

**The Dialogical Servant: Master-servant relations and the construction of servant identity in elite 19th and 21st century British households.**

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*I, Sally Eales, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (*[*www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means*](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)*). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.*

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines the relationship between domestic servants and their employers in Britain in two separate time periods: the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries. Based on diverse sources, including archived servant letters from the nineteenth century and oral history interviews conducted with contemporary servants working in elite homes in Britain today, I set out to reconsider traditional perspectives on servants, their lived experience and their interactions with their employers.

In working with their narratives, I set out to challenge reductive understandings of servants’ roles and to reconceptualise them as multi-faceted individuals. Through an examination of servants’ interpersonal linguistic strategies and the relational aspects of their interactions, I conceptualise the master-servant relationship as a site for the construction and contestation of servant identity. In so doing, I reveal the complex tensions and ambiguities that characterise working relations between masters and servants, relations that are deeply intimate yet also indisputably economic.

Building on themes of interpersonal relations, identity, representation, and agency, I chart the continuities and discontinuities that emerge in master-servant relations to produce the concept of the dialogical servant. Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, I demonstrate that servant identity is not a final and fixed subjectivity but rather is contingent, emergent and dynamically managed in interaction, and contested and reworked through an ongoing, dialogical relationship between individuals. In bringing material from two different time periods into conversation, this thesis contributes new insights to both historical and contemporary understandings of domestic service, establishing how servants author their own identities and make meaning within the specific social and cultural contexts of their everyday lives.

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**Table of contents**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Introduction** | 1 |
| **Chapter 1: Literature Review** | 9 |
| * 1. Finding nineteenth-century master-servant relationships in secondary sources. | 9 |
| 1.2 Deference, exploitation and the emotional terrain of master-servant relationships | 14 |
| 1.3 Twenty-first century domestic service and Britain’s elite in secondary sources | 30 |
| 1.4 Research Questions | 40 |
| **Chapter 2: Primary Sources, Methodology and Analytical Approaches** | 42 |
| 2.1 Primary sources: The elusive “servant voice” | 42 |
| 2.2 Aim and scope of the study | 47 |
| 2.3 Empirical Material | 50 |
| 2.4 Theoretical and Analytical Approaches to the material | 69 |
| 2.5 Structure of Empirical Chapters | 81 |
| **Chapter 3: Shifting boundaries - Closeness and distance in the master-servant relationship** | 85 |
|  |  |
| 3.1 Relational work and emotional labour. | 90 |
| 3.2 Shifting boundaries: the interpersonal terrain of the twenty-first century master-servant relationship. | 95 |
| 3.3 Erasure of servants: mitigation work and the construction of ‘exceptional identities.’ | 109 |
| 3.4 Performing relational work: closeness and distance in nineteenth-century servant letters. | 117 |
| 3.5 Discourses of kinship: intimacy and belonging in nineteenth-century servant letters. | 126 |
| **Chapter 4: Knowledgeable Agents: The making of the self-governing servant** | 142 |
| 4.1 The ‘servant problem’: Infantilising the servant. | 146 |
| 4.2 Agency and identity: Reconceptualising the servant. | 153 |
| 4.3 Dialectics of control: enacting specialist knowledge and professionalism in nineteenth-century servant letters. | 156 |
| 4.4 Dialectics of control: enacting professionalism and agency in the twenty-first century master-servant relationship. | 167 |
| 4.5 Resisting the Cultural Script. | 182 |
| **Chapter 5: Shattered identities: ruptures in the master- servant relationship** | 196 |
| 5.1 Implications of Ruptured master-servant relations in the nineteenth century | 200 |
| 5.2 Rehabilitating the nineteenth-century servant. | 204 |
| 5.3 Discourses of justice and reparation: Discrediting other servants. | 212 |
| 5.4 Ruptures in contemporary domestic service. | 222 |
| 5.5 Resistance and rebellion: discourses of crisis and loss. | 226 |
|  |  |
| **Conclusion to Thesis** | 246 |
|  |  |
| **Appendix 1**  **Appendix 2** | 261  262 |
| **Bibliography** | 263 |

**Introduction**

Televisual representations of master-servant relationships in British aristocratic life, such as *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-75 & 2010-12), *Servants* (2003) and *Downton Abbey* (2010-15), have perpetuated idealised and highly nostalgic readings of servants. Such adaptations provide a version of the past that Katherine Byrne has referred to as, ‘idyllic and reassuring’[[1]](#footnote-1) but one that has limited authenticity in terms of the actual lived experience of individuals in service. As Byrne notes, *Downton Abbey* portrays ‘a charmed world where employers were responsible and generous, servants were hard-working and respectful, and houses were both stately and a home.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Such depictions provide a romanticised portrayal that captures the popular imagination but can be criticised for shaping perceptions of the lives of domestic servants in ways that are not evidence-based.

Historian Lucy Delap unpacks these accounts describing them as ‘heritage nostalgia’[[3]](#footnote-3) and suggests that they have ‘come to take centre stage as ‘an evocative, fantasized means of dramatising the past in Britain.’[[4]](#footnote-4) Lucy Lethbridge’s extensive research into the untold history of these ‘below stairs’ workers also queries these idealised accounts, suggesting that the ‘age of the butler and mob-capped housemaid was barely over before it was transmuted into stories of an English golden age.’[[5]](#footnote-5) As she astutely notes, the degree to which it was deemed ‘golden’ depended ‘largely on which side of that age you belonged.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

Nostalgic representations are problematic as they can profoundly influence and shape modern-day understandings of the past. Nostalgia makes history easier to engage with (see Lowenthal 1998) but provides us with, what historian John Tosh refers to as, ‘a very lopsided view of history’ in which the past is rewritten and ‘redesigned as a comfortable refuge’[[7]](#footnote-7) with its negative aspects erased. Tosh describes nostalgia as a ‘drastic simplification’[[8]](#footnote-8) of the past because, as he argues, it is ‘an unreliable guide’ that ‘encourage[s] us to hanker after an unattainable golden age instead of engaging creatively with the world as it is.’[[9]](#footnote-9) What Tosh calls, ‘a yearning backward glance’ can offer ‘consolation’ and an ‘escape in the mind from a harsh reality’[[10]](#footnote-10) that suppresses the truth.

This is evidenced, as Byrne notes, in *Downton Abbey,* ‘which is clearly designed as an escape from the hardships of 21st century living: some bad things did happen there but ultimately everything could be sorted out by the patriarch, Lord Grantham.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Nostalgic depictions, therefore, create a sense of longing for a bygone era and with it a version of events that did not actually exist in the way that that they are represented and thus remembered. Accepting such nostalgic depictions as ‘the true version of events’ when they are not, also runs the risk that particular *ideas* about individuals’ lived experience are not only flattened out but at the same time get sedimented in social consciousness as ‘truths’ that purportedly provide an accurate reading of events as they occurred. They contribute to an ‘authorised’ or sanitised account that has an effect on how the collective group, in this case servants, are defined, remembered and known.

Wider societal discourses about servants also serve to define them in particular ways. Contrary to nostalgic representations, one of the most resonant aspects of public accounts of domestic service that persists today is that servants are defined primarily by exploitation, the drudgery of their duties and their lowly position in relation to their masters. Lucy Delap notes that when wider society considers servants, they are often pushed into ‘polarised positions’ where they are perceived of as either ‘exploited’ or ‘comfortably secure.’[[12]](#footnote-12) She argues that ‘the presumption that service was always and necessarily exploitative seems, in part, ‘to be a projection of our current evaluation of service onto the past.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

This was evidenced recently when London recruitment agency *Eden Private Staff* placed an advert on its Twitter feed for nannies, housekeepers and house managers. The feed was rapidly filled with a host of derisory retorts from readers, such as: ‘do you have any mines I could send my kids down please?’ and ‘touching of forelocks and curtseys no longer required.’[[14]](#footnote-14) These tweets suggest that collective societal perceptions of servants still accord with representations attributed to them at a time when domestic service was defined by hierarchical, societal and class distinctions. This serves to produce a social category, in this case, that of ‘servant’, which has had a range of attributes assigned to it that create deep-seated assumptions about the servant lived experience. As a butler[[15]](#footnote-15) who had worked in a number of aristocratic homes throughout Britain told me, ‘people think that you are a skivvy or a slave’ but that this ‘really is a misconception.’ As such, he found it difficult to equate his own personal lived experience of working in aristocratic households with the types of disparaging populist views about domestic service that have tended to dominate British cultural life and are reflected in *Eden Private Staff*’s Twitter feed. If we accept the narrative that his working life and contemporary lived experience as a butler are misunderstood, and that representations of his working role are flawed, it might also be the case that the way in which we understand historical servants and their lived experience have equally been subject to misinterpretation.

Why does domestic service evoke such strong feelings in people today? How can society be warmly nostalgic about domestic service while, at the same time, appearing to revile it? How can these two apparently contradictory ways of engaging with the past sit comfortably alongside one another? The comments found on *Eden Private Staff*’s Twitter feed reference an age when domestic service reflected stark social and class divisions and was considered a sign of wealth and status. They demonstrate how society continues to produce a sense of unease about the politics and practice of domestic service in twenty-first century Britain, invoking anxieties about the idea of obsequious ‘domestic flunkies’ trapped at the beck and call of their masters in hierarchical relationships characterised by power and class divisions. These derogatory views of servants, simply as subjects to be ridiculed or derided, and the nostalgic representations in dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and *Servants*, both offer flat-footed and monolithic accounts that provide inadequate readings of servants’ actual lived experience.

For example, the staff in the BBC drama *Servants*, as Iris Kleinecke-Bates suggests, ‘are forced into a quasi-parental relationship with their masters by their duty to look after the family and their guests who are, in turn, [...] made to look incompetent and even infantile.’[[16]](#footnote-16) This demonstrates how both nostalgic and cultural representations produce equally reductive and constricting ways of engaging with the past as they serve to shrink historical actors to simplistic one-dimensional characters. This is problematic because, in both cases, the critical determinants of servants’ lives are their subjugation and powerlessness. Through this, the lived experience of servants and how they make meaning in their lives are suppressed and they are cast simply as individuals who are there to serve and facilitate the needs of others in a way that neglects the complexity of their lives, their identity and their relationships. In summary, even when accounts are supposedly sympathetic (such as the comments on *Eden Private Staff*’s Twitter feed), they tend to project prefabricated accounts back onto servants and fail to look for evidence of their actual lived lives.

The power dynamics between nineteenth-century masters and servants have played a fundamental role in shaping our understandings of servants’ lives and, arguably, have had a permeating influence on how servants are perceived now in twenty-first century Britain. Yet the relationship remains a neglected area of historical enquiry. The presumptions on *Eden*’s Twitter feed demonstrate a wider implication for narratives of the past, whereby servants are ‘cast’ with a particular identity by contemporary accounts through their appeal to a fixed set of categories that may, or may not, be accurate, but which nevertheless come to inhabit the collective memory. Such accounts enter social consciousness, moulding society’s relationship with the past in influential ways, whilst simultaneously giving shape to social identities and, consequently, flattening out individuals’ actual lived experience.

In order to unpack these accounts, it is necessary to challenge these binary representations and to contest both the nostalgic representations of servants, and the wider societal and cultural assumptions about the drudgery of their lives that have resulted in societal distaste about twenty-first century domestic service. These are issues at the heart of this thesis and ones that I seek to address. Underpinning this work is an attempt to salvage servants from stereotypical depictions that have been handed down to us over time by examining the relationships between domestic servants and their employers in Britain in two separate time periods. My reason for focusing specifically on the master-servant relationship is to provide a better understanding of servants’ lived experience, one that is often elided by nostalgic representations and wider cultural discourses. Through this approach, it is possible to ask questions about servants’ lived experience and how they construct their social identities within the shared cultural and social contexts of the households in which they worked. Cultural historian Jerome de Groot suggests that ‘contemporary society needs new ways of looking at old things’[[17]](#footnote-17), an invitation I respond to in this work. Working with data from two different time periods is an approach that has the advantage of allowing insights from one era to illuminate the other.

In this thesis I consider, as my key research question, how servants construct their relationships with their masters communicatively. To acquire both a historical and a contemporary perspective, my research was conducted within two key time periods. The first period I consider is the long nineteenth century. My rationale for choosing this era is that the nineteenth century is generally considered to be the period when British domestic service was at its height and thus represents an important benchmark and comparator.[[18]](#footnote-18) Following this period, as the twentieth century unfolded, domestic service is said to have gone into a general decline and it might be presumed that it became completely extinct. Delap, for example, notes that domestic life in the twentieth century ‘is widely assumed to be free of the taint of domestic service, as servant keeping was perceived as residual and anachronistic.’[[19]](#footnote-19) The progressive introduction of labour-saving devices and other aspects of modernity (particularly social revolutions such as socialism and feminism as a result of two World Wars)[[20]](#footnote-20) are said to have reduced class hierarchies and workloads making the provision of domestic service both politically and socially unacceptable and unnecessary, thus supposedly rendering it obsolete. However, the idea of domestic service as an anomaly that vanished following the nineteenth century may be a cosy narrative but does not provide an accurate reading of what has actually happened to domestic service since then.

Evidence suggests that domestic service has *evolved* rather than become obsolete in the modern age. In light of this, the second time period I examine is the twenty-first century. My rationale for this is that this period, as we shall see, has witnessed a dramatic rise in the employment of nannies, butlers, housekeepers and maids, particularly in High Net Worth homes in Britain, a fact that serves to disrupt contemporary notions that domestic service has been consigned to the past. Using the same analytical framework for both periods means that new considerations can be made that illuminate the continuities and discontinuities of the master-servant relationship that contribute to understandings of how domestic service has evolved over time and, thus, build on existing histories of domestic service.

In order to situate this thesis in wider debates on domestic service I turn now to examine in more detail what we know in the scholarly literature about domestic service and relations between masters and servants. I do this, first, by placing domestic service and servants within a wider historical context and considering what scholarly and academic sources we have for understandings of service and, second, by considering literature on contemporary domestic service and the master-servant relationship in twenty-first century Britain.

**Chapter 1: Literature Review**

In this review of secondary sources, first, I discuss the scarcity of scholarly literature on domestic service and the reasons for it. Following this, I examine a growing body of feminist studies that were concerned with the emphasis on women in the home as pivotal to the management of power relations that underpinned divisions of gender and class in nineteenth-century Britain as it is within these sources that some scholarly interest in servants’ lives can be found. Following this, I review secondary sources on contemporary elites and the servants they employ in the twenty-first century. Lastly in this chapter, I outline my research questions. Further literature relating to primary sources that provide examples of the elusive “servant voice”, a discussion of my own material, my conceptual framework and my empirical approach are discussed in the methodology chapter.

**1.1 Finding nineteenth-century master-servant relationships in secondary sources.**The neglect of domestic service as an area of historical enquiry has resulted in a scarcity of scholarly literature on the subject. This scarcity has been highlighted by scholars such as historian Leonore Davidoff who asserts that ‘domestic service [is an] exceptionally elusive area of study.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Selina Todd has also referred to a ‘silence’ surrounding domestic service ‘that characterizes the major historical studies of class in twentieth-century Britain.’[[22]](#footnote-22) This is perhaps unexpected given that domestic servants constituted the largest category of worker in Britain in the nineteenth century. A wide variety of households employed domestic staff, from lower income families who might have employed a ‘maid of all work’ through to the nobility and landed gentry who retained armies of staff to run their large country estates and elite households. Considering their significance to the ideological construction of respectable nineteenth-century middle and upper-class life, their neglect in scholarly literature is somewhat surprising. It is, therefore, helpful to begin by examining the reasons for this scarcity before undertaking a critical examination of the literature that does exist to establish what this reveals about servants and their relationships with their masters and to situate this thesis within these wider debates.

The difficulty of finding scholarly studies on servants and their lives during the nineteenth century has been complicated by several factors. The absence of secondary sources reflects a more general and long-standing lack of interest in servants and servant life. One of the reasons for this is because, as Davidoff notes, the service relationship has not traditionally been considered ‘an integral component of history.’[[23]](#footnote-23) We might reason that secondary literature on servants must surely be found in the histories of working-class labour in Britain, however, servants are often also excluded from these studies too or, at least, are found only as an adjunct to them. There are a number of reasons for this exclusion.

First, as Laura Schwartz suggests, there has been a ‘tendency to identify [servants] with the interests of wealthy and paternalistic employers rather than their own class.’[[24]](#footnote-24) This has been exacerbated by the relative isolation and invisibility of servants’ labour. Working, as servants did, in their employers’ private houses made it difficult to gain access to their lived experience within the closed and intimate space of the family home. The idea that servants have been elided from scholarly literature due to the relative invisibility of their labour and the fact that it was conducted in spaces that were difficult to access is better understood through engagement with the concept of ‘separate spheres.’ The ideology of the ‘separate spheres’ framework was a concept taken up particularly by scholars of British women's history in the later twentieth century. In *Family Fortunes* Davidoff and Hall (1987), for example, provide a highly detailed account of the concept of separate spheres. They argue that historically Marxist scholars had paid ‘scant attention to the family, the private, the home, the place to which women [had] been conceptually relegated.’[[25]](#footnote-25) They discuss the blurring of the boundaries between the ‘public sphere’, a space associated with the workplace and commonly thought of as existing outside the domestic space of the home, and the ‘private sphere’; one commonly thought of as a domestic and feminised space set within the home.[[26]](#footnote-26) They argue that the emergence of the separate spheres framework was an active component in the formation of a British middle class in which women were excluded from public life and expected to concentrate on the family and home.

Amanda Vickery (1993) built on the idea of the separate spheres framework suggesting that it ‘has come to constitute one of the fundamental organizing categories, if not *the* organizing category of modern British women's history.’[[27]](#footnote-27) Vickery chronicles the history of the separate spheres framework and takes issue with much of the ideology around the concept, for example, that it served only to confine women to the home. She states that ‘where historians have researched the activities of particular individuals and groups, rather than the contemporary social theories which allegedly hobbled them, Victorian women emerge as no less spirited, capable, and, most importantly, diverse a crew as in any other century.’[[28]](#footnote-28) As she notes, however, the interpretation of the framework has developed and changed over time and ‘[p]roponents of the British separate spheres framework have revised many of their early generalizations.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Vickery also acknowledges that ‘the interpretation offered powerful justification for the study of women when the field was embattled.’[[30]](#footnote-30) If the separate spheres framework can inform our understandings of the lives of nineteenth-century women it can also provide a useful framework for mediating servants’ experience of belonging neither completely to the private domestic sphere, nor entirely to the public work sphere. This is because one of the consequences of this ideological separation has been the disavowal of domestic work that occurred away from the public arena and, by extension, also served to elide the identities of those who perform such work, such as housewives and servants.

A second reason why domestic servants ‘were a taken-for-granted part of the social landscape’[[31]](#footnote-31) was that mainstream and Marxist economists ‘regarded domestic service as unproductive labour because it added nothing of economic value.’[[32]](#footnote-32) Laura Schwartz notes, for example, that the actual work domestic servants performed, such as ‘(cooking, cleaning and caring) took place in the private sphere of the home, [re]producing people rather than commodities, and is therefore frequently defined as “non-productive”’[[33]](#footnote-33) and thus of little interest to historians of the English labouring classes. Other historians, such as Carolyn Steedman (2004), also apportion the exclusion of domestic service in secondary sources to a selective reading of theories of labour, of labour use and value, in modern industrialized society.[[34]](#footnote-34) Supporting Davidoff’s view, Steedman argues that this was due to a valorisation of productive labour over non-productive labour.[[35]](#footnote-35) Steedman draws on the work of Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith, who wrote in 1776, that ‘the labour of the menial servant [...] does not fix or realize itself in any particular subject or vendible commodity. His services perish in the very instance of their performance, and seldom leave any trace or value behind them.’[[36]](#footnote-36) Such accounts promulgate an idea, as Steedman argues, that servants performed ‘work that was not work’[[37]](#footnote-37) as they ‘did not produce vendible things.’[[38]](#footnote-38) In other words, the work they produced was considered immaterial as it produced nothing tangible. Disavowing servants and their labour in this way is problematic as it produces a historical record in which the presence of domestic servants and their relationships have been erased despite the fact that their labour was essential to the British economy and to the social fabric of nineteenth-century British life.

Studies of servants can more usually be found in scholarly literature as an extension to other disciplines, for example, those concerning family, class and women’s history. As these are viewed as tangential to the primary subject matter, however, they offer only sparse accounts. In summary, servants were not considered part of the traditional workforce, nor part of the working classes, nor part of the families for whom they worked. As social geographer Bronwen Walter notes, ‘even when women’s history was embraced in the 1970s little attention was paid to this topic.’[[39]](#footnote-39) What this has meant for histories of domestic service is that scholars of traditional studies of servants have tended to situate them within existing histories of labour, class and family relations. An emerging scholarly interest in marginalised groups began to take shape in the late twentieth century and as a result servants began to become more taken account of in social history debates. This interest intersected with a growing body of feminist studies that were preoccupied with the emphasis on women in the home as pivotal to the management of power relations that underpinned divisions of gender and class in Britain. It is this body of work to which I turn my attention in the following section as it is within these sources that some scholarly interest in servants’ lives can be found.

**1.2 Deference, exploitation and the emotional terrain of master-servant relationships**Various themes, such as the politics of domestic authority (what has come to be known as the deference/ defiance debate), women’s history, constructions of the family, and the emotional dimensions of domestic service, are all approaches that have been employed in order to understand the nature of servants’ lives. What I have set out to do in this review of the literature is to lay out the various threads of these approaches thematically and to characterise the contributions that have been made so far in order to determine what is left unaddressed by this work to date and then to situate my work within this gap.

When servants first came into focus, the deference lens was the primary one through which they were viewed. Historians including Davidoff, Hall, and Horn considered historical servants to be a marginalised group socially conditioned into obedience whose lives were characterised by deference and drudgery. Davidoff *et al* argue, for example, that ‘service to a master or mistress, to King and country, and to God, all figured in accepted world views’ with superiors expecting ‘attendance and deference as a matter of unquestioned right.’[[40]](#footnote-40) Davidoff suggests that the master-servant relationship was one built on ideas about authority and deference that replicated the power dynamics of a wider society in which individuals were expected to ‘know their place.’ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, religion and personal faith began to be subject to empirical knowledge, rational scientific thought, and secular world views and, as such, it became more difficult for the privileged classes to maintain the blind tradition that it was their God-given right to be served by an unquestioning ‘lower class.’ As historian Susan Kingsley Kent notes, the ‘industrial process of moving work outside the home’ and ‘the increasing cultural understanding of women as non-productive members of society and workers as male’[[41]](#footnote-41) meant that the working-classes were employed in an ‘outsider relationship’ in which they were defined as essential markers of the elite’s upper-class position in society and, as such, part of their role was to prop up the status of the middle and upper-classes. As the nineteenth century unfolded, and in order to preserve this privilege of status and deference enjoyed by the upper classes, clear boundaries between the elite and their servants had, therefore, to be guarded and maintained.

The industrial capitalism of Britain at this time had produced immense economic shifts that had resulted in alternative forms of employment for the working classes and a re-working of received notions of hierarchy and social stratification.[[42]](#footnote-42) One of the consequences of these shifts were that servant employers were becoming concerned that servants’ increasing choices in the labour market would bring troubling implications to their privilege and status. As Howard Newby states ‘all elites are normally concerned with stabilizing the hierarchy and thus preserving their own positions.’[[43]](#footnote-43) The changes in the labour market led many elites to stabilise their place in the world through a commitment to maintaining clear class role distinctions and the overt subordination of those in their employ. The difficulty for employers in these unsettling times was that traditionally accepted boundaries between masters and servants could be tested making their maintenance a constant challenge. This matter is given attention by Davidoff (1995) who characterises servants as individuals who had to be socially conditioned into deference through ‘behaviours such as walking out of the door backwards, maintaining absolute silence while performing their duties, never sitting down in the presence of their employers and never initiating an action or a speech.’[[44]](#footnote-44) As Davidoff suggests, the idea of the autonomous servant acting of their own accord was considered to be an ever-present threat in the nineteenth century and therefore it was ‘not surprising that the qualities of the good servant extolled by masters were humility, lowliness, meekness and gentleness, fearfulness, respectfulness, loyalty and good temper.’[[45]](#footnote-45)

Pamela Horn addresses this issue in *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (1990) arguing that maintaining class distinctions between master and servant, ‘was a matter of continuing concern to the employing classes of Victorian England’ and, as such, it was essential to ‘inculcate the correct attitudes of obedience and subservience into their domestic staff.’[[46]](#footnote-46) The authors of many household and servant manuals of the time were complicit in this endeavour. The attempt to socialise servants into unchallenged compliance was evidenced in manuals such as *Rules for the Good Manners of Servants in Good families* issued by the Ladies Sanitary Association (1901). As Pamela Horn notes, these manuals gave detailed practical advice on how to achieve these behaviours, such as, ‘always move quietly about the house and do not let your voice be heard by the family unless necessary’ and ‘[w]hen meeting any ladies or gentlemen about the house, stand back or move aside for them to pass.’[[47]](#footnote-47) The manual, *Advice to Young Women on Going to Service* (1835) informed female servants that ‘whatever your situation may be, housemaid or through-servant, or nursemaid, your mistress will expect you to obey her orders.’[[48]](#footnote-48) *The Servants’ Magazine; or, Female Domestics’ Instructor*, a publication ostensibly directed at servants themselves, ‘largely confined itself to finding divine justification for the maintenance of the status quo.’[[49]](#footnote-49) These forms of advice, Horn argues, highlighted the emphasis that was placed in the nineteenth century on ‘the need for the servant to accept his or her station in life without complaint.’[[50]](#footnote-50) One of the methods *The Servants’ Magazine* usedtoinstil such obedience was to publish moralistic cautionary tales that told of the dangers that might purportedly befall a disobedient or lazy servant. These were spelled out in the magazine in didactic ways. For example, in an edition printed in 1846, an author, known only as Grandfather Gray, writes the cautionary tale of the ‘kind but careless servant’ who, in her haste, left an un-snuffed candle resulting in the death of the child in her care.’[[51]](#footnote-51) Such moralistic discourses problematised servants by finding them deficient and lacking while their employers were represented as the blameless victims of their servants’ careless, lazy or dishonest behaviour. As it became more problematic for the employing classes to uphold the idea that servants should willingly serve them with blind devotion these moralistic discourses were intended to have the effect of creating obedience by silencing the servant and rendering them powerless, while also serving to cement the power dynamic on which the privileges of the upper classes were based. Whether servants passively conformed to these prescriptive models of deference is a matter of some debate.

The insights produced through the lens of deference are useful for providing one perspective on servants’ lives. However, renderings of servants that position them as simply deferential, powerless and obedient do not take account of the complex dynamics of their lives. This complexity is due largely to the significant, yet ambiguous position servants occupied, situated as they were, in close proximity to the families for whom they worked. The notion of servants as part of the family has been addressed by feminist scholars and has emerged from a growing interest in men and women’s changing place in society as a result of the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution that occurred throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As discussed earlier, the conflation of home and workplace for servants created an ambiguous state of affairs in that they were simultaneously living and working in close proximity with their employers and, thus, might be thought of as part of the family, while also held at a distance in order to maintain class and hierarchical distinctions.

In *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Clas*s (1995), Davidoff sought to provide insights into servants’ lives by situating them as part of the family. In the chapter ‘Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian Edwardian England’,[[52]](#footnote-52) servants were encompassed in her wider analysis of family life, in which Davidoff purposely conflates the roles of servant and wife, sometimes interchanging the terms by treating them as one and the same. Davidoff’s rationale for this is that she considered both wives and servants to be subjugated groups with ‘few links to wider society.’[[53]](#footnote-53) This is problematic because servants held rather different positions in the family to wives who were legally bound to the family in a way that servants were not. Despite this conflation, Davidoff does acknowledge important historical differences in their respective positions. She notes, for example, that ‘nineteenth century domestic service was a twilight world [in which] domestic servants were not really part of the family (as many employers would have liked to believe), but neither were they seen as unequivocally part of the paid workforce.’[[54]](#footnote-54) Her analysis highlights the ambiguous place servants held in society, positioned on the margins of the homes in which they worked (and often lived), but also denied recognition as an integral component of the British labouring classes.

In *Family fortunes: Men and women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (2002), Davidoff and Catherine Hall focus especially on the relationship between children and servants, examining the role of servants in the broader dynamics of family, identity and kinship formation. This is useful, however, although servants and children arguably held similar places within the household, in that they both were considered individuals who needed to be managed, controlled and disciplined by those in charge, their positions were quite dissimilar. First, for the servant, the household was both a home and a workplace, whereas this was not the case for children, for whom it was simply a home. Servants could be and were hired and fired.[[55]](#footnote-55) Second, in terms of their role in society, servants held a much lower rank than children especially in more aristocratic or elite homes. Further complexities arose when servants considered themselves to be part of the family. Davidoff and Hall note, for example, that ‘a servant who was genuinely part of the family could become crotchety and less efficient as she [or he] grew older and capable of manipulating the household through intimate knowledge of personal weaknesses.’[[56]](#footnote-56) The suggestion that servants could manipulate the household through their understandings of these ‘goings-on’ draws attention to the significance of the power dynamic inherent in the relationship and suggests that perhaps the household was a site of contestation where servants could find ways to assert themselves and undermine the authority within it.

