intimate alliance. We already know mistress and servant have fallen out while visiting Bertha’s relatives, and now Mrs Archer protests that “. . . you laughed at me, and told lies about me behind my back, to make me disgusting . . . because you were jealous . . .” (Eliot 42; ch. 2, original ellipses). Identifying the significance of this statement “precisely in its unexplainedness,” Small sidesteps a direct interpretation and suggests that “[m]ost readers will suspect a sexual drama, perhaps a shared attraction to an unnamed man, but we have no further evidence for this” (xxvi). Perhaps this is what “most readers” will suspect, but there is indeed no evidence at all for this assumption and it appears to me an unconvincing surmise based on an assumption that (sexual) jealousy between two women must revolve around a man. Arguably, their different class makes it unlikely that the two women would be competing for the affections of the same man. But in any case, surely another possibility is that Bertha’s jealousy is provoked by the transfer of Mrs Archer’s affections to another person – perhaps a man, but equally or more probably another woman. Thus the jealousy is engendered by the erosion of that bond of attraction which was so “rapidly” (Eliot 35; ch. 2) formed between Bertha and her maid.

We are dependent on Latimer’s morbid view throughout the narrative. His suspicion of the cross-class alliance between his wife and her “bold, self-confident coquet[tish]” (Eliot

35; ch. 2) maid constructs their intimacy in deliberately negative terms of morbidity, criminality and excess (along with the female masculinity of the servant, discussed below). Mistress and maid are connected to “ill-defined images of candle-light scenes in her dressing-room, and the locking up of something in Bertha’s cabinet” (Eliot 35; ch. 2). These confused, sinister scenes are suggestive of conspiracy and witchcraft and are of course linked to a premonition of Bertha’s murderous intent (or perhaps Mrs Archer’s – we do not know whose idea it was to kill Latimer¹⁰). But the alliance of these “two unloving women” (Eliot 41; ch. 2) – to the lethal exclusion of a husband – suggests something more.¹¹ There are homoerotic undertones to mistress and maid sharing the intimate space of the dark dressing room, and Mrs Archer’s access to “Bertha’s cabinet.” Meanwhile, Latimer’s suspicion and feeling of “definite disgust” (Eliot 35; ch. 2) for Mrs Archer is comparable to M. de la Tourelle’s outrage at being usurped by a surrogate husband in the guise of a maid.

The reading presented here is not intended to imply that George Eliot’s novella is “about” a lesbian or “lesbianlike” relationship, but rather that the intimacy and alliance (as well as the jealousies and anger) between mistress and maid is suggestively homoerotic. And the language and imagery present in the stories by Gaskell and Eliot are not dissimilar to that used in deliberate coding of same-sex desire in literature published in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, as we shall see.

“The Lifted Veil” and “The Grey Woman” have both been read as sensation fiction, a genre in which servants are prominent and cross-class relationships common (Trodd). As Elizabeth Steere asserts in her study The Female Servant and Sensation Fiction, “the blurring of boundaries in a cross-class romance proves nearly as sensational as blackmail, bigamy or adultery,” those other staples of Sensation novels (157). Amongst these sensational cross-class relationships, there are several examples of mistress-maid intimacies which have homoerotic dimensions.¹² Natalie Shroeder reads Lady Audley’s familiarity with her maid

Phoebe as couched in erotic symbolism (92). Of course this illicit cross-class intimacy also marks Lady Audley as a class impostor, rather than a natural lady (Steere 95-114). In a series of texts by male sensation writers, Robert Dingley identifies the presence of cross-class passions between women. He notes the jealous love of Margaret H for her mistress-cum-benefactor, Ethel, in Hawley Smart's Social Sinners (1880) and the attachment of the odd maid, Fanny Mere, to her mistress in Wilkie Collins's last novel, Blind Love (1890). Here the maid's excess of feeling for her mistress is explicitly "diagnosed" in terms familiar to the growing field of sexology by the villainous Doctor Vimpany (Dingley 106-07). But even without this diagnosis – not actually penned by Collins as that section of the novel was completed posthumously by Sir Walter Besant – Fanny Mere's queer mixture of general emotional indifference and excessive desire to protect her mistress lends an erotic dimension to her devotion. Dingley argues that class difference renders visible the "lesbian menace" of these relationships since they cannot be subsumed or "derealised" within the language of "romantic friendship", which "simultaneously speak[s] of lesbianism and camouflage[s] it" (104). Rather in both instances the implied "sexual situation becomes visible only in and through the representation of a social anomaly" (108), namely cross-class desire. Cross-class passions run in the opposite direction in Thomas Hardy's first novel, Desperate Remedies (1871), in which a mistress tries to seduce her young maid. In a comparatively explicit and lengthy scene, the predatory Miss Aldclyffe visits her servant in bed and tries to extract kisses and professions of love. The relative positions of mistress and maid seem to be temporarily undone in this scene: the maid opens the door to Miss Aldclyffe with the thought "[i]t was mistress and maid no longer, but woman and woman" (Hardy 106; vol. 1, ch. 6). But despite this momentary levelling or even inversion of class roles – Miss Aldclyffe says to the maid: "you are mistress in this room, and . . . you may send me away if you choose" (106; vol. 1, ch. 6) – the mistress's dominance is reasserted as soon as she gets into the maid's bed. Robert

Dingley highlights the “gulf between class position” and argues that “the erotic, and homoerotic, resonances . . . are embedded within, and are enabled and mediated through, a more familiar discourse of social difference” (Dingley 105).

