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Small acts of disdain

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#)

On *Mrs. Woolf & the Servants: An Intimate History of Bloomsbury* by Alison Light.

Alison Light

Mrs. Woolf & the Servants: An Intimate History of Bloomsbury
Bloomsbury Press, 376 pages, \$30.

An American economist, I think it was, once remarked that a single servant is worth a household full of appliances; in my experience, he was absolutely right. To be relieved of the tedium of looking after oneself, and of the day-to-day tasks that can make life such a trial and a bore, is to enter a state of near-bliss. One of the reasons that some of our polymathic ancestors were able to achieve so much was that they never had to do anything for themselves.

But there are also difficulties with servants. No man, said Napoleon, is a hero to his valet; and a servant is inclined to know more about you than you might wish him (or anyone else) to know. It is always a pleasure to discover that others have feet of clay; it is not so pleasurable to realize that others must have made the same discovery about you.

Virginia Woolf added a few complications of her own to the normal difficulties of the servant-master or -mistress relationship. She was that peculiarly emblematic type of our age, a person of advanced views and reactionary feeling. It is in fact very difficult to align harmoniously one's emotional responses with one's intellectual standpoint. Fervent democrats often despise most people; nationalists are appalled by the stupidity and backwardness of their fellow-countrymen; Communists are avid for money and exclusive privilege; puritans lust for the flesh. Sometimes it seems as if only indifference to the fate of others is genuine and heartfelt.

Virginia Woolf was not so lacking in compassion that she felt no self-pity; far from it, self-pity was one of her ruling passions. Indeed, she was an evangelical self-pitier, which accounts in large part for her popularity and historical importance. While her life had its frustrations, as most lives do, and its share of tragedy, as so many lives of her epoch did, it was nevertheless one of considerable privilege that she managed to transform in her own mind into something approaching tragedy caused by injustice. She forgot Doctor Johnson's great dictum that all judgment is comparative—including, or perhaps I should say especially, about one's own life.

And so, in dealing with her servants, as this interesting book shows, she often managed to think of herself as almost martyred by them; she was always the injured party in any dispute. Her servants worked long hours in harsh conditions, of a kind not met with anywhere in the Western world today, but she nevertheless berated them in her diary and in her letters for their stupidity, their lack of finer feeling or accomplishment, their suspected dishonesty and even their greed when, like *Oliver Twist*,

they asked for more (despite her advanced views, she never offered them more than the going rate, and sometimes a little less, the annual wages of a servant employed by her being at one time no more than one percent of her own annual income). She thought that they were so different in kind from her own class that no real communication could exist between her and them, as if they were aliens from another planet. She wrote repeatedly that subjective understanding of their lives was impossible for her.

And yet, as this book also makes clear, she could be kind to her servants in an impulsive kind of way. She demanded far less formality of them than was usual for her time; she arranged treats for them; she continued providing a small income for at least one of them after her retirement though she was not legally obliged to do so. Those of her servants of whom we have any knowledge remembered her with some affection and expressed their gratitude to her. As is so often the case in human affairs, the record was distinctly mixed.

Most people, I suspect, will want to read the book more for what it tells us about Mrs. Woolf than what it tells us about the social history of domestic service in Britain, with which it is also concerned. Here the author's social history is of the most orthodox kind: she implies, for example, that until state intervention in 1870 made education compulsory, the majority of the poor population of Britain was illiterate. This is not so; according to the later Professor E. G. West, 94 percent of the male population that was past the age of education in 1870 was already literate, a figure that is unlikely to have improved very much in the intervening years. And certainly the fragments of the letters to Mrs. Woolf from the servants that she quotes indicate a level of literacy among them at least equal to that expected of people of their social class today; moreover, they express themselves with a refinement of feeling that is not often to be found even among their social superiors today.