Rather than focusing on the ideology of the private sphere of the household as a constraining space that forced servants into unquestioning obedience or suggesting that servants were one of the family and held a similar place to wives or children in the home, other scholars have examined how servants found ways to challenge the domestic authority of the household. Their accounts serve to disrupt the reductive notion of the servant as deferential, passive and lacking complexity. They attempt to explore whether servants were in fact the deferential and obedient group that the first group of historians suggested and who, despite their complex feelings about their employers, passively accepted the role the society had given them, or whether they tried to protect themselves by becoming more questioning or possibly even defiant?

In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant resistance* (1985) James C Scott explores, more generally, how relatively powerless groups can use, what he refers to as, ‘ordinary weapons of resistance’ such as ‘foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so on’ [[57]](#footnote-57) to demonstrate, not exactly outright mutiny, but certainly covert forms of defiance. Relational tactics, such as defiance, are often employed in relationships of power (such as those between master and servant) when there is a struggle between what a subordinate wants to say and what they can say while avoiding outright confrontation and without jeopardising their relationships with those in authority. As Scott argues ‘no close account of the life of the subordinate classes can fail to distinguish between what is said “backstage” and what may safely declared openly.’[[58]](#footnote-58) He suggests there is a ‘massive *middle* ground, in which conformity is often a self-conscious strategy and resistance is a carefully hedged affair that avoids all-or-nothing confrontation.’[[59]](#footnote-59) Scott’s work focuses on peasants in a Malaysian village but is useful for the purposes of this review as it throws more general light on how scholars of domestic service have considered the ways in which nineteenth-century servants might have adopted subversive methods to challenge authority and power in the household.

In *The Politics of Domestic Authority in Britain since 1800* (2009) Judy Giles challenges the view that servants acted only in obedient and deferential ways, and queries how servants found ways to resist domestic authority in the houses in which they worked. She finds that domestic service ‘often became an emotional war zone in which numerous battles were fought between suspicious mistresses and resentful maids’ arguing that ‘if open anger was one response to the injustices of domestic service, covert resistance was another.’[[60]](#footnote-60) Giles suggests that, as servants were often defined by their employers as ‘duplicitous, rude, lazy, or alternatively, deferential silent, loyal’ they had ‘few dignifying identities to draw on.’[[61]](#footnote-61) This stigmatisation of servants, she argues, ‘produced structures of feeling that involved deeply felt ideas about obligation, privacy, authority and “place” and that these might manifest themselves in contempt and deception.’[[62]](#footnote-62) To support her argument Giles uses the example of a servant by the name of Winifred Foley who described her relationship with her 90 year old mistress ‘as one characterised by duplicity and deception.’ Giles discusses how Winifred ‘discovered the joys of hoodwinking her employer, who she called ‘the “cantankerous old tartar”, [by] altering the clocks, for example, in order to get more time in bed.’[[63]](#footnote-63) Another example Giles provides is of a servant called Pauline Charles who ‘became adept at pretending to be dusting or scrubbing when she had, in fact, been reading.’[[64]](#footnote-64) These examples challenge both nostalgic representations of servants and also reductive ideas of the servant as silenced into obedience. They also raise questions about whether the meek and loyal ‘face’ servants present to the family is simply a mask that can be sloughed off at will.

Rather than conceptualising servants as ‘socialized into unquestioning obedience’ or suggesting that ‘deference in fact masked covert defiance’[[65]](#footnote-65) Selina Todd sets out to challenge whether ‘deference’ or ‘defiance’ shaped servants’ behaviour and actions. Davidoff and Hall had previously noted that ‘servants, unlike children, could try and protect themselves by not becoming too involved in the family, leading to a detachment deplored by employers.’[[66]](#footnote-66) Todd takes up this debate and argues that ’detachment provides a more useful means of conceptualizing servants’ relationships with their employers than deference or defiance.’[[67]](#footnote-67) She states that deference and defiance did exist in domestic service relations but that ‘we need to take [servants’] detachment from work as seriously as deference and defiance.’[[68]](#footnote-68)

This detachment is understandable given that, as Davidoff and Hall note, ‘rewards and punishments often remained personal and arbitrary’[[69]](#footnote-69) and that servants were often ‘incorporated, yet kept at a distance, in separate parts of the house.’[[70]](#footnote-70) The ability to detach from their labour, as Todd notes, ‘made it possible [for servants] to separate the demeaning nature of domestic service (defined thus by themselves, as well as by society at large) from their sense of self.’[[71]](#footnote-71) One way servants could detach from their work was to leave service altogether. This is especially true during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when new employment opportunities were opening up for the working classes in factories, department stores and offices following the growing industrialization of Britain. As Todd suggests, ‘in leaving service, women demonstrated that, for them, it was just a job - a way of getting by, making do, surviving.’[[72]](#footnote-72) Todd’s suggestion that servants were able to assert themselves, in this case by leaving service, queries the notion that servants were simply obsequious beings who lacked agency, a matter that has been previously overlooked but, as Todd notes, one that is ’deserving of serious attention.’[[73]](#footnote-73) This is an invitation I take seriously in this thesis.

Both nostalgic representations of the life of the servant and broader cultural hostility directed towards servants (as evidenced in media representations and wider cultural narratives discussed in the opening paragraphs of this thesis) are perhaps given explanation through the deference and defiance debate that has historically dominated the scholarly literature. More recent studies have begun to move away from these earlier conceptions and have attempted to liberate servants from such monolithic narratives by focusing on the interpersonal, familial and emotional attachments that can, and do, exist between servants and masters. These accounts construct the household as a site of both inclusion and exclusion for servants, where conflict and contestation can exist alongside intimacy and affection. These more recent understandings query previous historical accounts that polarised servants and their masters, and the findings derived from them, suggesting that there were much closer ties than previously imagined in which there were struggles and tensions but affection too. Historian Lucy Lethbridge (2013) notes, for example, that ‘there was often kindness in the relationship, often affection, even intimacy; yet a haunting distance frequently loomed between servant and master in which much remained unspoken.’[[74]](#footnote-74) This interplay of closeness and distance raises questions about what emotional and relational work servants must have had to perform in order to navigate the messy interpersonal landscape of the master-servant relationship.

The struggle that servants experienced in navigating the ‘haunting distance’ between them and their employers ‘in which much remained unspoken’, and how this could lead to deeply emotional tensions, is a matter explored by Alison Light (2008) who asserts that domestic service ‘has always been an emotional as well as an economic territory.’[[75]](#footnote-75) Light describes the feelings of her grandmother Lilian Heffren, a live-in servant, as ‘messy, painful, intimate, [and] damaging’ typically invoking ‘feelings of inferiority, envy, deference and belligerence.’[[76]](#footnote-76) In *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (2008), Light ‘attributes to servants far greater emotional depth than did the earlier deference/defiance approach.’[[77]](#footnote-77) Light examines the complexity of life for those servants living in close proximity with their employers in middle class homes in London, highlighting how boundaries between family members and employees could become blurred, creating complex emotions around feelings of loyalty and dependence. Light’s study is centred on the first half of the twentieth century and she considers the notion of the servant as a member of the family concluding that ‘there is nothing dearer to the conservative imagination, be it that of the master or the servant, than the figure of ‘the family treasure’, the old retainer become friend, or indeed “almost a member of the family.”’[[78]](#footnote-78) Light’s work focuses solely on middle class households, and specifically, on the Bloomsbury set. She devotes much of the book to examining the experiences of female servants employed by Virginia Woolf, such as Sophie Farrell, Nellie Boxall and Lottie Hope, drawing attention to the profoundly emotive relationships that emerged between this mistress and her servants.

Light characterises the relationship as a deeply confrontational, but at the same time, a profoundly dependent and emotional one. She explores how Woolf struggled with, on one hand, the presence of servants in the relatively closed space of her house and, on the other, her own dependency on them. In larger wealthier homes it was easier to maintain spatial boundaries between servants and their employers due to the distribution of space, however, Woolf’s home was a middle class one, unlike the larger homes of the landed gentry, and it was thus much harder to maintain this separation. As Todd notes ‘[smaller] houses meant the middle class were more aware of the servants’ presence - their smell, their sneers, their laughter; maids were in the next room now, not below stairs.’[[79]](#footnote-79) This was certainly true for Woolf who was ‘frequently irritated by her servant’s voices and found their talk invasive, a mere babble - like that of foreigners - too close and intimate.’[[80]](#footnote-80)

Woolf’s disgruntlement highlights a dichotomy: on one hand, servants were often rendered ‘invisible’ by their employers, while on the other, they remained both all too present and indispensable. In fact, as Light tells us, the most desirable servant was ‘a kind of absent presence.’[[81]](#footnote-81) Woolf’s relationship with Nellie Boxall was particularly fraught and Light refers to the way that Woolf wrote about Nellie in her diaries as ‘vicious.’[[82]](#footnote-82) One of Woolf’s diary entries describes Nellie, when she was in a bad mood, as ‘insufferably selfish and spiteful.’[[83]](#footnote-83) In spite of this, Woolf expected unquestioning devotion from her. So strong, as Light suggests, was her belief that a ‘servant’s devotion should be selfless’ that when Nellie wanted more pay or appreciation, Woolf considered that she was just being self-centred.[[84]](#footnote-84) This was a frenzied relationship in which Nellie frequently resorted to ‘tears and temper’ that Woolf derided as ‘hysteria’ and responded to by becoming ‘cold and angry.’[[85]](#footnote-85)

Nellie was essential to the operation of the household as the work she performed liberated Woolf from the drudgery of domesticity and allowed her the space and time to put pen to paper. However, the trouble it took to manage the confrontation and tensions in their relationship was not something Woolf welcomed. Their relationship was characterised by a blurring of the boundaries between devotion and loyalty - and power and subservience. Light’s immensely valuable study provides some powerful insights into how the blurring of boundaries in servant-keeping households was negotiated and raises questions about how servants navigated this. Her study is primarily focussed on the tensions inherent in a relatively small sector of British society (the Bloomsbury set) and the analysis is largely from a top-down perspective. Although conclusions can be drawn about the lived experience of servants from Light’s work, she primarily uses the word of the employer (Woolf’s diaries) from which to draw these conclusions. Neither does she give us access to how the servants themselves understood or experienced their relationship with Woolf.

Lucy Delap (2011) builds on Alison Light’s studies into the ‘emotional work of service’ suggesting that ‘twentieth century servants were not a silent class but were articulate vocal and active participants in the presentation of service.’[[86]](#footnote-86) Delap has produced valuable work through using a bottom-up approach on the matter of domestic service through the use of servants’ testimonies to provide insights into the relationship between them and their employers. Her work sits within scholarship that has set out to examine the lived experience of marginalised subordinate hard-to-reach groups more generally, such as paupers and migrants, through closer analysis of their diaries, letters and personal testimonies. Through these means, Delap develops a thesis that domestic service could be a positive, even empowering, experience for many women. Taking issue with previous accounts that characterised servants’ lives as defined by drudgery, deference or defiance, she argues that ‘service has been portrayed as the lowest status occupation, an aspiration free zone, in which sullen workers were patronized and talked down to by overbearing mistresses.’[[87]](#footnote-87) Delap calls such narratives into question and sets about salvaging domestic servants from a ‘melodramatic account of nineteenth-century service’ that, she argues, has been characterised as ‘a site of victimhood.’[[88]](#footnote-88) Drawing on diverse sets of material, such as the oral testimonies of servants, official reports, censuses, magazines and erotica, Delap has sought to provide ‘a far more diverse setting for domestic service’ than the ‘monotony of drudgery that has predominated in historical accounts.’[[89]](#footnote-89) Delap calls for a ‘revised narrative of domestic service’ and argues that testimonies of ‘pleasure and satisfaction, a sense of skill and accomplishment’ can be found ‘alongside sentiments of bitterness and resentment’[[90]](#footnote-90), an invitation I take seriously in this thesis.

In this section I have demonstrated how particular accounts of domestic service have thematically conceptualised servants through obedience and the corporeality of their labour in ways that were presented as ‘drudgery’ and which have been characterised as exploitative in both general and academic literature. Feminist scholars primarily considered servants to be socially conditioned into obedience and deference, however, this offers only a one-sided perspective on their lives. Scholars of family history, and of the changing dynamics of men and women in society throughout the nineteenth century, sought to position servants as part of the family but this was problematic due to the much more ambiguous place servants do actually occupy in the home. Other scholars, such as Giles, suggested that servants could exercise control in their lives and challenge their employers’ authority through ‘ordinary weapons of resistance’ such as covert defiance. Similarly to Giles, Todd also suggested that servants were able to exert control through a detachment that ‘was deplored by employers.’ Their work draws attention to how servants found ways to assert themselves in the home and to challenge the authority of their employers - a matter that has previously been overlooked by scholars but one (as Todd notes) that is worthy of attention. Following this, Light and Delap produced some immensely insightful work that examines twentieth-century domestic servants in ways that highlight the emotional complexity of the terrain of domestic service. Their work raises questions about the kinds of relational work servants perform to navigate the emotional complexity of their relationships with their employers and whether, as Todd suggests, their ability to challenge the authority of the household has been obscured.

Many of these accounts define the relationship between master and servant as an adversarial one and argue that when servants asserted themselves they did so for insubordinate reasons and as a resistance to the authority in the household. For example, Davidoff tells us that ‘traditional weapons such as sulking, mishearing, or semi-literate spoiling of materials, creating disorder, wasting time, deliberate “impudence” or “answering back” were developed to a high art by servants.’[[91]](#footnote-91) Although in some cases this is undoubtedly so, one of the key intentions of this thesis is to contribute to these understandings by finding out whether servants also found other ways to assert themselves and to act with resistance or even agency but for mutually beneficial reasons, and whether the emotional complexity of the relationship can be conceived of in less adversarial ways. I intend to evidence how the relationship can be defined, not only by detachment and insubordination but also, in both time periods, as engaged and affectionate, even where there are considerable power differentials at play.

Circling back to the discussion at the start of this thesis concerning the ways in which nineteenth-century understandings of service have shaped the present-day, one step of analysis will be to examine twenty-first century domestic service and to bring the two centuries into conversation with one another. As such, in order to situate this thesis within broader contemporary debates on modern-day servants and their lives, I now turn my attention to scholarly studies that have been conducted on elite households and the contemporary lives of servants in the twenty-first century in order to provide context for how my work builds on more recent accounts.

**1.3 Twenty-first century domestic service and Britain’s elite in secondary sources.**

Globalisation and the progression of neo-liberalism since the First World War has sparked a resurgence of global elites in the twenty-first century and with it a growing academic interest in their lives. Research that began to examine the households of contemporary elites in Britain was initially economic in nature and conducted either by urban geographers or sociologists (see Webber and Atkinson 2017, Atkinson, Parker, Burrows 2016, 2017 and Atkinson, Burrows, Glucksberg 2016, 2017). Their work focuses on analysing the spatial distribution of elites, how the elite’s wealth is generated (see economists such as Thomas Piketty 2014, 2020) and their consumption habits.[[92]](#footnote-92) A 2013 study by Beaverstock *et al*, explores how the super-rich are ‘serviced’, however, it is not concerned with how the rich are attended to by their domestic staff, but rather how their wealth is serviced by private wealth management providers.[[93]](#footnote-93) Since the 1980s wealth differentials in the UK have seen a return to levels not witnessed since the First World War. It has been asserted by urban geographers and sociologists that the relative *equality* experienced between 1918 and 1980 was not, in fact, a normal state of affairs but rather should be more accurately interpreted as, ‘an aberration from historically typical conditions.’[[94]](#footnote-94) In his controversial book *Capital in the Twenty First Century* (2014),the French economist ThomasPiketty provides further evidence to support this view. Picketty chronicles the history of wealth distribution from the start of the Industrial Revolution, when British society was highly unequal in terms of class structures and personal wealth, drawing parallels between the landed gentry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the super-rich of the twenty-first century today. In fact, he speculates that the twenty-first century will be ‘even more inegalitarian than the nineteenth, if it is not already so’ questioning ‘in what respects the structure of inequality in the world today is really that different from that which existed during the Industrial Revolution or in traditional rural societies?’[[95]](#footnote-95)

Through the use of archival and contemporary material, Burrows and Webber provide an analysis of this social change, comparing the lifestyles of those who occupy Highgate’s most prestigious properties today with those who occupied them a century ago.[[96]](#footnote-96) In their paper ‘Life in an Alpha Territory: Discontinuity and conflict in an Elite London Village’ (2016), which focuses on how the elite integrate into local neighbourhoods, they state that ‘of the 14.6 million High Net Worth Individuals (HNWI) living across the globe in 2014, it is estimated that some 550,000 reside in the UK.’[[97]](#footnote-97) High Net Worth Individuals are defined as those with one million US dollars or 630 thousand GDP to invest, in addition to owning their own homes and who typically live in wealthy neighbourhoods. The population of HNWIs declined somewhat by 3.3% between 2017 and 2018, however resident UK HNWIs still totalled 556,160 in 2018 according to the 2019 World Wealth Report.[[98]](#footnote-98) This dramatic growth in the economy of Britain raises questions about what form domestic service takes in modern Britain.

In his study of historical perspectives of domestic service B W Higman asserts that ‘domestic service grows best in societies where a substantial middle-class coexists with significant inequality, rather than where the concentration of wealth is extreme, or where true egalitarianism exists.’[[99]](#footnote-99) Harry Mount reporting in the *Telegraph* noted in 2017 that the number of domestic servants [in the UK] is “booming” and that the increased numbers of recruited staff are there primarily to serve the interests of Britain’s growing elite, stating that: ‘wherever the multiple between the wages of the rich and the poor grows, so does the number of servants.’[[100]](#footnote-100) The *Financial Times* reported similarly, in February 2017, that while economists and experts ‘foresee automation and robotics replacing many professional jobs,’ those who cater for the very wealthy ‘are likely to prove resilient.’[[101]](#footnote-101) The *Financial Times* stated that this was because they provide ‘a niche, personal and bespoke service […] underpinned by flattery’, one difficult to imagine being outsourced to robots.

While little has been written about domestic service more generally in Britain in the twenty-first century, there is a growing body of work by social science scholars and geographers interested in the effects of colonisation and migration on contemporary domestic service (see for example Haskins and Lowrie, 2015) who examine the experiences of domestic workers who have arrived in Britain from the Global South, for example, from countries such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and China, and from the continent of Africa, to service the needs of Britain’s elite.[[102]](#footnote-102) Globalisation is a critical factor in this process as it has enabled many migrant workers to come to Britain to secure work as domestic workers or au pairs that has resulted in new forms of domestic service. The interest in these global migrants has, in turn, according to Haskins and Lowrie, ‘generated an explosion of incredibly rich scholarship in the social sciences’[[103]](#footnote-103) on contemporary domestic service.

Rosie Cox’s book *The servant problem: paid domestic work in a global economy[[104]](#footnote-104)* sits within these studies and examines the experiences of women from impoverished countries in the Global South who work as often exploited, domestic staff in affluent and middle class homes in the UK. Cox focuses primarily on London and charts the huge shifts in the historic circumstances of domestic servants who work for the British middle and upper classes in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She first considers twentieth-century servants who came from rural parts of Britain to work in London and then moves on to discuss those who come from impoverished countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, following large migration shifts that occurred throughout the twentieth century. She uses the oral histories of those migrants currently working in homes of London’s affluent elite to throw light on these contemporary master/ mistress-servant relationships, that are, similarly to Woolf’s household, often profoundly emotionally charged and fraught with anxiety. She builds on the work of Delap and Light to explore how the notion of ‘home’ underpins our understandings of these relationships, arguing that, as the home is a private, intimate space that is ‘defined in opposition to work and as a place of belonging’, what occurs there is more ‘emotionally charged’ and ‘[touches] us more deeply than things that happen elsewhere.’[[105]](#footnote-105) Cox’s findings support scholarly work that situates domestic service within an ‘emotional landscape’ (Delap 2011) and she argues that the ‘emotional charge’ of domestic service ‘makes employers and domestic workers highly sensitive to each other’s behaviour.’[[106]](#footnote-106) Interestingly, Cox’s conclusions reflect Alison Light’s findings from an earlier historical period that the relationship could be deeply confrontational but, at the same time, also profoundly dependent and emotional. Although Cox’s work is particularly insightful, her focus remains primarily on migrant women in London and their exploitation, and perhaps accords more with wider debates that touch on issues surrounding modern slavery.

A significant theme about these contemporary studies is the consideration given to the everyday experiences of the modern servants through a focus on interpersonal relations, identity, representation and agency. As Haskins and Lowrie note, many of these studies ‘intersect and overlap with each other’ but one theme that brings the body of work together is the concept of ‘domestic workers as colonized people, and colonized people as domestic workers, struggling to control the conditions in which they live by negotiating the ways in which they are represented, and the ways in which they can represent themselves.’[[107]](#footnote-107) As they argue, these representations ‘work to reinforce the employers’ power, and the power of the wider state authorities’ over colonized domestic workers’ lives, whether that be as servile and inferior people, vulnerable and feminized (Ally; Lowrie: Nilan, Artini, and Threadgold), sexually promiscuous (Platt), or basically incompetent and in need of training and education in civilized behaviour, to be made “useful” (McCabe; Robinson: McCallum: Macdonald).’[[108]](#footnote-108) The tropes of servanthood (servile, inferior, incompetent) provided by these accounts seem to ape and perhaps reinforce similar stereotypes of servants from the nineteenth century.

Building on the themes of interpersonal relations, identity, representation and agency, my intent is to chart the continuities and discontinuities that emerge in the master-servant relations of the nineteenth century and those between the domestic-service employers and employees of the twenty-first century. The contribution of Haskins and Lowrie, similarly to Rosie Cox, draws attention to, and unpacks the experiences of exploited migrant workers, however, my interest lies primarily in examining contemporary master-servant relations through the experiences of domestic servants who are either British-born or derive from other first-world countries. The body of work around the study of the exploitation of migrant and colonized workers tends to focus on individuals who have specifically migrated to Britain in order to find work in domestic service. These studies are immensely insightful and particularly important at this time, however, the basis for my study is to examine individuals who more closely inhabit roles that ape those of the nineteenth-century servant.

There are two primary reasons for this. First, the deteriorating economic circumstances of their native countries has meant that most exploited workers have few choices but to migrate to the First World in order to find domestic work. This thesis, however, is concerned with the experiences of first-world domestic workers who have more economic choices before them and yet have actively chosen to enter into domestic service. Not only do they provide closer comparators to nineteenth-century servants but also the study of their experiences is also a largely neglected area of study. Second, as Delap notes, historians of British domestic service ‘have tended to situate it [domestic service] as an illustration of the lives of the poorest, most marginal and most degraded workers’[[109]](#footnote-109) but, as she goes on to suggest, ‘[although] some workers did lead marginalized lives and experienced exploitation, marginality is not the most revealing of historical frameworks.’[[110]](#footnote-110) This is a suggestion I consider seriously in this thesis and, as such, the question remains of why people enter domestic service in Britain in the present day despite a wider range of options.

A brief Google search of online recruitment agencies such as Indeed provides a glimpse into how sectors of the industry have been professionalised in recent years with butlers having the potential to be paid up to £95,000 per annum and housekeepers expected to be ‘multi skilled, proactive and efficient.’[[111]](#footnote-111) Nannies are offered ‘stunning’ accommodation, first class travel when travelling with the family, weekends off and salaries in excess of £35k.[[112]](#footnote-112) These particular advertisements suggest that perhaps the nature of domestic service has indeed changed, and that modern servants now enjoy a more professional and liberated position within elite households than their historic counterparts.

Servants are now employed in a range of super-wealthy households in modern Britain, from very formal aristocratic households that mirror the nineteenth-century country estate to more informal High Net Worth households, typically inhabited by individuals from the creative industries, such as film, TV and media. Situated between these are households led by those in the banking, financial and legal sectors. The historical legacy of the Victorian age of the domestic servant is evidenced in the kinds of roles that these elite households typically employ: nannies, butlers, gardeners, housekeepers, chauffeurs and chefs - the occupations that one would classically expect to find in dramas such as *Downton Abbey* and *Upstairs, Downstairs.* The strict boundaries and protocols that determined the specific duties that each servant performed in the nineteenth-century household have faded in the modern age. The armies of staff that existed in the country house and elite homes of the nineteenth century are unusual in modern Britain and it is, therefore, rarer to find clear delineations in terms of role definitions.

In the nineteenth century, as Rosie Cox notes, ‘the large country house or town residence had a staff that was organized into a strict hierarchy, with each member responsible for specific tasks.’[[113]](#footnote-113) An example of this is provided by Lucy Lethbridge who tells the story of Lady Diana Cooper who grew up in Belvoir Castle, Rutland and ‘remembered the “gong man” whose only job was to summon the household to meals by walking the corridors three times a day banging a gong.’[[114]](#footnote-114) This would be unlikely in contemporary Britain, even on more expansive formal estates, as it is less likely that there will be a large retinue of staff and servants with clearly defined roles. In modern domestic service, chefs might be expected to perform gardening duties, for example, and nannies might be expected to take on housekeeping tasks, and so on. Although we must be careful not to take his account at face value, as he may have been influenced by nostalgic representations, one butler, who had worked in a large number of formal aristocratic homes including Buckingham Palace and Clarence House, told me:

The role has changed in the way that [historically] the butler would run the house but then there'd [also] be a Master of the Household or an Estate Manager or a House Manager but [nowadays] the Butler has taken more of that role on. So these days you're doing more paperwork, more staff organisation, whereas the butler traditionally has always looked after the family to the degree that he's the one that the Lady of the Household will come to - to organise the minor things whereas nowadays the Butler has to take a bigger role. I mean I have to cook, I valet - whereas pre-Second World War those jobs would have been done by separate people, they would have recruited a valet, you recruited a chef, under butlers, maids, all this, whereas these days as a butler you have to take a bigger role on, you have to multitask a lot of the time including chauffeuring[[115]](#footnote-115)

Despite this, some aspects of the role remain remarkably similar. For example, he also explained that in more formal households some servants are still expected to wear uniforms. As he noted: ‘I normally have to be in livery’, which he described as consisting of ‘grey pinstripe trousers, black waistcoat, black jacket.’ Although these formal households have changed the least since the nineteenth century, Cox notes that within them ‘the historical legacy of formal households is manifest in the types of jobs that exist and in who is considered suitable to take on those jobs.’[[116]](#footnote-116) On one hand, some modes of modern service ape the structures of the past, but other modes of service, at least superficially, appear more inclusive and egalitarian.

Nannies, butlers and housekeepers are also found in many private High Net Worth homes, although here the arrangements are often more informal than those described above. Staff and employers will call each other by their first names, they may eat meals together and are not expected to wear uniforms. They are also often encouraged to think of themselves as ‘part of the family.’ This more relaxed attitude in terms of power dynamics in the master-servant relationship might be considered more desirable and preferable to the hierarchal nature of such relationships in the past. It raises questions, however, of whether there is more confusion about where the boundaries between employee-employer and master-servant relations lie. This is a matter I seek to address in this thesis - whether inhabiting the role of the contemporary domestic servant means having to navigate a complex territory that has emerged from a historic hierarchical relationship between masters and servants. This hierarchy once defined the world of domestic service, however, servants’ lives now occupy a more liminal and less clearly defined landscape. The peripheral nature of the servant’s position, neither wholly family member nor wholly employee, is produced out of the blurring of the boundary between these two positions. I seek to examine whether negotiating this has unexpected emotional impacts for servants.

Domestic service is based on economics and physical labour on one hand, and on intimacy and affective labour on the other. Yet, while research has tended to focus on the corporeal and physical labour that servants perform, little is known about their relational work and interpersonal relationships from their own perspectives or the ways in which these shape their everyday lived experience. It is this gap in knowledge, about how domestic staff perform, negotiate and maintain their relationships with their masters in both historical and contemporary households that this thesis seeks to address. I intend to examine whether servant identity is constructed through various discourses but, at the same time, emerges through the ‘voice’ of the servant and the ways in which they explicate their lived experience. The work servants perform is complicated by the spaces in which that work is conducted, which are, effectively, a workplace within a home and vice versa. Taking this as my point of departure, in the following section I develop my research questions in more detail, explain the reasoning behind them and provide three sub-questions that shape the structure of this thesis.

