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Upstairs, Downstairs, in the Central European Home

Ursi Blosser/Franziska Gerster, *Töchter der guten Gesellschaft. Frauenrolle und Mädchenerziehung im schweizerischen Großbürgertum um 1900*, Chronos Verlag für Geschichte, Zürich 1985, pp. 342.

Karin Walser, *Dienstmädchen. Frauenarbeit und Weiblichkeitsbilder um 1900*, extrabuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 195.

I.

A great deal has been written about feminists in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but a lot less about the everyday lives of ordinary women, and what there is concentrates mainly on the lower end of the social scale. However, the twin impulses of social history and women's history are leading to a growing interest in typical female experiences of the past.¹ The two books reviewed here both provide welcome evidence of this emerging trend, and are fascinating examples of the very different ways in which feminist historians are trying to draw les-

1 See *John C. Fout*, *An English-Language Bibliography on European and American Women's History*, in: *John C. Fout* (ed.), *German Women in the Nineteenth Century*, New York 1984, pp. 368–423. The second half of this collection of original essays provides some useful examples of recent trends in research. See also the introductory article by *Fout* in the same volume, pp. 3–54 (Current Research on German Women's History in the Nineteenth Century) with extensive bibliographical references to the German-language literature. Other recent collections include *Karin Hausen* (ed.), *Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte*, Munich 1983; *Ruth-Ellen B. Joeres/Mary Jo Maynes* (eds.), *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1986; *Renate Bridenthal/Atina Grossmann/Marion Kaplan* (eds.), *When Biology Became Destiny*, New York 1984; *Annette Kuhn et al.* (eds.), *Frauen in der Geschichte*, 6 vols., Düsseldorf 1979–85; *Hans-Ulrich Wehler* (ed.), *Frauen in der Geschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (= *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Bd. 7, H. 3–4, Göttingen 1981); and *Frauengruppe Faschismusforschung* (ed.), *Mutterkreuz und Arbeitsbuch*, Frankfurt 1981. *Ute Frevert*, *Frauen-Geschichte. Zwischen Bürgerlicher Verbesserung und Neuer Weiblichkeit*, Frankfurt 1986, is the first serious attempt at a synthesis. For further bibliographical information, see *Kuhn*, *op. cit.*, vols. 2–3, and *Ute Daniel*, *Bibliographie zur Sozialgeschichte der Frauen 1800–1914*, in: *Eva Walter*, *Schrieb oft, von Mägede Arbeit müde*, Düsseldorf 1978, pp. 247–78. There are useful collections of original sources in: *Elke Frederiksen* (ed.), *Die Frauenfrage in Deutschland 1865–1915*, Stuttgart 1981; *Gerlinde Hummel-Haasis* (ed.), *Schwester, zerreiße eure Ketten*, Munich 1982; *Richard Klucsarits/Friedrich G. Kürbisch* (eds.), *Arbeiterinnen kämpfen um ihr Recht. Autobiographische Texte zum Kampf rechtloser und entrechteter »Frauenspersonen« in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed., Wuppertal 1981; *Annette Kuhn/Valentine Rothe* (eds.), *Frauen im deutschen Faschismus*, 2 vols., Düsseldorf 1982; and *Renate Möhrmann* (ed.), *Frauenemanzipation im deutschen Vormärz*, Stuttgart 1978. For two more broadly-based collections, see *Eleanor S. Riemer/John C. Fout* (eds.), *European Women: A Documentary History 1789–1945*, New York 1980, and *E. Hellerstein/L. Hume/K. Offen* (eds.), *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States*, Brighton 1981.

sons from women's past for women's action in the present. Both books are fine examples of the sophistication and subtlety of much of women's history today, both show an acute awareness of the factors – notably class – which structured women's lives, and share a concern, already evident in a good deal of previous Central European writing in this area, with the psychological aspects of women's experience, with their inner life as well as the outer forms it took. Both books, too, are careful to study women in relation to men, so that they tell us as much about overall emotional structures and behaviour patterns in past society as they do about the specific subject of women. And both take great pains to distinguish between prescriptive norms and actual behaviour, between fantasy and reality. When all this is added to their clarity of style, their imaginative use of contemporary quotations, and their careful mixing of theoretical insights and empirical research findings, the result is two books that are as entertaining and exciting to read as they are instructive and provocative to contemplate. Both books have their setting in the bourgeois home of late 19th and early 20th-century Central Europe, one in Switzerland, the other in Germany. But while Ursi Blosser and Franziska Gerster usher us in through the front portal, take us round the *Gesellschaftsräume* and finally lead us into the family quarters and the marital bedroom, Karin Walser slips us in quietly through the servants' entrance and shows us a slice of life below stairs, both as it was lived by the servants and as it was imagined by the rest of the household. Blosser and Gerster's book is in two parts, which deal respectively with women's role in the upper-middle class family and »society«, and their education and socialization into this role when young; the parts are really in the wrong order, and it would have made more sense to have printed the sections on socialization first, leading on naturally to women's adult life in the second part. Both parts, however, have much of absorbing interest to say, and are illustrated with useful photographs and lively quotations (though the linguistic abilities of this particular reviewer were sorely tried by the numerous passages in Swiss-German). The authors intelligently play off books of etiquette and formal advice against memoirs and oral-history interviews, diaries and letters. The perils of oral history are illustrated by the authors' acute observations about the extent to which interviewees, like memoir-writers, repress the darker aspects of their past and fit their memories into socially-acceptable categories.