Towards the end of the century, and in genres other than sensation fiction, women writers interested in depicting or encoding same-sex love also use mistress-maid relationships to write about love and desire between women. Two American short stories, “Martha’s Lady” by Sarah Orne Jewett and “Miss Grief” by Constance Fenimore Woolson, appear to present opposite ends of the spectrum – one is open and celebratory, the other an ambiguous and apparently heavily coded story which presents the reader with the challenge of deciphering the “unread” and tragic Miss Grief. Meanwhile, Jill, by the Welsh author, Amy Dillwyn, is openly celebratory of the ennobling power of love between women while at the same time utilising “discourses of social difference,” including cross-class masquerade, to represent unrequited same-sex desire.

Sarah Orne Jewett’s short story “Martha’s Lady” represents the morally and spiritually enriching experience of love and devotion to another woman, even as the central tropes of absence and deferral lend it an air of pathos. Yet the deferral is necessary to the representation of same-sex desire in the story, expressed through Martha’s longing and her development of rituals and fetishisation of objects associated with her idealised lady. As in Jill, the long deferral is necessitated by the different class positions of the two women. Martha, like Jill, sustains her love through a chivalric loyalty. Significantly, however, Jewett ends this story with a poignant reunion; a consummation and mutual recognition of Martha’s long affection.

The lady of the title is Helena, a young woman from Boston visiting a relative’s house in which Martha is a newly appointed, awkward young serving girl. Helena takes Martha under her wing, teaching her how to be a good servant, and Martha responds with a lifelong

devotion where the absence of the object of her love does nothing to diminish her passion and loyalty. The love of a servant for her “lady” in Jewett’s story is expressed in a chivalrous, Christian sublimation of her desire. Martha experiences, in the forty plus years her lady is absent, “the happiness of holding fast to a great sentiment, the ineffable satisfaction of trying to please one whom she truly loved” (211-12). Sublimated into her daily domestic tasks, Martha’s love is expressed through her servitude and loyalty.

The bond is not entirely one-sided. An early scene in which “mistress and maid” collect cherries together, and “Martha climb[s] the cherry-tree like a boy” (207), establishes an erotic undercurrent to their relationship. When Helena leaves, she begs Martha “I wish you wouldn’t forget me ever” (211), and she makes several gestures of remembrance towards Martha, gifting carefully selected small tokens which Martha ritually cherishes. But the two women do not meet again until both are become old. In the closing lines of the story there is a mutual recognition and a kind of consummation of Martha’s love:

That night Martha waited in her lady’s room just as she used, humble and silent, and went through with the old unforgotten loving services. The long years seemed like days. At last she lingered a moment trying to think of something else that might be done, then she was going silently away, but Helena called her back.

“You have always remembered, haven’t you, Martha dear?” she said. “Won’t you kiss me goodnight?” (219)

A later version of the story revises Helena’s words to emphasise their latent passion: “‘Oh, my dear Martha!’ she cried, ‘won’t you kiss me goodnight? Oh Martha, have you remembered like this, all these long years!’” (219). A passionate and tender moment of recognition of Martha’s long love and remembrance is rewarded by her “mistress” at last.

Jewett’s story clearly has an allegorical dimension in its depiction of the dignity and constancy of Martha, whose devotion makes her “unconsciously beautiful like a saint” (215)

and her care for Helena gives her profound Christian values of love, care, selflessness, and modesty. The final kiss may be (under)read as part of an idealised fulfilment of a sublimated Christian devotion, and of course religious faith and spiritual union are themselves common tropes in the expression of love between women, but in this narrative of improving love it is also a positive celebration of enduring erotic bond between women (Hobbs; O'Brien 584-85, 590-94).

The mistress-servant couple in "Miss Grief" by Constance Fenimore Woolson,¹³ is more ambiguous. On the surface this is a tale of frustrated artistic expression, similar in many aspects to Mabel E. Wotton's story of a starving female writer in "The Fifth Edition" (1896). Susan Koppelman argues "Miss Grief" explores the lethal effects of an unsympathetic heteronormative cultural and artistic world on a writer whose "lesbian imagination" renders her an outsider (101). It is a slippery yet evocative story full of misunderstanding and misinterpretation which invites the reader to look beyond the mistaken assumptions of the narrator, not least to interrogate the true relationship between the lady and her maid. The narrator of the story is an arrogant male author, who (along with his male servant) constantly misreads his mysterious visitor, Miss Aaronna Crief, beginning by misunderstanding her name to be "Miss Grief" (Woolson 109).¹⁴ The misreading of her name as "Miss Grief" is a sadly apt appellation for the fading woman who haunts the narrator's apartment. The narrator similarly fails to read the signs of Miss Grief's starvation or comprehend the nature of her relationship with her female companion, which demands that we read between the lines to discover the truth. There is much in this story that responds to a queer reading but for the purposes of this essay I will confine myself to the mistress/servant trope as suggestive of an intimate and erotic bond.