**1.4 Research Questions**I base my research questions on the notion that servants have been stripped of any complexity and cast with simplistic, one-dimensional identities by nostalgic representations and wider societal discourses. Furthermore, servants are also bled of their own identities by their employers. Judy Giles touches on the idea of servant identity noting that ‘some of the most corrosive memories of service centre on rules forbidding any kind of singing, dance or music, or other expressions of an independent personality.’[[117]](#footnote-117) This eliding of servant identity and an independent personality by their employers calls into question how servants resisted (or not) the rules enforced upon them and found ways to assert themselves within the confining nature of the household. It also raises questions, ones that I seek to address in this thesis, about how they achieved this while, at the same time, navigating the complex emotional and interpersonal terrain of the master-servant relationship itself. Taking these considerations as a provocation I have identified three sub research questions that direct and inform my analysis of the servant experience as set out in my three substantive empirical chapters.

How do servants of both the past and present adopt or resist the identities constructed by popular and dominant discourses of servant identity in British cultural and societal life?

What pragmatic and strategic linguistic approaches do servants adopt in order to challenge boundaries and create meaning *in situ* within the established power hierarchies inherent in the master-servant relationship?

Operating within the constraints placed on them by these power dynamics, how do servants resist damage to their identity when the master-servant relationship threatens to rupture?

At the core of this thesis is the idea that humans make meaning, and that identities are co-constructed and negotiated with others, through the use of language. By analysing servants’ narratives, I reconceive them as active dialogues in which the tensions between different versions of the self are illuminated. I set out to find evidence of the “servant voice” by investigating the first-hand accounts of a marginalised group whose voices have mostly been silenced in historical records. In order to explicate how I did this and how I performed my analysis I turn now to the methodology and sources chapter in which I will examine some examples of the elusive “servant voice” that we do have access to, a critical evaluation of the approaches I employed, which are recognised in the field of sociocultural linguistics but have not yet been applied to this subject matter, a discussion of the ethical considerations inherent in this work and the strengths and comparability of qualitative interviews and archival, written accounts as empirical sources.

**Chapter 2: Primary Sources, Methodology and Analytical Approaches**

In this chapter I first discuss the difficulties of finding access to the elusive “servant voice”, and survey primary sources on servants more generally. Second, I discuss and provide a justification for the methodological approach that I used in undertaking this research. I describe the sources and materials I employed, discuss the theoretical and methodological challenges I encountered in relation to the acquisition of both sets of data, and explain how I mapped the similarities and differences between them. I also explain how I analysed my data using discourse analysis to examine the interpersonal pragmatics of servants’ linguistic strategies as a basis for understanding master-servant interactions, and assess why this framework proved especially useful for unpacking their underlying social dynamics.

**2.1 Primary sources: The elusive “servant voice.”**

Historian Leonore Davidoff argues that ‘written evidence [of servants] is overwhelmingly from the superordinates’ side and from the more articulate and powerful individuals within even that stratum.’[[118]](#footnote-118) As she suggests, ‘no-one ever asked subordinates how they viewed the household.’[[119]](#footnote-119) More recently, Light has noted that ‘servants’ voices are rarely heard.’[[120]](#footnote-120) The lack of the servant voice in the historical record is primarily because, as linguist Stephan Elspaß points out, ‘documents written by elite writers have come down to us in greater numbers for different reasons, but mainly because they were traditionally attributed a higher value than texts from “ordinary” writers.’[[121]](#footnote-121) This has been true throughout history and even today, in contemporary Britain, it is more likely that the private correspondence and documents of a small elite, such as royalty, aristocrats, politicians and professional writers are preserved rather than the writings of the ordinary person. The prioritising of the preservation of letters and documents from these upper ranks resulted partly from a narrow perspective on what was considered to be of ‘value.’[[122]](#footnote-122) This has meant that, as Davidoff has powerfully argued, ‘the world view of Victorian society, which has been handed down to us, was mostly the creation of those people in positions of power who had the resources as well as the need to propagate their central position.’[[123]](#footnote-123) Elspaß supports this view, noting that ‘traditional language historiography has clearly concentrated [...] on texts of writers from the upper classes in society’[[124]](#footnote-124) resulting in a limited and rather skewed perspective on the lived experience of those who were not part of this elite group.

A contributing factor to the dearth of secondary studies of servants (discussed in the last chapter) is thus partly due to the shortage of primary sources on which to base them, making the task of analysing their experience, or witnessing their relationships, difficult to perform. Furthermore, as evidenced in the previous chapter, little research has yet been conducted on the lived experience of contemporary British domestic servants in elite and High Net Worth households in Britain today. In this section I discuss the reason for this lack of sources from both time periods and examine some evidence of the servant voice that does exist in the historical record in order to situate my study within these sources. Despite the fragmentary nature of these accounts, I argue they can nevertheless provide some useful insights on the servant experience.

Primary sources that contain evidence of servants can be found in the diaries, journals and letters of their employers and although they provide viewpoints from the masters’ perspectives on their servants’ lives, they can be, as a result of the more powerful position of the authors, rather reductive accounts. As such, analysis of them does not help to interrogate or challenge preconceived ideas about servants or wider cultural discourses that set out to define them in particular ways. In these accounts, references to servants are usually less than favourable, with servants frequently problematised in terms of their character, their morality, their conduct and their sobriety. Writing to her friend Mary Russell in 1864, Jane Welsh Carlyle wrote of her housemaid Helen, who she had recently decided to part with:

She was an incorrigible goose, and destructive and wasteful beyond all human endurance. As a specimen of the waste figure three pounds of fresh butter at 20 pence a pound regularly consumed in the kitchen, and half a pound of tea at 4/ made away with in *four days*!! Then, as a specimen of the destruction - figure *all, every one*, of my beautiful fine - and some of them quite *new* table napkins, actually “worn out” of existence! Not a rag of them to be found and good sheets all in rags, besides a boiler *burst*, a pumpwell gone irrecoverably *dry*, a clock made to strike *fourteen* every hour – and all in the china and crokery (sic) in the house either disappeared or cracked[[125]](#footnote-125)

The casting of servants in these terms by their employers, as corrupt, wasteful and disruptive does not seem to provide a fully rounded account of all that servants could be. Of course, some servants acted in corrupt and disruptive ways, however, this was not always the case. As Jane’s letter to her friend goes on to reveal, she had in fact been misled about Helen’s apparent wastefulness. As the story unfolds it comes to light that another servant was responsible for the destruction and waste that Jane had found ‘beyond human endurance.’

Jane’s misjudgement of Helen speaks to a prevailing narrative of a totalising account of servants as all bad or corrupt in which there is little space for servants to give their side of the story. In turn, this raises questions concerning the extent to which servants had the opportunity to speak of their own experience in their own words. Some individuals did write the stories of their lives as domestic servants including Eric Hornes’ *What the Butler Winked At* (1924), Margaret Powell’s *Below Stairs* (1970) and Eileen Balderstone’s *Backstairs Life in a Country House* (1982). These books were written, however, once the individuals had left service and were designed for entertainment purposes. Even when we find the narrative of a servant still in service, as in the case of the letters and diaries of Hannah Cullwick, it often remains that of a servant voice constructed alongside that of their master. Hannah’s unusual master-servant relationship was documented in diaries that she kept from 1854-1873. This is a well-known and frequently used source, however, as Derek Hudson notes, although Hannah was, ‘the most thoroughly documented housemaid of the Victorian age’,[[126]](#footnote-126) this was not a typical servant-master relationship and, as such, the accounts of her work and her relationship with her employer are not, therefore, generalisable. Her diaries were written with the knowledge her employer (Arthur Munby) would read and partially edit them. This co-construction makes it difficult to discern which is the voice or identity of each of the interlocutors. Helen Merrick claims that the Cullwick diaries are of little use as a historical resource because they were written by Hannah in collaboration with Munby and for his ‘perusal’, which calls her ‘agency into question.’[[127]](#footnote-127)

Rising literacy levels would have meant that most servants would have had the ability to write their own accounts, however, members of the elite still had more time to write about their own lives than those of the lower classes. Mass literacy drives in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant that ‘a large proportion of the “ordinary” population (farmers, artisans, soldiers, housemaids etc.) were able to read and put pen to paper’, but despite this, ‘they rarely had reason or opportunity to do so.’[[128]](#footnote-128) This was certainly the case with domestic servants who, as Delap notes, ‘were a marginalized and hard working group who, by and large, had little time or inclination to write of their lives.’[[129]](#footnote-129) Correspondence and letters that provide samples of the servant voice, their perspective on master-servant relationships and their sense (whether explicitly or implicitly noted) of the work required to maintain them are, therefore, generally difficult to find. This means that the worldview of the nineteenth century and the identities of the working classes within it were largely shaped by people in positions of power and, as Davidoff notes, ‘mostly the creation of those people [...] who had the resources as well as the need to propagate their central position.’[[130]](#footnote-130) Conversely, ‘categories of people who are the furthest away from the centers of decision-making are ranked accordingly; and they are also visualised in images that emphasise their powerlessness and degradation.’[[131]](#footnote-131) This is a concern that I seek to address in this thesis.

**2.2 Aim and scope of the study**As Haskins and Lowrie state, there is much ‘fertile ground for cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research and study, where diverse sources, methodologies, and approaches can be usefully brought to bear to generate new insights within a larger discussion’ on both historical and contemporary domestic service.[[132]](#footnote-132) This is an invitation I respond to in this thesis. I intend for my work to build on, and complement, the studies of Cox, Lowrie and Haskins. My primary aim is to capture the disparate and silenced voices of servants in order to reconstruct the everyday experiences of a marginalised group whose first-hand accounts have so often been flattened out in popular representations. My intention is to conceptualise the master-servant relationship as a site for the construction and contestation of servant identity in order to produce new understandings of servants’ lives.

As we have seen, primary sources that provide insights into historic domestic-service relationships are both difficult to access and, in many instances, entirely absent in the historical record. This is particularly so in terms of sources that give access to the individual servant voice that can provide bottom-up perspectives rather than top-down ones. As such, I take an innovative approach to securing the material for analysis by drawing on two datasets from two different time periods: data derived from nineteenth-century servant correspondence that I sourced from archives; and data extracted from original oral history interviews that I undertook with twenty-first century domestic staff from elite British households. Due to the limited nature of the historic “servant voice” I set out to explore two different time periods so that I can use what is happening in contemporary domestic service to throw light on the lived experiences of nineteenth-century servants and, furthermore, for findings derived from nineteenth-century service to produce new understandings about servants’ lives today. I remain, however, alive to the fact that there are important distinctions in context between the two sets of material.

First, I set out to uncover the voices of historic servants through an examination of a number of nineteenth-century servant letters. Letters are useful for understandings of relationships as they are fundamentally interactional and communicative, and can therefore shed valuable light on how individuals construct relationships. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note, ‘letters become vehicles through which information is circulated, social roles are enacted, relationships secured, often in a paradoxical mix of intimacy and formality.’[[133]](#footnote-133) When discussing private correspondence historian John Tosh states that ‘[there] are no other sources that bring to life so clearly the family and social relationships of people in the past.’[[134]](#footnote-134) Letters also provide a site for identity construction. Elizabeth Jane MacArthur notes that, ‘letter writers inevitably construct personae for themselves as they write, and if they are involved in a regular exchange they construct personae for the correspondent and plots for the story of the relationship as well. They become co-authors of a narrative in which they, or rather epistolary constructions of themselves, play leading roles.’[[135]](#footnote-135) It is not easy to accurately determine, with the distance of time, the dynamics of master-servant interactions of the nineteenth century; however, the way that servants express themselves, manage their identities and make sense of their lived experience through their correspondence can provide vital points of entry.

Second, I set about interviewing contemporary twenty-first century servants to explore their experiences of working in elite houses today. Capturing the recorded accounts of modern-day household staff can expand and add an important dimension to the historical account. As such, examining contemporary servants’ experiences, their lives, and the ways in which they shape relations with their employers, can provide important insights into the continuities and discontinuities that exist in relation to past histories of domestic service, providing a dialogical link between past and present. Given this, my approach was to access the thoughts and feelings of the present-day servants and use that to interrogate and to throw new light on what I was able to find in the archive.

It should be noted that two themes that do not form part of this thesis are the sexual division of labour and the gendered aspects of service. Although these topics are acknowledged by scholars of domestic service as important characteristics in the domestic service relationship [[136]](#footnote-136), I chose not to explore these topics for two reasons. First, these are sizable areas of study and, as my primary interest was in servant identity and the interpersonal relations between servants and masters, I did not have the space to cover the sexual division of labour and the gendered aspects of service sensibly within the scope of this thesis. Second, there was not enough evidence in the empirical material for me to make substantial arguments in relation to these themes.

In the next section I provide a detailed overview of the datasets I used, a critical evaluation of the approaches I employed in my research, a discussion of the ethical considerations inherent in this work, and the strengths and comparability of archival written accounts and qualitative interviews as empirical sources. My intent is to examine how servants linguistically construct, and perform their identities within these two sets of material and thus, what can be understood about their relationships to their masters and, by such means, produce a closer understanding of their lived experience. In the following sections, I begin by providing a detailed overview of the materials I used, and the challenges I faced in securing my datasets, before outlining my methodological approaches to the empirical work and its analysis.

**2.3 Empirical Material**

***Archival Material***

As extensive household records are kept in the archives of country houses and estates, I had imagined that the task of finding correspondence written by servants to their masters and mistresses would be a relatively straightforward one. What I soon discovered, however, was that often servant correspondence was not considered significant enough to preserve and that this task was going to be more problematic than I had originally anticipated. Live-in servants of the nineteenth century would have written letters home to their families that might have revealed more intimate details of their relationships with their masters. Unfortunately these rarely survive as poorer working-class families did not have the means to preserve or archive them. There are, however, some exceptions to this. Masters were frequently absent from home travelling between different houses or abroad and, as such, letter writing formed a method by which they could, on one hand, instruct servants; while servants, on the other, could update their masters on the running of the house and estate.

I began at Windmill Hill, the purpose-built archive that houses the Rothschild family archives from Waddesdon Manor. Its website states that it ‘welcomes researchers’ and I was hopeful, after reading this and corresponding with the head archivist there, of finding correspondence that might prove fruitful for my research. I duly arranged a meeting with the archivist who was initially enthusiastic about my work and what the archive might have to offer. During subsequent visits, however, it soon became apparent that there was little or no correspondence written by servants to which I was able to gain access. I had therefore to begin my search again, which I did by researching online archives, and by corresponding with archivists around the country. Although they were exceptionally helpful, they were not able to offer much hope in terms of finding letters that were written in the nineteenth century from servants to their masters/mistresses. Although the responses I received were varied, the typical response was that the archive had ‘significant collections of correspondence for certain aristocratic and gentry families’ but that ‘there is not much within them relating to domestic service.’ I discovered that most family and estate archives management records provide general information about servants’ working conditions, wages or even their beer drinking habits, however, as Sambrook notes, these records are usually ‘obstinately silent’ about individual servants and their lived experience.[[137]](#footnote-137)

I thus set about arranging my own research visits in order to investigate various archives and found five collections that proved to be fruitful and which I eventually consulted for this thesis. These were the Lady Derby Collection, Hatfield House Archives; the Savernake Estate Collection held at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre (WSHC); Romney of the Mote Manuscripts (1461-1957) held at the Kent History and Library Centre (KHLC); The Pratt Manuscripts (1375-1968) held at the Kent History and Library Centre (KHLC); and the Carnarvon of Highclere Papers held at the Hampshire Record Office (HRO). I consulted the records of these particular houses because the families who owned them were among the leading constituents of the upper classes of the nineteenth century and employed large retinues of staff. There was, therefore, a greater probability that I would find a more comprehensive range of letters between servants and masters in these archives. Additionally, many servants in such households were maintained in their employment for many years, which I surmised might result in increased levels of affection or closeness in correspondence. I believed, therefore, that these letters might more fruitfully illuminate how servants enacted their relationships with their masters through expressions of intimacy and kinship and the use of interpersonal language while also conforming to the verbal etiquette expected in these hierarchical relationships. The letters were all in their original format and, as such, transcribing them presented many challenges. Many of them were fragile and difficult to read due to paper tears, ink blots, stains and/ or indecipherable handwriting. Some letters were characterised by non-standard spelling and grammar, and in some cases, cross-written to save paper, making transcription difficult. The cursive style of nineteenth-century writing and particular conventions, such as linking up words in an ‘orthographic unit’, also provided further challenges.

In total I examined approximately 150 letters across the four archives I visited and from this number I selected and transcribed 32 letters in total. The 32 letters chosen, fell into distinct categories. The first were written by servants who were geographically distanced from their masters and mistresses and were updating them on their everyday lives. Some of these letters were personal while others were more descriptive, focusing on household practicalities and their relationships with other servants. The second category contains letters that were written by servants who had either been dismissed or who had fallen out of favour with their masters and/ or mistresses. These letters are useful for demonstrating how servant identity can be shattered when ruptures occur in the master-servant relationship. The third category of letters were a small number written by masters and mistresses to each other about their servants. These particular letters written by employers fall into one of two groupings, they either provide unique perspectives into the ways in which servants interacted with one another, or they provide insights into how a cultural script of servanthood was created that has persisted and become sedimented over time in collective ideas of what it is to be a servant. There were also a small number of letters written by servants looking for work and also one set of letters written by a retired servant to his former mistress.

Although all 32 letters informed my analysis and findings, I only discuss 16 in detail in this thesis (see Appendix 1). The advantage of working with a relatively small number of letters is that by adopting a detailed qualitative approach and conducting a micro-investigation of each letter, rich data can be produced that helps us to unpack these master-servant relationships in depth. How I set about interpreting the letters will be discussed in detail in a later section. The 16 letters I discuss in my empirical chapters were chosen as they provide detailed accounts of personal interactions, whereas others were more perfunctory or transactional in nature. An example of one letter I transcribed but do not discuss was written to the Carnarvons from a servant called Hohl in 1846. Hohl was away on the continent with the Carnarvon children and their governess, and was reporting to Lady Carnarvon what they had spent on their trip thus far - 17 francs on the apartment, 16 francs on dinner, 8 francs on breakfast and eggs, 7 francs on tea, and 2 francs on a bottle of wine. While this accounting is interesting and tells us something of their relationship, there were other letters that provide more apt examples of the themes I had chosen to focus on.

***Fragmentary nature of letters***Personal correspondence is useful for accessing the lived experience of ordinary people and is a resource familiar to cultural and social historians, as is the method of close reading. It should be acknowledged, however, that much of the material used here is capable of supporting several readings, many of them potentially contradictory and all mediated through various social, analytical and cultural frames of understanding. As such, letters in the archive cannot be relied on for a totalising account of history or a generalizable version of events. This is true, however, of the writings of all ‘hard to reach’ groups, including, for instance, female letter writers, paupers, and migrants.[[138]](#footnote-138) As historian David Gerber notes, when using letters as a resource, ‘the continuities and commonalities always seem to remain tentative, and reliance on them often risks imposing order on materials that defy it.’[[139]](#footnote-139) Letters as a resource are thus partial and fragmentary with interpretative limitations, however, as historian Keith Jenkins argues, it is also the case that ‘there is no way that any historical closure can ever be achieved.’[[140]](#footnote-140) Given this, Jenkins calls for ‘new, disrespectful, contentious, radical readings and re-readings, writings and rewritings of the past (`the before now') to be produced.’[[141]](#footnote-141) I set out to answer this call by arguing that the study of previously unexamined servant letters opens up new possibilities for understandings of servant life. The linguistic patterns that emerge from historic servant letters can offer unique insights and tantalising glimpses of the servant experience.

As with most archived letters, the selected letters have been chosen because of their content, yet they provide only one side of the story. As Liz Stanley (2004) notes, ‘the loss of the “other side” of the correspondence influences the reader’s understanding of the remaining letters.’[[142]](#footnote-142) How is it possible to know or construct this ‘missing’ consciousness without entering into a process in which the reader imagines into existence the other lost interlocutor whose voice is missing from the archive? This other consciousness is inserted into the reading of the text even though it remains the reader’s own, projected ‘other.’ Personal or familiar letters have long been viewed, along with diaries and other forms of autobiographical writing, as a means of self-expression.’[[143]](#footnote-143) Each letter has a motive that the writer considers to be important and, as such, servant letters of the nineteenth century served many purposes; to convey information, as a vehicle of self-expression, and also as a form of identity performance. The data found in these sets of letters obviously provides rather individualistic accounts of the servant experience and, it should be noted that the language used is dialogically shaped to the audience, often with the intent of getting the addressee to act in particular ways.

***Oral History Research and Material***

As I have shown, the nineteenth-century “servant voice” is elusive and rarely recorded in the archive and, therefore, I reinforce my archival material by setting out to uncover the experiences of twenty-first century servants and to bring them into conversation with one another. I chose to focus on High Net Worth or aristocratic households for several reasons.[[144]](#footnote-144) First, High Net Worth or aristocratic households are most likely to employ a wide range of professional domestic staff on a full-time basis. Second, contemporary High Net Worth households provide a direct comparator for the elite households of the past, in terms of income and status, and little is currently known about service within these households.[[145]](#footnote-145) In order to provide approximate data from the contemporary world one approach could have been to use written records for interrogation. This is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. First, while domestic servants of the modern-day might keep diaries and journals it is highly unlikely that they would be willing to share the content of these with a researcher. Second, even if they were willing, there are complex ethical issues around the publication of diaries and journals of individuals who are still alive. Last, but by no means least, most modern-day employers and their domestic staff tend to communicate, not by letter, but by text and email and, regardless of whether individuals might be willing to share the content of these interactions, access to this type of correspondence is usually tightly restricted under non-disclosure agreements. Furthermore, country houses such as Chatsworth, who archive their emails for future records and take their archiving seriously, would not allow a present-day researcher access to these for a number of years and only then, when anyone in the record was no longer alive.

I turned, therefore, to the idea of oral history interviewing as this was likely to produce comparable data in the sense that oral history provides the opportunity for individuals to tell their stories in their own words. At the start of my research, I had anticipated that finding modern-day servants who would be prepared to talk to me was not going to be an easy endeavour; I was unaware, however, quite what a problematic and challenging process it would prove to be. Prior to submitting my funding application, I conducted a pilot study and found a number of participants who were willing to be interviewed once the project was underway. These individuals were secured through Greycoat Lumleys, a Domestic Staff Agency, who agreed to place an advert on their website describing my research and my request for interview participants (see footnote).[[146]](#footnote-146) I was buoyed by the number of positive responses I received and, after follow-up emails and meeting with one of the respondents, I was able to submit my funding application, with the claim that my proposed research was ‘doable.’

Once my research moved beyond these preliminary stages, however, most of the individuals who had committed to an interview, fell away. They stopped answering calls and emails and, ultimately, only one interview was conducted as a result of the initial advert Greycoat Lumleys had generously placed on their site. To add to my dilemma, there was a staff restructuring and the new manager, understandably concerned about client confidentiality issues, decided they could no longer help me secure participants for interview. This left me in a quandary: I knew that there were many individuals employed in High Net Worth households throughout the UK but, at this point, at least, it seemed most were not prepared to be interviewed by a researcher.

There are many reasons why accessing the world of those who work in the private homes of the British twenty-first century elite is problematic and all are entirely understandable. First, as becomes evident in the following substantive chapters, both employers and staff are acutely aware of the reputational risks that can arise from unauthorised ‘talk’ about the household and the private actions and behaviours of the masters and, consequently, of the need for extremely high levels of security. Second, many domestic staff recruitment agencies were concerned that discussing the world of domestic service with a researcher might constitute a breach of the very tightly worded confidentiality contracts that they hold with their clients. Private household staff are often required to sign non-disclosure agreements by their employers and, although all respondents were anonymised and provided with pseudonyms, there were obviously concerns that, if identified, they might be in breach of these contracts. Lastly, the reason why most individuals would be reading Greycoat Lumleys’ website is to find work and one of the expectations around working in a private household is loyalty. Agreeing to talk to me about their roles within the families they worked for, had the potential to raise issues of disloyalty or duplicity.

Undeterred, I placed self-funded advertisements in publications such as *The Lady* and on WWW platforms such as *Gumtree.* I also made email approaches to other leading recruitment agencies such as Beauchamp Partners and to archivists at private country estates such as Highclere Castle and Castle Howard. I also made direct approaches to butlers I sourced via Facebook (none replied) and I also emailed Butler Training Academies (one replied). Eventually, one or two willing participants contacted me and, having set up interviews with those individuals, I used a snowballing technique to identify further interviewees. Securing interviews with domestic staff in elite and contemporary High Net Worth households was complex but fully illuminated why capturing their voices and experiences and situating them within the long durée of the social history of domestic service in Britain was, and is, so important. I am indebted to these individuals for agreeing to commit to these interviews.

During the interviews, each respondent was asked a set of questions that elicited information pertaining to the research themes. Each interviewee was offered an information sheet about the research to read in advance of the interview and consented according to the protocol established under the University of Sheffield’s ethical review procedure. To prevent the interviews from being limited in terms of their breadth and scope they were semi-structured, rather than unstructured or structured. As such, I arrived at each interview with a set of pre-prepared questions and prompts that I used as a guide. This allowed me to focus the interview on my predetermined research interests, but also for it to flow organically and allow space for the respondents to develop themes, stories and narratives without feeling constrained. It also allowed me, as the interviewer, to build a rapport with the interviewee and to ask impromptu, unprepared questions that drew on the participants’ responses and to elaborate on key issues so that depth was added to the material.

The interviews were recorded using a digital sound recorder and the recordings were stored in digital file form and transcribed manually by me as per my ethics approval agreement. In terms of transcription methods, as Dörnyei states ‘there is no “perfect” transcription convention that we should adopt automatically’[[147]](#footnote-147) and all transcribers ‘bring their own language ideology to the task.’[[148]](#footnote-148) What is essential, however, when transcribing, as Dörnyei notes, is that the researcher manages ‘the tension between accuracy, readability, and the “politics of representation.”’[[149]](#footnote-149) Although many discourse analysts employ methods of transcription that are designed to capture talk-in interaction and aspects of utterances such as pronunciation, turn taking etc. (for example, Jefferson's transcription system), they were not employed in this project as my aim was to capture primarily the content of what was said rather than how it was said and, therefore, I used a standard orthography in order to invoke the naturalness and readability of the discourse. The interviewees were asked to consent to both an anonymised interview transcript and an audio recording of their interview. Participants also agreed for the recordings to be deposited in an appropriate oral history archive, such as The Oral History Archive, however, only after any identifying information was redacted.

My intention was to interview a range of domestic staff, not to focus on just one group, such as housekeepers, as I considered that the specificities of one role were such that they might only illuminate one very particular set of arrangements - for example childcare is assumed to involve relational work, whereas chauffeuring or cleaning are generally not. In order to capture differences in different kinds of domestic service I elected instead to try and capture a representative range of household staff including butlers, housekeepers, bodyguards, nannies, gardeners and chauffeurs. These individuals came from households that included, for example, British aristocracy, British royalty, High Net Worth households, and high-profile celebrities from the creative industries, such as film and TV. My research took me to British country estates, and to Gulpen in the Netherlands where I was a guest for a day at the rather imposing International Butler Academy. There I interviewed several butlers, trainee butlers and also the founder and self-styled ‘Lord of the Manor’ who had himself formerly been employed in High Net Worth households, and who provided useful background and contextual information for the study. All interviewees were individuals who had experience of working in private domestic service employment in High Net Worth and/ or aristocratic households and who had provided labour that contributed to the day to day running of such homes.

My funding proposal stated that I would conduct 20 qualitative interviews and in total I conducted 21 with most interviews lasting up an hour, although some were shorter, and others lasted nearly two hours (see Appendix 2). Perhaps surprisingly, given how problematic it had been to find participants in the preliminary stages of my research, the point at which I decided to stop was not determined by a lack of new participants. Conversely, by this point, I had formed enough contacts that I still had a number of leads to other willing participants and also, unexpectedly, found myself in the position of now being directly approached by potential participants keen to talk about their working experiences.

My reasons for stopping were both pragmatic and theoretical. Setting up, travelling to, conducting, recording and transcribing interviews is time-consuming and, therefore, I decided to stop at the point when established themes were evident and no new data was being uncovered. The process of zig-zagging back and forth between data collection and analysis is known as ‘iteration’ and is a key process in qualitative sampling.[[150]](#footnote-150) It is generally agreed that the iterative process should continue until a *saturation* point is reached, that is when the researcher becomes ‘empirically confident’ that ‘additional data does not seem to develop the concepts any further but simply repeats what previous informants have already revealed.’[[151]](#footnote-151) Although 21 interviews might be considered a relatively small sample, it yielded rich data that provided comprehensive and multiple understandings of modern-day servants’ experiences. Thus, I considered this to be the saturation point and I stopped at this juncture.[[152]](#footnote-152) How I set about interpreting the data will be discussed in a later section.

Lastly, it is important to note that all the interviewees were provided with pseudonyms and all identifying information, such as names of employers, their children and their houses, have been redacted as per my ethics review agreement.