This was certainly a necessary procedure, given the strictness with which most of them were brought up.² The children of the grand bourgeoisie in Basel or Zürich were meant to be »seen and not heard«, and this was above all true of the female children. While boys were allowed to play rough games outside, girls were kept indoors, under constant supervision. The aim of their early socialization was to break their will and supplant their supposedly wild and natural instincts with civilized modes of behaviour which would form the basis for the development of their later »female« character. The children of the Swiss grand bourgeoisie saw relatively little of their parents. Father was a remote, stern, authoritarian figure; mother left most of the physical aspects of childcare – including breast-feeding infants – to servants. Parents frequently went on holiday without their children. Some mothers even set aside an appointed time of the day when their children would be ushered before them, like being presented at Court. Children were basically brought up by servants, and the nanny – often a long-term employee of the family – was a central figure in their lives. The children could be freer in the servants' presence; the lack of distance and relative absence of taboos on what we would now regard as naturally childish behaviour allowed them to play and have fun in a

2 On childhood and upbringing in the 19th century, see Jürgen Schlumbohm (ed.), *Kinderstubben. Wie Kinder zu Bauern, Bürgern, Aristokraten wurden 1700–1850*, Munich 1983; Irene Hardach-Pinke, *Kinderalltag. Aspekte von Kontinuität und Wandel der Kindheit in autobiographischen Zeugnissen 1700 bis 1900*, Frankfurt 1981; Gerd Hardach/Irene Hardach-Pinke (eds.), *Deutsche Kindheiten. Autobiographische Zeugnisse 1700–1900*, Frankfurt 1978; and Juliane Jacobi-Dittrich, *Growing Up Female in the Nineteenth Century*, in: Fout (ed.), *German Women* (op. cit.), pp. 197–217.

way that was virtually impossible in their parents' presence, while servants often did much to get round or soften the impact of parents' disciplinary actions. Relations with children of other families, by contrast, were governed by an outward formality that even went to the lengths of using visiting cards and formal invitations delivered by servants, as a foretaste of social conventions applying in later life.

Children sometimes rebelled against these constraints, usually indirectly, through pranks and escapades, but as far as girls were concerned these rebellions seem to have been very mild. More opportunity for breaking the rules came with early adolescence, from about twelve to sixteen, when as *Backfische* girls from these upper-middle-class families belonged to a distinct, even organized peer-group, in the form of the *Vereinli* (the equivalent of the German *Kränzchen*), carefully put together from socially-acceptable families under the watchful eye of their mothers. Blosser and Gerster have been fortunate enough to locate an extensive diary of the activities of one such *Vereinli*, kept by its members and written in a tone of self-irony that make the passages in which it is cited some of the most entertaining in the book. The members met regularly for sewing, music-making, reading and other approved activities, but they also enjoyed themselves by occasionally being quite unladylike in their deportment, and allowed themselves open discussion of matters normally considered out of bounds in polite society. Among these, relations with boys of their own age took up a great deal of time: but so rare were the opportunities of meeting them, that the most trivial occurrence – a chance eye contact across the street, a smile glimpsed from afar – could set off the most extravagantly romantic crushes. Virtually the only time the girls were actually allowed to touch boys was in dancing-lessons, but here too physical contact was restricted to ritualized and impersonal forms. Movement was deliberately made to be stiff and unnatural. Considerable attention, for example, was paid to the *Komplimenten* or *Reverenzen* which punctuated all the dances at regular intervals. One book of instructions described the *Damenverbeugung* which the girls had to master in this context as follows: »Mit geradem Oberkörper geht die Beugung zuerst von beiden Knien aus. Ehe diese Bewegung ganz beendet ist, muß der vorstehende Fuß den Schwerpunkt aufgenommen haben. Infolge dessen vermag der andere, zurückstehende Fuß durch Erhebung seiner Ferse sich mit Leichtigkeit aus der geschlossenen Stellung zu lösen, um auf der Fußspitze einen kleinen Schritt zurück zu weichen. Der Oberkörper neigt sich vor und richtet sich zugleich wieder auf, während die gebogenen Knie sich strecken unter leichtem Zurückziehen des vorderen Fußes. Der linke Arm schmiegt sich in eleganter Form an das Kleid, während der rechte Arm gegen die Brust geführt wird.« Such a manoeuvre might be executed up to fifty times in a single dance. The aim was to school the body in stiff, formal postures and movements, which – in other forms – would govern its social presentation in future years.

Formal socialization was intensified when the girls went on to finishing school (*Pensionat*) after Confirmation. Here they acquired a smattering of knowledge with which to converse in polite society, were subjected to a severe disciplinary regime, and were completely isolated from male company except on formal occasions which were devised mainly as tests of their deportment.³ From finishing school the girls, now metamorphosed into young ladies, went

3 For girls' education, see *Dagmar Grenz*, *Mädchenliteratur. Von den moralisch-belehrenden Schriften im 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Herausbildung der Backfischliteratur im 19. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1981; *Monika Simmel*, *Erziehung zum Weibe. Mädchenbildung im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt 1980; *Gertrud Tornieporth*, *Studien zur Frauenbildung*, Weinheim 1979; *Margarete Schecker*, *Die Entwicklung der Mädchenschule*, Weinheim 1963; *Jürgen Zinnecker*, *Sozialgeschichte der Mädchenbildung*, Weinheim 1975; *G. und L. Bernstein*, *Attitudes Toward Women's Education in Germany, 1870–1914*, in: *International Journal of Women's Studies* 2, 1979, pp. 473–88; the same authors: *The Curriculum for German Girls' Schools, 1870–1914*, in: *Pedagogica Historica* 18, 1978, pp. 275–95; *Joanne Schneider*, *Enlightened Reforms and Bavarian Girls' Education*, in: *Fout* (ed.), *German Women* (op. cit.), pp. 55–71; and *James C. Albisetti*, *Could Separate Be Equal?* Helene

