

A Response to “Serving in the Household and the Imagination: The Brontës, Alcott and the Interconnected Roles of a Neglected ‘Transatlantic’ Female Figure,” by Paula Guimarães

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Maurizio Vaudagna, in grateful memory

Since the mid-18th century, the time period that Ian Watt associates with the rise of the novel, the maid has been the unsurpassed emblem of the social climber, who humbly accesses genteel families in order to gain an elevated social role by marrying her employer or other family member. Her achievement of better standards of living was epitomized by the social progress of the shrewd and coquettish home servant in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), establishing a literary pattern of social emancipation later confirmed by Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), whose protagonist reaches the same status in a more scrupulous and tactful way. By comparing the latter with Alcott’s domestic servants, Paula Guimarães astutely follows Christine Doyle in taking the domestic career of Brontë’s heroine as the main model of social mobility in Alcott’s fiction. That British classic also reflected the hardship of the American writer’s own youth, when poverty induced her to put aside her literary ambitions to start a degrading apprenticeship as a servant in a wealthier family.

Guimarães’s article adds further historical and literary evidence on British servants, developing the fruitful transatlantic connections aptly solicited by Christine Doyle’s volume. Her argument re-elaborates the dynamic features of the domestic Victorian heroine, insisting on the social progress typical of governesses and family maids even if neglecting the menial aspects of the household servant that Alcott strategically introduces in her minor narratives and which, as I here argue, could constitute a fruitful research path on the subject.

Louisa May Alcott was very young when she left her home to spend exhausting weeks of humiliating boot-blacking for a bachelor who initially welcomed her in “a truly fraternal spirit” as “one of the family in all respects, and only required to help about the lighter work,” later to treat her as a “galley slave” comparable to the chattel of captive Black servants (“Out to Service” 1-2).

The drudgery of that labor stayed with her for a long time, so that, even in better days when she was able to hire her own domestic help, she expressed her distance from the laziness of the leisure class, which she satirized in *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1869). Before achieving her enormous success, housework had always been a constant concern for Alcott. She took turns with her sisters to secure her parents the domestic assistance they needed. No less than Jo and Amy March in *Little Women* (1868), Louisa engaged in innumerable discussions with her sibling May to decide who of them had to quit their creative stays in Boston to resume the heavy chores that their home required. This was in a pre-electric era with few modern appliances and facilities to keep their place warm and clean, as Sandra H. Petrulionis sums up in her recent essay fully devoted to the long-neglected servant in *Little Women*, Hannah Mullet: “At no time did the Alcott girls benefit from the loving labor of a live-in servant such as Hannah” (69). Both at Hillside and Orchard House, while Bronson Alcott took care of the garden and of the construction work occasionally needed, his daughters were only seldomly sustained by hired servants usually paid by their benevolent uncle, Samuel May. In those years, very distinguished governesses and instructors like Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody joined the family to contribute to Bronson’s pedagogic experiment of “Temple School” but, unlike the charming maid who lived and worked with the March sisters in *Little Women*, none of them was hired on a steady basis.

Family diaries and letters occasionally refer to the menial work of unskilled servants, but they remain undetected in both *Jane Eyre* and *Little Women*. Their invisible, humble activities were reserved for illiterate immigrants and Black servants who, as Alcott incidentally reports, took upon themselves the heavy job of cleaning and cooking in overheated basements quite distant from the living rooms of most Victorian domestics celebrated in family fiction. Those kitchens, as Strasser and other historians of domestic service in America pointed out, were the central heating of the Victorian home, and created the worst imaginable working conditions in terms of wages, hours, and duties. The low-waged, Black cooks and the immigrant domestics who inhabited those furnaces are absent in the March saga but are resurrected in minor narratives less aimed at confirming the emancipatory features of the rising governess. Still, the most