***Power dynamics of Interviews***

Various scholars (see Kvale, 2006; Tangaard, 2009) call for a recognition of the power dynamic that often exists in interviewing between two interlocutors. In many cases, probably including my own, interviewees feel conscious, if not constrained, by the social differential that exists between their position and that of the interviewer. This can make interactions more structured than those that would otherwise take place through natural conversation. Due to this, as Kvale notes, researchers are often tempted to obscure these power dynamics by ‘masquerade[ing] as a friend to get the information [they] need.’[[153]](#footnote-153) Their behaviour mirrors, in some ways, that of contemporary employers in master-servant relationships who masquerade as family to get the work they need done. As Jo Maybes, Jennifer Pierce and Barbara Laslett (2008) note in *Telling Stories;* ‘oral forms of self-narrative follow their own particular logics, conventions, and rhythms that, once noticed, can serve as a guide to interpretation.’[[154]](#footnote-154) The interviewer will ask certain questions that will elicit certain responses from the interviewee who, in turn, will choose how to respond, what to reveal and what to conceal. In the same way that the interviewer’s questions shape the direction of the interview, so do the interviewee’s responses. Beyond that, and perhaps even more significantly, they also profoundly shape their own presentation of experience and identity. Whether this process is egalitarian and democratic has been a matter of some debate.

Some scholars (see Way et al 2015)[[155]](#footnote-155) suggest that by adopting a ‘self-reflective, dialogic framework’ when interviewing, such as adopting ‘a stance of curiosity with participants, rather than contention or combativeness’ and treating participants as ‘allies who offer perspectives that enhance and enrich data’, can help to develop a ‘climate of mutual trust and respect to build up’ [[156]](#footnote-156) that works to foster a more egalitarian relationship between interviewer and interviewee. They state that:

Being aware of the ways in which ‘one embodies “interviewer” can also help the participant to feel safe and open. To that end, consider conducting the interview one-on-one in a space where participants feel comfortable and are not concerned with being overheard. Work to minimize physical and psychological distance by dressing similarly to participants, eliminating physical barriers and power distances, and avoiding paying too much attention to notes and recording devices[[157]](#footnote-157)

These self-reflective approaches are interactional strategies that I adopted in my interviews and in my role as ‘interviewer’ in order to achieve a more democratic process.

The different circumstances of each of the servants interviewed and the specific peculiarities of each of their relationships with other social actors in their worlds, means that their accounts cannot be taken as straightforward or accurate representation of the events they describe. Other social actors who appear in their stories, such as other servants or their employers, may have different and competing versions of events. Equally, the fact that their accounts are retrospective means that they have had the opportunity over time to ‘polish’ and hone the stories they told me. Each interviewee is, however, engaging in a retrospective identity construction that provides evidence of the multiplicity of their divergent selves. Alessandro Portelli, who writes about form and meaning in oral history suggests that ‘oral history has no unified subject. It is, he suggests, ‘told from a multitude of points of view […] the impartiality traditionally claimed by historians is replaced by the partiality of the narrator.’[[158]](#footnote-158) As such, I conclude that the oral history interview cannot be understood as either unbiased or monolithic, but instead takes the form of an incomplete dialogue between interviewer and interviewee and can thus only ever produce a necessarily partial account. As such, it should be emphasised that the oral history interview, as a resource, is fragmentary and has the capacity to support a variety of interpretations each of which can be mediated through various social, analytical and cultural frames of understanding.

**On the comparability of oral and written sources**Although diachronic studies are not uncommon in the field of linguistics, the model of comparative research I employ is fairly unusual due to the difficulty, as highlighted earlier, of securing directly comparable data. As previously discussed, the letter and the oral account constitute two quite different modes of material that produce two very different varieties of data. Letters are momentary, providing episodic glimpses into a world we can no longer access; while the interview affords a more consolidated reading of events from a retrospective perspective. Written language is traditionally considered to be more formal, distant and planned, while the spoken word is traditionally considered to be more informal, familiar, and unplanned. Elspaß, in writing about the use of private letters in sociolinguistic investigation argues, however, that in many ways, these two distinct forms, the written and the verbal, are closer than might at first be imagined. He states that the ‘traditional distinction between “spoken language” and “written language” is simplistic and even misleading.’[[159]](#footnote-159) Although it might be thought that, on one hand, a conversation of naturally occurring talk between close friends is the epitome of a text of ‘immediacy’, and say, a written legal contract the epitome of a text of ‘distance’, Elspaß argues that these examples constitute ‘two poles of [a] conceptual continuum.’[[160]](#footnote-160)

He argues that it should not be assumed that the written word is always formal, and the spoken word is not. Whether a text is ‘immediate’ or ‘distant’ depends largely, Elspaß suggests, on factors such as how formal the relationship is between the interlocutors and how distant, temporally and spatially, the interlocutors are from one other. I suggest that both the oral history account and the letter actually sit fairly closely to one another in terms of Elspaß’ continuum of ‘distance’ and ‘immediacy.’ An interviewee has had more time to select, whether consciously or unconsciously, what they are going to say, and what to reveal and what to conceal, more so than people are able to in everyday conversation, and this is also the case with a letter writer. As Heidi Hallman notes, the key is that *‘all* text, whether spoken or written, is purposeful - that is, all text works to respond to something, and therefore works to make meaning.’[[161]](#footnote-161)

In the interpretation of the material my initial intention had been to look for patterns and themes relating to ‘intimacy’ but there was not enough data on this theme alone. It did, however, serve as a lens through which to view the material. I began with an analysis of the historical material. The 32 letters I had chosen for transcription were selected because of their interpersonal aspects and so I began by selecting specific linguistic features and themes that brought these aspects to light, such as emotive language, and expressions of closeness, warmth and affection. Through this process one core theme emerged: that being the *relational work* servants perform in order to construct, negotiate and maintain relationships with their employers. This informed my understanding of the contemporary data. Taking this as my point of departure, I coded the contemporary material by focusing on relational behaviours and strategies in the oral history interviews, such as the positioning of the self and others, the avoidance of disagreement (or not), mitigation strategies, and emotive expressions, in order to illuminate points of connection and divergence within the historic material. By drawing on interpersonal speech strategies, such as those that come under the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (see Giles, 2016), I was able to highlight how individuals can reinforce their identity. Communication Accommodation Theory, on one hand, focuses on the ways in which individuals use language to converge with the speech characteristics of their interlocutor to make them appear more similar to one another and, on the other, how individuals use divergence or difference in speech that works to create distinctiveness. I later returned to look again at the archival material to see how and in what ways the experiences of contemporary servants informed and refined my understanding of the nineteenth-century servant experience. Engaging with the contemporary data in this way enabled me to pick up themes in the historical material that I would not otherwise have spotted, for example, the way that the servants emphasised difference with their masters and others in the household through the use of speech divergence in their letter writing, and the emphasis many servants placed on their personal expertise and knowledge that helped to reinforce their identity.

In the initial stages I was trying to find a cohesive ‘story-line’, but what became apparent during the interpretation process was that there was not one single unified account of servants’ lives. I found that drawing conclusions from the data became a balancing act between arriving at an overarching narrative while simultaneously preserving what Dörnyei refers to as the ‘the intricacy of multiple meanings.’[[162]](#footnote-162) The transcription and coding processes allowed me to get to know the data well but, despite this, I continued to read and reflect on what I was finding in order to let the field ‘speak’ to me and to shape my thinking. Through this methodology I gleaned insights from two different perspectives that allowed me to use the insights from one set of material in order to interrogate the other. Although I do not use data from all the letters and interviews in my discussion chapters and, in both cases, some are considered in more depth than others, I pulled out the most pertinent examples from the material that best answered my research questions.

Despite the fragmentary nature of the material (for both present as well as past accounts remain equally localised and specific), reading these two sets of data together gave two different perspectives on what is fundamentally the same sort of relationship albeit in two different time periods. Servant correspondence allows us to directly witness how servants performed and enacted their identity and roles. The oral histories of contemporary servants provide a different perspective. From their narratives, we have a retrospective viewpoint from which we can glean insights into what servants consider to be important in their relationships with their employers, how they enact their roles to a third party, and the peculiarities of their individual lives, which provides a more ‘behind the scenes’ perspective.

I amplify my material by using discourse analysis to investigate the interpersonal pragmatics of the linguistic strategies of servants to examine at close range how they pragmatically manage the connection (or disconnection) with their employers. Discourse analysis is a micro-analysis that offers a particularly close framework for studying social relations. Its close, qualitative method allows for, as Brad S Gregory (1999) notes, ‘meticulous attention to human interaction on the micro-scale [that] preserves the agency of ordinary people.’[[163]](#footnote-163) Using discourse analysis captures a level of detail that allowed me to intensify a relatively small amount of material and to interrogate the dynamics of the interpersonal aspects of these relationships. Furthermore, an interpersonal pragmatics interpretative framework, when applied to texts or oral language, allows the researcher to consider how language functions and how meaning is created by individuals within their shared social, cultural and historical contexts.

An analysis of interpersonal pragmatics is well suited to the themes I have chosen to address because it is used ‘to designate examinations of the relational aspect of interactions between people that both affect and are affected by their understanding of culture, society and their own and others’ interpretations.’[[164]](#footnote-164) It is dialogic in nature and places emphasis on concepts such as style, performance, positioning and social practice as its grounding for the study of identity. Interpersonal pragmatics and identity construction are closely linked and in the following sections I will provide an explanation of both, followed by a discussion of dialogism.

**2.4 Theoretical and Analytical Approaches to the material**

Histories of ordinary people have tended to focus on the impacts of significant historical events, such as industrialization, the removal of poor relief, the emergence of the nuclear family, the introduction of death duties, and so on (see Tosh 2010). While these approaches all provide valuable insights into the lives of ordinary people they approach the subject matter from an objective top-down direction. The bottom-up approach this thesis takes is intended to provide insights from the perspective of the ordinary person that contribute to a history from below*.* This is useful because as historian John Tosh notes:

*[History] from below* concentrates on those who have been least visible in the historical record. Seeing history from the bottom up does not mean recreating the rhythms of everyday life. It means seeing the past from the point of view of ordinary people [...]. Above all, history from below contests the passivity to which ordinary people have been consigned by so many historians.[[165]](#footnote-165)

Taking a linguistic approach to the narratives and testimonies found in letters and interviews allows us to see the world from the ‘point of view of ordinary people’ and, therefore, to contest the passivity that Tosh suggests they have often been assigned.

Examining at close range the discourses and interpersonal interactions of servants allows us to nuance the idea of the social world as an objective reality and instead to show how it is both mutable and dialogically constituted through human interaction. As historiographer Keith Jenkins notes, ‘what constitutes (makes up) the human subject at any given moment in space and time is [...] not the expression of some inner core or human “essence”, but rather the result of that dynamic process termed *iterability* (the process of repetition and difference; of the repetition of the never quite the same) which ensures that nobody is ever complete or stable or fixed “once and for all.”’ Given the small number of primary sources in the historical record that provide access to the “servant voice”, there is a need to amplify the data and to work at a more micro-level, and a linguistic methodology allows us to do just that. As linguist Anna de Fina suggests, using linguistic methodologies can reveal how ‘identity is not seen as a concept that resides in the mind of the individual self but rather as a process of construction that has its locus in social interaction, while people are not seen as having one unique and homogeneous identity but as managing a complex inventory of possibilities.’[[166]](#footnote-166) Discourse analysis, when applied to servant letters and oral history interviews, allows us to examine this ‘complex inventory of possibilities’ and to consider the relationship between masters and servants as one of mutual constitution.

Utilising this methodology, I set out to reconsider how we view nineteenth-century servants and how they make sense of themselves. Through this approach it is possible to ask questions about servants’ lived experience, and how, through their linguistic practices, servants make meaning within the shared cultural and social contexts of their social worlds. Essentially, I position servants as individuals who are able to act of their own accord and use language to construct their identities *in situ*. I make an original contribution to knowledge within the discipline of sociocultural linguistics by demonstrating, through reference to letters and interviews, how servants draw on a rich repertoire of voices to project multiple personal identities that are variously shaped by conceptions of the self and wider perceptions of their role in society. Whether the identity of ‘servant’ is ascribed or pre-determined and whether they can rally the resources at their disposal to alter perceptions of themselves is a key question. I set out to position servants as self-governing individuals who were, and are, able to create, negotiate and maintain complex relationships with their employers. I thus position servants, not simply as supporting actors in the lives of their employers, but as agents of their own making, with their own identities and with the capacity to make meaning in the world around them.

Throughout this thesis I argue that in order to develop a deeper understanding of servants’ lived experience, a close examination of how they construct their identities linguistically, and how their choice of linguistic strategies is dialogically shaped by social practice and the people they interact with, is crucial. The concept here is of the servant as a dialogic being and, as such, the research interest lies in, as Mikhail Bakhtin put it, how each utterance is ‘orientated towards a future answer- word: [how] it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction.’[[167]](#footnote-167) To illuminate this I draw on the work of Bakhtin and his concept of the *Dialogic Imagination*, and also Hubert Hermans, a scholar of Bakhtin’s, and his theory of ‘The Dialogic Self’(2010).[[168]](#footnote-168) I also draw on the work of social theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu who, similarly to Bakhtin, offer an account of language and discourse as a sociocultural phenomenon created in social practice through an ongoing, dialogical relationship between individuals, and the world around them. These models, thus, share close similarities in that they conceptualise language as a tool for making meaning and constructing identity within particular contexts.

**Interpersonal Pragmatics and Identity**

Interpersonal pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that has emerged from the field of pragmatics and is concerned with the interpersonal and relational aspects of language. Similarly to other theoretical approaches to the study of language, such as conversational analysis and variation in language, interpersonal pragmatics is concerned with language in use. Of course, early developments in pragmatics also dealt with language in use, for example, Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1963, Searle 1969), Grice’s Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), and Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), however, interpersonal pragmatics takes a different approach from previous theories in that it is primarily concerned with relationships and how individuals use language *in situ* to enact and negotiate those relationships. Linguist Robert B. Arundale argues that this is a relatively under-researched area of language use and notes that ‘human language development [has] been well studied, but matters of language use within relationships that humans create and enact with one another have received less attention.’[[169]](#footnote-169) This is certainly true in considerations of the servant experience.

Interpersonal pragmatics is concerned with why individuals might make particular linguistic choices and the interpersonal effect of these choices, how language choice is affected by power, distance and closeness, and how linguistic strategies are used for interpersonal and relational effects. As Ken Hyland suggests, ‘almost everything we say or write, in fact, says something about us and the kind of relationship we want to establish with our interactants.’[[170]](#footnote-170) An examination of interpersonal pragmatics enables linguists to interrogate how the social and linguistic practices of the individual influence identity construction and how each unique individual makes meaning within shared social, cultural and historical contexts through the use of language. Recent developments in the understanding of identity construction take a dialogic approach, rejecting monolithic notions of the self and the argument that the individual is the locus for its construction, shifting instead towards the idea of identity as a process enacted in social encounters and practices.[[171]](#footnote-171)

These developments suggest that identity is highly negotiable, emergent, and occurs in interaction and social practice. As Anna de Fina states, ‘[p]eople continuously create and recreate social reality, and in turn are shaped by it in a dialectical process.’[[172]](#footnote-172) This suggests that there is never a complete and finalised version of the individual self and that the construction of identity, and that the way in which individuals represent themselves in the world, is a fluid and ever-changing process. Sociolinguists Benwell and Stokoe support this view noting that ‘a unifying theme in discourse and identity research is the rejection of the “essentialist” position that identity categories [...] are fixed, unitary properties of individuals’[[173]](#footnote-173) suggesting, rather, that selves and identities are co-constructed in discourse and that it is through these discourses and the stories that people tell, that individuals ‘produce “edited” descriptions of themselves and others.’[[174]](#footnote-174) It is these edited descriptions and the argument that servant identity is negotiable, emergent and dialogic in nature, that I examine in this thesis. Dialogism purports that all voices and positions are distinct in themselves but, at the same time, are connected to a great many other voices and positions. Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism suggests that language and discourse are collective, ongoing shared events and that no utterance has any meaning on its own.[[175]](#footnote-175)

I conceptualise both sets of data, the letters and the oral history interviews, as dialogic, and in both I consider the servant voice not as an isolated phenomenon but as a dialogical entity that provides evidence of how identity is co-constructed, negotiated and multi-faceted. As Jenkins asserts, ‘socialisation or enculturation never runs smoothly, and, more importantly, is never fully accomplished, so that the sometime identity which subjects inhabit is always temporary.’[[176]](#footnote-176) By examining the interpersonal pragmatics of servants’ language choice and their discourses of self-representation, the thrust of this thesis is to explore a concept of servant identity that is not static or fixed but rather is one consisting of complex layers that are continually and creatively re-formulated, where each servant has his or her own voice and ideological position. In the next section I will provide a discussion of dialogism and following this, an overview of the structure of my substantive chapters.

**Voice and the Dialogical Self.**

Dialogism is a Bakhtinian-informed model that proposes that identity is not stable but rather something continually produced and reproduced through exposure to a multiplicity of voices and a variety of discourses, both historical and present. Bakhtin argued that ‘[e]very utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere. Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account.’[[177]](#footnote-177) The concept of a multitude of voices emerged from Bakhtin’s concept of the polyphonic novel, which conceptualised the novel as consisting of a multitude of characters, each with his or her own voice and/ or ideological stance. Bakhtin argued that each utterance operated, not in a vacuum, but rather in relation to all other utterances:

The dialogical argument suggests that discourse is created through chains of utterances that are embedded in, and inseparable from communities, history and places. These utterances are marked by what Bakhtin termed ‘addressivity’ and ‘answerability’ and are thus always dialogic:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads [...] After all the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it.[[178]](#footnote-178)

For Bakhtin, all sociocultural phenomena are created through an ongoing, dialogical relationship between individuals and the world around them. He asserts that ‘[t]ruth is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.’[[179]](#footnote-179) This model, thus, conceptualises language as a tool for making meaning within particular contexts.

For an appreciation of how these discourses sit within the concept of the dialogic self it is helpful to provide an outline of ‘Dialogic Self Theory’ (DST).[[180]](#footnote-180) Scholars of Bakhtin (see Hermans and Hermans, 2010) developed this theory and, as a result, the model of the *dialogical self.* This is the idea that construction of the self is formed through a speaker's relations to other people, to their words, their discourses, and the cultural spheres they inhabit. DST sets about debunking the notion of the internal and the external self as two disparate concepts operating in disconnected ways, instead, attempting to coalesce the two.[[181]](#footnote-181) This model considers the self, not as a fixed phenomenon, but instead, as a polyphonic entity, consisting of a multiplicity of voices, each of which has a dialogic relationship not only with itself but also with broader society. In its most succinct form, as Bakhtinian scholar Hubert Hermans states, ‘the dialogical self can be described in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of voiced positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined as this mind is with the minds of other people.’[[182]](#footnote-182) As a response to earlier readings of the self as a static, stable and fixed entity, DST invites the reader to consider the self as embodied, socialised and decentred. The dialogical self consists of many selves who interact with others in a dialogical fashion. Each self takes up dynamic positions and enters into processes of positioning, repositioning and counter-positioning through the medium of voices and stances.

The notion of voice helps us to understand how servant identity, and the ways in which servants represent themselves, are intrinsically linked to their different social and cultural selves. As Hubert Hermans and Thorsten Gieser argue:

Voices behave like interacting characters in a story or movie, involved in processes of question and answer, agreement and disagreement, conflicts and struggles, negotiations and integrations. Each of them has a story to tell about their own experiences from their own perspective. As different voices, these characters exchange knowledge and information [...] creating a complex, narratively structured self.[[183]](#footnote-183)

According to DST, the self, which is commonly associated with internal processes; and dialogue, which is commonly associated with external processes (at least in Western traditions), are argued to be, in fact, intrinsically linked.[[184]](#footnote-184) The dialogical self ‘is continually challenged or plagued by questions, disagreements, confrontations, and conflicts because other people are represented in the self in the form of voiced positions functioning as centers of initiative, construction and reconstruction.’[[185]](#footnote-185) Similarly to contemporary models of identity (see Judith Butler 1990, for example) where gender is understood as positioned on a spectrum or a continuum, theories of dialogism and the *dialogic self* suggest that there is no single unified being and that language intersects with the individual self to generate identities that are characterised by hybridity. Through this privileging of a multiplicity of different voices, discourses and practices, DST prioritises the relational individual over the notion of the singular unified individual. In this account, the construction of the self is based on the interdependence between self and others, and identity is shaped in the relationship between the past and present. Within every individual the past and present meet and what has gone before and what is to come combine to create a distinct voice.

It is argued here that by positioning servants dialogically in relation to their masters, and to other servants and the household of which they were a part, we can throw new light on their lived experience. Often the servant is conceptualised through the stylised acts that they perform: the butler serving food and drink from a silver tray, the housemaid sweeping the fireplace and the cook in the kitchen baking and preparing food. These essentialist impressions establish a static view that fixes the idea of a servant in a particular time and place. DST allows us to reimagine the domestic servant, not as a unified single entity but instead as a multi-faceted being with varying levels of complexity. As such, the relationship between servant letters, oral history interviews and servant discourse provide useful platforms for discerning how domestic servants curate their identities using various voices from their respective cultural and social worlds.

Both letter and oral history interviews are dialogical as they each elicit forms of dialogue; letters are written by the writer to a certain distinct other, while oral history interviews are conducted between an interviewer and a subject. I argue, therefore, that both invoke a conversation between two interlocutors. Letters are not one person writing or speaking about their life, but a communication or exchange between one person and another.’[[186]](#footnote-186) Elspaß has argued that ‘[t]o study letters as dialogic text forms [...] one would seek a comprehensive collection of letters between two correspondents’[[187]](#footnote-187), which I was clearly not able to do in this thesis. As I have argued, however, if dialogism is to be understood as concerned with how all utterances are intended to shape future responses, are a response to previous utterances, and an anticipation of what is yet to come, there is no reason why ‘one-sided’ letters, such as migrant letters, pauper letters or indeed servant letters cannot be studied through the lens of dialogism (see Hallman, 2009).[[188]](#footnote-188) Correspondence is a social practice that provides a site for identity construction through language use - a practice characterised by mutuality and involvement - but also individuality and distancing. Historic servants’ linguistic strategies are, of course, shaped by the constraints of the hierarchical relationships and the social structure and norms of the time in which they were produced, however, analysing servants’ epistolary practices and how they discursively construct their identity in relation to others, how they resist, challenge or maintain those norms, can offer important insights into their lived experience.

Oral history interviews are also dialogical (see Bakhtin & Tanggaard 2009; Kvale 2006). The interview acts as an intermediary space in which an individual’s multiple and sometimes discordant voices wrestle over how to position themselves and others in what Bakhtin describes as the ‘coexistence of socioideological contradictions between the present and the past.’[[189]](#footnote-189) Lene Tanggaard (2009), drawing on Bakhtin, argues for the concept of the interview as polyphonic; ‘replete with the use of many voices, words, and discourses that structure the conversation.’[[190]](#footnote-190) He makes the point that an interview engenders many disparate voices and discourses that act to create new forms of knowledge and new narratives. He states that ‘no dialogue in a research interview is conducted only on the basis of our own exclusively subjective words or just one general language. A research interview will inevitably be polyphonic.’[[191]](#footnote-191) The notion of an interview as dialogic is explored by Denzin, who notes that an interview is, ‘an active text, a site where meaning is created and performed. When performed, the interview text creates the world, giving the world its situated meaningfulness.’[[192]](#footnote-192) What this means is that the interview allows individuals to respond dialogically to their past experiences and to make meaning from the stories they tell about themselves as they construct the world around them.

An important consideration to address at this point is what the motives are for both the letter writer and the interviewee? In the same way that the letter writer can use the letter to construct events in a particular way, equally the interviewee may use the interview as a way to make sense of events that have happened to them, and to reconstruct the past. This means, however, that in both cases, the letter and the oral history interview are only ever partial accounts because, despite their differences, both the letter writer and the interviewee must manage the tension between what to tell and what not to tell, and the accounts that emerge, therefore, will always be partial in nature. Both forms, however, challenge the dominance of the ‘top-down’ perspective by bearing witness to a world otherwise unknown in broader society.

**2.5 Structure of Empirical Chapters**

In choosing the themes for each of my empirical chapters I primarily concentrated on examining interactions between servants and masters, which rely on, actively shape, and are shaped by the relationship dynamics of the interlocutors.

In my first substantive chapter ‘Shifting boundaries: Closeness and distance in the master-servant relationship’ I contribute to an understanding of servant identity as operating within a state of liminality and shaped by the precarity of the master-servant relationship. I draw on the work of relational economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer (2005, 2012) who unpacks relationships that are thought to be purely economic or transactional to demonstrate the degree to which they rely on complex interpersonal work. I also draw extensively on sociocultural linguists interested in Interpersonal Pragmatics, such as Miriam Locher and Richard Watts (2005), and describe how servants’ relational work is linguistically defined in their interactions. I present evidence of the liminal nature of the servant’s position, neither wholly family member nor wholly employee, and examine the emotional impacts of the continual blurring of the boundary between these two positions. I take a dialogical perspective and challenge the unified idea of the fixed identity of the servant as ‘the family treasure’ or family member. The thrust of the argument is that identities emerge relationally when individuals are able to make meaningful contributions to the collective, and participate dialogically in the social practices of the group of which they are a part. This is challenged, however, when servants must navigate their liminal position, a process that produces identities that are both shifting and multiple.

In my second substantive chapter ‘Knowledgeable Agents: The making of the self-governing servant’ I provide further insights into how servant identity is dialogically and relationally constructed by drawing on Anthony Giddens’ work on agency, to demonstrate how servant identity is dialogically constructed through their agency and knowledge. I thus consider the household as a site of social practice in which meaning and identities are co-constructed and negotiated with others. I provide evidence of how servants’ *situated experience* gives primacy to the dynamics of their relationships by placing emphasis on agency and knowledge. I argue that a servant’s situated experience is such that the practices they engage in, their agency and their knowledgeability, afford them the opportunity to redefine what it means to be a servant. In both the servant letters and the contemporary interviews, it was evident from their narratives that servants exhibit a form of self-presentation and claim for themselves a particular self-identity. Subservience and deference were of course very much a part of a servant’s cultural identity. However, I offer insights into how, by acting as agents in the process of meaning making, servants artfully found ways to counter identity constructions that are rooted in essentialist ideas of servanthood.

In my third substantive chapter: ‘Shattered identities: ruptures in the master-servant relationship’ I build on the conception of the dialogic servant and on notions of servant identity to provide an examination of what happens to servant identity when ruptures occur in their relationships. I draw on historic ideologies that suggest relationships between ordinate and subordinate in the nineteenth century were based on moral duty and protection. In terms of the relationship between masters and servants these notions fed into the idea of a paternalistic relationship and suggested that masters and mistresses were socially obliged to act with protection and kindness towards their servants. Building on this notion, I argue that servant identity becomes deeply problematic when master-servant relationships fall apart and servants have to linguistically navigate the complexity of making appeals to their employers without setting themselves adrift from them. Notably, the problematic nature of what happens to servant identity when relationships between master and servant rupture is as much in evidence in the twenty-first century data as it is in the nineteenth. Identities emerge through acts such as performances of agency (discussed in the previous chapter) and I argue in this chapter that the identity of the servant constructed through these processes can be shattered when ruptures occur in the relationship. I examine social positioning in oral history interviews to provide evidence of how moments of rupture in contemporary master-servant relationships feed into the collective history of domestic service, and how that collective history unfolds dialogically. I consider how servants’ self-representations and identity constructions emerge, not as consciously crafted processes but rather, dialogically, out of the contexts in which the servant positions him/ herself at times of crisis.

**Conclusion**  
Both contemporary interviews and nineteenth-century correspondence provide sites for constructions of representations of the self. When individuals describe their experiences, actions and thoughts they knit together a narrative in which many voices are expressed. Due to the limited scope of the accounts we have about domestic service, and the fragmentary nature of the servant voice in the historical record, my intent is an attempt to salvage servants from subjective depictions of them constructed in nostalgic and wider societal discourses. Underpinning this thesis is the idea that our view of the past is not a final definitive statement but is instead a narrative that can be contested and reworked. My intention then is to investigate how servants of the past and present have lived and constructed multiple social identities through their dialogical engagements with other key players in their social worlds.

This close examination of the voices and discourses used by servants to produce socially constituted identities will, I hope, produce an understanding of servants as dialogical entities, not just individuals who are subject to the actions of others but who, through their relationships with their masters, other household staff, and the social and cultural worlds they inhabit, are able to produce multi-layered identities.