back home to learn about household management by helping their mothers, to while away the time in cultural and philanthropic activities, and to launch themselves into the marriage market. Here they were required to present themselves as dainty, tender, innocent, erotically passive, pleasant, happy and essentially weak creatures, damsels clad – at dances – in ethereal ball-gowns that denied their real physicality while ritually advertising its charms through the obligatory *décolleté* exposure of the upper part of the breasts. All the while they had to retain an image of other-worldly virginal purity, from which the slightest deviation could spell a ruined reputation. They could not afford to show preference for one man over another, nor to make any positive approaches themselves; even their reactions had to be neutral: blushing on an inappropriate occasion could cause quite a minor scandal because the emotions it revealed were not supposed to be present in a lady. The young ladies longed for a husband, a *König des Herzens*, a knight in shining armour to rescue them from their state of suspended animation, in terms which made it clear that they had internalized the belief in male superiority even in their fantasies. Yet they could to some extent manipulate the market, by going to social occasions where it was known that a favoured suitor would be present, and avoiding those where they were likely to be pursued by unwanted admirers, and within the limits of the small-scale society of the local grand bourgeoisie in Zürich or Basel, they were at least able to exercise some choice of prospective husband.

Nevertheless, this was no preparation for married life, least of all for its sexual aspect. Women of this class entered the married state in a condition of almost complete ignorance; as the authors show through extensive quotation from an intimate diary, even the most considerate of husbands could do little to diminish the shock of direct sexual contact, however long he might put off the moment of truth in the interests of gradually accustoming his wife to a sense of physical familiarity. Unlike women, men in these circles were allowed to sow their wild oats at university or elsewhere, and they were also generally considerably older than their spouses, so they were likely to be a good deal more experienced. Books of advice like Hermann Klenke's *Das Weib als Gattin* (1872) were of little use since they refused to be at all explicit and contented themselves with vague references to *physische Umarmung* and nothing more. Klenke, like other authorities, advised sexual restraint and accompanied this with dire warnings about the consequences of over-indulgence. Others advised the wife always to keep her husband sexually dissatisfied so that he would keep coming back for more («Laß Deinen Mann jeden Tropfen der Liebe einzeln genießen; gib ihm nie soviel, daß er gesättigt nichts mehr verlange»). None of them allowed that women could or should derive sexual fulfilment from marriage; on the contrary, they unanimously emphasised the importance of the wife never losing her sense of modesty (*Schamhaftigkeit*). Small wonder, as the authors note, that the chances of either partner deriving sexual satisfaction from marriage were minimal.⁴

Lange and Women's Education in Imperial Germany, in: *History of Education Quarterly* 22, 1982, pp. 301–17.

4 For introductory discussions of marriage, family and sexuality in the 19th-century bourgeoisie, see *Frevert, Frauen-Geschichte* (op. cit.), pp. 128–134; *Heide Rosenbaum, Formen der Familie*, Frankfurt 1982, p. 251–380, *Hellerstein et al.* (eds.), *Victorian Women* (op. cit.), and especially *Peter Gay, The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, Vol. I: *Education of the Senses*, Oxford 1984, Vol. II: *The Tender Passion*, Oxford 1986. This is a very under-researched area for Central Europe (cf. the remark by *Fout, German Women*, p. 17, that it was impossible to locate anyone in a position to contribute an essay to his collection). There is, however, a substantial tradition of writing on sexuality in Victorian England going back to the essays in *N. Annan et al., Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians*, London 1949 and *Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830–1870*, New Haven 1957, and including such classic works as *Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians*, New York 1966. For a useful recent survey, see *Jeffrey Weeks, Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sex since 1800*, London 1981.

Within marriage, the wife was confronted with contradictory roles, which are analysed with great perceptiveness in the first, more interpretative part of the book. To begin with, she was a household manager, overseeing the servants and arranging dinners, receptions and so on. The demands of this role had been progressively reduced over the course of the nineteenth century, as the production of clothes and food and other necessities had been transferred from the home to the industrial world. Few grand bourgeois houses still had their own farms in the 1890s; and clothes were now purchased from Paris couturiers who visited twice a year or so. Nevertheless, managing not only a cook, a chambermaid, a nanny and a coachman/gardener/handyman but also a small army of part-time, living-out servants from washerwomen to under-gardeners, required the exercise of »masculine« powers of organisation, discipline and command. These conflicted with the passivity demanded of her as a wife, a passivity reinforced by the elaborate, unpractical dresses and tightly-laced corsets whose restrictions on movement stressed her lack of productive functions and distance from physical labour. Finally, as a mother she was supposed to transmit social values to her children and discipline them at the same time as showing them love and understanding.

In carrying out these roles, the women of the grand bourgeoisie were obliged to move within a highly-ritualised social world, in which spontaneity was virtually impossible. Insisting on the maintenance of »good tone« and propriety could give them a certain degree of power over men. But this was far outweighed by the system of patriarchal dominance on which home life was based, with the husband exercising the ultimate disciplinary power over children and servants alike, and the whole enterprise, particularly the presentation of the home to the outside world, geared to his interests as banker, merchant or industrialist. The extreme formality of social intercourse customary in these circles, argue the authors, led to the repressed emotions of husband and wife finding an outlet in dichotomizing fantasies about women as angels at the hearth or wild incorporations of sexuality, men as fatherly protectors or dangerous erotic tempters.⁵ On whom were these fantasies projected? The answer, as supplied by Karin Walser in the second of the books under review, is clear: they were projected onto the servants.