Miss Grief is accompanied on her visits to the narrator by a woman whom both the author and his manservant believe to be "a maid" (103, 104, 108, 119). Miss Grief is

described as a lady come down in the world, “shabby, unattractive and more than middle aged” (104); her companion is older but dressed similarly. As the two women depart the author watches them from his window:

. . . presently I saw them issue forth in the rain and walk away side by side, the mistress, being the taller, holding the umbrella: probably there was not much difference in rank between persons so poor and forlorn as these. (109)

In this view, the relationship of mistress and maid is assumed and yet the class barrier between them is collapsed as they are unified in their forlorn poverty.

The assumption that Miss Grief and her companion must be mistress and servant (which the reader shares for at least part of the story) suggests a perhaps willing blindness which prefers not to recognise the possibility of female marriage or other union. Although Sharon Marcus argues that “[m]embers of respectable Victorian society were . . . able to perceive women as married to one another” (196), this story appears to represent an unwillingness or inability to perceive the relationship between two women who live together beyond conventional models (mistress-servant, aunt-niece); female intimacy is at best laughable. Two women – a mistress and maid – managing a house together, is “an arrangement,” as Elizabeth Steere points out, “that may at first appear too conventional” (163) to excite remark, but in this story we are invited to rethink the conventional through the deliberate ambiguities of a story concerned with the unconventional.

The precise status of Miss Grief’s companion and her presumed role of lady’s maid is complicated by a narrative which refuses to bring this character into focus; her identity, even her name, remains uncertain. Miss Grief refers to “Serena” with whom she has tried to smoke (115). Much later we learn that their smoking was an attempt to ward off hunger: “I had heard that . . . one was no longer tired and hungry – with a cigar” (122). Starvation from want of food is a real danger in the story but Miss Grief’s hunger is also a metaphor for her literary

and social exclusion. The hunger and fatigue she tries to escape through smoking with Serena has further emotional and sexual undertones, for the cigar is resonant as a sexualised image and one associated with the androgynous and sexually ambiguous writer George Sand, amongst others.¹⁵

The narrator asks, “Serena is your maid?,” eliciting the answer “She lives with me.” (115). The narrator’s response is “inward laughter,” a hint that perhaps he does recognise but is dismissive of the hint of sexual intrigue. In “[a] vision” which recalls Mrs Archer and Bertha closeted together, the narrator imagines “those two forlorn women, alone in their room with locked doors, patiently trying to acquire the smoker’s art” (115). Of course the narrator gives away more than he sees and here the suggestion is that the women share “their” room on equal terms if in desperate circumstances. Yet the precise identity of Miss Grief’s servant/companion/lover in this story remains elusive. When Miss Grief lies dying, the author meets the “maid” whom he has seen at his residence. She refutes his assumption that she is Serena or indeed a maid: “Serena, indeed! Rubbish! I’m no Serena: I’m her aunt” (119). The denial is ambiguous, not least because the phrase “I’m no Serena” transforms “Serena” into an ordinary noun, suggesting that the woman is denying being a type of woman rather than a specific individual. Is Serena a previous lover, even though Miss Grief talks about her in the present tense? Is this woman really an aunt, in the literal sense? We know that “aunt” is an empty, imprecise, or even ironic category in this story since the narrator has toyed with the idea of addressing Miss Grief as “aunt” by way of overcoming an awkwardness in their socially unconventional acquaintance (she being an unattractive middle-aged spinster, he a single man about town). The unreliability of the claimed identity of aunt is further suggested, if not conclusively, by the woman’s urgency, on returning to their flat, to announce to Miss Grief: “He knows I’m your aunt: I told him” (120). It is a statement which sounds more like an alert to her companion that she must now corroborate a story and Miss Grief duly responds

“Then please, dear Aunt Martha, . . .” (121). Statements and “facts” in this story hide as much as they reveal, but in the interstices of the slippages and misapprehensions of the story it is difficult not to see a link between “aunt Martha” and the mysterious Serena, suggested in part by the fact that the narrator has mistakenly imagined them both as servants.

The nature of the relationship between mistress and “maid” is presented as one of the many blind spots of the arrogant narrator and becomes a tantalising enigma for the reader. The male narrator cannot recognise or categorise their relationship(s) any more than he can categorise the work Miss Grief has given him to read. Thus, ironically, the role of maid is a cross-class “disguise” imposed by the assumptions of an uncomprehending narrator on a range of other possible intimate same-sex relationships, yet it is a “disguise” the reader is invited to try to see beneath.

Perhaps the most significant example of a deliberate and sophisticated adoption of a cross-class relationship to signal same-sex love between women is Amy Dillwyn’s recently republished novel, Jill. The discourse of social difference is central to representing same-sex desire, while disguise, surveillance and criminality on the one hand, and a chivalric code of service on the other, all contribute to this story of unrequited love between women. Jill was a commercial and critical success in Dillwyn’s own day (more than one reviewer demanded a sequel, which eventually appeared) and it was an important novel for the author, drawing heavily, as it did, on her own long yet apparently unrequited love for the woman she came to refer to in her diaries as her wife.