**Chapter 3: Shifting boundaries: Closeness and distance in the master-servant relationship.**

Frances was the owner of a recruitment agency that provides private staff for elite twenty-first century British households. When I interviewed her in April 2017, she suggested that modern-day employers of servants no longer knew how to manage their household staff in the way that nineteenth-century masters and mistresses had done. Her view was that:

[Employers] don’t know how to give the right time off, give the right hours, how to be gracious, how to discipline, how to be formal without being too distant [...] a lot of employers don’t know what formal is, formal is not rudeness, it’s not being strict, it’s not being distant, it’s being correct with respect to the job you’re *both* doing [...] it’s extremely difficult with untrained employers, very difficult, basically we need something rather like a finishing school for employers[[193]](#footnote-193)

The behaviours that Frances describes, such as modern-day employers acting in formal ways, being too strict or even rude to servants, appeals to a nostalgic notion of how servants should be treated derived from nineteenth-century concepts of managing servants. Although the long nineteenth century in Britain was a period of mass democratisation with previously unexperienced and burgeoning social and economic freedoms, a stratified social hierarchy was still in existence within which the categories of ‘master’ and ‘servant’ were, largely, more securely defined than they are today.[[194]](#footnote-194) I argue that the behaviours of twenty-first century employers described by Frances are based on insecurities derived, primarily, from the anxieties that surround how to distinguish the roles of master and servant in the modern age. Without more formal social stratification in place to prevent a blurring of social positions, extra effort must be put into distancing strategies that help the employer to distinguish themselves from their staff, to create boundaries and thus maintain the relationship as one of difference. Distancing is an attempt by employers to construct a more formal and less personal relationship by creating a separation between them and the people who work for them. This is problematic, however, as employers cannot escape the fact that they share the intimate space of their homes with servants who work at the core of their families’ lives and thus share a connectedness with them that is difficult to disavow.

Although boundaries in the master-servant relationship create a division in the relationship, they must also be permeable enough to allow servants to integrate into the core of family life. Frances told me that she had employed servants of her own, many of whom had been with her for years. She described them to me fondly as being ‘like members of [her] own family.’ Describing a relationship as ‘familial’ suggests an intimacy that goes beyond the idea of a formal relationship based purely on economic transaction. Historical concepts of the family are complex and ideas surrounding the notion of ‘family’ have not always related just to relationships of blood lineage but also to groups of people living together. Naomi Tadmor (2001), for example, writing on the eighteenth-century history of the family in England and the language of kinship, suggested that when the English ‘spoke or wrote about ‘families’, it was not the nuclear unit that they had in mind. “Family” in their language could mean a household, including its diverse dependants, such as servants, apprentices, and co-resident relatives.’[[195]](#footnote-195) Tadmor considered the house as a unified site of social practice and situated the servant as integral to the working of the house suggesting that the ‘concept of the family was thus flexible and permeable’[[196]](#footnote-196) and that just because servants were not ‘authentic’ members of the family ‘this does not mean that kinship was not important, or that kinship ties were weak.’[[197]](#footnote-197) The notion of the household as a site of social practice and the servant as part of a network of kin and thus integral to the working of the house are matters I explore in this chapter.

When Frances equated her servants with being ‘family’ it produced the sense that she shared interpersonal bonds with them and that the relationship was one in which a sense of kinship and familial intimacy could be produced. Her testimony also highlighted how the relationship was more than simply a formally transactional one. Despite this, when asking Frances further whether it was really possible to generate such intimacy with her staff and whether they were ‘really like family?’ she modified her original statement by replying: ‘not in most houses […] you wouldn’t want it to be, that’s not how it is in general. It doesn’t happen. There are people who are much beloved because they’ve been there a very long time, but I wouldn’t say ever like family members.’ On one hand, Frances claimed that some of her servants were ‘like members of [her] own family’, while on the other, she later resisted this definition by saying ‘I wouldn’t say [they are] ever like family members.’

These two disparate accounts vividly exemplify the ambiguous place servants hold in the household. Are they a member of an extended family or network of kin, or are they simply an employee who happens to work in a household? Frances was, on one hand, positioning her servants within a historic discourse of the servant as a valued member of an extended family, as exemplified by Tadmor. On the other, however, she equally described them as ‘not ever like family members’ and, therefore, relegated to the periphery of family life. As data from my oral history interviews with contemporary household staff reveals, however, servants often understood their position, if not as ‘authentic’ family members, certainly as individuals with a place at the core of the household. The distancing strategies employed by employers and described by Frances, such as being rude to staff or not giving appropriate time off are, therefore, problematic for the servant who has often built an emotional closeness and an intimacy with the family that borders on kinship.

How servants find ways to navigate the complex emotional and interpersonal terrain of the master-servant relationship, one of the key aims of this thesis, is explored in this chapter. I first begin my analysis by using the testimonies of modern-day servants to examine how their employers blur the boundaries between familiarity and distance when constructing relationships with their staff. I have chosen to discuss the twenty-first century material first as the first-hand accounts of modern-day servants allow me to use the emotional and interpersonal aspects of servants’ work as a backdrop to the master-servant relationship that sets the scene for the entire chapter. After I have set out the ways in which current employers can sometimes confuse these boundaries in the relationship, I then examine how contemporary servants find ways to relationally negotiate the uncertainty this produces through interpersonal pragmatic acts, such as managing their emotional displays, mitigation, and other forms of relational work. I consider how, by inviting staff to think of themselves as family members, employers draw warmth and affection from them creating, in the process, a relationship based (or seemingly based) on mutual bonds of intimacy. This, in turn, increases the amount of relational work that servants do to sustain the relationship and also, by extension, their emotional commitment to the family. The relationship becomes problematic, however, when the narrative of a familial relationship becomes harder to sustain and distance builds up in the relationship. Examining these dynamics helps to show how master-servant relationships are not always as detached and impersonal as the categories of ‘master’ and ‘servant’ or even ‘employer’ and ‘employee’ might lead us to believe.

As discussed previously, in the same way that histories of domestic service inform and shape our current understandings of the contemporary world of domestic service, so present-day circumstances can inform understandings of past histories. Given this, I next turn my attention to the historical data and use observations drawn from the contemporary data to consider how the historical experiences of servants align or diverge from those of their nineteenth-century counterparts. By applying discourse analysis to three archived letters, I intend to show how fully these historic relationships also relied on complex interpersonal work and I suggest that this was a relationship that was as equally characterised by closeness, intimacy and affection as it was by distance, detachment and vulnerability. The central aim of both sections is to capture how the joint practices of individuals, and the interpersonal and emotional aspects of those joint practices create and sustain (or not) the relationship.

As discussed in my methodology chapter both interviews and correspondence provide sites for constructions of representations of the self. With this in mind, I will also examine, in both sets of data, how servants position themselves in relation to their masters and others in the household and how they construct their relational identities *in situ* within the emotional landscape of the master-servant relationship. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, I evidence how servants use the master-servant relationship, and their relationships with other household members, as sites from which to construct for themselves, particular identities. Although traditional master-servant relationships are largely understood as formal and hierarchical I set out to demonstrate how they also consist of many interpersonal and relational aspects that are continuously managed, negotiated and reworked through the interactional and collective experiences of household members.

**3.1 Relational work and emotional labour.**A relational framework is useful for considering how servants create interpersonal ties and build a connectedness with their employers, and how this can result in the appearance of a familial relationship. Relationality refers to the interpersonal level of communication rather than the logical (Halliday 1994).[[198]](#footnote-198) Relational work is*,* as the economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer suggests, ‘the creative effort people make in establishing, negotiating, transforming and terminating interpersonal relations.’[[199]](#footnote-199) It is this creative effort, and how servants navigate interpersonal relations with employers that I focus on here. Zelizer sought to unpack what are thought to be purely economic or transactional relationships to demonstrate how fully they rely on complex interpersonal work. In her ground-breaking book *The Purchase of Intimacy* (2005)[[200]](#footnote-200) Zelizer examines both the role of relational work in alliances that might otherwise be thought of as purely economic, and demonstrates how, in many realms of social life, intimate service work, which we valorise as something that cannot be commodified, is, every day, bought and sold and that, in every relationship, transactional and interpersonal elements are held together in a constant state of interaction and interdependence.

Zelizer critiques the notion that domestic labour and commerce occupy two separate spheres and suggests that transactional arrangements and emotional relationships cannot be separated when participants live in close proximity to one another. She argues that, with shared living over periods of time, members of the same household ‘commonly develop understandings, practices, rights, obligations and sensitivities with regard to each other that surpass the complexity, intensity and durability of most other social ties.’[[201]](#footnote-201) Zelizer uses a relational approach to explore ‘how interpersonal negotiations transform […] personal relations’ and ‘how negotiated interpersonal relations shape the accomplishment of concrete economic activity.’[[202]](#footnote-202) Zelizer highlights how relational work ‘emphasises the creativity of interpersonal relations’ but at the same time she notes how individuals still operate within shared cultural and historical understandings of relationships and ‘within boundaries set by historically accumulated meanings.’[[203]](#footnote-203)

Linguists have also recently become particularly interested in considering how relational work is performed and managed pragmatically in the everyday through the use of language. Linguists Miriam Locher and Richard Watts (2005) describe relational work as comprising ‘the entire spectrum of the interpersonal side of social practice’[[204]](#footnote-204) and suggest that it sets up how relations are defined in interaction. They define linguistic relational work as the way in which ‘interlocutors invest "work" into their ways of communicating by adapting their language to different speech events and the different goals that they might be pursuing.’[[205]](#footnote-205) Relational work in language is closely connected to identity construction because it relates to the social positioning of self and others in interaction and ‘pays tribute to the fact that people are social beings who use language not only to communicate facts but also to shape their identities vis-a-vis their interactional partners.’[[206]](#footnote-206)

Locher and Langlotz suggest that ‘emotional connection is “crucial” to understanding the interpersonal side of individuals’ interactions.’[[207]](#footnote-207) As they note, ‘we live in socially constructed worlds of experience and primarily evaluate and make sense of them through the human agents with whom we interact and who influence our emotional states.’[[208]](#footnote-208) There are many factors that influence how an individual negotiates the interpersonal aspects of a given interactional situation but how emotions are managed is a critical one. Generally, individuals will perceive their emotional worlds of experience differently. For example, some individuals find it easier than others to control their emotions in confrontational situations, whereas others may find it harder to suppress or manage how they are feeling. Individuals’ social interactions are affected by their relationships with their audience (and any other person who might be tangentially involved or indirectly affected by the interaction), the setting, the linguistic context, and the power differential in the relationship. These factors can all affect how an individual linguistically manages interpersonal communication in a given situation. In all cases, however, the expression or denial of an emotion is a social act.

One of the aims of this chapter is to examine how servants manage the relational work of expressing or suppressing their emotions and to what ends. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) Erving Goffman discussed the concept of regions and region behaviour with front regions (public spaces) being spaces where ‘performances’ take place and where social action is ‘acted out’, and back regions (private spaces) as spaces that actors can withdraw to in order to ’buffer themselves from the deterministic demands that surround them.’[[209]](#footnote-209) Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983), building on Goffman’s work on ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ personas, suggests that how we present ourselves is evidenced in the suppression and management of our emotions.[[210]](#footnote-210) Managing emotions (or not) in this way is called ‘emotional labour’, and is the self-regulatory process individuals enter into when there is a need to suppress or modify their emotional responses in a given situation. Hochschild developed the idea of emotional labour in order to provide understandings of the subjective element of the daily work flight attendants were required to perform in the US airline industry. In a noted passage, she defines emotional labour as follows:

This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others. [...] This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.[[211]](#footnote-211)

The regulation of emotions can serve many interpersonal functions and their modification, expression, or denial, serves to influence the construction, maintenance and fostering of relationships. Due to the power dynamics inherent in them, hierarchal relationships, such as the master-servant relationship, thus, provide fertile ground for the study of emotional labour. By accessing servants’ narratives, I explore in this chapter how servants modify, express or deny their emotions and how this serves various interpersonal functions that help to influence the construction, maintenance and fostering of their relationships with their employers.

Zelizer notes that ‘[a]nalysts of interpersonal relations frequently distinguish between real and simulated feelings, disparaging simulation with terms such as *pseudo-intimacy* and *emotion management.*’[[212]](#footnote-212) She argues that in some sorts of relationships ‘simulation of feelings and meanings sometimes becomes an obligation, or at least a service.’[[213]](#footnote-213) Given this, the transactional aspect of the domestic service relationship may create a situation in which the emotional connections formed or exchanged could somehow be deemed inauthentic. As such, searching material for evidence of emotional work and then attempting to understand an individual’s emotional inner world is not a straightforward matter. This is because, as Langlotz and Locher remind us, although ‘emotions serve the primary purpose of evaluating our inner and outer world of experience’, when it comes to the analysis of emotional work, ‘emotions can only be analysed as externalized and communicative phenomena rather than internal psychological states.’[[214]](#footnote-214) To further complicate matters, emotions are socially constructed and the meaning attributed to specific emotions shifts over time. This is because emotions are shaped and influenced by the cultural norms of the context in which they are produced (see Parkinson 1996; Van Kleef 2009).

The history of emotions is a relatively new but rapidly expanding and wide-ranging field of study in which there is much diversity of research. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to evaluate the many analytical approaches in the field, however, the approach I take in this chapter is based on the idea that ‘the relationship between emotional feeling and emotional expression is very complicated, involving all manner of social codes, rituals, performances, etc., and therefore the authentication of emotions takes place in the context of situated practices.’[[215]](#footnote-215) This means that the dynamics of a given social situation are always at play when considering the expression of emotion and, as such, emotions are an interactional phenomenon. Although I cannot access actual dialogues between masters and servants, the recollections of their interactions allow me to access retrospective accounts of their feelings, emotions and perspectives. From these, as we shall see, it is possible to draw conclusions about a servant’s emotional work, and their situated emotional experiences, from the expression, or denial, of their emotions in both their interviews and their letters. Through examining the dialectics of intimacy and distancing these narratives provide, and the interpersonal pragmatic uses of language, such as the use of emotive expressions, mitigation strategies, repair work and indexing, I uncover how servants linguistically create and foster social relationships with their masters and, in turn, construct their identities.

**3.2 Shifting boundaries: the interpersonal terrain of the twenty-first century master-servant relationship.**  
When masters confuse the dialectic between intimacy and distance this can be challenging for the servant and create vulnerability in the relationship. The best recourse for household staff in navigating this precarity is through the performance of relational work consisting of both emotional and affective labour. I argue here that it is these forms of labour that prove vital for the construction, negotiation and maintenance of their relationships with their employers. They are critical modes of work, not just for successfully maintaining their position within the household, but also for forming connections with employers in the first place.

The significance of forming an emotional connection in the relationship was evidenced by Michael, a bodyguard, who had worked for a wealthy family on an estate in the East of England. In the following extract, Michael not only notes the vulnerable nature of his employment, but reminds us that the rather arbitrary decision of whether an individual secures a position in the first place, is based on their ability to make an emotional connection with the person hiring them:

there would have to be some kind of connection immediately and if there wasn’t then you wouldn’t be hired and that’s how volatile this work is […] if there’s something [the client] doesn’t like about you or whatever, then you’ll just not get the job, not based on how well qualified you are or how experienced you are, it comes down to a simple matter of if she doesn’t like something about you then you’ll not be hired and it’s as simple as that[[216]](#footnote-216)

Michael is suggesting here that the basis of the master-servant relationship rests on the individual qualities of the servant and whether they have the potential to produce a connection with the employer - it is not a matter simply based on an individual’s skill or competence at their job. I suggest that the idea of being able to form a connection with their employers lies at the heart of the master-servant relationship and it is this interpersonal process that allows the narrative of a close familial relationship to be built.

Once emotional connections are formed they can be difficult to sustain and servants can experience feelings of hurt when they are treated with unfairness, indifference, or even disdain. This creates a discrepancy between the emotions the servant describes feeling and the overarching aim of creating a good relationship with their employers. Caroline, a nanny in London, described how she had to ‘have a thick skin because some things can be said and then retracted.’[[217]](#footnote-217) She told me, for example, that her employer ‘will say something really offhand and really upsetting and twenty mins later phone [her] because he’s forgotten a charger and wants [her] to post it to New York.’ Caroline interprets her employer’s request (to post the forgotten charger to New York) as an imposition after his earlier, what she perceives to be, hurtful treatment of her but by suppressing how she feels and choosing not to display a negative reaction, she avoids disrupting the interpersonal connection between them. For each servant, the relational work involved in negotiating such interactions was directly linked to the management and suppression of their emotions. This ability to display a ‘front stage’ persona and the emotional labour required to contain, censor and curb their emotional feelings, was one of the key elements underpinning the maintenance of relationships between master and servant.

Tara, a nanny based in Cambridgeshire, described how she had managed her emotions in order to sustain her relationship with the family she worked for by displaying a ‘front stage’ persona and vividly articulated the complex emotional labour this required. Tara cared for two children with whom she had built a close relationship. She described how the children’s own mother would get angry with the children and ‘scream horrible words and call [the daughter] an idiot.’[[218]](#footnote-218) When I asked Tara if she had felt able to address the matter with her employer she told me: ‘the only time I feel safe to voice that sort of opinion is if I’m asked for advice’ but otherwise ‘I don’t feel it’s my place to step up to the mother and say, “you’re being a really shit mother.”’ She told me: ‘many times I would come home absolutely heartbroken, and sometimes in tears.’ Tara is expressing to me how she manages her emotions by taking on a ‘front stage’ persona, in which she does not voice her opinion, and a ‘back stage’ one, in which she is able to release how she truly feels when she is at home.

Tara described how she countered the mother’s treatment of the children relationally by taking charge of their emotional welfare. She told me:

I did my best [...] to teach them about love, affection, understanding, care and patience with other people and empathy and try and foster that in them myself because they certainly don’t get it from their parents[[219]](#footnote-219)

As Langlotz and Locher argue, ‘human beings can only learn about appropriate social behaviour and the corresponding norms of emotional communication through complex and culture specific processes of socialisation in which acts of parental guidance play very important roles.’[[220]](#footnote-220) Tara is here describing how she felt responsible for taking on the emotional socialisation of the children in her charge that would normally be considered the responsibility of the parent.

Tara’s narrative, when considered against Frances’ testimony at the start of this chapter, demonstrates a very real tension and an ambiguity about where servants and their employers consider the line lies between the categories of ‘employee’ and ‘family member’, and between the personal and the impersonal. As Tara explained: ‘families liked the idea of you being part of the family and they say that you are part of the family,’ but I feel that you're not really, you are an employee.’ Tara talked about the distorting of lines between these two positions saying that, ‘because we do work so intimately with the family […] people forget those boundaries exist [but] I’ve never forgotten them.’ She explained that ‘while you're doing everything just perfect, everything's great; "Oh, she's such a member of the family.”’ However, as she went on to describe, ‘with [some] families you really did have to keep the boundary […] because the second that you challenge, challenge a request or something, that doesn't go down very well.’ The paradox here is that Tara was considered by her employers to be part of an extended family (and acted as part of that extended network) until she challenged them. By challenging a request that might occur in any everyday familial relationship, an invisible boundary between familiarity and distance was perceived to have been crossed and Tara was quickly reminded of her place in the hierarchy.

The enactment of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ personas for relational purposes was also emphasised by Shannon, a member of staff working for a HNW household in South East England. Originally employed as a nanny, as the children in her charge had become older, her role had metamorphosed into something more akin to housekeeper over her time in the household. Shannon had learnt over the years that, at times, not speaking her mind and suppressing how she felt about what she was being asked to do, was a useful strategy in fostering good relations with her employers. She told me:

I've been there 17 years but I've got something of my own problems going on. [...] I'm stuck in the middle they tell me to do something with the kids - sometimes I try to do it and sometimes I just don't. I don't listen to them I listen to myself[[221]](#footnote-221)

Shannon’s adeptness at avoiding disagreement or confrontation with her employers by suppressing her own feelings serves as a relational strategy. Shannon is describing how her perspective on a given situation and those of her employers may not match and, therefore, to avoid disagreement, Shannon keeps the peace in the household by suppressing her own thoughts and not speaking her mind. In spite of this silencing of her own voice, Shannon does not defer to her employers’ wishes in situations where she believes she knows better than them and instead, she ‘does not listen to them.’ In these cases Shannon chooses to listen to her own internal voice, and trust her own judgement. In effect, she is explaining how she is prepared to silently overrule the wishes of her employers in cases where she feels she knows better but she does this stealthily by simply not informing them of her intentions and instead going ahead with what she believes is the right course of action. Although Shannon is suppressing her own thoughts in order to keep the peace and avoid disagreement, she is also overruling the wishes of her employer. This overruling, which may be thought of as a subversive act, however, goes unnoticed by them.

Shannon provides evidence of the multiplicity of her different relational selves as both her assenting voice (‘sometimes I will try to do it’) and her dissenting voice (‘and sometimes I just don’t’) compete with each other. Shannon is dialogically involved in a process of negotiation as she anticipates her employer’s different viewpoint and interests, and counters them with her own. The relational and interpersonal work that Shannon performs in the household is a significant aspect of her role. She told me that her role ‘might not be an office job or some fancy job, but this is my job and I'll do it to the best of my ability - even probably go beyond what I need to do.’ Shannon said that in her role she was ‘trustworthy [and] flexible, very flexible.’ Her flexibility and commitment to the household, by going beyond the call of duty, draws on familial ties that place her as the much-needed central figure positioned at the heart of family life. This is also evidenced through her expression of close shared experiences with the children:

Sometimes when we're on holidays I would have to share a room with [child M] and then actually there was a point when there was no toilet so we had to use a bucket [laughter]. We were in [NW Europe] and we were staying in the outside house, in a cabin thing and they [the family] were staying in the chalet. Of course we could have gone into the house but it was like trekking up through the field and I was like “no let's just use a bucket”[[222]](#footnote-222)

Shannon explains how she uses her emotional resources to build bonds with the child in her charge. In her retelling of this incident she provides both transactional and also relational information. Equally, Shannon’s behaviour at the time of the incident also served transactional and relational functions that will have contributed to the maintenance of her relationship with the family. Shannon presents herself as able to think up inventive ways to overcome the tricky lack of bathroom facilities. Inherent in the telling of this story, however, is also the suggestion that she and the child have been thrust together in an awkward situation that it is up to her to resolve.

Although they are all on holiday together, she draws attention to the fact that her employers are in the main house whereas she and the child are some distance away, on the other side of a field, in a cabin. Thus, Shannon creates an ‘us’ and ‘them’ discourse in which she and the child are disassociated from the main family but, despite this, she creates a sense of solidarity between them. Their ‘separateness’ from the core family group works, not only to emphasise their ‘aloneness’, but also serves to position herself as relationally close to the child she is caring for.

Through elements of her narrative, such as her laughter when she tells me ‘we had to use a bucket’ and the expression ‘of course’, she suggests the use of the bucket in place of bathroom facilities is quite natural. What is implied here is that Shannon has a casual and relaxed attitude towards what could be perceived of as a difficult situation. She is able to transform what could have been an anxious social situation into something that can be conceived of as amusing or even fun. Sharing bedroom space together (not an uncommon practice) and the amusement over having to use inadequate bathroom facilities for the sake of convenience draws on an intimacy and a mutuality with the child that invites us to think of theirs as a close and personal relationship. Not only does Shannon express a physical distance from the parents in her retelling of this incident but also she implies an emotional distance too. There is the suggestion that the parents have not clearly thought through the implications of the lack of bathroom facilities and what this actually means in practical terms for Shannon and their child.

We might imagine that creating a close and personal relationship with the child in her charge would also serve to create important affective bonds between Shannon and the family more generally. To a degree this was true and the relational work Shannon performed did serve reciprocal purposes in that it sometimes worked relationally to make her employers act in mutually beneficial ways. For example, Shannon described the family she worked for as ‘very accommodating’ and explained that she was allowed to help herself to whatever she liked in the household:

They're so great like that “have anything you like, have beer, have wine.” Whereas another family would say “oh no you can't have any of the kids’ food,” [this family] they're like “eat whatever you like” and they're like “stay at the house if we're not here [...] there's always a bedroom upstairs you know stay if you want to stay over if you don't want to drive home”[[223]](#footnote-223)

Treating servants well in this way and drawing them into the heart of family life works as an instrument for procuring warmth, loyalty and affection from them, which it undoubtedly achieves in Shannon’s case. Despite this, Shannon also spoke of a distance in the relationship and expressed ambivalent feelings about her employers, particularly the mother. She told me that ‘[the mother] likes to think she's very high and mighty’, and that she was ‘not very warm.’ Even though Shannon had, in her words ‘brought up’ her employers’ daughter and had ‘looked after her very well’ she told me that she did not have ‘a connection with [the mother].’ The connection referred to earlier by Michael that was necessary in order to secure employment in the first place, and Shannon’s lack of connection with her mistress here, are two divergent but linked narratives. Shannon, despite the generosity afforded her through the provision of food, drink and a bed should she need them, implied that she was hurt because, although she had cared for the daughter ‘very well’ and, although she did not explicitly say it, had been a kind of pseudo mother to her and to the child’s other siblings, this had not been enough to procure warmth and affection from the actual (biological) mother. It is this erasure of the relational work servants invest in the relationship that servants often struggle with as it commodifies their emotional labour and makes it no more than simply part of a transactional exchange.

It is also evident that the amount of relational work a servant performs is often unrelated to how much they are appreciated (or unappreciated) or how much they have to put their own needs, wants and, in some cases their own families’ needs and wants, aside. It could be argued that Shannon is complicit in this hegemony and it is because of her unwavering loyalty and affection towards the children she cares for that her employer feels able to legitimately distance Shannon by withholding a connection and a warmth from her. Perhaps it was also explicitly due to the closeness and mutuality that inevitably develops in these relationships that her employers specifically used tactics to create distance between themselves and Shannon. These are, however, risky strategies. Shannon was clearly, if not indispensable, certainly central to the successful functioning of the household. Her entire life was threaded around the family’s needs and wants. When I asked her how she would define her position within the family, she initially struggled to find the words before telling me:

I would call myself the middle woman, I would say I am guidance counsellor, PA, dogsbody, a go to [...] I just keep everybody sane I think. I'm the middle person, I don't know, I just do it, every single thing[[224]](#footnote-224)

The multi-voiced nature of Shannon’s discordant voices is evident here as she oscillates from one position to another verbally negotiating and renegotiating how she presents her role to me. Referencing herself as a ‘dogsbody’, with its connotations of low status work, stands in stark contrast to the other more high status positions Shannon also inhabits, such as ‘guidance counsellor’ and ‘PA.’ These are roles that suggest less about domestic work and more about the handling and management of people. Shannon performs the relational work of mitigating the dichotomy between these two highly divergent statuses through her expression of a willingness to keep the family functioning successfully when she says ‘I just keep everybody sane I think.’ She immediately undermines this, however, when she says ‘I just do it, every single thing.’ She does not categorically assert that she feels unappreciated for her ability to deal with ‘every single thing’ and to be able to inhabit these various roles that are demanded of her but the suggestion is implicit in her choice of words.

Shannon identified very deeply with being part of an extended network of kinship but, at the same time, her outsider status in the family was problematic. Negotiating interpersonal aspects of relationships is not just about being agreeable it is also about the ability to challenge boundaries and deal with contradictory aspects as much as much as bonding ones. One of the difficulties Shannon struggled with was the disparity between the lives of her employers’ children, whom she had cared for over 17 years, compared with the circumstances of her own child Niamh. As Shannon’s employers had allowed her to bring Niamh to work with her since she was a baby Niamh had, as a result, grown up with Shannon’s employers’ three children in an almost pseudo-sibling relationship. Shannon contrasted her employers’ children’s more privileged position with that of her own daughter’s more humble origins and, in rather confronting ways, described how she encouraged her employer’s children to think about their circumstances differently:

One thing I find really hard is for Niamh going in there and seeing that everything is being handed to them [her employer’s children] on a silver plate where she will have to work triply hard -  she will not have the sort of life that they have [...] they go to private school, they've had tutors - they've had so many tutors. Niamh you know when she goes to a normal government school ... we can't afford a tutor. She won't get the chance of going to Oxford or Cambridge or one of these Ivy Leagues. And I like to instil that in [the children in my charge] and I tell them “you're so lucky look at me and Niamh, we have to struggle, she has to work hard” and I was really hard probably on [child C] when she came back from America like "you get so much given to you, you know, think about Niamh she's not going to have the opportunities that you have you know”[[225]](#footnote-225)

Here, Shannon provides examples of how she performed the work of attempting to influence the children in her care in order to develop their understanding of the less privileged lives of others.

The relational work of influencing others, even when this involves challenging them or their lifestyle, serves to provide an authentic connection with others. When Shannon described earlier how she heeded her own voice rather than that of her employer but how she did this without revealing to them that she intended to overrule their wishes, she was effectively describing how she had been silenced in the relationship. Here, in contrast, Shannon feels more able to use her voice because she has worthwhile knowledge that she feels the children could benefit from and through the voicing of this knowledge, rather as a parent would, Shannon attempts to create a more meaningful connection with them.

By allowing Shannon to bring her daughter to work the family had not only made life easier for Shannon but also benefited themselves in that she was more accessible to them and more at their beck and call. Although it is usually only the servants who are relegated to the periphery of family life, or who are seen as pseudo family members, in this case, Niamh had spent her formative years growing up with these children despite the huge disparity in their lifestyles. This was both enabling and limiting for Shannon and, by extension, for Niamh. Their lives had become more entwined with the family despite the risks this entailed to their autonomy and to their identities. Shannon did not like to think of Niamh as lower status to the other children in the household and so mitigated this by suggesting to her employers’ children that they should be grateful and not take for granted their more privileged position.