II.

Domestic service was the largest single category of female employment, at least away from the land, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were over one and a third million domestic servants in Germany in the 1890s, and there were still over a million in 1925. They were particularly concentrated in the big cities. In 1905, there were 148,000 in Berlin alone, a third of all women working outside their own home in the city. Domestic servants came in many varieties, from chambermaids and nannies to wet-nurses and lady's companions, but the vast majority were servants of all work. Half the servants employed in Berlin in 1885 were still in households wealthy enough to employ other servants as well, but by 1910 this proportion had sunk to only a quarter. Most servants never graduated to a better-paid, more prestigious domestic position such as cook, but stayed in the occupation only for a few years, until they married or left for a job in a factory or elsewhere. Typically, ser-

5 The classic German discussion of these dichotomizing fantasies is *Klaus Theweleit, Männerphantasien*, 2 vols., Frankfurt 1978, but they have frequently been noted before, in the English literature on the subject, notably *Eric Trudgill, Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, London 1976 (note the title). *Keith Thomas, The Double Standard*, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* XX, 1959, 2, is an important general discussion, while the central case of Arthur Munby and his sexual attitudes towards maidservants is discussed in *Leonore Davidoff, Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick*, in: *Feminist Studies* 5, 1979, 1, and *Derek Hudson, Munby: Man of Two Worlds*, London 1972.

vants were young, below the age of 30, born and brought up in the countryside, working in service as their introduction to urban life. And they were women: as Rolf Engelsing showed some time ago, menservants disappeared almost entirely as a group in the course of industrialization in the nineteenth century.⁶

A world in which so many women were servants living in the homes of their employers, and in which not only the very wealthy but even the professional classes employed servants (even though they could scarcely afford it), was a very different one from our own, and it is not surprising that historians have been drawn to investigate it in recent years. Apart from Engelsing, who may be said to have pioneered the field as far as Germany is concerned, Uta Ottmüller published a book in 1978 investigating the reasons for the decline of domestic service, while Heidi Müller's splendid catalogue to the exhibition on domestic servants held in the Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde in Berlin in 1981 provided a comprehensive, well-illustrated survey of a vast range of aspects of the servant's life. In 1982, Katharina Schlegel published an important article on relations between employers and servants in nineteenth-century Hamburg, providing a sensitive exploration of conflict, exploitation and resistance within the bourgeois home, on the basis of a collection of lawsuits brought by servants against their employers, or vice versa, (*Dienstboten-Streitsachen*), now held in the Staatsarchiv Hamburg. The psycho-sexual world of the servant has been explored by Regina Schulte in an article of 1978 and in her book, *Sperrbezirke*, published in 1979, while another general survey of exploitation and resistance is provided by Dorothee Wierling in an article of 1983. Comparative studies are available for France (by Anne Martin-Fugier and Geneviève Fraisse) and for France and Britain (by Theresa McBride).⁷ So the history of domestic service can hardly be said to be »forgotten«, as Karin Walser claims it has been in her book on the subject (p. 10).

Walser's contribution, nevertheless, is an important one. She is the first historian apart from Katharina Schlegel to explore the relationship between servants and the families they served, and she does this less by presenting new material (of which, indeed, there is very little in this book) than by bringing new and explicitly feminist perceptions to bear. Walser begins her absorbing and clearly-written analysis by noting the ambiguities of the servant's position in the bourgeois home. In daily contact with the family, yet not of it, dealing with intimate aspects of family life yet enjoying no intimacy with its members, the servant was a standing contradiction in a home life that – especially in the central reaches of the bourgeoisie – had become privatized as never before. Employers tried to overcome the threat that servants po-

6 Rolf Engelsing, *Dienstbotenlektüre im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, and: *Das häusliche Personal in der Epoche der Industrialisierung*, and: *Das Vermögen der Dienstboten*, in: R. Engelsing, *Zur Sozialgeschichte deutscher Mittel- und Unterschichten*, 2nd ed., Göttingen 1978, pp. 180–283, esp. pp. 230–233.

7 Uta Ottmüller, *Die Dienstbotenfrage. Zur Sozialgeschichte der doppelten Ausnutzung von Dienstmädchen im deutschen Kaiserreich*, Münster 1978; Heidi Müller, *Dienstbare Geister: Leben und Arbeitswelt städtischer Dienstboten*, Berlin 1981; Katharina Schlegel, *Mistress and Servant in Nineteenth Century Hamburg*, in: *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians* 15, Spring 1983, pp. 60–77; Regina Schulte, *Sperrbezirke. Tugendhaftigkeit und Prostitution in der bürgerlichen Welt*, Frankfurt 1979, and the same author's: *Dienstmädchen im herrschaftlichen Haushalt. Zur Genese ihrer Sozialpsychologie*, in: *Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte* 41, 1978, pp. 879–920; Dorothee Wierling, »Ich hab meine Arbeit gemacht – was wollte sie mehr?« *Dienstmädchen im städtischen Haushalt der Jahrhundertwende*, in: *Hausen* (ed.), op. cit., pp. 144–171; Anne Martin-Fugier, *La place des bonnes. La domesticité féminine à Paris en 1900*, Paris 1919; Geneviève Fraisse, *Femmes toutes mains. Essai sur le service domestique*, Paris 1979; Theresa McBride, *The Domestic Revolution. The Modernization of Household Service in England and France 1820–1920*, London 1976.

sed to their privacy by subjecting them to a whole range of depersonalizing techniques, from changing their names arbitrarily when they were signed on, to forcing them to adopt highly formalized modes of address when talking to them. The danger that employing servants would bring the state into the home because of all the legal rights and obligations that employment usually entailed, was warded off by the frustration of all attempts to reform the patriarchal regulations of the *Gesindeordnung*, the law governing servants. This originally applied to servants on noble landed estates but it also – and not by chance – covered ordinary domestic servants as well. Servants were reduced to the status of automata by the constant and arbitrary summons of the bell, by hours of work that were fixed at sixteen to eighteen hours a day but in practice were limitless, and by a coldness and reserve on the part of employers that left them without any feeling of recognition for what they were doing.