Jill is a picaresque novel about the emotional and spiritual education of a girl through her encounters with two women whom she meets on her adventures. The novel is narrated by an unconventional Victorian heroine, Jill Treacastle. With a nod to fairytale and sensation fiction, Jill runs away from a nasty stepmother and ineffectual father, determined to see something of the world and to make an independent living as a lady’s maid. Some necessary

training in hair dressing completed (this tomboyish protagonist balks at learning dressmaking), Jill forges a character to secure a place as lady's maid and courier. She is already an experienced traveller and accomplished linguist and Jill accompanies her mistress, Kitty Mervyn, on a European tour. Kitty and Jill are thus brought together in circumstances which afford a considerable level of physical contact and almost constant companionship but which conventionally prohibit further intimacy because of their difference in social status. Or, to put it another way, the class difference and power dynamics of the relationship between mistress and maid offer Dillwyn a way to suggest the erotic attraction of one woman for another. Furthermore, the maintenance or transcendence of class barriers operate as an extended metaphor through which to articulate same-sex desire. At the climax of the novel, the temporary transcendence of class symbolises a sublimated erotic union between mistress and maid, while elsewhere Jill's aversion to men is expressed in terms of class prejudice.

As lady's maid, Jill has some access to the bedroom which becomes an erotic space where Jill may watch and touch Kitty. She dresses and undresses her mistress, she brushes her hair; most importantly in the bedroom Kitty lets down her guard and Jill thus becomes possessed of secret knowledge which binds her to her mistress. As servant, however, Jill may be peremptorily excluded from this intimate space. When Kitty is deeply hurt by news of her beloved's engagement to another, Jill feels an "incontrollable [*sic*] impulse" to be with her mistress, and breaks the rules of conduct by going to Kitty's locked room unbidden: "But I could not enter the room unless she choose [*sic*] to admit me" (222; vol. 2, ch. 5). Kitty sends Jill away, saying she will ring when necessary:

Was the reminder of the bell intended as a gentle hint that it was officious to disturb her with an offer of services which she could command if she required them? . . . I asked myself . . . what I supposed I should have done had she opened the door to me? Should I have flung my arms around her, and told her that I knew all, and was come

to comfort her, or behaved in some similarly gushing manner? . . . I knew better than to imagine that an absurd demonstration of that kind would gratify her from any one, and least of all, from a servant. (223; vol. 2; ch. 5)

Where Jill is acting out the role of a chivalrous lover, loyal yet subservient, ardent yet expectant of no love in return, Kitty simply reads her behaviour as that of a slightly overzealous maid. The power of the mistress to summon a maid to her bedroom at will is given a marked erotic twist in Edith Wharton's short story, "The Lady's Maid's Bell," where the homoerotic subtext revolves around two lady's maids, one of whom is a ghost. According to Holly Blackford, the ringing of the mistress's bell symbolises same-sex desire, perhaps even the promise of sexual gratification. On hearing the night-time bell, the new maid, Hartley, feels a heady mixture of apprehension and expectation: "It is going to happen now" although she confesses to herself that she has "no notion" what it might be (Wharton 23). The bell rings "to announce the presence of the dead Emma" (Blackford 238), but Hartley and Emma are in competition for their mistress's affection and the mistress does not use the bell to summon Hartley at all. Blackford argues that "the apparition of the former maid Emma Saxton lingering around her bedroom at night, suggest[s] that Emma is a projection of Hartley's erotic desires for her mistress" (237). Thus the bell can be interpreted as "a symbol of female sexuality" but, as Blackford suggests, there remains some "ambiguity [about] who possesses it given the social roles of lady and maid." (238) There is no such ambiguity in Jill, where the maid waits for her mistress's bell in vain.

The erotic suggestiveness of the mistress-maid relationship in Jill depends not only on the constant deferral of desire produced by the class divide between the women but also on the frisson produced by the fact the reader knows that Jill is only disguised as a maid and is in fact the social equal and distant relation of Kitty. After all, Jill might at any moment "come out" to Kitty. Indeed, she comes tantalisingly close to declaring herself on more than one

occasion and this urge to reveal her true class and family connection is inseparable from the desire to declare her love: “I knew well enough that I myself should have been at her feet if she had but held up her little finger to me” (215; vol. 2, ch. 5). In a pivotal scene where Kitty sacks Jill on discovering that Jill’s “character” was a forgery, it is Jill’s fear that Kitty has no affection for her that stops her confessing her true identity:

. . . for a moment I felt very much inclined to tell her who I was. . . . I think I should inevitably have yielded to the inclination, and imparted my history to her there and then, if there had been anything in her manner to make me believe that I had won a footing, however low down, in her affection – that she cared about me just one little bit. But there was no such indication. (228; vol. 2, ch. 6)

Superficially this is a scene in which a criminal act may be mitigated by a revelation that Jill is the daughter of a baronet and “a [family] connection” (91; vol. 1, ch. 10), but these legal and social concerns are overwritten. This is the moment when a lover hesitates to declare her feelings to her beloved and ultimately demurs fearing rejection.