demanding home service was the humblest, the unskilled work of those who inhabited the lowest spheres of the domestic hierarchy: it offered no career perspectives and was too humiliating to suit the ambitions of most family maids and governesses. A menial servant, as I have previously argued, was never “one of the family” and was listed among the vituperated Irish and Black servants who also included the Mediterranean immigrants who were considered Black, and forced to live in a condition of interracial proximity, which created innumerable conflicts and frictions, but also innumerable narrative possibilities (Daniele 491). What I argue here is that, having been a menial servant herself and not a governess, unlike her fellow domestic women writers who hesitated to explore the lower ranks of that domestic hierarchy, Louisa May Alcott reproduced, in her pioneering realism, dialects and contrasts that proletarian writers like Rebecca Harding Davis fully captured.

The social value of the domestic system advocated by the reformer Catharine Beecher (Sklar) turned even a non-conformist home like the Alcotts’ into an immigrant shelter and a co-ed abolitionist school. The “enlarged family” conceived by the radical reformer Bronson Alcott in his utopian “Fruitlands” also featured the welcoming boarding-rooms where his philanthropic wife, Abigail May, accommodated dozens of immigrant women ready to be hired in Boston’s homes.

I wish my colleague had clarified whether British servants in Brontë’s fiction were as racialized as the ones described by Alcott in her minor fiction. Coming from a family of impoverished intellectuals, Louisa May, who often provided light domestic service and childcare for her distinguished neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson, frequently attacked the cultural élite who surrounded her. She would, however, later become as judgmental and prejudiced herself toward the most destitute immigrant houseworkers. The rigid class and ethnic divisions which structured domestic service in Victorian America have only been partially represented in Alcott scholarship, modelled as it is on the genteel vocation of *Little Women*, whose labor hardly transcends the educated ranks of the governesses and family maids embodied by *Jane Eyre* and her American followers. A closer look at the lower floors of Alcott’s domestic fiction would probably shift our focus from those heroines of the lower-middle-class on the rise to those servants who could not share their career aspirations.

The employment office opened in Boston by Alcott’s mother, reformer Abigail May, was, in many ways, an “intelligence office.” It monitored the flood of subaltern Irish and Black servants charitably sustained in many a fund-raising address to the Woman’s Society in Boston. In Abigail May’s vibrant presentation of the

“competent agencies” aimed, like her own, to prevent Bostonian streets from becoming public vending spaces for destitute women (“Reports to the Boston Woman’s Society,” Houghton Library, bMS Am 800.23 [247]), she addressed her genteel benefactresses in the proto-Marxist, Owenite rhetoric which characterized Bronson’s anti-utilitarian and Christian utopianism. Robert Owen’s work was quite well known in 19th-century Boston, where experimental utopian communities were being established in several locations. As a devoted reader of Carlyle, Abigail denounced the sufferings induced by the waged, industrial system which also operated in the Victorian household, in the vast interracial context of domestic service that she confronted in her charitable practices. Her political stance is symbolically mimicked by the visit paid by the March sisters and their own philanthropic mother to the Hummels’ disorderly home. In that poor dwelling they perform the light domestic service to provide meals and infant care, in a fictional version of the sanitizing inspections enacted by benevolent societies among the lowly. Gregory Eiselein and Sarah Elbert stress the controlling aspects of Victorian benevolence, divesting it of the sentimental rhetoric associated with the sacred role of the Victorian housekeepers. Abigail May’s sheltering of many a woman immigrant was a response to a vast humanitarian emergency which concurrently produced a massive demand of housework, not previously financially negotiable in private households. As I argued in my 2003 article, the hardest waged service of the female immigrants from Europe and of the differently “colored” cooks developed a hiring system which instantly turned the home from an affective sphere of dedication and spontaneous care to a waged working space for domestic workers. This reflected an industrial work division denied by the rural economy. As the invisible servants in the basement took upon themselves the distressing tasks of cleaning and cooking, they remained spatially secluded in darkest corners of the Victorian home that few governesses and live-in domestics dared to tread.