Boundaries between family member and outsider were confused in ways that would remind Shannon quite abruptly, of her peripheral status. For example, in the following extract Shannon draws attention to this and, by extension, the fundamental precarity that exists in the master-servant relationship through the fear of dismissal:

if you've been with this family as long as I have [...] you see, you become, I don't know, like the middle person, you take all the anxiety away from all the kids and then one day they say we don't need you anymore and [...] that will eventually happen to me because you know once [child M] goes to university there is no need for me to be there anymore[[226]](#footnote-226)

Shannon is alert to the fact that her position within the family remains a vulnerable one. Regardless of her skill and competency and her closeness to the family she sees her future options as limited. Despite the loyalty, dedication and emotional labour she had invested in the family for over 17 years, she understood that, ultimately, this was fundamentally a transactional relationship and that once she was no longer required she may be let go of, even though she had attempted to make herself indispensable by being central to the functioning of the family.

As Shannon’s identity was so tightly bound up with her role in the family and her relationship with the children, knowing that once they left home she would need to find a different position and negotiate a different role in life was a cause of concern for her. This may be why Shannon expressed little interest in positions outside of this particular family, telling me that to be a nanny today ‘you must be super qualified’ and that an applicant would need to ‘speak several languages’, and ‘to be able to play ten instruments’ with the ability to ‘throw a party with everything handmade.’ In comparison to the period when Shannon was first working for this family 17 years ago, she told me that ‘it's very different now, it is very modern, you need a lot to be a modern nanny these days you really do - I don't have any of that so I probably won't get another job, I've just got my experience.’ As Bridget Anderson notes, ‘the domestic worker is selling, not her “labour power” but her personhood’[[227]](#footnote-227) but ‘personhood’ is a less tangible commodity than ‘labour power’ and, as such, more difficult to make part of a transactional exchange. Shannon’s dichotomy circles back to Steedman’s argument, outlined in my literature review, that servants’ work is often elided because they perform ‘work that [is] not work’[[228]](#footnote-228) as they do not ‘produce vendible things.’ [[229]](#footnote-229) Although, in much of her narrative, Shannon rejects the notion of herself as marginal and instead constructs herself as holding a central position within the family, she equally draws attention to how this has created limitations for her. The relational work she had invested in the family and the mutuality and connection she had received in return had been a great source of fulfilment to her but for this same reason Shannon found it hard to contemplate the idea of continuing on to another role.

In this section I have drawn attention to how contemporary servants operate at the unclear boundary of their employers’ private and personal lives in which they are often called upon to behave in ways that are situated on a continuum - with the impersonal at one end and the intimate at the other - and how this can create confusion and vulnerability when they are treated variously, or simultaneously, as a family member or at other times as an employee. By denying friendliness, or by not considering their needs, employers reinforce their own privileged position and reproduce the inequality in the relationship. Equally, by drawing servants into the heart of the family employers also secure an intimacy and a form of kinship from servants that is advantageous at particular times. In the next section I will explore in more depth how servants describe managing the erasure of their identities through their mitigation work and by constructing exceptional identities for their employers and in so doing, dialogically co-construct their own identities.

**3.3 Erasure of servants: mitigation work and the construction of ‘exceptional identities.’**Placing oneself as central to the family and presenting oneself as indispensable was also evident in the narratives, not just of nannies, but butlers too. Nikolas was the self-styled ‘Lord of the Manor’ I met at the International Butler Academy in the Netherlands. He ran the Academy under tight protocols; the trainee butlers were expected to adhere to a punishing regime and to perform to exceptionally high standards. Nikolas had previously worked as a butler himself for many years and held strong views about the importance of loyalty and commitment to the household in the role of the butler. He told me:

Things like loyalty and hard work and discretion, all the qualities that were there in the good old days should still be there today with the number one point [being] the ability to put another person's agenda before your own or the other person's wishes or requirements or whatever. We live in a very selfish society it's all about us, me, my family, my life, my dog, my whatever and in the case of the butler we always have to think about the other person's life, family, dog, whatever and that is very difficult. I was very good at it I was maybe extreme at it[[230]](#footnote-230)

Nikolas draws on populist discourses about a general selfishness of society to make sense of his overriding obligation to his former employer. Discourses around ‘loyalty’ and ‘hard work’ are rooted in historic notions of morality, paternalism and dependence. They work to add plausibility to the reasons behind Nikolas’ preparedness to go beyond the call of duty in his work and his willingness to exceed expectations.

Nikolas discursively authors his identity by resisting contemporary societal norms of prioritising one’s own family before anyone else and offers valuable insights into the reasons he was prepared to do this:

I was [a professional butler] for 17 years and now when my daughter calls me I'll drop anything and everything and I'll go to see her but back then my wife could tell me our daughter is in hospital right now and it was not that I couldn't care less but I would always think “what about the family?” And there I do mean the family I worked for [not his own family]. A good butler would need to think about the family and that is very difficult no matter how frustrated you get[[231]](#footnote-231)

This willingness of Nikolas to disavow his own family and to prioritise the family he works for speaks to the traditional notion of servants as simply being at the beck and call of their employers. His testimony provides evidence of a clash of a fantasy between traditional and modern domestic service practices. The notion of erasing one’s own personal life is referenced by historian Alison Light, discussed earlier, when she refers to servants needing to be ‘a kind of absent presence.’[[232]](#footnote-232) Light was referring to servants of the nineteenth century but it is notable that many contemporary servants drew on the notion of the marginalised and silenced servant in a way that meshed with broader cultural discourses on domestic service.

Head butler, Paul, told me that: ‘to a degree the biggest thing about the job is to become like a ghost.’[[233]](#footnote-233) He referred to the presence of ‘a line in the ground that you don’t cross.’ He explained that there were times when he was expected to know when to be present and, equally, to know when to be ‘absent.’ He told me, ‘you can be fairly friendly with the principal and easy going when it’s just you and the principal […] but when the principal’s family turn up […] you don’t speak unless you’re spoken to.’ Pam, a housekeeper in Norfolk, also told me ‘you have to know when you can stand and chat, you have to know when to walk on by, and you also have to know when to run for the hills.’[[234]](#footnote-234) Both Paul and Pam position themselves dialogically in relation to their employers in such ways as to serve particular relational goals, in this case, to navigate the shifting boundary between familiarity and distance, and between family member and outsider, in order to establish and maintain the interpersonal connection between themselves and their employers.

Although, as discussed in the previous section, employers kept their servants close and allowed them to think of themselves as family members when it worked in their favour they were quick to render them invisible when it did not. Caroline had looked after her employers’ two children since they were only 16 months and eight weeks old respectively and had close and affectionate relations with the family, to the point that she had been described by them as the husband’s ‘other wife.’ Her employer’s actual wife had told her on another occasion that: ‘I think by now, nine years later, you are the fifth [family name].’ A Google search reveals many images of this famous couple with their children in various photographs of them going about their daily lives. Caroline, however, does not feature in any of these photos, an absence that suggests that she was clearly not the fifth family member, as the wife had claimed. Yet, the relational work Caroline had invested in the children was immense. She claimed that she had ‘raised them’ and described how she felt when she left her post; ‘you have that awful feeling of “am I doing the right thing?”, you know, will anyone love them as much as I love them will anyone be able to cope with them as much as I cope with them? […] so it’s very hard to leave.’[[235]](#footnote-235) Here Caroline draws on discourses of motherhood, kinship and expressions of affection for the children positioning herself at the centre of their lives.

The personal expressions of affection she had for the children dialogically serve both individual and social purposes. They are constructed in such a way as to suggest the children’s emotional well-being and care was dependent on her. The emotional bond Caroline had generated with the family, and particularly with the children was of little consequence in a wider sense though, as Caroline’s position within the family was erased to the outside world. As she notes:

the people you work for can never admit to the media that they have help […] I worked 24/7 six months last year […] even then [the father of the children] was interviewed and asked how they juggle it, he just didn’t mention me and I thought you never can say it, just say “I have help”, it’s not the end of the world[[236]](#footnote-236)

Caroline’s employers clearly used a combination of intimacy and distancing techniques in their personal relationship with her to include her privately, while, simultaneously, excluding her publicly. This emphasises a distinction between their public and private worlds. Publicly Caroline was excluded from representations of the family, yet privately she was drawn into it and referred to as a ‘second wife.’ This brings to light how the power of societal norms can take precedence over the bonds of friendship, loyalty and shared experience that Caroline and her employers had forged across the chasm of their distinctly separate positions in their social worlds.

The presence of friendship and shared experience in the relationship stands out in stark contrast against servants’ experience of erasure and invisibilization. One way that servants managed this in their retelling of these instances, was through mitigation work in which they would give reasons for their employers’ actions. Caroline, for example, told me that being a nanny in an elite household meant that ‘your life gets put on hold […] you can’t say “ok I’m finishing at 7pm” and it is 7.05 […] because they could be stuck somewhere.’ Here, Caroline gives a relatively plausible explanation as to why she is unable to leave work on time (because her employers may be ‘stuck somewhere’). In so doing she demonstrates to me that she is able to show empathy for her employers’ situation and place their needs above her own. Michael also mitigated his experience of his mistress’ difficult behaviour saying that she was not always ‘in good form or good moods’, but that this was because ‘she had a lot of pressure on her […] she had high end meetings to prepare for world leaders that she met so her job was highly pressured.’ Mitigation is a form of relational work that allowed servants to give reasons and to justify to themselves (and to me) why they must make allowances for their employers’ sometimes inconsiderate behaviour. This mitigation work, in turn, contributed to the maintenance of the relationship.

A servant’s mitigation work was often unrelated to how challenging an employer could be. A strategy servants sometimes use to mitigate this was to construct an ‘exceptional identity’ for their employers that allowed them to forgive sometimes fairly unforgivable behaviour. Pam, the Norfolk housekeeper mentioned earlier, resisted the culturally recognised social identity of the servant as marginalised and silenced, and that of her work as a form of drudgery. On the contrary, she embraced a version of servant identity in which there was affection between her and her mistress. She expressed huge sentiment for her role telling me that she had always ‘really wanted to be a lady's maid’ and that she liked ‘all the *Upstairs Downstairs*.’ She expressed her great fondness and even love for her employer who was, in her words, ‘a lovely lady.’[[237]](#footnote-237)

Over the course of the interview Pam described her employer as ‘amazing’ and stated that she (Pam) ‘loved’ and ‘idolised her’, also declaring, ‘she made me what I am.’ On the other hand, however, Pam also depicted her mistress variously as demanding, distant and contemptuous. She told me, for example, that her mistress had ‘zero tolerance’, that ‘she didn't know where the kitchen was’, that her breakfast tray had to be ‘precise.’ She told me that, when helping her to find a pair of shoes to match a particular outfit, her mistress had sent Pam to find another pair ‘fourteen times before she got the pair she wanted.’ Much to Pam’s embarrassment her employer would also malign foreign members of staff in the household saying to Pam, ‘I can't understand them - I cannot understand them’ and, when she needed help, would call out: ‘Cretin! Where is that cretin?’ Pam described her own thoughts in instances such as these as: ‘oh my god, you can't say that’ but excused her employer on the basis that ‘she obviously thought she could.’

Her mistress would also invite Pam’s husband into the house and make Pam serve him in the parlour after he had driven Pam to work:

She’d say to me "Pam, Pam, so lovely to see you. You go and wash up and get ready and when you are ready [your husband] and I will take tea in the parlour,” and so I had to go and wait on my husband because he was socialising with her in the parlour. And that's just what she was like, she was hysterical![[238]](#footnote-238)

Here, her mistress crosses a symbolic boundary that would have been inconceivable for Pam to cross. Furthermore, by her mistress drawing Pam’s husband into such an intimate setting she acts to differentiate Pam’s menial position more distinctly. This can be considered a way of marginalising her even more. Pam mitigates any suggestion of this by casting these sorts of behaviours as amusing, for example, when she says: ‘She was hysterical!’ Moreover, Pam’s decision to construct her employer in this way acts also to position her own self dialogically in relation to her and thus provide a particular impression of Pam as congenial and amenable that, in turn, serves interpersonal purposes.

Constructing an ‘exceptional identity’ for her mistress helps Pam to negotiate potentially difficult scenarios that clearly played a critical part in the continuance and success of her role. This relational work is closely connected to her own identity construction because, as discussed earlier, people use language ‘not only to communicate facts but also to shape their identities vis-a-vis their interactional partners.’[[239]](#footnote-239) Each of these individual interactions not only helps to build and sustain relationships but also, in turn, provide a site for the construction of identity. For example, by eliding some of the more unsavoury aspects of her mistress’ behaviours and actions Pam is able to create a good relationship with her and thus construct her own identity around that of a lady’s maid, such as might be characterised *Upstairs Downstairs*, andin a way that is acceptable and even attractive to her. Pam provides further evidence of the way their relationship provides a site for the construction of her own identity by drawing on the direct speech of her mistress’ daughter. Pam arrived for work one Monday morning after taking the weekend off and her mistress’ daughter, who had been looking after her mother over the weekend in place of Pam, remarked: ‘I don’t know how you put up with her Pam’ before disappearing out of the door ‘like a jack rabbit.’ Pam legitimises her good standing in the household and her good relationship with her employer by drawing directly on the daughter’s account from that particular morning. This account not only served relational purposes but also helped to provide legitimisation of Pam’s place and thus identity in the household as the one person able to manage the difficult demands of the mistress in a way that no-one else, not even her own daughter, could.

Despite Pam’s husband taking tea in the parlour and the intimate nature of some of the tasks Pam had to perform, for example, getting her employer into her corset by ‘putting a foot in her back,’ there remained a huge gulf in terms of the interpersonal distance between them. Evidence of this paradox of intimacy and distance was apparent when Pam told me that, while she had worked for her, she had not even known her mistress’ first name:

I was with her for five years [...] and you know I loved her but I never knew her Christian name and at the funeral, this is the best bit, they were all going "Oh Beatrice would love this, Beatrice would love this" [...] and I said “who is Beatrice?” and the daughter's husband [...] said “well Beatrice” [indicating the coffin] and I was like “oh I didn't even know - I'd only ever called her Mrs [anonymised]” and anybody I knew had only ever called her Mrs [anonymised] we never knew her name[[240]](#footnote-240)

It is difficult to ascertain whether, as Goffman discussed, the emotions Pam felt for her employer were authentic. What she later told me, however, suggests that in some ways they may have been. After leaving Beatrice’s house, where she had been so happy, she moved to another that so badly affected her self-esteem she described herself as ‘almost not the same person.’ She told me, ‘I couldn’t fit and yet I could have ruled the world when I left [Beatrice’s] house, but I didn’t fit and within four months had lost all my confidence and that’s how a house can change you.’

When individuals are able to embody how they *should* be feeling as opposed to how they are truly feeling, this is what Hochschild labels ‘deep acting.’ As suggested previously, the ability of an interlocutor to perform this deep acting is a significant component of relational work. Even though her job depended on it, however, Pam was not able to perform the relational work necessary, or to ‘deep act’ her way through this second role simply to sustain the relationship. In other words, she was not able to embody how she *should* be feeling as opposed to how she was truly feeling to survive in this new house. This suggests that the relational work Pam performed was highly context specific and dependent on how she felt about her employer and, as such, how she constructed their relationship, and thus their relative identities, *in situ*.

How relationships are constructed *in situ* has implications for how we view the relational and emotional work that servants of the nineteenth century performed. Using insights from my contemporary interviews, I now turn to a comparative analysis of the historical data, using this to argue that master-servant relationships of the nineteenth century were also based on an economy of personal qualities and the emotional orientation of servants, both of which were traded and valorised in such relationships. I draw attention to how nineteenth-century servants performed remarkably similar relational work in navigating the lines between that of family member and servant. Paradoxically, however, in these historic cases, it is often the servants who engage in dialectics of intimacy and distancing with their masters.

**3.4 Performing relational work: closeness and distance in nineteenth-century servant letters.**I undertook this work by conducting a finely grained analysis of a number of letters found in the Carnarvon of Highclere Papers held at the Hampshire Record Office (HRO) that I used to provide evidence of servants’ relational interpersonal linguistic acts. These epistolary acts reveal how servants discursively constructed their relations with their masters and mistresses. They evidence how servants used strategies of deference and restraint in their writing to establish and show respect for the social distance that clearly existed between writer and recipient, but equally how the deployment of surprisingly open and frank expressions of intimacy, affection, and kinship also served to close this gap. It is clear from the historical data that servants often struggled to manage their emotional lives and their interpersonal relationships with other servants in the house. Their letters, on one hand, focus on mutuality and involvement with the family they worked for by drawing extensively on discourses of kinship, intimacy and belonging. On the other, they use individuality and distancing strategies that they then mitigate by using language in a way that serves particular relational goals and serves to moderate or soften these strategies. The interplay of these various strategies also provides preliminary insights that suggest that these letters were not just an evidentiary record of everyday matters but were also an important site for the construction of representations of the self.

The letters examined for this section were chosen because they show a clear sense of the distance that existed between writer and recipient but also they reveal surprisingly open and candid expressions that suggest that there was much intimacy and affection in the relationship. The relational work servants performed in their letters not only shows how they went about constructing interpersonal relations with their employers, but also provides evidence of the relational work they performed with other members of the household. This tangential work would also have had direct implications for constructing good relationships with their employers. The better they were able to form good relationships with other household members the more they would have been considered a positive influence on the household, not a disruptive one.

In this extract from a letter written in July 1839, Ann Gaymour, the housekeeper at Highclere Castle, is reporting to her mistress, Lady Carnarvon, on events occurring back at Highclere while her mistress is away:

I am ashamed to say that the maids at Highclere disagree very much and Jane have given one warning to leave as she cannot live with Fanny she behave so bad to her – I told Fanny before I left I hoped they would be more peaceable than before as I was sorry to hear so much of it in the neighbourhood she said she expected they should soon be the same again as she hated the sight of her and could not bear to have her in the room with her[[241]](#footnote-241)

It is notable that Ann is quite candid in how she describes this tricky situation, even going so far as to say that one of the maids ‘hated the sight’ of another (Fanny) and ‘could not bear to have her in the room with her.’ With the distance of time, we cannot know the accurate facts about the case of the ‘quarrelsome’ maids but these were certainly frank descriptions provided by Ann about a situation that she clearly felt comfortable about candidly describing to her mistress. Ann’s letter performs the transactional act of reporting on the bad behaviour of the maids at Highclere but, at the same time, also performs much relational work through the expression of her own emotional response to these events when she states, for example, that she is ‘ashamed’ that the maids at Highclere disagree.

Shame is a self-referential emotion and Ann uses it to align herself with one maid (Jane) by articulating the shared nature of their experience, while, at the same time, distancing herself from the disagreeable maids when she says that she had hoped ‘they would be more peaceable than before.’ The relational work this performs, such as the expression of her own perspective in relation to the various other maids, and her overall candidness and frankness with Lady Carnarvon more generally, would have helped to form a meaningful connection between them. This connection, in turn, may have been intended to serve particular interpersonal functions, such as helping to close the gap in social distance that would have clearly existed between this particular servant and her mistress.

As was evidenced by Shannon in my discussion of the contemporary data, dialectics of intimacy and distancing are sometimes strategies used to restore meaningful connections in groups when tricky situations occur. For an example of how servants performed such a dialectic of intimacy and distancing I draw, not on a servant letter, but on a letter written by one of Lady Carnarvon’s sisters, Lady Isabella Howard, which she sent to another of their sisters, Lady Charlotte, at Highclere Castle.[[242]](#footnote-242) She details an event that befell one particularly unfortunate servant working in an aristocratic household in Penrith, and describes how the other servants reacted to this specific incident. This letter is different from the other letters analysed in this thesis as it is not one written by any of the servants themselves. In the letter, however, Lady Isabella, describes the speech and behaviours of a number of servants thus affording an opportunity to specifically examine how servants managed their relationships within the household when a quite dramatic situation occurred. What is striking about Lady Isabella’s letter is the presentation of a nuanced account of the different servants’ reactions. The letter also provides an opportunity to explore how servants were able to deftly re-establish degrees of connection when there had been quite a disruption in their lives through a dialectic of distancing themselves from some individuals, while aligning themselves with others.

The event Lady Isabella describes occurred at Greystoke Castle, Penrith in 1832. Lady Isabella Howard wrote to her sister, Lady Charlotte Howard, explaining how events had unfolded that day:

My Dearest Charlie,

the grand news of the day is the alarm yesterday morning that [the] housemaid Fanny was rigid with Cholera, she was reported to be completely doubled up with spasms - the young Mr Irving was the first Doctor who arrived he pronounced it only English Cholera and gave her a very strong dose of calomel, promising to come again [...] she grew rapidly worse however. Mary in the greatest alarm sent off for somebody else then Mr Irving senior made his appearance and the result of his visit was a poor little half starved boy Could you have believed it, and she is past forty. Her sister the laundry maid is so angry and ashamed that she would not go near her, Mary’s daughter ejaculated “Lord have mercy upon her” and ran downstairs but you should hear Mrs. Carface “She could not think of approaching the infamous creature, quite out of her line as Thank Heaven she had never before been in a house where such a circumstance had transpired, and she supposed there was not a more delicate woman breathing than herself” and the end of it was that Julia acted nurse, until they got a very nice woman from the village who has taken the poor baby home with her. Julia has been busy in cutting up clothes which I think is very good of her but I think the poor child will not live which will be a happy release, as the father is a married man which it seems the poor woman did not know, and always expected he would marry her until a few weeks ago, when his wife and children came after her “to Penrith”[[243]](#footnote-243)

What is interesting about the events Lady Isabella describes is the detail with which she is able to describe them, sometimes even quoting the speech that the servants apparently used. Far from being held at a distance, the intimate personal knowledge she seems to have about these events suggests that, even in such an aristocratic house as this, servants’ and masters’ lives could be closely intertwined. Of course, we cannot accurately know with the distance of time whether these were the exact words the individuals used but, Lady Isabella’s account of the situation suggests that, while the story is a shocking one to the household, it seems natural to her that the family and their servants’ lives are interwoven in this way.

Lady Isabella describes how Fanny’s sister, a laundry maid at the castle, is so ‘angry and ashamed’ with Fanny that ‘she would not go near her.’ Lady Isabella’s representation of events clearly demonstrates a closeness to the events that went on that day. Fanny is described as, not only explicitly being ‘ashamed’ of her sister, but also that she intends to distance herself from the incident by not going near her. The presence of this illegitimate baby means that her sister has become an unmarried mother, a social position that would have been considered shameful in the nineteenth century. Any social category contains evaluations about appropriate and inappropriate behaviours and Fanny’s sister’s emotional evaluation is that Fanny’s behaviour has been inappropriate and thus she seeks to emphasise, quite publicly and deliberately, a distance between them. On one hand, this might be surprising considering that Fanny is after all her own flesh and blood, on the other, she clearly does not want to be ‘contaminated’ by, what she perceives to be the ‘immoral behaviour’ of her sibling, nor judged by it, and thus seeks to distance herself. She thus relationally constructs an image of herself in which she is presented positively whereas her sister is presented negatively.

This form of distancing also manifests itself in the relational actions of the other servants. As Bandelj notes, ‘social groups build identity through attempts to differentiate themselves from each other, so identity building is clearly a relational effort.’[[244]](#footnote-244) This identity building through forms of differentiation is evidenced in Lady Isabella’s letter when she describes how another servant Mary, ‘ejaculated “Lord have mercy upon her” and ran downstairs.’ Following this, Lady Isabella tells Lady Charlotte about the reaction of Mrs Carface, another servant in the household, saying, ‘and you should hear Mrs. Carface: “She could not think of approaching the infamous creature [...] as Thank Heaven she had never before been in a house where such a circumstance had transpired, and she supposed there was not a more delicate woman breathing than herself.”’ Here, two other servants, also differentiate themselves from Fanny: Mary invokes God and ‘runs downstairs’, and Mrs Carface who, casting herself as ‘more delicate than any other woman alive’, sends out a clear message that this incident constitutes a serious threat to her identity that she must distance herself from.

In direct contrast to these reactions, ‘Julia’ is described by Lady Isabella as acting ‘as nurse’ to the baby. Julia is most likely to have been one of Lady Isabella’s other sisters, Juliana Barbara Howard.[[245]](#footnote-245) Her ‘acting as nurse’ for a servant’s baby is somewhat surprising as this suggests an unexpected closeness by this member of the aristocracy with the servants at Greystoke Castle and an engagement in their lives that might have been considered even beyond the realm of nostalgic depictions, such as those found in *Downton Abbey*. It also suggests that, in contrast to the servants, Lady Julianna has taken a more humanistic and less moralistic stance towards Fanny and her new-born son. Of course, being a person in a position of power (although she was only about 20 years of age when this incident occurred) she may have felt more able to show openness towards the baby than the servants who would have been afraid of being associated with the supposedly immoral behaviours that led to his birth, even though this ‘immorality’ had been performed by some-one else. On one hand, the servants publicly distance themselves from the baby boy while, on the other, Lady Julianna draws close to him through her preparedness to act as nurse. When individuals provide accounts of events, such as Lady Isabella is doing here, they express something of the relationships between the different positions of the individuals around them. Social practice within a collective group is realised through the actions of its participants and here we can see how the relational actions of the servants, working in concert with one another, have a direct impact on the household as a whole. Lady Isabella’s letter to her sister evidences how the household becomes a site of social practice as meaning and servant identities are co-constructed and negotiated with others.

Lady Isabella writes that she is ‘almost ashamed’ of writing about the events of that day at Greystoke Castle, possibly because she was aware that it may appear to her sister, Lady Charlotte, that she was engaging in frivolous gossip. She mitigates her perceived ‘shamefulness’ over the retelling of the incident to her sister, however, by declaring ‘you cannot conceive from the previous alarm of cholera, and not even her [Fanny’s] own sister suspecting the real cause, what a sensation it has made in the house.’ Despite Lady Isabella’s social position of power and status, she too has taken up the sense of collective feeling in the household. We cannot tell if these are authentic feelings but, again, they do provide evidence of a shared sense of something lived through jointly. This challenges the ideathat in all servant-employing households of the nineteenth century, especially elite ones, servants and their employers lived entirely separate lives as is often depicted in televisual representations, such as in the drama series *Servants*. In this sense, their joint self-expression performs the social bonding intended by creating instances of connection and mutuality between them, and thus providing a dialogical and, by extension, relational effect.

The emotional landscape of the household has been altered by these events and, it seems, Lady Julianna has used her position to do the relational work of providing some directional clarity that helps to restore the equilibrium. Order is eventually re-established in the household and meaning is made in the way that the tensions are resolved in order to repair the situation and produce a relatively positive outcome. The ‘poor baby’ is handed over to ‘a very nice woman from the village’ and clothes are cut up to provide garments for him. The emotional distress triggered by this incident is successfully managed so that order and stability are restored through the relational work of the various participants and a dialectic interplay of their various emotional reactions, culminating ultimately in an emotional bonding through the joint care of the child. Of course, to some extent, this acts as a counter-view to the contemporary material where the emphasis was on the relational work that the servants do. Here, it is clear that at least some nineteenth-century employers acted in relational ways and were aware of the emotions of their servants.

As dialogic acts, letters always involve the anticipation of the response by the reader (or addressee) and, therefore, unwittingly shape both the register and content of the interaction. This was evidenced in Lady Isabella’s letter, for example, when she anticipates that her sister might consider that she is engaging in frivolous gossip and thus seeks to explain herself by emphasising what a significant and ‘sensational’ event the birth of the child has been. Taking this as my entry point into the next section, I identify relational work nineteenth-century servants performed through repair work and the implementation of discourses of kinship, intimacy and belonging in their letters. By examining the interpersonal pragmatic aspects of their language use and the dynamics of their interactions, I locate evidence of how they adjust their language to their addressees and to individual situations for interpersonal effects.

**3.5 Discourses of kinship: intimacy and belonging in nineteenth-century servant letters.**The historical record shows how servants continually and strategically position themselves in relation to others in their interactions and use language dialogically to influence others’ responses. This is evidenced in letters written by Miss F. S. Davies, a governess for Lady Carnarvon’s children; Alan, Auberon, Lady Eveline and Lady Gwendoline. In 1849 Miss Davies wrote several letters to her mistress from Coblenz (now Koblenz) in Germany where the children were staying under her supervision. The details of the collection, in which her letters are archived, describe her correspondence as principally concerned with the children’s activities and lessons.[[246]](#footnote-246) A closer examination, however, demonstrates how they are replete with much interpersonal content. These elements perform essential relational work as letters were often used to connect separated and fragmented families when family members were apart. This work could be, however, undermined when sensitive or tricky moments occurred. For example, in the following letter, there has been an unfortunate incident in which some letters addressed to Lord Porchester,[[247]](#footnote-247) Lady Carnarvon, a Lady L. and a Lady X., were mistakenly opened by Lady Evelyn, one of the children in Miss Davies’ care.