If social status keeps the two women apart, the transcendence of class barriers encodes a sublimated erotic union between mistress and maid. The sensational climax of Jill and Kitty’s relationship is played out when the two women are captured by bandits in the lawless interior of Corsica and imprisoned in a chapelle mortuaire – one of the windowless chapel-like tombs characteristic of the island. The gothic often provides a way of exploring “unauthorised genders and sexualities” including “cross-class relations” (Haeefele-Thomas 3), as does the spectral (Castle 1993). In the liminal realm of the tomb an idealised and highly symbolic, if temporary, union between the two women occurs, one that is expressed through a levelling of class difference. In their new comradely position as prisoners Jill experiences a kind of liberation as the class barriers and former social roles which have hitherto inhibited their relations appear to fall away.

Thus [Kitty] ran on, joking, laughing, making light of every discomfort, and chatting to me as if she had thought me her equal, as if the tomb had been a leveller of ranks to the living as well as to the dead, and as if in entering it all social difference between her and me had been annihilated. (176; vol. 2, ch. 1)

Their temporary social equality is accompanied by acts of mutual generosity and an emphasis on merging identity. Locked in the pitch black tomb, the women begin to clear a space in which to lie down, both tensely aware of the possibility of coming into contact with human remains. Finding something unpleasant, Jill stifles a cry and quickly removes it without alerting Kitty:

As I made this effort to spare her feelings, I was struck by the quaint probability of her being at the same instant engaged in a similar endeavour to spare mine; and I realised that the common danger to which we were exposed was a link which united us so firmly that our separate identities were, for the time being, well-nigh merged into one. (180, vol. 2, ch. 1)

As in Gaskell's "The Grey Woman," "common danger" unites two women across boundaries of class. The spiritual union of separate identities also invoked here is of course one of the high ideals of romantic love as well as a common trope in the articulation of same-sex desire between women. It is here underlined by a more earthly, physical closeness as they lie down to sleep "upon the ground, pressing closely together for warmth" (180; vol. 2, ch. 1), while the understated eroticism of the contact in the tomb is humorously extended as the two women disrobe at Kitty's urgent command, "Off with your dress . . . !" (191; vol. 2, ch. 2), so as to make a rope with which to escape.

Of course Jill really is Kitty's social equal and so there is perhaps little to concern the guardians of class in this temporary alliance on terms of equality. The secret truth of Jill's class is used in a rather different expression of sexuality in one of the few glimpses of life

below stairs we are afforded in this novel. On first becoming a live-in servant, Jill finds herself the unwilling recipient of the attentions of an odious valet who forces himself upon her. Their difference in social rank appals Jill, and since the valet is the only male admirer to approach Jill in the novel, this repulsion serves as a wider comment on Jill's sexuality. In a compelling scene, Jill violently repels the male servant's offensive sexual advances by dashing a candle in his face and burning off half his whiskers, a prized symbol of his virility. Jill expresses her repugnance in terms of the valet's transgression of class boundaries: "Scandalised at the notion of a man-servant taking the liberty to raise his eyes to a lady, I could hardly trust to the evidence of my own senses at first" (107; vol. 1, ch. 11). But remembering her assumed role:

. . . I shuddered to think that I must endure being made love to by a valet: it was an odious and degrading idea. . . . Disgusted and angry at the admiration which I deemed an insult, and was yet powerless to resent, I endeavoured to nip it in the bud by energetic snubbing. (108; vol. 1, ch. 11)

Her disgust becomes almost hysterical when he threatens to kiss her:

it made me frantic merely to think of such a humiliation, what should I do supposing the monster actually did manage to profane my face with his lips? Should I kill him on the spot, or should I expire from sheer disgust? . . . This, verily, was a degradation for which I had not bargained . . . (110; vol. 1, ch. 11)

Class is invoked as a reason for Jill's disgust at these unwanted advances – and she maintains a sense of her true class identity throughout the novel – but her anger is initially aimed at men: "it's a great pity that there are any men at all in the world, – or, anyhow, except gentlemen" (109; vol. 1, ch. 11). The half-hearted class qualification does little to undermine the power of her first statement. For his part, the valet considers Jill's repulse as evidence that she is "ill-made" and "should be burnt" (112; vol. 1, ch. 11), a response that highlights her

queerness while recalling the fate of witches and the cross-dressing Joan of Arc, who were burned at the stake. This episode reads both as a vividly captured protest against the sexual exploitation of vulnerable women by men who impose their desires on female bodies while transgression of (hidden) class boundaries allow Jill to express a deep aversion to the sexual advances of a man. Henceforth, Jill prefers to spend her time serving her “two ladies which I could do without shocking my self-respect in any way” (114; vol. 1, ch. 12).