In a little discussed but illuminating article that appeared in *The Christian Register* (1873) only few years after her charming depiction of Hannah Mullet, Alcott stigmatized the serving inefficiency of her Irish helps. In that essay on “The Servant-Girl Problem,” and also in her diaries of June, July, and August 1875, she defined them as “Irish incapables” (*Journals* 196) and “foreign incapables” (“Out to Service” 1). This was a time of general intolerance toward immigrants from Europe, characterized by ethnic and religious conflicts aroused by their unprecedented offer of domestic work. Such an attack of what was perceived as a mass of Catholic intruders hardly fit the rosy picture of Hannah Mullet in *Little Women*. However, as their rapid urbanization contributed to transform

housework from a woman's private occupation to an impersonal, waged service (Daniele 491), the routine and heavy chores of those unqualified strangers became mostly associated with poorly-paid Irish immigrants and those who were formerly enslaved. In her daily encounter with them, Louisa May's abolitionist mother ended up favoring Black Americans over Irish migrants, welcoming the former as "Our colored people! Their very skin a crop, bear quietly the oppression" (qtd. in Daniele 506n46). Likewise, despite her edifying depiction of Hannah Mullet, Louisa May Alcott did not spare Irish maids from her virulent attacks, ranking them among the most insubordinate and inadequate serving components of the American household in her invective on "The Servant-Girl." Philanthropic purposes and rigid racial and class categories indeed clash in her distinction between the unqualified waged service of Irish and Black dishwashers and the genteel models of exemplary housekeeping which monitored it. The working space of the former was the hazardous open fireplace with no protection where Irish and Black workers were frequently burned. Alcott skillfully reproduced their cries of pain in their foreign accents (Daniele 490). This working space was far below the educated ranks of the skilled governesses and family maids that Christine Doyle astutely identifies with "women whom no one knew how to treat" because they "existed in some nebulous place above the level of servant but below the level of family" (146).

Guimarães's pursuit of the transatlantic dialogue between the British Brontë and American Alcott illuminates the higher rank of live-in service amply represented in Victorian fiction; but Alcott's dubbing of the faulty Irish vernacular adopted by Hannah Mullet in her letters to Mrs. March shifts the reader's attention to lower ranks of domestic service in the Victorian household. In doing so, she reveals the alien nature of menial service which the Marches' domestic environment gently incorporates in the harmonious relations of kinship and affective proximity that, in *Little Women*, produce an ideal bond between the girls and their foreign maid. Such an idyll was hardly experienced in the basements where, in real life, Irish maids and Black cooks were confined. Echoes of their hesitant English appear in Alcott's vitriolic article published in the *Christian Register*, on December 6, 1873, which thus comments on the unabridged linguistic and cultural gap between servants and mistresses: "Some ladies object to having a stranger at the table, yet it is better to have a lady there than an ear at the keyhole, and an Irish tongue to gossip of family affairs to the neighbors girls" (qtd. in Daniele 506n51).

A closer look at the attics and the basements of the Victorian home is still missing in the critical accounts of Alcott's writing on domestic helps, even though the financial restraints of her family made her endure a precocious departure from their protected home space. As she went "out to service," as Alcott emphasizes in the title of her tale on the inhospitable household where she served, she unwillingly experienced a traumatic, hideous transition from her genteel status of impoverished domestic help to a destitute hired condition which approximated the underpaid labor of the industrial era.