What do we learn of Mrs. Woolf? I think the principal thing is her almost comical lack of self-knowledge, not a slight defect in one who made of herself an object of profound study. Over and over again she said that she longed to be free of servants, so that she could have her privacy and not be obliged any longer to engage in trivial quarrels with them. They would no longer interrupt her in her work, and distract her from it with their "human mind[s] wriggling undressed," "almost incredibly without the power of analysis or logic."

But who, here, was completely without the power of analysis or logic? Mrs. Woolf believed it to be completely *infra dig* for someone of her background, status, and talent to have to answer a ring on her front doorbell for herself. At one point, it is implied in this book, she scarcely knew how to do so. She certainly had no vocation for washing and scrubbing, and she relates her forays into the kitchen as a breathless schoolgirl might relate a school outing. Mrs. Woolf making a pie definitely has the air of Marie Antoinette playing shepherdess about it, and one cannot imagine her putting meat through a mincer, for example. That would be a culinary task too far.

Now there is nothing discreditable in any of this: I am no fan of washing and scrubbing myself, labor-saving devices notwithstanding. But it is surely not a very difficult thought that, if one is not going to do these things for oneself, someone has to do them for one (assuming that total squalor has been ruled out as a possibility). The inconveniences of having that person do them are inevitably to be balanced against the inconveniences of doing them oneself, and—if one has the money—of choosing between these inconveniences. And once one has made one's choice, one should shut up about it.

Mrs. Woolf remained querulous about her servants, however, and reminded me of those white women in southern Africa who, never having lifted a finger for themselves, complained bitterly about the stupidity and incompetence of the blacks who served them. This they often did in their presence, making the mistake (which is sometimes made in hospitals by nurses when a stroke deprives a person of his power of speech) of believing that those who cannot speak cannot hear.

The Woolfian comedy reaches its peak in the sacking of her cook, Nellie Boxall, after eighteen years. She described the period leading up to it as “the most disagreeable six weeks of my life,” which must either be an exaggeration or an indication of a very sheltered and self-absorbed existence. But at the very time she was extolling her own freedom from “an affectionate domestic tyrant,” and complaining about “the unworkability of the system [of domestic service],” Mrs. Woolf was looking for an immediate replacement for Nellie Boxall. Life without a cook was unthinkable for her. Mrs. Woolf’s dream of complete independence was bogus. Who, then, was completely without the power of analysis or logic?

Is this all second-best bed stuff? (I refer here to Orwell’s essay on Dickens: “Some years later Mr. Bechhofer Roberts published a full-length attack on Dickens in the form of a novel [*This Side Idolatry*], but it was a merely personal attack, concerned for the most part with Dickens’s treatment of his wife. It dealt with incidents which not one in a thousand of Dickens’s readers would ever hear about, and which no more invalidates his work than the second-best bed invalidates Hamlet.”) The answer depends on the extent to which the worth of someone’s writing depends upon the consistency of his ideas with his life. That extent cannot be very great: if Mrs. Woolf’s books are good, they would have been good even had she treated her servants a lot worse than she did actually treat them. In so far as she is regarded as a moral exemplar, however, a free-spirited bohemian, the details provided here undermine the claims made on her behalf.

One small personal note. After my mother’s death, I discovered from her letters that, on her arrival in England as a refugee from Germany, she had gone for a time into service in an area of the country not very far from where the Woolfs lived. She never spoke of the episode. The then-recently formed National Union of Domestic Workers, founded to improve the conditions for servants, was deeply opposed to the “influx of foreign refugees . . . wanting domestic work,” and “absolutely refused to accept foreign entrants for membership.” The union must have feared a depression of wages. Would my mother have wanted Mrs. Woolf as an employer? That depends, I suppose, on whether she was better or worse than the average employer. But on the evidence presented here, she would have considered my mother as scarcely human, at least not in the sense that she considered herself human. And, in my experience, it is relatively small acts of personal disdain, rather than greater, structural injustices, that rankle and enrage people.

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