Class distinctions underpin Jill’s stated aversion to men, yet Dillwyn also uses the rigidity of class distinctions in Victorian Britain to make it impossible for the maid and her mistress to develop the intimacy Jill craves. At the same time, however, it is the very distance between mistress and maid – with its elements of dominance and subordination, the “performance” of ritual tasks which are a double performance because of Jill’s disguise – that allows Dillwyn to suggest an erotic desire between women, rather than just admiration or simply spiritually enriching devotion. As work by Sharon Marcus and others has shown, the theme of love between women would not need to be hidden in Victorian Britain, and the Pall Mall Gazette blithely notes Jill’s focus on women and the novel’s shadowy and perfunctory treatment of Kitty’s male lovers (“Three Novels”). But Dillwyn makes some effort to signal that Jill’s feelings for Kitty exceed conventional sentimental friendship and are different from the mainstream homoeroticism which Marcus sees as central to heterosexual femininity. Jill is decidedly unfeminine: as a girl she “revelled in being a mess” (6; vol. 1, ch. 1), seeing conventional dress primarily as an impediment to physical adventure (an opinion she shares with several of Dillwyn’s other tomboy heroines). Jill eschews sentimentality as a barrier to her passion for adventure, and claims to be destitute of fond feelings for anyone, until Kitty exerts a “strange fascination” (167; vol. 1, ch. 12) upon her. They first meet, briefly, aged fifteen (some years before Jill enters Kitty’s service disguised as a maid). The possibility of a “romantic friendship” developing between the two girls is raised only to be dismissed as

something “some girls”, but not these girls, would do (19; vol. 1, ch. 2), Jill being anything but the conventional girl. Thus it is implied that a mere sentimental attachment is too ordinary (perhaps not sufficiently erotic or sexual) to accommodate her feelings for Kitty. It is worth noting here that at the same time that Jill is possessed and infatuated by a secret passion for Kitty, other kinds of love between women are also presented as legitimate and spiritually enriching. Later in the novel, Jill makes friends with Sister Helena; the two women are brought together by an intuited class affinity even though they are both out of their “natural” station (Jill as an unknown convalescent in a charity hospital, Helena as a lady who has given up her wealth to minister to the sick). This second relationship reinforces the women-orientated nature of love and affection in this novel, but it is the first cross-class mistress-maid scenario that suggests a more urgent erotic desire of one woman for another.

Disguise is a feature of several of the mistress-maid stories discussed in this essay. In her cross-class disguise, Jill may be seen as a descendant of Viola in Twelfth Night, who disguises herself as a (male) servant, who then sparks the erotic attraction of Olivia, the lady she has come to woo on behalf of her master.¹⁶ There are obvious parallels between the cross-class disguise Jill adopts and the figure of the cross-dressed (cross-gender) female-to-male transvestite, not least in the comparative freedom offered by both disguises. Class, as a hierarchical social concept, is itself gendered, and in Dillwyn’s writing the lower classes are associated with masculinity. Therefore by adopting the disguise of a servant, Jill already has more agency and is performing a more masculine role than her identity as Miss Trecastle allows. The role is particularly suitable, since the heroine’s tendency to move between gender and class norms is emphasised from the start. Christened with the “uncouth appellation” (5; vol. 1, ch. 1) Gilbertina (her parents had wanted a boy named Gilbert) she takes the nickname Jill which her mother thinks is “ugly and objectionably suggestive of low, republican ideas, such as carrying pails of water, rough tumbles and cracked crowns” (5; vol. 1, ch. 1). Jill is

also lacking in the most important of feminine qualities; by her own admission she is a cold and unfeeling person who never loved another human until she first met Kitty. The androgynous Jill, like a female-to-male cross-dresser, achieves economic and other freedoms denied to her as a young lady by disguising herself as a maid suggesting that the female servant (and by extension the woman-loving woman) is gendered masculine in this novel.

Indeed the figure of the servant is gendered masculine in almost all the stories discussed in this essay. The binary construction of gender posits masculinity as associated with initiative and action, and servants are often more organised and active than their mistresses. But there are also physical attributes which differentiate them from their “ladies.” Servants tend to be darker, taller, older, and often described as “gaunt,” against paler, pretty, weaker, feminine mistresses. In “Martha’s Lady,” Martha climbed trees “like a boy” in her youth and is now a “tall gaunt woman” with a “brown old New England face” (Jewett 215). In Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Grey Woman,” the female servant is described “tall and handsome though upwards of forty, and somewhat gaunt” (302) and she is once mistaken for a man by the sound of her voice alone (319). Amante cross-dresses as a man while the blonde young Anna disguises herself as “his” lower class wife, both darkening their features in order to play their respective lower-class or cross-gender roles. In George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil,” Mrs Archer is similarly signalled as masculine through markers of age, height and darkness and in this instance a virile flirtatiousness: “She was a tall, wiry, dark-eyed woman, this Mrs Archer, with a face handsome enough to give her coarse hard nature the odious finish of bold, self-confident coquetry” (35). In the tense science-fiction conclusion of the novella, Mrs Archer is brought back from the dead by means of a blood transfusion from a man. This infusion of masculinity, Kate Flint suggests, gives her the power to speak and accuse her mistress, while Helen Small adds that Mrs Archer is also a stand-in for her mistress’s husband, Latimer, since he and she are (eventually) united in their loathing of

Bertha (Small xxiv). As this symbolic overlap with the husband and the earlier physical description of Mrs Archer suggests, the gendering of the servant as masculine includes a sexually virile dimension. This gendering (and sexualisation) of the servant is not confined to the Victorian fiction discussed here. In Felix Vallotton's arresting post-impressionist oil painting, The Mistress and the Servant (1896), a dark, voluptuous, powerful woman helps a pale, slightly cringing and drooping figure into a sea or lake. The darker figure stands squarely with her back to the viewer, her well-rounded buttocks on full display, and the side of one full breast also visible. She is a potent and obviously sexualised figure. The "mistress" and "servant" are instantly distinguishable, encoded by the well-established markers which signify class, gender, and sexuality.