Walser cites a number of work-plans drawn up by employers for their servants. These make clear the desire of the lady of the house to keep her maid busy every minute of the day. The author notes that many of them lay great stress on the personal cleanliness of servants («Von 1/2 4–4 muß das Mädchen sich zum 2. Male waschen und anziehen»), and comments on the bourgeois fear of servants bringing dirt into the home, but she largely misses the significance of this obsession. Dirt meant disease, and servants, whose job it was to deal with dirt, formed a barrier between the bourgeois family and the all-too-present danger of epidemics and infections in the nineteenth-century. Many of them paid for this with their lives, for domestic service suffered by far the highest mortality rates of any occupation in the great typhoid and cholera epidemics such as those which struck Hamburg in 1887–8 and 1892, even though they belonged to the healthiest and most resilient age-groups in the population. In such epidemics, indeed, servants formed virtually the only link between the bourgeois home and the outside world, as the middle-class family shut itself off from the dangers of public life and relied on servants to run all its errands instead. The bourgeois fear of servants spreading dirt into the family was also a psychological, symbolic expression of the feeling that the servant was a foreign body in the intimacy of the home, an intruder, an anomaly, and as the anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown, images of dirt commonly express fears of disorder of this kind, when the purity and integrity, whether real or imagined, of an existing institution, seem to be threatened.⁸

To overcome these contradictions bourgeois families pursued the fantasy of the »treasure«, the »pearl«, the devoted, self-sacrificing servant who suppressed her own desires for personal fulfilment, independence, sexual expression, marriage and children, and lived vicariously through her employer's family instead, serving it her whole life long; the kind of servant, in fact, most often seen on nostalgic television programmes such as »Upstairs, Downstairs«; a fantasy-projection of a mother who never says »no«, a woman with no wishes, no desires, no life of her own. The reality was very different. On average, servants lasted only between six and nine months in each job before changing to another. On their afternoons off they released their pent-up resentments in a flood of »gossip« with fellow-servants from other households, and many employers had reason enough to fear that their reputation would suffer should they overstep the mark in their dealings with those who worked for them. No wonder that employers did their best – or worst – to restrict servants' time out of the home. On shopping expeditions for their employers, servants could find ready excuses for staying out longer than expected in order to indulge in more exchanges of information and complaints with friends. Moreover, because wages were so low and food and lodging provided by the employers so miserable (especially by contrast to that enjoyed by the family), servants

⁸ For disease and mortality among domestic servants, see chapter 5 of *Richard J. Evans, Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years 1830–1910*, Oxford University Press, 1987. An anthropological perspective on dirt is provided by *Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger*, Oxford 1977.

generally regarded it as their right to fiddle their shopping expenses and keep the customary *Marktgroschen* back for themselves.⁹ As a contemporary observed, »Ein Gebund Spargel, das man für achtzig Pfennige ersteht, wird der Herrschaft mit einer Mark verrechnet: die überschüssigen zwanzig Pfennige sind die Privatdotation der findigen Käuferin. »Nun Jungfer Köchin!« hört man auf den Märkten unserer Großstädte die feisten Hökerweiber den körbeschleppenden Dienstmädchen zurufen, »wollen Sie nichts bei mir einkaufen? Hier die Hähnchen lasse ich Ihnen für zwei Mark fünfzig Pfennig. Sie können Ihrer Herrschaft drei Mark berechnen« (quoted p. 96). Back home, the servant assumed an outward correctness, under which her mind continued to range with amusement, anger or contempt over the behaviour of her employers during the day.

Should the worst come to the worst, and she left with a bad reference, the »loss« of her service-book was the likely result: over a thousand »disappeared« in this way in Berlin every year, enabling those who had mislaid them to start with a clean sheet once more. Official attempts to control the labour market for domestic servants were resisted by the majority, who preferred uncontrolled private job agencies, where they also became accustomed to laying down terms (such as refusing to do the washing) for the information of prospective employers. Very few ever joined a union, however. Their scattered, individualised form of work made this unlikely, and concerted strike action was out of the question. The Social Democrats, for their part, did a great deal to bring the miseries and injustices of domestic service before the public eye, and fought legal cases on servants' behalf, but they had only a limited understanding of their needs, advising them, for example, to use the official job agencies instead of private ones. Walser cites Lily Braun as evidence for Social Democratic uneasiness about employing servants at the same time as trying to unionise them, but Braun's aristocratic background and substantial (though not always secure) private means made her very unusual among the Social Democrats, very few of whom had servants, and it is dangerous to generalise from her (in this, indeed as in anything else).¹⁰

If the fantasy of the servant as a self-sacrificing »treasure« was very far from the truth, then so, argues Walser, was its opposite, the fantasy of the servant as prostitute. Like the prostitute, the servant, in a sense, sold her personal services to bourgeois men. In the home they projected onto her their fantasies of a sensuality denied their own lives by the code of conduct of the time. The sons of the house made the servant the object of their oedipal desires. Women too indulged in such fantasies, projecting on to the servant the fears and desires engendered by the repression of their own sexuality. Women's organizations, housewives' societies, even the feminist movement, all believed that time off, away from the moralising influence of the family, would only provide the servant with the opportunity to get into trouble, and any loosening of the family's control over the servant's sexuality would inevitably end in illegitimate birth and eventual prostitution. These fantasies thus became yet another instrument of control; they also generated a contemporary literature, linking domestic service with prostitution, which has been uncritically accepted by subsequent historians (including the present reviewer). Yet, says Walser, it was wrong: many prostitutes were certainly former domestic servants, but so too were many working women in the same age-group. The proportions – about 28 % – were the same, and so the alleged connection vanishes into thin air.