Like Harriet Beecher Stowe and her sister Catharine Beecher, Abigail May and her husband, Bronson Alcott, explicitly detected the source of the degraded domestic work in the industrial transformation of home service in a waged service like all others (308). The shared industrial context discussed by Guimarães makes her comparison between British and American domestic service even more convincing, and explicitly emerges in Abigail May's fund-raising address to the benevolent ladies in Boston, in which she deplored in Marxist tones the "incompetent wages for labor performed in the cruel tyranny of Capitalist power. The capitalist speculated on the bones and sinews of the laborer" (qtd. in Daniele 505n39). Her lucid portrait of the exploited work force in the American home was expressed in the vibrant rhetoric of the utopian socialism that inspired her husband's vegetarian utopia, "Fruitlands," whose "enlarged family" was later satirized by their daughter in "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873). Bronson's plan to alternate manual and intellectual work involved an equal share of both among the utopian residents in order not to hinder their natural and harmonious growth. In Fruitlands's communitarian life, housework was meant to be voluntary and to resist any pecuniary interest. In real life, it proved especially exhausting and degrading for the women involved, as Rebecca Harding Davis clearly remarked in "The Harmonists" (1866). The interdiction of any form of monetary transaction in that utopian model of society partook of a pre-industrial, pastoral vision which reserved the sacred nature of a private sphere to the moral elevation of each member, under the unwaged aegis of the dedicated housekeeper. But the pressure of industrialism and of its waged system that the utopian model rejected was an act of resistance which caused the Alcotts' utopian experiment to fail miserably, and which turned the American home into a mercenary space of economic negotiation in which service was impersonally sold and commodified. "Fruitlands" paradoxically collapsed for want of reliable domestic help and enough food to survive the winter. After its failure Louisa May cultivated a satirical and realistic sensibility which distinguished her disenchanting generation in the Reconstruction era. As Alcott notably became a

shrewd manager of her own profits, she concurrently developed a more pragmatic approach to domestic service which did not prevent her from hiring servants and harshly deploring them for their poor performances. Like her mother, she did not hesitate in identifying the most negligent servants with the Irish immigrants, reaching peaks of intolerance quite unexpected from the author who only few years earlier offered such a charming picture of home service through the affectionate depiction of Hannah.

That dutiful family maid in *Little Women*, studied for the first time by Sandra Petrulionis, hardly accounts for Louisa May's conflicted perception of waged service and her persuasion that "every sort of work that is paid for is service" (Alcott, "Out to Service" 352). Later on, as a mistress herself, she took the stance of the many demanding and critical detractors of Irish maids in her vilified description of "The Servant-Girl Problem." In the tale "Psyche's Art," she embodies the implacable Mrs. Dean who reprimands the "unmistakable odor of burnt milk," "the crash of China," and the desolate "Irish wail" coming from the kitchen with the words: "Good gracious me, my dear, there's such a mess in the kitchen! Kathy's burnt-up the pudding, put castor-oil instead of olive in the salad, smashed the best meat dish, and here's Mr. Gage's come to dinner!" (Alcott 79–80).

By confronting the "tide of humanity who throng our streets on parade every day," Louisa's mother, Abigail May Alcott, experienced similar critical moments and "a certain confusion of purpose" in securing Catholic access to what she perceived as the American Protestant home (qtd. in Daniele 505n43). In her attempt to culturally assimilate the many immigrant women packed in her placement office, she banned religious tokens such as holy crosses and Madonnas, which, as Guimarães recalls in her essay, were also censored along with "any sort of personal adornment" in the Lowood where *Jane Eyre* came from (Barker 72). Abigail's alarm, however, did not deter her from her benevolent intention to provide viable solutions for the growing human flood which reached the American coasts, despite her vocal expressions of dismay on the foreign icons hanging from the necks of the "God-invoking Irish" maids and the "Neapolitan charms," which clearly revealed the presence of many Southern Italian women among her needy crowd (Alcott qtd. in Daniele 506n47). In her biased perception, those Catholic tokens were "self-indulgent decorations" and a superstitious evidence of the

rapid progress of Catholicism among us with its train of false influences. I'm surprised at the easy manner with which we adopted the insignia of the Romish Church. We scoff (at) Calvinism; but we wear petrified saints on our bosom-pins, chiseled martyrs on our girdles, neapolitan charms and mosaic exquisites on our bracelets and watch-seals. Alabaster ropes, holy babes, cameo madonnas are familiar objects of our homes, attractive in form and feature. A striking instance of our short-sightedness has been lately garnished us, too bald a fact to go unnoticed. . . . I find little done beyond the hasty distribution of bright-medals and green-ribbons with a picture and autograph of the philanthropist himself. Explosive harangues, and the monthly remittance of heavy bills of exchange for the Cathedral or Cork. The money which was obtained from ignorance and credulity as well as that which has been accumulated by morbid excitement on the temperance question has gone strait way to Ireland—and we are refunding it from the pockets of private benevolence & public appropriations. Now my friends are not we building up Catholic faith on Protestant charity? (qtd. in Daniele 505–06n45)