In the diverse selection of British and American texts discussed here, the mistress-maid relationship is a homoerotically charged trope and, in some instances, a narrative device deliberately selected to represent or encode love between women. The maintenance or levelling of class boundaries between mistress and maid could be subtly manipulated to explore same-sex desire. The female masculinity of many of the servants inverts proper social relations and contributes to the erotic charge between mistress and maid. Furthermore the cross-class disguises present in some of the stories have much in common with female-to-male cross-dressing, disrupting categories of gender and class. While I have endeavoured to approach these texts without slipping into anachronistic readings of a transhistorical lesbian identity, it is worth noting the recurring motifs of the mistress-maid relationship – deferral, distance, displacement, masquerade – are prominent features of a wider "lesbian" literary tradition as reconstructed over the last thirty-five years (e.g., Faderman; Castle; Donoghue, Inseparable). Of course the erotics of service delineated here are also related to wider Victorian idealisation of chivalry and Christian self-sacrifice; the female knight is a common image in writing about alliance, love and desire between women.

These stories are, of course, far from uniform representations of same-sex love and desire. Female homoerotic alliance can be a lifeline (Gaskell) or a threat (Eliot), and in both these examples, as in Wharton, the mistress-maid bond is disruptive of heterosexual marriage. Desiring another woman can be the source of infinite spiritual sustenance (Jewett) to be consummated at last, or it is associated with loneliness and starvation (Woolson). Finally, Amy Dillwyn's Jill places a mistress and (disguised) maid at the centre of a novel which openly explores powerful attraction between women and the ennobling nature of even unrequited love. Simultaneously, Jill is an attempt to articulate, in partially coded ways, the idea of a same-sex desire that is "more" than "romantic friendship." In her complex use of cross-class disguise, Amy Dillwyn employs the erotics of service to articulate – and class boundaries to frustrate – the "strange fascination" between women.

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NOTES

My thanks to members of the VICTORIA discussion group (at Listserv), and Bob Muscutt in particular, for suggesting texts relevant to this study.

1. Despite the relative scarcity of mistress-maid portrayals in Victorian literature, eroticised relationships between mistress and servant have a long literary history. Hallett suggests that "From the early modern period, at least, homosexuality was frequently associated with a double transgression, a socially inverted sexual corruption of higher class innocents by members of a lower order. . . . Numerous tales of lesbian relationships across class divide [in the period to 1800] attest to the power of this, as either social reality or as sexual fantasy, or both" (40). For other pre-Victorian examples see, for instance, Valerie Traub (2002, 59) on Agnolo Firenzuola's I Ragionamenti, Jessica Tvordi (1999) on Maria/Olivia as well as

Cesario/Viola in Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, Emma Donoghue (1993, 173-81) and Kristina Straub (2009, 88-109) on Daniel Defoe's Roxana: the Fortunate Mistress. Donoghue also looks at the wider question of class divide and mistress-maid representations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1993, 139-143). In the twentieth century the mistress and servant trope is a fairly established presence, see, for instance, Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca (1938), Sarah Waters, Affinity (1999) and Fingersmith (2002) and Carol Ann Duffy's "Warming Her Pearls" (1987).

2. The homoerotics of service and cross-class female relationships have been explored in literary criticism and histories of the early modern period and also critical discussions of twentieth century writing (see note 1). Yet, with the recent exception of Steere's study of The Female Servant in Sensation Fiction (2013), there has been little critical analysis of the homoerotic dimension of cross-class mistress-servant relationships in nineteenth-century literature. On a related topic, cross-class disguise is discussed in Fessler's essay on Sarah Grand (2008), but the focus is on androgyny and transvestism rather than the erotics of cross-class relations.

3. Mrs Mary Motherly, the pseudonym of Emily Andrews Patmore, urges maidservants to be suspicious of over-familiarity on the part of their mistresses: "There is sometimes a mistress rich but ill-educated. Such a mistress is almost sure to make companions of her servants, because her knowledge and ideas are nearer on a level with theirs." But a "sensible girl" would rather serve "a lady who always feels and observes a difference between herself and her servants", her genuine superiority conferring "more dignity on [the servant] than the mistress who will allow full familiarity . . ." (Motherly 22)

4. Ellis, in The Mothers of England: Their Influence and Responsibility (1843), warns that "All symptoms of the society of this class of persons being a favourite indulgence to the young, is an omen of danger which ought not to be disregarded; and above everything they

should be kept away from their bed-rooms, as well as from every other place where servants are privileged to carry on their own peculiar style of conversation, unrestrained by any fear of intrusion.” While expressing her respect for the trustworthy servant, “I still think the best of them are too much under the influence of false and limited views of things in general, to admit of their being desirable companions for children in their moments of unrestrained confidence. But when we speak of those who are not the best, especially of those artful and unprincipled characters who endeavour to work their way by flattering the vanity, or falling in with the wrong feelings of their superiors, it is impossible to express too strongly the sense which all reasonable persons must entertain, of the dangerous consequences likely to ensue from association with such individuals . . .” (247, my emphasis.)