This argument is as confused and unconvincing as Walser's opposite thesis, of the depersonalization of the servant, is logical and persuasive. Many estimates of the proportion of former domestic servants inscribed as prostitutes considerably exceed the proportion of ser-

9 For more general discussion of this characteristic aspect of working-class behaviour, see *Richard J. Evans* (ed.), *The German Working Class 1888–1933: The Politics of Everyday Life*, London 1982.

10 *Alfred G. Meyer*, *The Feminism and Socialism of Lily Braun*, Bloomington 1985; *Lily Braun*, *Memoiren einer Sozialistin*, 2 vols., Munich 1908–11, Reprint Berlin/Bonn 1985.

vants in the female workforce (which was itself mainly concentrated in the under-30 age group in other branches such as factory work, too).¹¹ Walser cannot simply dismiss or ignore these estimates without further discussion. In a sense, however, they are beside the point, for what they record is the former occupation of the small and dwindling proportion of full-time prostitutes officially registered with the police, a group that (as I pointed out some years ago)¹² was by definition untypical. The reason why there were so many ex-domestic servants among them is probably that ex-servants, with their rural background, lacking family and connections in the city, and without the intimate knowledge of the urban world that came from growing up in it, were less able to work clandestinely, as most prostitutes did, and so were more likely to be picked up by the police and inscribed on the official list.

It was in any case no fantasy that many prostitutes were ex-servants, even if their numbers, taken absolutely, were small. As Walser herself notes, servants were instantly dismissed if pregnant, and were unlikely to get another job: if their lover deserted them, prostitution – as biographies and interviews indicated – could indeed be the result. So the connection between illegitimate motherhood and prostitution, arbitrarily denied by Walser, was real too. Walser also confuses the observation, made by many historians, that a large proportion of prostitutes were ex-servants, with the assertion, which nobody to my knowledge has made, that a large proportion of domestic servants ended up as prostitutes. This is quite a different order of statement, since (as is well known) the number of servants in any given city vastly exceeded the number of prostitutes. Nevertheless, the fact that some servants did become prostitutes does require explanation (of the sort attempted with some plausibility by Regina Schulte) just as the fact that some women factory workers, for different reasons, also became prostitutes, requires explanation too. Walser's arguments in this area are valid on one point, however. As both Alain Corbin and Regina Schulte have demonstrated, the once-common notion that servants were in constant danger of seduction by the master or »young master« is indeed a fantasy. Though it did occasionally occur (one recalls that Karl Marx had an illegitimate child by his servant), it was on the whole rare. Distance and impersonality were the norm, especially when the frequent turnover of domestic staff is taken into consideration. The evidence provided by Walser for such distance is drawn from a variety of contemporary sources and is detailed and persuasive. By contrast, the evidence for the alleged fantasy of the servant as prostitute is taken overwhelmingly from novels, where of course it serves the particular aesthetic purposes of the novelist, and cannot be assumed to be a simple reflection of reality. Sexual relations are the least known, perhaps least knowable aspects of life in the bourgeois home, but there are better ways of getting at them than through fiction.

III.

These two books, with their similarity of approach and complementarity of subject, raise three more general questions which are worth briefly discussing further. First, how typical are the patterns they reveal? Are they general characteristics of bourgeois domesticity or do

11 Figures provided by *Alfred Urban*, *Staat und Prostitution in Hamburg vom Beginn der Reglementierung bis zur Aufhebung der Kasernierung (1807–1927)*, Hamburg 1927, pp. 39–40, 103, indicate that 162 out of 279 newly inscribed regulated prostitutes in Hamburg in 1872 gave their profession as »domestic servant«, that is, no fewer than 58 %. *Abraham Flexner*, *Prostitution in Europe*, New York 1914, p. 157 cited figures showing that 431 out of a total of 1,200 prostitutes inscribed in Berlin in 1909–10 were former domestic servants, or 39 %. *Alain Corbin*, *Les filles de nocé: Misère sexuelle et prostitution aux 19e et 20e siècles*, Paris 1978, notes (p. 242) that some 35 % of prostitutes registered at Marseille in 1872–82 were domestics, and supplies the same figure of 35 % domestics among 6,342 prostitutes registered in Paris in 1877–87.