This anti-Catholic tirade did not make Abigail May any less committed as a proto-Marxist¹ radical social reformer who, as a reader of Thomas Carlyle and an enlightened descendant of the Quincys, did not hesitate to shelter those destitute women in Boston, before embarking on the non-profit crusade of her utopian husband.

In her acute sense of the dehumanizing effects of the labor market, Abigail May chose an explicit anti-capitalist rhetoric to appeal to her fellow women philanthropists in Boston. In her fundraising “Reports to the Boston Woman’s Society” of January 3–March 1850, she pleaded for the mass of female servants who sought a job and a shelter in town. Her philanthropic practice was shared by a range of other domestic reformers and “migration Societies” which urged the benevolent ladies and “sisters of Charity” to devote their alms-giving and sewing for “a just appreciation for our Native; and a more just supply for our Foreign Poor” (Abigail May Alcott qtd. in Daniele 506n47). In her programmatic appeal in support of her Missionary and Relief room located at 12 Groton Street in Boston, Louisa May Alcott’s mother advertised selected reliable German and American girls ready to join the homes of her genteel audience, while placing Irish and other Catholic women workers in the lower category of vagrants who always needed further inspection: “Best German, American, and well recommended Irish help procured at the shortest notice” (qtd. in Daniele, ft. 42, 505n42).²

1. Socialist utopianism in America is conventionally defined proto-Marxism, since Marx systematized and consolidated that early anti-capitalist model.

2. Citations are Daniele’s transcriptions of the original manuscript (Abigail May Alcott Papers; Houghton Library; bMS Am. 800.23).

Abigail May's prejudiced perspective on "the present-generation of fugitive Ireland" (Abigail May, "Reports to the Boston Woman's Society", qtd. in Daniele 505n44) certainly reflects the difficult task of assimilating those aliens to the American home: "Now my friends you ask for a remedy . . . We cannot always make a stranger most comfortable in our own guest chamber, be it ever so nicely swept and garnished—but if we have been good neighbors we can introduce them to pleasanter places" (qtd. in Daniele 505n43). In this respect, the peaks of intolerance of her fundraising campaign appears less revealing of the working limits of the poor foreign servants who applied to her placement office than of her own fears as cultural mediator of their integration. Nevertheless, despite all her cultural biases and hesitations, she made of her household in Boston a memorable social experiment of co-residence and social care. She was able to do this, even though she was worried that: "Many of them cannot be acclimated, many can never be Americanized—and you are to have the crudest population—the most spurious civilization in the human world. I confess to my own timidity; I dread the experiment" (qtd. in Daniele 505n44).

Nevertheless, her active response to the social emergencies produced by the first immigration wave from Ireland and the Mediterranean in the 1830s documents the sudden availability of a massive female labor force from abroad, and their sudden transformation into vulnerable, waged houseworkers. In this transition, and in the appreciative comments of mine on Guimarães's article and on the recent essay on Hannah Mullet by Sandra Petrulionis, I suggest that their mutual transatlantic focus on the so-called "servant question" might find a further development by looking beyond the Marches' joyful living rooms and the charming family festivals which make *Little Women* such an unsurpassed celebration of the American family. Even on the theme of domestic service, the witty dualism of Louisa May Alcott's work directs us, in more controversial and complex forms, towards a more thorough assessment of the American household. Ultimately it leads us simultaneously, between fact and fiction, towards the most sympathetic appreciation and the most virulent prejudice in the Alcotts' collective efforts to reform America.

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