5. On surveillance and servants see McCuskey (2000). A sense of the ritualised behaviour and the dynamics of looking, the power of utterance and the encoded domination and subservience of mistress and maid, is clearly apparent in servants’ and conduct manuals. For instance, on the complicated business of looking or averting one’s eyes, when to speak, when to stand, see The Servant’s Behaviour Book (Motherly 47).

6. Neither maids nor servants are indexed in her book, but in her outstanding discussion of whipping in the chapter “Discipline and Punishment in the Fashion Magazine” Marcus mentions “Letters [which] described mothers, aunts, teachers, and female servants forcing girls and young women to remove their drawers, tying girls to pieces of furniture . . .” (139, my italics). Marcus also details Victorian worries about servants sharing beds with girls as mentioned above.

7. Indeed, servants are included in some of the fashion plates discussed in Between Women, including one in which a “well-dressed servant . . . with her hand buried in her pocket” hands tea “with her eyes averted” to a lady. Marcus argues that “[t]he servant’s decorum creates a masturbatory allusion that links the maid and her mistress’s guest.” (131)

8. Marcus draws important distinctions between friendship, erotic infatuation, and female marriage, although she acknowledges that there was significant overlap between the behaviour and expression of different kinds of female intimacy. Adopting Marcus's distinctions, we can identify erotic desire, often deferred or unrequited, as well as female marriage in the texts discussed here. Friendship, with its emphasis on equality and reciprocity, is unsurprisingly rare (unless we see friendship as interchangeable with female marriage which of course runs contrary to Marcus's thesis) since the hierarchical and bounded positions of mistress and servant do not permit friendship. This is not to claim that there are no friendships in these texts – there is, for instance, a warm friendship between the convalescent Jill and the aristocrat turned nurse, Sister Helena, in the second half of Dillwyn's novel, which expands on the kind of intimacy possible between two women. Significantly this friendship is based on a mutual recognition of their class equality.

9. Trodd sees Latimer as a victim of “the alliance of subordinates” in a story which places Victorian anxiety about privacy and surveillance in the home its centre: “The association of wife and servants collaborates in lurid expression of that sensationalism in which the man is the victim in the home, unmanned and paralysed by exposure to spying, intrigue and constant intrusion on his privacy” (121).

10. Flanders suggests that Mrs Archer is a depiction of one of the most notorious murderers of the nineteenth century, Mrs Manning, a woman of foreign extraction and formerly a lady's maid. The spectacle of this former maid, in the tight black silk dress worn at her public hanging, was to haunt Victorian fiction for decades, with appearances as Hortense in Dickens's Bleak House and more obliquely, Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles as well as lesser works by Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs Henry Wood (Flanders 171-180).

11. Unloving, along with unnatural, are terms used to describe Jill and emphasise her exceptional fondness for Kitty, in Amy Dillwyn's novel discussed later in the essay.

12. Steere explores possible lesbian readings and “intimate mistress/maid relationships” in Blind Love (162), Desperate Remedies (163) and Lady Audley’s Secret (164).

13. “Felipa” (1876) by the same author similarly employs difference in social status (in this instance class, age and nationality) and tropes of service and devotion to represent an erotic bond between a capricious lady and a twelve-year old itinerant girl, dressed in boy’s clothes: “small, dark-skinned . . . the offspring of the ocean and the heats, tawny, lithe and wild” (56).

14. After her death her name is given as “Moncrief”, further confusing our sense of her identity. The odd first name originates (like Gilbertina in Jill, discussed later in the essay) because “my father was much disappointed that I was not a boy, and gave me as nearly as possible the name he had prepared – Aaron” (114).

15. Amy Dillwyn (1845-1935), whose novel *Jill* is discussed later, took pleasure in the public attention bestowed on her longstanding habit of smoking cigars (see *Painting*). In an article in the *Lady’s Pictorial* (19 April, 1902), Dillwyn’s cigar smoking is mentioned alongside that of fellow businesswoman and novelist Emily Faithfull.

16. We know that Amy Dillwyn studied Shakespeare and was familiar with *Twelfth Night*. On the erotic dimensions of service and disguise in *Twelfth Night* see Tvordi and Straub. In her discussion of the destabilising effect of the transvestite, *Vested Interests* (1992), Majorie Garber uses *Twelfth Night* to illustrate a wider point about the “destabilisation” of categories of class and gender (amongst others) represented by the transvestite, and the possibility of substitution or slippage between these categories (Garber 36). There is a similar slippage between class and gender in stories about cross-class disguise.

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