12 *Richard J. Evans*, *Prostitution, State and Society in Imperial Germany*, in: *Past and Present* 70, February 1976, pp. 106–29.

they reflect more specific experiences linked to time and place? Relatively little work has so far been done in this area, but much of what is discussed in the two books seems to have been fairly characteristic of upper-middle-class domestic life at this time. The finishing schools to which the *Backfische* of Basel went, taught the same lessons to young ladies from Germany, France, Italy, Britain and other countries too, and the students were commonly a mixture of nationalities. There were differences in the values and behaviour of a grand patriciate like the merchants of Basel, and the upper-middle class in a smaller provincial centre like Winterthur, but on the other hand the life of a young lady in other European cities with a wealthy and closed mercantile elite, like Hamburg, was not so very dissimilar, and the existence of a *Dame*, *Gattin* or *Hausfrau* in the elite of Zürich was similar in many ways to that led by the ladies of the leisure class in bourgeois France or England at the same time. In most European towns, too, domestic servants followed similar patterns of recruitment, employment and exploitation. Female socialization, especially in the upper reaches of society, was probably more uniform across Europe than male, because of its confinement to domestic roles.¹³ Secondly, although all three authors go to some trouble to distinguish the normative and the imaginary from everyday reality, do they get it right? A great deal of the argument in both books depends on accepting that bourgeois women were socialized into repressing their own sexuality; interestingly, both books also argue that this was the case with bourgeois men too, with Blosser and Gerster dismissing the idea that they turned to prostitutes for sexual satisfaction as a »male myth« and Walser dismissing the idea that they seduced their maid-servants in similar terms, as well as going on to claim that the dimensions of the prostitution business have been exaggerated anyway. Yet some caution needs to be exercised in this area. In the opening volume of his massive work on *The Bourgeois Experience*, Peter Gay has marshalled some impressive evidence for female sexuality and sensuality even in the middle classes at the height of the Victorian age.¹⁴ Blosser and Gerster's sample of original material on this point is a very small one, and difficult to use because of its reticence (in contrast to the openness displayed in some of Gay's sources). The copious prescriptive literature cited by the two Swiss authors is not matched by anything like the same richness of original testimonies of actual experience, and Walser relies almost wholly on fictional literature. It may be the case that other investigations, for example using the wealth of female testimony available in the family archives of the grand bourgeoisie in a town like Hamburg, will reveal a different and more varied picture.¹⁵ Certainly the social pressures operating against open displays of emotion, physicality and sexual desire in these circles were enormous. But the dichotomy between public and private life was sharp and well-understood, and hypocrisy was

13 See in particular *Bonnie G. Smith*, *Ladies of the Leisure Class. The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton 1981; *Sibylle Meyer*, *Die mühsame Arbeit des demonstrativen Müßiggangs. Über die häuslichen Pflichten der Beamtenfrauen im Kaiserreich*, in: *Hausen* (ed.), *Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte* (op. cit.), pp. 144–171; *Sibylle Meyer*, *Das Theater mit der Hausarbeit. Bürgerliche Repräsentation in der Familie der Wilhelminischen Zeit*, Frankfurt 1982; *Leonore Davidoff*, *The Best Circles*, London 1973.

14 *Peter Gay*, *The Bourgeois Experience*, Vol. 1: *The Education of the Senses*, Oxford 1984. See also *F. B. Smith*, *Sexuality in Britain 1800–1900: Some Suggested Revisions*, in: *Martha Vicinus* (ed.), *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, Bloomington 1977; *Carl N. Degler*, *What Ought to Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century*, in: *American Historical Review* 79/5, December 1974; and *Angus McLaren*, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-century England*, London 1978.

15 The women of the grand bourgeoisie used their leisure to the full in writing numerous letters and copious diaries, and in circles where family tradition was strong, such as the mercantile elite in Hamburg, these have been preserved in considerable numbers. See *Staatsarchiv Hamburg 622–1: Familienarchive (passim)*.

one of the main ways in which the middle classes managed to deal with it. It would seem likely that at least some women managed to triumph over these obstacles and build a sexually-satisfying relationship none the less; while, conversely, Alain Corbin's classic study on prostitution in 19th-century France does show an increasing demand on the part of bourgeois husbands not only for sexual satisfaction outside marriage but also for emotional warmth as well. There is certainly a good deal of evidence that bourgeois men regularly frequented brothels before marriage, and this suggests that many of them would have found few problems in coming to terms with continuing to do so later on.¹⁶ Ultimately, perhaps, it has to be said that we really do not know enough about this area to be sure of our facts, so that one can only conclude with the reflection (always comforting to historians) that more research is needed in this area.

Finally, what lessons do the three authors derive from their study of domesticity? What can present-day feminists learn from these two books? Interestingly, the conclusions they draw are diametrically opposed to one another. Walser sees the decline of domestic service as an early example of the quantitative limits of wage labour which advanced industrial societies, with their increasing long-term unemployment, seem to have come up against. Servanthood declined because working within the home was held in general contempt. Servants were the pariahs of the day – as expressed in contemptuous fantasies about them – just as housewives are in our own time. Women themselves, then and now, have colluded in this contempt, even developed their own specifically female expression of it. Feminists have to come to terms with this fact, just as men must come to terms with their part in devaluing domesticity. The solution, Walser suggests, is as follows: »[. . .] Frauen werden ihren Bereich gegen jede, auch positive Veränderung durch Beteiligung von Männern abschotten müssen, solange sie sich durch indirekte Strategien der Kontrolle und des Abhängighaltens anderer für die Verhinderung der Entfaltung ihrer Weiblichkeit als Frau und als Mutter entschädigen und damit diese Verhinderung selbst mittragen. Umgekehrt werden Männer sich nicht solidarisch in bisher den Frauen zugewiesenen Arbeitsformen engagieren können, sondern entweder die Frau zu kopieren oder zu beherrschen versuchen, solange sie sich der Konfrontation mit dem anderen Geschlecht entziehen, es in Abhängigkeit halten und so selbst abhängig werden. Die Utopie neuer Arbeitsformen kann nur die sein, daß ein Verhältnis zwischen den Geschlechtern sich entwickelt, das es nicht nötig hat, den Geschlechterkampf auch als Arbeitskampf auszutragen, sondern das darauf zielt, die gesellschaftlich notwendigen Arbeiten so unter sich aufzuteilen, daß Entwertung sich erübrigt.« Walser goes on to suggest that housework should become a form of wage labour like any other, and men should stop trying to become like women. Walser endorses the popular scorn for the *Mappi*, »Väter, die, getrieben vom Gebärneid, danach streben, die Mutter zu ersetzen, statt durch Differenz zu ihr und Gemeinsamkeit mit ihr Väterlichkeit zu entwickeln.« Women's work, she argues, whether waged or not, has a validity of its own. Women have never been integrated into the world of waged labour, which has depended largely on their support as unwaged housewives, nor will they be, in contrast to the assumptions of orthodox Marxism. Women have not been forcibly confined to the home by tradition, patriarchy, capitalism, or any other historical force; they have chosen it as their own sphere, and defending themselves against being sucked in to the horrors of exploited waged labour outside the home can be seen as a form of resistance to male domination.