Miss Davies’ explanation affords an opportunity to examine how this important relational linguistic work is performed, in this case primarily through the mitigation and repair strategies the governess institutes, in order to recover the situation and to renegotiate her identity:

I told lady Evelyn she has done wrong in opening the letters although I must say it was by your ladyship permission that she did it, the child looked distressed and so was I, but I trust you will be believe me Dear Madam when I tell you that all that she read of Mrs. L’s was; “we are returning to – “naming Highclere, and so is Lord P. returned” I then said look at the name before you go further for these were the rules two sentences that had met her eyes on looking at the signature and finding it was not Sir Thomas's she immediately closed it and put it in a safe corner in the bookcase in the library room and for myself, I can solemnly declare that beyond what Lady E read, not a syllable is known to me and I am sure also that neither of the dear children would knowing, as they did, it was with not permitted them. As to Lady X‘s the seal was not broken here, as we received it surely sealed and with her name upon it's X so we forwarded it to your Ladyship, and I'm greatly surprised to hear that you received it open: we did not forget that you particularly requested that these might be forwarded to you. Therefore, the dear children would not think of opening them. I am grieved Miss X’s has been opened, but since guessed, and rightly, that it contained one for her, and so broke the seal, but Lady E lost not a moment in resealing it and it has remained ever since carefully put in the bookcase, and its contents are but unknown[[248]](#footnote-248)

This is a lengthy explanation, consisting of both informational and relational content. Furthermore, this potentially embarrassing situation is one in which Miss Davies must presume her audience includes more individuals than just Lady Carnarvon and this wider audience is one that she must also consider. She herself notes that some of the opened letters were addressed to various other family members and, therefore, it can be deduced that she would have been aware of accommodating this wider audience when composing her response. She carefully avoids apologising explicitly for the mistakenly opened letters but instead, describes in detail how the letters came to be opened and the steps taken to ensure that the content remained confidential. Interestingly, she attempts to absolve herself of responsibility but, at the same time, also performs important repair work. She does this by attempting to promote her own perspective on the events for personal purposes and in order to create a shift away from a negative account (of the wrongly opened letters) towards a positive one.

Miss Davis firstly states ‘I told Lady Evelyn she had done wrong in opening the letters’ before going on to say, ‘although I must say it was by your ladyship’s permission that she did it.’ This is a bold strategy as it attempts to downplay any involvement on her own part in the incident, reducing the fault to one of only two possibilities; either Lady Evelyn was wrong for opening the letters or Lady Carnarvon was wrong for giving her permission to do so.[[249]](#footnote-249) This is risky as, while it absolves her of any involvement in the unfortunate incident, it also serves to place the blame firmly elsewhere.[[250]](#footnote-250) Furthermore, to ensure that Lady Carnarvon is in no doubt that Miss Davies is not to blame, she adds legitimacy to her account by drawing on her own personal authority as governess. She achieves this by quoting the actual speech she gave to Lady Evelyn at the time of the incident: ‘I then said look at the name before you go further for these were the rules.’

After these bold moves, and perhaps aware that she might be overstepping a line, she then attempts to mitigate what are potentially face threatening acts (see Brown and Levinson, 1978) through various discourses designed to soften or, at least, neutralise her assertions. Drawing on discourses of morality and truth, she writes ‘I trust you will believe me Dear Madam’ and ‘I can solemnly declare that beyond what Lady E read, not a syllable is known to me.’ In true dialogic form these discourses anticipate the potential of a negative response from Lady Carnarvon and attempt to shape that response. As such, Miss Davies mitigates the illocutionary force of any potential discord that may potentially be created by the implication that she was not at fault.

There is much evidence of a dialectic dance of intimacy and distancing in her account. While, on one hand, Miss Davies distances herself from the transgression, she also attempts to express a closeness and an intimacy with Lady Evelyn by using elements of language that draw on emotion words and mutual understanding. She writes that ‘the child looked distressed and so was I’, which invites a sense of commonality and connection between herself and the child through the expression of shared emotional distress. As demonstrated by Shannon, in the contemporary material, when facing a difficult dilemma this invoking of a shared emotional experience helps to create an intimacy that serves relational purposes. Miss Davies’ depiction of close emotional interactions with the child helps to construct theirs as a close and personal relationship. Similarly to Tara and Shannon in the contemporary material, Miss Davies’ emotional orientation is pivoted towards her charge, Lady Evelyn, with whom she makes clear she shares distress. Furthermore, although she does not explicitly say so, there is the implied subtext that Lady Carnarvon is the author of that distress for it is she who holds the power to chastise whomsoever she feels is at fault.

This is risky strategy and, again, Miss Davies also draws on emotive language to mitigate its effect. She states that she was ‘greatly surprised to hear that [Lady C] received it open’ and was ‘grieved’ to hear that the seal had been broken. This is an indirect way of reinforcing her understanding of how serious the incident is, while also seeking to moderate and soften her previous claim, in which she had suggested it was everyone else’s fault apart from her own, in order to establish greater rapport. Her linguistic strategies here serve a number of purposes that attend to the maintenance of the relationships in which each of the actors partake. These include Miss Davies’ relationship with her charge Lady Evelyn, Lady Carnarvon’s relationship with her own daughter (Lady Evelyn) and Miss Davies’ relationship with her mistress. The previous distancing of herself from Lady Evelyn and from any blame in the unfortunate incident, brushes up in contrasting ways against the intimacy of her more emotive expressions of shared feeling and sentiment.

As if to counter the distancing of herself from the incident, Miss Davies continues her letter by using interpersonal strategies that perform helpful repair work. She constructs her relationship with the children and Lady Carnarvon through epistolary practices that draw on discourses of kinship and familial ties and through the articulation of stories that weave together aspects of hers and the children’s lives and their shared experiences. This is especially evident in a description of a walk she took with the children from Coblenz:

We walked over to the village of Ehrenbreitstein and passing through it came to a road that winds along at the back of the fortress and went a considerable way along until we ascended the hill from where we had a beautiful view of Coblenz on the left and a most rural one to our right: two workmen passed us to whom lady Evelyn spoke and asked them if by going we were then ascending we could get back to [Coblenz] by a shorter and pretty road, they said we could so on we ran in high glee all of us enjoying it exceptionally, when we came to the top, we had to pass over ploughed fields and missing our way, we asked a man we met, which was our best way to Coblenz[[251]](#footnote-251)

Although this section of the letter achieves the transactional act of reporting the activity of their walk, it also performs much relational work too. The playful descriptions of how they found their way home after becoming lost, for example, create an engaging sense of intimacy through the articulation of her shared experience with the children.

As Miss Davies describes their collective ‘glee’ and ‘exceptional enjoyment’ of the walk she is also expressing something about their emotional bonding. As discussed earlier, emotions are socially constructed and their meanings shift throughout time and within different social contexts. They are also socially shaped and influenced by the cultural norms of the particular time in which they are produced ‘via cultural language, specific emotion words and emotional practices.’[[252]](#footnote-252) Despite this, however, it is clear that, even supposing the meaning of the emotion word ‘glee’, for example, has shifted since the nineteenth century, it remains primarily an emotionally positive expression and, therefore, I argue that Miss Davies’ intent was to depict a positive and intimate scene for her mistress, one undoubtedly intended to serve interpersonal ends. Through her repeated use of the collective ‘we’ in her letter Miss Davies creates a sense of solidarity by depicting the group as a close-knit one. She expresses this solidarity through their shared collaborative practices, for example, describing how they ‘asked a man we met, which was the best way to Coblenz.’

Although parts of the next section of the letter are indecipherable, due to paper damage, it is possible to ascertain that the little group were lost for some time, at one point ending up back at the vineyards, before they finally found their way back to their hotel in Coblenz. Miss Davies frames the story of the walk as a rather heroic one in which they emerge as a plucky little group who collaboratively worked together to find their way home. However, when they return, she laments, ‘we were rather disappointed when we got back to find no one had been frightening themselves about us.’ This image induces a certain pathos in the reader - the noble little troop of walkers had hoped they had been missed after being away for much longer than planned but how, in fact, this turned out not to be the case. Langlotz and Locher note that ‘people often strategically induce emotional states in others as a way of achieving interpersonal goals.’[[253]](#footnote-253) Given this, the evocation of pathos this may have served might have elicited some sympathy in Lady Carnarvon when she read Miss Davies’ letter. The absence of people at the hotel, who would have cared enough to ‘frighten themselves’ about Lady Carnarvon’s children, when the little troop of walkers did not arrive home at the expected hour, draws attention to their isolation and separateness from home.

There are times, however, when Miss Davies takes on a different voice, for example, when she indicates an eagerness for her own personal agenda. For example, in the following extract she explains how the children have taken up art lessons with a German drawing master:

Mr J kindly offered to bring him, which he did punctually at the time named, introduced us, and then left us to get on as well as we could with a little man who does not speak a word of English though we had been told he spoke it before through the German Master. I am delighted to say that they are all getting on very nicely, particularly lady E [...] with whom the master seems much pleased, and it is at the same time a most excellent German lesson for them they find that it informs them greatly in speaking the language. I hope you will not be displeased when I tell you that I too am taking lessons, on enquiring what he charged for the lesson he said xx, and I then asked if I could take some, he replied that the charge would be the same were there many or only one, so I thought as I must sit by, I might as well avail myself of so good an opportunity, and try what wonders I could do with my pencil.[[254]](#footnote-254)

Here, Miss Davies has a set of competing linguistic demands to juggle. She first focuses on the rationale behind the usefulness of the children taking up drawing lessons with a German master. As the lessons are conducted in German, it affords the children an extra opportunity to practise the language. This is a reasonably straightforward matter. A trickier one to explain, however, is that Miss Davies has also acted with a certain degree of autonomy by taking matters into her own hands and has joined the children in taking up drawing lessons herself.

Although, on one hand, this might be considered a fairly innocuous move, on the other, she clearly feels some trepidation about how to explain her decision, evident in her use of the phrase: ‘I hope you will not be displeased.’ This is dialogical in the sense that it both prospectively anticipates there may be a negative response from her mistress (that Lady Carnarvon might consider this selfish or an error of judgement) but is also an attempt to reshape that response into a positive one. For example, the expression of ‘hope’ at first suggests an inability to direct action but can, on closer examination, be considered a strategy designed to direct Lady Carnarvon’s response. Miss Davies then mitigates this strategy with the implied suggestion that it would have been foolish for her not to have taken up lessons, ‘I thought as I must sit by, I might as well avail myself of so good an opportunity and try what wonders I could do with my pencil.’ She attempts to justify her actions by suggesting the end (that she will produce wonders with her pencil) justifies the means. Her evaluation of the situation, as a ‘good opportunity’, serves to subtly express her own personal view (that she is clever and has good ideas) while also steering Lady Carnarvon to arrive at the same view. Again, as with the mistakenly opened letters, Miss Davies uses mitigation as a relational linguistic strategy to make her actions as acceptable as possible to her Ladyship without having to concede that she might have been wrong in either or both cases.

Miss Davies also performs important relational work with Lady Carnarvon by indexing her own special relationship with the children and drawing on discourses of kinship, affection and self-sacrifice. Miss Davies makes her affection for both the children and her mistress an integral part of her identity construction. She weaves together charming depictions of domesticity alongside heartfelt testimonies of affection and sentiment for her charges. To return to Elizabeth Jane MacArthur’s suggestion that ‘letters writers inevitably construct personae for themselves’,[[255]](#footnote-255) Miss Davies constructs an identity for herself that is centred on the care of her charges who become the co-authors of a narrative in which they are given pivotal roles. Miss Davies also positions herself as a key actor in this narrative by drawing on the personal and intimate nature of hers and the children’s intertwined lives:

I feel so grateful and thankful to say that the dear ones are all so very well and happy and full of enjoyment. The dear ones are getting on nicely with their Grecian history in which Auberon is hugely interested, and they say their Latin every day, their verbs and declensions, they are very good and make me as happy as the day is long. I have no time to think of my letters now [...] from the time I get up until I go to bed my time and thoughts are devoted to my precious charges. The only reason for respect at staying here longer, is that we know our departure will be an assurance of a speedy reunion with you my dear madam and this cannot come too soon.[[256]](#footnote-256)

Her personal expressions of affection for the children dialogically serve both individual and social purposes. Like Caroline in the contemporary data, she positions herself at the centre of the children’s lives. When she writes ‘they are very good and make me as happy as the day is long’ she is expressing her own emotional investment in their relationship as evidenced in her deep maternal affection for the children. Expressions of an inner emotional state, such as, ‘I feel so grateful and thankful to say that the dear ones are all so very well and happy and full of enjoyment’ are constructed in such a way to suggest that her happiness is dependent on theirs and she is thus, by extension, cast as a selfless, loving and benevolent member of the family.

As Rebecca Earle notes ‘personal or familiar letters have long been viewed, along with diaries and other forms of autobiographical writing, as a means of self-expression.’[[257]](#footnote-257) When Miss Davies, for example, writes ‘I have no time to think of my letters now [...] from the time I get up until I go to bed my time and thoughts are devoted to my precious charges’ she is expressing her preparedness to sacrifice her own desires (similarly to Nikolas) and wants for the sake of the children. Returning to the theme of the pseudo family member discussed in the contemporary material when discussing Shannon‘s relationship with the family she worked for, this draws on a discourse that is bound up with the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother. Miss Davies’ relational work, however, is exclusively focused on her charges and this, one would imagine, thus secures her a safe place within the family.

Miss Davies continues to index a special relationship with the children by drawing on the self-referential emotion of pride when she describes how well the children are doing at their studies, ‘the little boys are getting on nicely with their Grecian history’ and ‘they say their Latin every day, their verbs and declensions, they are very good.’[[258]](#footnote-258) Although indexing special relationships is a way of building intimacy with Lady Carnarvon, it would also have been the transactional part of Miss Davies’ role to update her mistress on the children’s activities. She does this, however, in ways that interweave their activities with discourses that draw on motherhood, kinship and familial ties.

By expressing her pride in the little boys, she positions herself at the core of their lives, in the same way that Caroline, the modern day nanny did when she worried about who was going to care for her charges when she left the family. When Miss Davies writes, ‘our departure will be an assurance of a speedy reunion with you my dear madam and this cannot come too soon’ she subtly draws Lady Carnarvon back into this narrative of familial ties and kinship. These touching sentiments are, of course, a reflection of the time and context in which they existed. As suggested by Hochschild[[259]](#footnote-259) and previously discussed in this chapter, people attempt to manage their emotions in accordance with what they believe is expected of them in the particular social situation they are in, and Miss Davies would have been drawing on much wider cultural discourses that were commonplace in 1846, discourses that will certainly have informed her epistolary practices. They nevertheless construct a narrative, as previously noted, in which she constructs for herself a leading role in the centre of the family’s intertwined lives. Her explicit expressions of devotion to the children and warm personal affection to Lady Carnarvon also serve the pragmatic purpose of helping to recover Miss Davies’ identity and reputation after the unfortunate incident of the wrongly opened letters.

**Conclusion**In this chapter I have demonstrated how servants or private household staff operate at the margins of family life where, on one hand, they are dealing with the most personal, private and intimate parts of their employers’ lives while, on the other, they are an outsider and interloper. The internal domestic space within the home becomes a site in which the inequalities and power differentials of the outside world can be replicated in private. This means that although domestic servants are entrusted with the intimate care and responsibility of their employers’ homes, their children, and their most precious possessions, their status and position remain always and necessarily vulnerable. Despite operating on the margins of family life they are, nevertheless, often pivotal in holding the family together while at the same time occupying a ‘kind of absent presence.’ The data from the interviews conducted with contemporary private household staff evidenced how servants were, at times, allowed to enter the core part of the family in ways that suggested that they had become full participants in the collective group. At other times, however, their employers would confuse that boundary in ways that would remind them, quite sharply, of their outsider status. The sense of vulnerability this to-ing and fro-ing creates can only be contained and addressed through intensive relational work and emotional labour on the servant’s part.

Servants found that employers would often blur the distinction between family member and employee, encouraging staff to think of themselves as family members but then marginalising them when this narrative did not work for them anymore. I have evidenced how this creates confusion and vulnerability for servants. The work servants performed to organise themselves around the power inequalities also worked to both establish and maintain the social separation between themselves and their employers. By analysing servants’ interpersonal linguistic strategies I have revealed how a dialectic of closeness and distance is deployed by employers in their dealings with their household staff, and detailed the consequential relational work that servants have to perform to navigate this dialectic. This relational work that servants invest is largely what helps to sustain and maintain the master-servant relationship.

The evidence demonstrated how employers kept their servants close when it worked in their favour but are quick to render them invisible when it does not, in turn, creating emotionally complex scenarios. It should be noted that, in the present-day material, there was explicit commentary on how the boundaries were shifted by employers, however, this was not a factor that was as clear in the historical data in the same way, which is not to say that it did not occur, just that it would have been unlikely to be directly commented on by nineteenth-century servants.

I also sought to explicate the role that the expression and suppression of emotions (emotional labour and affective labour) plays in the relational work of household staff. I have argued that it is the servant’s emotional and affective labour that performed the critical relational work required for the continuance of their positions in the household. Emotional expressions are primarily communicative, designed to produce interpersonal effects, rather than a reactive phenomenon. Servants of both generations and historical periods prove adept at developing relational strategies, such as the avoidance of disagreement and the suppression or expression of their emotions, or by displaying desired emotions such as warmth and affection to meet the specific expectations of their employers and households.

I brought to light how servants and masters can act in mutually beneficial ways, for example, when a servant works to create connection and is able to use mitigation, repair work and other relational aspects to foster good relations with their employer this has beneficial consequences. As a consequence, employers might, for example, draw the servant into the heart of the family or provide other benefits, such as providing freely available food, drink or accommodation. In essence, emotion regulation can produce benefits for the servant when it works to produce good relations with their masters, who in turn may treat the servant well. This can also be confusing, however, when warmth and affection are not part of the transactional exchange and servants must react to this by regulating their behaviour.

The material in both the interviews and the letters provides illustrations of the polyphonic nature of voice and the dissenting discourses within and shows how the servant’s lived experience is a multiply constituted and complex one. As extensively discussed, identities are emergent and dynamically managed in interaction. I examined here how servants continually and strategically positioned themselves in relation to others in their interactions and how they use language dialogically to influence others’ responses, behaviours and their wider social environment. This served to provide evidence of multi-faceted identities as their different voices exchanged knowledge and information and, in turn, created a complex, narratively structured self. I suggest that the connection between relational work and identity construction resonates with, and informs, wider debates on the identity of the servant. Servants might also construct exceptional identities for their employers, for example in the case of Pam, who described her mistress as ‘hysterical’ when she crossed symbolic boundaries that Pam was not able to transgress herself or behaved in culturally inappropriate ways.

Correspondence from the nineteenth century was contextualised as a social practice that afforded a site for the construction of representations of the self through the relational work of the servant. The letters demonstrated degrees of restraint that establish a clear sense of the distance that existed between writer and recipient but equally there were explicit and close expressions of intimacy, sentiment, kinship and belonging that served to close this gap. Lady Isabella’s letter described the relational interactions of servants in a particular household and how they aligned themselves with each other while at the same time distancing themselves from those contaminated by what they perceived to be the ‘bad practices’ of the laundry maid Fanny. This letter also highlighted how the house became a site of ‘collective emotional labour’ (see Hochschild 2012) and social practice, as meaning and identities were dialogically co-constructed and negotiated with others. The letters also emphasised close, familial relations with employers through emotional expressions, reference to emotional connections and by drawing on a rhetoric of intimacy, belonging, and kinship. Mitigation was also used as a relational strategy although, unlike the contemporary servants who used it more to mitigate the actions of their employers, the historical servants, as in the case of Miss Davies, used it more to mitigate her own behaviour. Miss Davies achieved this through the extensive relational work she performed when writing to her mistress about the incident of the mistakenly opened letters.

Mutuality was also used as a relational strategy in both the historical and the contemporary data. For example, both Shannon and Miss Davies drew on discourses of motherhood, kinship and shared experiences for relational purposes. They presented themselves as able to overcome tricky situations, such as Shannon’s amusement over the bucket used to counter inadequate bathroom facilities, and Miss Davis’ expressions of ‘glee’ and ‘exceptional enjoyment’ of her walk with the children over the hills around Coblenz despite the fact that they became lost and subsequently hurt by the other hoteliers’ lack of concern for them on their return. In both cases this created a sense of mutuality and connectivity with the children they cared for that served interpersonal purposes in terms of their relationships with their mistresses.

There also existed a narrative distance between Miss Davies directly telling Lady Carnarvon about the positive time she had spent with the children that sent out a subtext suggesting that she was a competent person the Carnarvons had appointed to look after their children in their absence, and the narratives of some of the contemporary servants. Shannon, for example, did not express her competence directly and instead told me how she had overridden decisions made by her employers but that she had done this stealthily so that they did not notice. Tara also felt unable to confront her mistress when she witnessed what she considered to be mistreatment of the children by their mother and, instead, wept about it later when she was alone, suggesting to me that she knew better how to care for the children than their own mother. The connection between these various accounts perhaps is, however, that despite these differences in emphasis and overall message, the same point remains that, in both types of account, the speaker is emphasising their own competence.

Both sets of data show how social and linguistic practices were used in identity construction and how each unique individual developed and projected a nuanced sense of self and made meaning of their lives and relations with their employers within a shared social, cultural and historical context through their use of language. I thus considered how the household became a site of social practice in which meaning and identities were co-constructed and negotiated with others. In the following chapter I develop the theme of servants as relational and dialogical individuals in more depth by positioning them as self-governing agents in the process of meaning-making. In order to achieve this I draw on Anthony Giddens’ notion of ‘knowledgeable agents.’ I will show how servants display forms of self-presentation and claim for themselves a particular self-identity based on their knowledge and agency.

When servants appear in the historical record, they are often portrayed as individuals who were pitied or disparaged not as individuals with considerable levels of agency or knowledge. This is because subservience and deference were very much part of their cultural identity. I demonstrate, however, that by acting as agents in the process of meaning-making, servants find ways to counter identity constructions that are rooted in reductive and essentialist ideas of servanthood. I produce an understanding of servants as dialogical entities, not simply individuals who are subject to the actions of others but who, through their knowledge of the households in which they worked, of their employers and the social and cultural world they inhabit, are able to act with agency and construct themselves as self-governing individuals.

**Chapter 4: Knowledgeable Agents: The making of the self-governing servant.**

In the previous chapter I examined the relational work that is performed by servants in their day to day lives, and how power balances, expectations, and boundaries are challenged on a daily basis as the relationship is continually negotiated and renegotiated. I discussed how the boundaries between familiarity and distance, and the personal and the impersonal are blurred meaning that servants have to perform significant relational work in order to navigate this terrain. In this chapter I take this concept further and investigate how servants of the past and present construct multiple social identities through their dialogical engagements with others in their social worlds. I develop the theme of servants as dialogical individuals by positioning them as self-governing agents in the process of meaning-making. I produce an understanding of servants as dialogical entities, not simply individuals who are subject to the actions of others but who, through their knowledge and the enactment of professional identities, are able to act with agency and construct themselves as self-governing individuals.

Reductive accounts of servants, such as those that position them as existing solely to facilitate the privileged lifestyles of their masters and mistresses, hold enduring power and have become cemented in widespread ideas about domestic service. Such viewpoints are complicit in the notion that nineteenth-century domestic servants held little agency within the households where they lived and worked. I argue in this chapter, however, that servants could and did assert themselves in many ways. For example, they could ask for higher wages or leave their positions. In a letter to Lady Carnarvon dated October 1835, servant Ann Moore writes, ‘I had almost forgotten to tell your Ladyship Mary housemaid beged me to tell you she felt her board wages low would I please to tell your ladyship.’[[260]](#footnote-260) This extract provides evidence of how servants were able to assert themselves, in this case by asking for higher wages. In this chapter I show how servants are able to act as individuals with agency and in so doing assert particular identity constructions and resist others.

I first consider how servants were constructed in public discourses of the nineteenth-century, such as in those found in newspapers and Victorian servant advice manuals, and argue that servants were often infantilised and problematised in these discourses. I discuss the widely debated ‘servant problem’ of the nineteenth century in which good servants were not only considered difficult to find but also thought of as incompetent and in need of constant supervision. Such discourses served to position servants in particular ways and attributed to them certain negative characteristics, such as ‘bad’, ‘dishonest’ and ‘incapable.’

This is a view acknowledged by historian Cissie Fairchilds in *Domestic Enemies,* when she argues that ‘employers seem rarely to have recognized [servants] as individual human beings with unique personalities of their own’ and instead defined them as ‘representative of the *genus* servant - a social type characterized by a variety of unfortunate personality traits.’[[261]](#footnote-261) I start with these themes because they allow me, in the analysis of my material, to re-conceptualise the notion of the incompetent servant and instead to evidence how servants were able to act professionally and with agency. In order to achieve this, I draw on Anthony Giddens’ notion of ‘knowledgeable agents’ in order to demonstrate how servants display forms of self-presentation and claim for themselves particular self-identities based on their knowledge and agency. I provide a definition of ‘agency’ drawn from Giddens’ *theory of structuration* (1984)[[262]](#footnote-262) and propose a working definition that reflects the ability of the servant to exercise some sort of power and to adapt to the changing circumstances around them.

Following this, in the analysis of my material, I conduct a discourse analysis of three nineteenth-century servant letters.[[263]](#footnote-263) I provide an examination of how epistolary practices afforded three servants the opportunity to push forward ‘professional identities’ that, in turn, challenge the notion that servants were incompetent or needed constant supervision. Through a reading of these letters what becomes apparent is that one of the key ways in which a servant resists the identity of the servant as child-like or incompetent is through acting as a person with knowledge, a person able to problem solve, make decisions about the running of the household and even at times deputise for their masters and mistresses. Following this, in the next section, I provide comparative evidence from the contemporary interviews of how three modern-day servants[[264]](#footnote-264) also found ways to affect change, influence their employers and project a professional identity. Through an analysis of this material, I set out to challenge the notion that servants are infantilised beings who required constant supervision. I provide evidence of how servants, both past and present, were, and are, able to act with professionalism and pragmatically create representations of themselves through their knowledgeability and agency in ways that reconceptualise them as competent and capable individuals.

In the final section of this chapter I build on this work by conducting discourse analysis on extracts taken from nineteenth-century letters written by John Kent, one of the Lord and Lady Carnarvon’s upper servants, that demonstrate how this particular individual was able to enact considerable agency and his own personal authority in order to position himself in relation to his employers and thus shape his identity. In particular, I consider instances in which he sought to level the social distance between himself and his employers in order to resist the cultural script of servanthood. In this section I will show how, through dialogical engagements with his employers, Kent was able to linguistically assert particular identity constructions, while resisting others.

Through an examination of the nineteenth-century servant letters it is possible to access the language of individuals directly performing acts of agency and identity work, whereas in the twenty-first century interviews I am examining servants’ accounts of how they describe managing particular scenarios. In both cases, however, by situating the servant as a dialogical being and examining the individual discourses they use, I develop an understanding of the lived experience of the servant as one that both asserts and resists certain stereotypical conceptions. It is within this cultural landscape and bewildering tangle of competing discourses that servant identity is enmeshed. I thus seek to examine how servants managed the tensions between reductive judgements and discourses, accepted or resisted them, and found creative ways to author their own identities. By applying the model of the dialogical self, I investigate how they resisted these prescribed cultural representations and positioned themselves in relation to these scripts in order to produce specific and unique representations of themselves.

Whether the identity of ‘servant’ is an ascribed subjectivity or whether they can mobilise the resources at their disposal to alter perceptions of themselves is a key question. I thus consider the various ways in which servants construct their identity, arguing that servants’ identity is contingent on the collective group and on the household as a site of social practice. As I will show here, servants of past and present repeatedly offer alternative identity positions, such as a ‘professional’ identity, in order to resist negative or inferior representations of themselves. Moreover, I will also investigate how modern-day servants construct their identity through their engagements with current social discourses about the historical nature of domestic service and collective understandings of master-servant relationships. This close examination of the voices and discourses used by servants to produce their socially constituted identities will, I hope, produce an understanding of servants as dialogical entities, not just individuals who are subject to the actions of others but who, through their relationships with their masters, other household staff and the social and cultural world they inhabit, are able to act with agency to construct themselves as knowledgeable, and more multi-faceted individuals than wider discourses would have us believe.