16 Corbin, op. cit., provides a detailed analysis of changing forms of male sexual desire in 19th-century France. Feminists in Hamburg at the turn of the century were not slow to point out the regularity with which »The patriotic student celebrations at Friedrichsruh [. . .] had their conclusion in the brothels of Hamburg« (cited in my »Prostitution, State and Society«, op. cit., p. 123), a verdict confirmed in the personal reminiscences of *Emil Helfferich*, *Ein Leben*, Hamburg 1963.

Blosser and Gerster take a very different view. Taking their cue from Norbert Elias, Karin Hausen and Klaus Theweleit,¹⁷ they argue that the notion of a »female sphere« is a historical creation of patriarchy, as is the idea of a »female character« (*weibliches Wesen*). Datable to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it rendered middle-class women almost completely helpless (*unmündig*) and condemned them to internalize and live out a set of values and behaviour patterns that denied them much of the possibility of expressing their true humanity, just as, in a different way and to a lesser degree, the historical development of the polar opposite of the male character repressed a large part of men's humanity as well. The world of the home as they portray it is not women's sphere, it is governed by men, and women are forcibly confined to it in a strictly subordinate role. The separation of male and female spheres is seen by the two Swiss authors as the fundamental basis for a double standard of morality, in which men use their power over the world of work, money, property, communication and politics to impose on women restraints and sanctions they would not dream of imposing on themselves. Correspondingly the turn-of-the-century feminist movement, in encouraging women to enter the public sphere, is seen as a liberating influence by Blosser and Gerster, and indeed appears as such in the biographies of several of their subjects, whether they took advantage of it or not. They add: »Was die Autorinnen bei dieser Arbeit aber immer wieder überraschte, war die ›heimliche Aktualität‹ des Themas: Aus der Rollenzuschreibung der Geschlechter erwachsende Ansprüche und Anforderungen bilden auch heute noch einen Teil der inneren und äußeren Realität der Frauen. Selbstbewußtsein, Durchsetzungsfähigkeit und beruflicher Erfolg werden weiterhin primär dem Mann zugeschrieben. Dieselben Fähigkeiten werden der Frau zwar nicht von vornherein abgesprochen, aber sie muß damit rechnen, daß ihr Aggressivität nachgesagt und ihre Weiblichkeit in Frage gestellt wird. Nicht zu vergessen sind die im Zuge der wirtschaftlichen Rezession und Stagnation wieder lauter werdenden Stimmen, die die Frauen – versehen mit einer neuen Mütterlichkeit – wieder an den Herd verbannen möchten.« The duty of present-day feminism is thus seen by those authors as the exact opposite of what it appears to Walser to be.

It would be going far beyond the bounds of this review essay to debate the virtues and problems of these two views.¹⁸ Seen as theoretical mediations of historical work, they both have a good deal to recommend them. Walser, and the team at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research to which she belongs, have made fruitful use of their version of feminism to generate new insights into the positive reasons for choices made by women in past society, thus breaking free from the all-too-common view of women as objects of policy and victims of society;¹⁹ while Blosser and Gerster have used theirs in turn to undermine many popular myths about the joys of »home, sweet home« in the Victorian age. Yet ultimately it seems to this reviewer that it is the two Swiss feminist historians who have the more secure grasp on the social dynamics of power, the better understanding of the mythical character of the mas-

17 Karin Hausen, Die Polarisierung der »Geschlechtscharaktere« – Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben, in: Werner Conze (ed.), Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas. Neue Forschungen, Stuttgart 1977; Klaus Theweleit, Männerphantasien (op. cit.), and Norbert Elias, Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation, 7th ed., 2 Vols., Frankfurt 1980.

18 For related historical work, see particularly Irene Stoehr, »Organisierte Mütterlichkeit«: Zur Politik der deutschen Frauenbewegung um 1900, in: Hausen (ed.), Frauen suchen ihre Geschichte (op. cit.), and the controversy between Irene Stoehr, Machtergriffen? Deutsche Frauenbewegung 1933, in: Courage: Aktuelle Frauenzeitung 8, 1983, pp. 24–32 and Regula Venske, Der »andere Blick«? – Frauen, Faschismus, »weiblicher Widerstand«, in: Hamburger Frauenzeitung, Summer 1983.

19 See for example Helgard Kramer, Frankfurt's Working Women: Scapegoats or Winners of the Great Depression?, in: Richard J. Evans/Dick Geary (eds.), The German Unemployed: Experiences and Consequences of Mass Unemployment from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich, London 1987, pp. 108–141.

culine and the feminine, the clearer vision of the contradictory and confining nature of »women's sphere«, the sharper nose for the deforming and damaging effects of sexual stereotyping on human society and the lives of those who belong to it; and it is their recipe for action which surely holds out the better promise of a more humane society in the future.