**4.1 The ‘servant problem’: Infantilising the servant.**When examining the way in which servants were historically portrayed in society and how this has influenced our view of them over time it is helpful to understand why such reductive accounts exist in the first place and where they originate from. In the case of servants I argue that is partly through popular widespread societal discourses that acted in reductive ways and served to marginalise servants that have caused such accounts to take shape. For example, the issue of the ‘servant problem’ was of paramount concern and a matter hotly debated by the elite classes of Britain throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century. This was a twofold problem. First, there was the difficulty of securing ‘good’ servants who were considered trustworthy, loyal and reliable. An article entitled ‘Bad Servants’ printed in *The Sun* newspaper on 6 February 1857 highlighted this concern, stating that: ‘A very large proportion of the miseries of civilised life arises from bad and dishonest servants.’[[265]](#footnote-265) Nearly twenty years later, on 1 May 1872, the *Leeds Mercury* also stated that:

the household that knows no difficulty in the matter of servants, where the work is always done and well done, where the servants are attentive, cleanly, honest, and industrious, where no jarring words disturb the harmony of domestic life, and where the wheel of domestic duty runs smoothly and continuously - the household which enjoys those blessings, is a rare exception to the rule.[[266]](#footnote-266)

Second, there was the concern that, once good servants had been secured, the attraction of new employment opportunities that were opening up for the working classes in factories, department stores and offices, might lure servants away into alternative forms of employment. In 1879, the *Aberdeen Evening Express* articulated both the anxiety over finding good servants in the first place, and the secondary anxiety of managing to keep hold of them once they had been found. The paper complained that, although ‘various attempts have been made to solve the domestic servant problem. On every hand and on every clime, complaints are unending as to the incapacity and scarcity of servants, and no signs of improvement have ever been apparent.’[[267]](#footnote-267)

These complaints spoke to wider frustrations of the servant-employing classes of the time and provide examples of how certain damaging discourses came to be more widely promulgated. How individuals are linguistically referred to, and the characteristics attributed to them have an effect on how they are perceived by wider society that, in turn, affects their own personal subjectivities and social identities. Negative stereotyping of servants acted as a regulating force and influenced wider cultural perceptions meaning they became problematised and associated with unacceptable behaviours. This is partly how the creation of a *genus* servant (with abject qualities), referred to by Fairchilds, came to be created and normalised by wider nineteenth-century society. Dominant and elite voices in society sedimented a powerful social discourse and with it an abject identity for servants that not only came to shape how they were construed societally but which also risked becoming performative for the servants themselves. Other discourses, for example, parenting discourses, and servant guidance written by educators and nineteenth-century advice givers in Victorian advice guides, also acted as attempts to silence and infantilise servants in order to render them more manageable.

In the nineteenth century mistresses, in particular, bore the responsibility of the control of their servants and, therefore, were expected to exert authority over them, however, this could be problematic. As Davidoff and Hall note, a woman who ‘ran the household efficiently and took firm control [...] had to be firm and business like, yet these qualities were the opposite of that feminine softness, gentleness, and submission of self which constituted the claim to feminine influence.’[[268]](#footnote-268) Idealised notions of femininity and the concept of the mistress as ‘the angel of the house’ made it uncomfortable for society to accept the nineteenth-century woman as an authority figure and, as such, mistresses were consequently cast in more socially acceptable terms. Lucy Delap discusses the ‘unwomanly’ role of the authority figure among Victorian advice writers and explains how various metaphors were used in order to manage the tension between these two polarised positions: on one hand, the authority figure who was closely associated with nineteenth-century masculinity while, on the other, the idealised gentle and passive female who was considered the architect of nineteenth-century femininity. According to Delap, one popular metaphor for the mistress was that of ‘a foster-mother exercising authority with loving paternalism.’[[269]](#footnote-269)

Indeed, other scholars exploring the mistress-servant dynamic also positioned the mistress as a protector of domestic servants. Sociologist Judith Rollins, for example, uses the term ‘maternalism’ to refer to mistresses’ obligations of ‘protection and guidance’ over their servants. She argues that this is a ‘concept related to women’s supportive intrafamilial roles of nurturing, loving, and attending to affective needs.’[[270]](#footnote-270) This is evidenced in a letter to the editor in the *Freeman’s Journal* dated Sept 10 1879. In this letter entitled ‘The Mistress and Servant Problem’, a person signing him or herself simply as A.M.G.D. stated that, ‘mistresses are as much bound to watch over the religion and morals of their servants as over those of the members of their own families.’[[271]](#footnote-271) As Rollins notes, however, the caring expressed in ‘maternalism’ is not ‘human-to-equal human caring’; it may appear to protect and nurture but it also ‘degrades and insults.’[[272]](#footnote-272) It reinforces the unequal dynamic in the mistress-servant relationship and conceptualises the servant ‘as child-like’[[273]](#footnote-273) in ways that clearly served to infantilise them.

This infantilisation of servants in public discourse extended to Victorian advice manuals. Similarly to the advice given to parents on how best to raise obedient children, advice manuals for employers of servants often mirrored these parenting discourses. Evidence of this can be found in *The Complete Servant: being a practical guide to the peculiar duties and business of all descriptions of servants* (1825), in which authors Sarah and Samuel Adams reminded mistresses of their obligations of protection, setting out how they were a servant’s ‘*patroness* as well as their employer.’[[274]](#footnote-274) Although the term patroness does not carry with it quite the same connotations as ‘foster-mother’, nor the concept of ‘maternalism’ as suggested by Rollins, it nevertheless draws on a discourse of protection.

Servant advice manuals also contained strategies and techniques that attempted to silence and subdue servants. For example, *The Complete Servant* advised servants that the ‘happiness of society arises from each of us keeping in our station, and being contented with it’ and that ‘mildness of *behaviour* will help you through many difficulties.’[[275]](#footnote-275) This particular manual in fact recommends that a servant remain silent wherever possible because ‘the virtue of silence is highly commendable.’[[276]](#footnote-276) Combined, these discourses act to invisibilise servants and construct them as passive and submissive. In summary, servants were variously infantilised by their mistresses, and silenced and constructed as lacking in agency by advice manuals - all of these representations create a pejorative discourse around servanthood that acts to render servants powerless and remove any sense of their individuality. This raises the question of how servants managed the connection between their own personal subjectivities and these wider cultural discourses that set out to infantilise or problematise them.

These depictions of servants have had tremendous social and cultural resonance and are reflected in the ways that contemporary servants themselves refer to and describe or reference their own behaviour. As has already been discussed, one of the key ways identities are constructed is via the language used about particular social categories or roles. The primary aim of these discourses was to create deferential individuals who, in their social interactions, are complicit in, and contribute to, their own submission. Prescriptive texts, such as *The Complete Servant*, tell us much about the expectations of educators and nineteenth-century advice givers, but little about how the servants themselves received and internalised these conceptions and how they juggled the dichotomy between these discourses and their own personal subjectivities.

The question of how individuals experience and communicate themselves to the world they inhabit, how they project understandings of themselves and how they manage their relationships with others is critical to everyday life although largely unexplored in this domain. Individuals are continually engaged in crafting representations of themselves in everything they do and can choose to embrace or resist prevailing discourses through their language practices. Servants are no exception and were, I argue, continually engaged in identity work in their interactions in ways that help to construct themselves as subjects of value and to counter the tide of negative discourses designed to devalue them.

Howard Newby (1975) discusses what he terms ‘the deferential dialectic’ in the relationship between those at the bottom of the social hierarchy and the elite classes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He rejects the way that behavioural notions of deference have been applied to groups of people lower down in the social hierarchy and argues that ‘labelling [servants] ‘as “deferential” results merely from a superficial observation of their “on stage” behaviour.’[[277]](#footnote-277) Newby argues that an ‘emphasis on attitudes has led to a concentration on the purported *attributes* of individuals rather than their *relationships*.’[[278]](#footnote-278) This leads to an oversimplification ‘about the coherence and definiteness of beliefs about the nature of society held by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.’[[279]](#footnote-279) Newby states that ‘it is too simplistic to consider deference as either a type of behaviour or a set of attitudes. Any worthwhile definition must necessarily encompass both, since, deference can best be viewed as describing a form of *social interaction*.’[[280]](#footnote-280)

Language and identity are mutually constituting and, therefore, it is possible, through the specific linguistic choices individuals make, to transmute who one is through indexing aspects of an individual’s identity. Anna de Fina explores this matter and suggests that people can signal aspects of their identity by conveying, for example, ‘their affiliation or disaffiliation with particular social categories, beliefs and ideologies.’[[281]](#footnote-281) This argument suggests that individuals can alter perceptions of themselves by challenging the norms of how they themselves are represented and, therefore, can exert their own influence to change wider perceptions of their constituency. Given this, I argue that, through their social interactions, individuals can exercise their agency and challenge how they are classified.

**4.2 Agency and identity: Reconceptualising the servant.**Social spaces and the practice that occurs within them provide fertile ground for the construction of identity. Social practice within any collective group is realised through the actions and the lived experience of its participants. Although the structure of the household was such that there were systems in place that served to maintain the hierarchical distinctions between masters and servants, the management of a large nineteenth-century household was contingent on servants’ agency and participation within it. It is through the scope that servants had to act as individuals with agency and to participate in the household they had the opportunity to, not only redefine social practice within the household, but also to reinvent how they themselves were perceived. I argue that by reconceiving the servant as an actor capable of acting with agency a different interpretation of the servant is possible.

Using a theoretical framework that privileges experience over structure the cultural script of the servant as infantilised and powerless can be challenged. As Etienne Wenger notes, ‘theories of *social structure* give primacy mostly to institutions, norms and rules […] [the most extreme of them deny agency or knowledgeability to specific actors.’[[282]](#footnote-282) Conversely, ‘theories of *situated experience* give primacy to the dynamics of everyday existence, improvisation, coordination, and interactional choreography. They emphasise agency and intentions.’[[283]](#footnote-283) I argue that, rather than the structure of the household being the only factor that defined the practices that occurred within it, the practices of the servant, their agency, knowledge and interaction with other members of the collective, equally had profound influences on the practices of households. As such, I suggest that a servant’s situated experience was such that the practices they engaged in, their agency and their knowledgeability afforded them the opportunity to contribute to the household in ways that redefine our understandings of servants’ lives.

As Megan Clare Webber argues, ‘agency’ is ‘a slippery term that seems to elude meaning.’[[284]](#footnote-284) Given this, before a discussion of how servants enacted their agency in their letters and interviews it is useful to provide a working definition of the term ‘agency’ for the purposes of my analysis. Drawing on sociologist Anthony Giddens’ *theory of structuration* (1984),[[285]](#footnote-285) which examines the relationship between structure and agents, I propose a working definition of servant agency that reflects the ability of the servant to exercise some sort of power and to adapt to the changing circumstances around them. Giddens relates agency to power and argues that:

[To] be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power [[286]](#footnote-286)

Expanding on this ability ‘to exercise some sort of power’ Giddens explains that the forms of domination that are built into social institutions should not be seen as ‘in some way grinding out “docile bodies”’ but rather, that power within all institutions and social systems ‘presumes regularised relations of autonomy and dependences’ between individuals and collectives. However, as he states, ‘all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors’ and he refers to this as the ‘dialectic of control’ in social systems.[[287]](#footnote-287) It is this dialectic that I am primarily interested in.

In a discussion of female agency Deborah Simonton and Anne Montenach deal with agency ‘as a dynamic and relational concept’ to show how historically ‘women could rise above their restrictive situations.’[[288]](#footnote-288) Building on this notion of agency as relational I argue that when servants seek to control what is occurring in their external world, this serves specific relational and interpersonal purposes. As Giddens argues ‘[t]here are many ways in which the seemingly powerless, in particular contexts, may be able to influence the activities of those who appear to hold complete power over them; or in which the weak are able to mobilise resources against the strong.’[[289]](#footnote-289) Working in private households, with the balance of power weighted in the employer’s favour meant working in an environment in which it was difficult for the servant to overtly influence the activities of their superiors, however, I will show how servants found creative ways to do exactly this. Agency and identity are inextricably linked and, without the power to act of their own accord and to affect the world around them, servants would be unable to promote particular identities and, at the same time, to resist others. Agency is the ability of an individual to control one’s own actions and, by extension, to control what is occurring in their external world. I argue that, by acting with agency, servants make profound contributions to the social practice of the household and, in so doing, they both construct and resist particular definitions of themselves.

In the next two sections I examine the ways in which servants of both the past and the present attempt to find a ‘voice’ and find ways to act with agency when necessary. I will first demonstrate how the letters in the archive reveal the discursively produced formation of the dialogic self as servants grapple with the construction of different incarnations of themselves and the conflict between these iterations of self. I will then provide a comparison between their experience and that of twenty-first century servants working in elite private households in modern Britain in order to fully show how domestic servants, of both eras, resisted erasure. I mobilise post-modern conceptions of identity and of selfhood as fluid, multi layered and ever-changing, situating this within a Bakhtinian conceptual framework.

**4.3 Dialectics of control: enacting specialist knowledge and professionalism in nineteenth- century servant letters.**   
In this section I examine epistolary performances in which nineteenth-century servants enact knowledgeability and professionalism in ways that provide evidence of Giddens’ *dialectic of control* inherent in the master-servant relationship. In the nineteenth century, masters and mistresses travelled extensively, to other houses or to warmer climes. In the Highclere Castle archive, for example, there are many letters written by servants to Lady Carnarvon while she was away. In May 1839 Ann Gaymour, the housekeeper at Highclere Castle (mentioned previously), wrote to Lady Carnarvon regarding an imminent visit by Lady Andover and a Mrs Bullen to Highclere that was to occur when Lady Carnarvon would not be there to receive them. Ann wrote ‘we will do everything in our power to make Lady Andover and Family comfortable and Mrs Bullen also if she comes to Highclere as if your Ladyship was at home.’[[290]](#footnote-290) The idea that servants needed constant supervision, authority and control is challenged here by Ann when she indicates that she will confidently deputise for her mistress in her absence and act authoritatively on behalf of her.

I do not wish to overstate Ann’s intentions nor argue that she is deliberately setting out to challenge notions that servants were unable to act in professional or authoritative ways but instead to suggest that we can reason from her letter that an ability to act with knowledge and agency when unsupervised appear to be a regular aspect of her role. When Ann discusses Lady Andover’s visit she switches from the collective use of ‘we’ to the use of a first person pronoun, stating, ‘I expect Lady Andover and Family for two or three nights.’ This fashions a story that it is she who will be hosting Lady Andover and Mrs Bullen and, therefore, in charge of their visit. She also takes great trouble to reassure Lady Carnarvon that her guests will be treated just as well as if her mistress were at Highclere. Ann’s efforts at reassurance also emphasise the interdependence of the master-servant relationship, the *dialectic of control* that Giddens refers to, and the reliance on servants to run households smoothly in their employers’ absence.

Many of the letters evidence how servants would augment their position within the household by constructing themselves as persons with considerable knowledge. These letters provide a body of evidence that reveal how servants identified with their working role and positioned themselves in terms of that role, as problem solvers, and as competent and knowledgeable agents of the household. As the letter from Ann goes on to reveal, servants were often operating with little supervision, overseeing other servants and working with a degree of agency and flexibility.

In this section of the letter Ann has just overseen the move from the Carnarvon’s London House in Grosvenor Square, shutting it down and reopening Highclere Castle, presumably for the summer:

Charlotte came to Highclere with me and is getting on very well as I direct her which I must do at present and make her do her work […] I have a pleasure in showing them if they are not above being told which Charlotte is not - we left the London House in very good order and all the Bedrooms as comfortable as I could make them and the Drawing rooms look very nice indeed and everything was very clean when I left […] their was only the servants came in before I left as we was obliged to wash the first week the dirty Linen I brought from London and this week we have been preparing the house as next week I expect Lady Andover and Family for two or three nights that I cannot say what linen will be wanted till I write to your Ladyship again. I know there is servant Table Cloths wanted and small wine parlour Dinner cloths, but I will make a list when I see what can be repaired - I must send what Needle work I can to the school as there will not be much time for Needle work as Mrs Morton will want Mary a good deal upstairs when the wet nurse leaves[[291]](#footnote-291)

There is a significant amount of transactional information in this section of her letter but also much relational content that works to position Ann as a person of knowledge. The letter includes meticulous details regarding overseeing other staff and the household management of both the London House and Highclere. Ann praises another maid called Charlotte by stating that she is ‘not above being told what to do’ and is therefore ‘getting on very well.’ By positioning Charlotte as cooperative and willing to take instruction, Ann indexes her own superior rank and thus enhances her social status within the household.

Her meticulousness in detailing to Lady Carnarvon how she is managing her various responsibilities chimes with her subservient position, however, it is clear that, within certain parameters, she has a considerable degree of agency and flexibility. For example, when she says ‘I know there is servant Table Cloths wanted and small wine parlour Dinner cloths, but I will make a list when I see what can be repaired’ she is not asking advice or deferring to her mistress in any way, she categorially asserts her knowledgeability and understanding about what is required and that she knows what she must do. Overall her letter indicates a huge familiarity with the household and a ‘professionalism’ about her work. The letter illuminates how servants often held considerable knowledge about household management that permitted them to push forward a ‘professional identity’ in ways that invite a re-conceptualisation of the notion of the infantilised servant lacking in agency.

In a letter found in the Kent archives (post 1804) written to Lady Frances Pratt of Camden from one of her servants (possibly a gardener), we can find evidence of how a ‘professional’ identity was sometimes asserted through specialist knowledge:

Dear Madam,   
I think it a matter of total indifference whether you make your amiable little Girl a Croppy or not. Here follows the names of several plants that will grow: either upon the smoothest or hardest rocks, or also upon rocks having some few cracks in them – if there be no natural crevices they may be split with wedges and a little earth put into the artificial fissures there made – Mr Ferguson could readily point out how this may be affected by shocking the whole rock by means of gunpowder, or partially by wedges. Of the Cistus or rock roses there are 30 or 40 kinds and these are all handsome they are the finest of all the flowers that grow on rocks, of Junipers there are 3 kinds of sedums or stone crops there are 20 or 30 kinds, of horseleeks there are 7 or 8 hardy species, the tender ones are very numerous.  
Wallflower  
Snap dragon  
Parietaria   
Ivy – (take care as it will overrun all others)   
Heathers will grow but appear stunted   
In order to cultivate Lychens it is necessary to bring the stones on which nature has planted them, and they will spread from and they will spread from those to the other naked rocks – this is the only means yet found of cultivating this numerous and singular tribe of plants, no person having yet discovered their seeds or mode of propagation, which has led Botanists to call them “Cryptogameous Plants” that is plants that celebrate their nuptials in a most hidden manner.[[292]](#footnote-292)  
[...]   
I have the honor of being  
Your Ladyship’s most obedient servant   
James W Donnell[[293]](#footnote-293)

Donnell’s letter is clearly written in response to an earlier letter from Lady Frances in which we can deduce that his mistress has asked him for specific advice about how to grow plants on rocks. Furthermore, it is also clear that Donnell is responding to some mention that has been made by Lady Frances, in a previous letter, about one of her daughters in which it seems she has suggested that she is considering making her daughter ‘a Croppy.’[[294]](#footnote-294) Lady Frances was married to John Pratt who held the Lord Lieutenancy of Ireland during the time that rebellions broke out in the late eighteenth century. As such, due to their strong political Irish connections it is likely that ‘Croppy’ refers to ‘Croppies’ who were Irish rebels fighting for independence from Britain in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (see previous footnote). The elite position of Lady Pratt in the British aristocracy, coupled with her husband’s political leanings, suggest that the notion of her daughter being made a ‘Croppy’ may well have been a light-hearted or ironic proposal.

The reference to Donnell’s feelings of ‘indifference’ suggest that he has little interest in Lady Frances’ ‘amiable little Girl’ and whether she might become a ‘Croppy’ or not. This is somewhat surprising, as highlighted in the last chapter, servants often took great pains to show concern and affection for the children of their employers. The fact that he is prepared articulate such an unsympathetic stance towards Lady Pratt may have had quite a strong illocutionary effect especially when considered within the normative context of the hierarchal relationship of mistress and gardener. Donnell is also able to mobilise resources at his disposal to exert a degree of authority largely through his knowledge of gardening. Meaning is created as Donnell draws on various ‘voices’ and slides between a previous more dismissive voice when he states ’I think it a matter of total indifference whether you make your amiable little Girl a Croppy or not’ into one that is more engaged. For example, Donnell goes into much detail about particular plants that can grow on rocks, such as ‘the Cistus or rock roses’ of which ‘there are 30 or 40 kinds and these are all handsome they are the finest of all the flowers that grow on rocks.’ This more authoritative voice uses specialised language and thus is more self-commanding.

His explanation of how Lychens reproduce via their spores ‘because no person having yet discovered their seeds or mode of propagation’ is structured with great care. In true dialogic form Donnell anticipates that his mistress will not understand what ‘Cryptogameous Plants’ are and explains them as ‘plants that celebrate their nuptials in a most hidden manner.’[[295]](#footnote-295) In so doing, Donnell is able to push forward a knowledgeable and ‘professional’ identity appropriating Latin plant names to add legitimacy to his account. Combined, the various voices he draws on speak to Bakhtin’s notion of borrowed ‘voices’ and the emergence of the multi-voiced individual. His appropriation of different voices that he oscillates between provide evidence of how servants could use their superior knowledge by linguistically conveying who they were in the world and how they wished to be perceived.

A second way that servants could act with agency was through the capability to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs. This is found, for example, in letters to the third Countess of Carnarvon, from a servant who signs himself W. Clifford, concerning the redeployment of servants from Grosvenor Square. These letters contain discourses of both distance and allegiance, concerning fellow servants. It is unclear what position Clifford holds but he is described in the archive as ‘possibly a butler’ at Lord and Lady Carnarvon’s home in Grosvenor Square and at their estate at Highclere - he is certainly a servant with some authority and writes regularly to Lady Carnarvon updating her on events at home. In 1846 a circumstance arose at the Grosvenor Square house and, in a letter dated August 26, Clifford writes to Lady Carnarvon to update her:

The porter to whom your Ladyship gave a general recommendation has applied for the situation of upper servant in livery to the family of Mr. Darby M.P. for East Sussex. Mr. Darby requiring more particular information of his character, the porter referred him to me and Mr. Darby called accordingly in Grosvenor Square yesterday. By enquiring from Attrell and Mrs Wallis I found upon clear and unequivocal evidence, his habit of intemperance, which your Ladyship was not aware of when you gave the written recommendation, is most questionable[[296]](#footnote-296)

Clifford’s letter performs the function of protecting his mistress’ authority in her absence while also demonstrating his preparedness to solve sensitive problems. Clifford is faced with a dilemma and has to juggle a number of competing demands. First, he cannot suggest that Lady Carnarvon does not know her own servants by directly telling her that her recommendation of the porter was wrong. Second, he needs to be cognisant that, although Lady Carnarvon would not have wanted to be known as someone who recommended incompetent servants to her peers, she would also presumably not have wanted to retain the ‘intemperate’ porter. Lastly, Clifford must appear to have some authority and agency of his own but equally he cannot be seen to be rising above his station nor showing due deference to Lady Carnarvon’s authority. So, Clifford has a complex situation to resolve that has the potential to result in misunderstandings. Suggesting that Lady Carnarvon has got it wrong: ‘I found upon clear and unequivocal evidence, his habit of intemperance’, might appear to be a challenge to her authority but he mitigates this by suggesting that Lady Carnarvon could not have known about the porter’s drinking habits: ‘which your Ladyship was not aware of when you gave the written recommendation.’ By stating that Lady Carnarvon would not have been aware of the porter’s habit of intemperance he sustains a connection with his mistress by protecting her reputation and shielding her status.

He goes on to explain that the person Mr. Darby required was a man who was to ‘attend on [Mr. Darby]’s mother’ and that ‘the man would be left very much in the position of trust and confidence.’ Clifford reports to Lady Carnarvon that he has told Mr. Darby that he does not have the authority to ‘interfere in such matters’ and that if Mr. Darby intended the porter to ‘fill a situation especially requiring the qualities of steadiness, sobriety and trustiness it would be desirable he apply to Mr G Tomkins in whose service the porter said he had been for 4 years before he was engaged by [her] Ladyship.’ Clifford is keen to assert himself as a key member of the household and displays qualities that would have traditionally been viewed as untypical of a servant in order to carefully and pragmatically problem-solve the issue and to avoid any potential misunderstanding or backlash. As such, he acts as a knowledgeable agent in the dialogical process of meaning-making.

Clifford positons himself as a person who can act with agency although, ironically, his actions would also have had the potential to result in the ‘incompetent’ servant in the Carnarvons’ employ being retained, a not entirely desirable outcome considering the porter’s less than desirable qualities. By deflecting Darby and proposing that he should get a second reference, he provides just a hint that there may be a problem with the porter. In so doing, he manages to resist the idea that he is being unhelpful by not giving a reference and, at same time, protects the household. His letter also demonstrates that he, a senior servant of Lady Carnarvon, feels able to resist such a request, despite Mr. Darby’s superior position as an M.P. and, therefore, presumably a person with some power. Clifford thus positions himself as a person with agency, an individual who can intervene to change the course of events, who can make choices and affect outcomes and, who could, at any point in the sequence of events, have acted differently.

In so doing he protects the reputation of the household and of the collective group. He utilises his knowledge to augment his position as that of a servant of value; and as a person with considerable agency, one able to make decisions that can effectively overturn those of his mistress. Had the porter Lady Carnarvon recommended proven to be unsuitable to Mr Darby’s mother or worse, harmed her in some way, it could have made Lady Carnarvon’s recommendation to Mr. Darby a poor one that, in turn, would have served to make her appear ill informed or lacking in judgement and authority over her household. As discussed in the first part of this chapter, ‘the relationship between mistress and servant [was placed] as the centrepiece of domestic authority and a model for wider social relations’[[297]](#footnote-297) and, as such, mistresses were expected to know their servants and be responsible for them. This depiction of mistresses, however, was often seen to be lacking as it was cast in gendered terms with mistresses often accused of being ‘overly kind or sentimental in their relations with their servants.’[[298]](#footnote-298) Clifford therefore has shielded his mistress from that estimation.

Clifford draws on a relational identity by adding primacy to his relationship with the other servants, Atterell and Mrs. Wallis, and showing deference to their opinions. Clifford demonstrates that he is aware that the more individuals who are aligned with this particular problem the broader the support he has. In true dialogic form, he anticipates Lady Carnarvon‘s response; she may accept, criticise or affirm his decision and he positions himself carefully within this range of possibilities. As Hermans and Hermans argue, ‘[w]hen we are engaged in a social activity, we must combine […] first person information about ourselves with imagined third-person information (from the side of the other) in order to understand our intentional activity, [when] the two perspectives, imagined and directly perceived information, do not fully match [this] creates fertile ground for misunderstandings.’[[299]](#footnote-299) Clifford recognises that the decision-making process he has entered into (not to recommend the porter), requires the anticipation of the response of specific absent others whom he is addressing and from whose imagined perspective he is acting.

Clifford demonstrates that he is able to understand the problem from different angles and, as such, acts accordingly to mitigate any potential misunderstandings. The fact that he behaves in this way suggests that he considers his own standing to be more powerful than might be expected as, rather like Donnell, he transgresses the normative presumption that servants will always defer to their employers. There are two competing frameworks here that he has to work within, one that he will do as ordered, and the other that he will protect the reputation of his mistress.

The third page of Clifford’s letter shifts position as he attempts to influence his mistress in his view that an alternative servant; ‘the man Richard’, for whom he and the other servants have a great deal of affection, might be better suited for the position of upper servant to Mr. Darby’s mother;

I am sorry your ladyship happened to be absent on the occasion, as we have all felt an interest for the man Richard who had been remaining in the house a short time since the porter left, and of whom both Attwell and Mrs Wallace speak in such high terms of praise, was so exactly fitted for the situation with Mr Darby, that had it not been interfering in a delicate matter, I should have felt the strongest inclination to have said something on his behalf. If any of your ladyship’s friends should require a very steady and attentive servant we all feel that he would be very proper person to recommend, and that his claim is strengthened by the misfortune of having [had] a long interval of suffering in a hospital since he was forced by illness to give up his last situation. I must further mention that Mr Darby said he should not require support of services for three weeks to come[[300]](#footnote-300)

Meaning is created in how the 'self' and 'other' are represented and Clifford slips between these two positions. He shifts from the use of the pronoun ‘I’ to the pronoun ‘we’ throughout this section of the letter. From the use of the first person singular in the section, ‘I found upon clear and unequivocal evidence’, to the use of both the first person singular and first person plural in the phrase, ‘I am sorry your ladyship happened to be absent on the occasion, as we have all felt an interest for the man Richard’ to the use of first person plural, when he states, ‘we all feel that he would be very proper person to recommend.’ This shifting between pronouns reflects a shift between how he represents himself as both an individual, and as part of the collective group. When he overturns the decision of his mistress he seeks to promote himself as the capable agent with the ability to make evaluative judgements. Following this, conversely, he signals to Lady Carnarvon that he is part of the collective group (using the first person plural ‘we’) when attempting to promote Richard, thereby signalling his connection with the other servants in the household.

**4.4 Dialectics of control: enacting professionalism and agency in the twenty-first century master-servant relationship.**

My empirical oral history interview material also demonstrates that the lives of modern-day employers of domestic staff are also characterised by mobility and the need to travel. They typically travel for work-related reasons, often in professional and highly demanding roles. Depending on their role within the household, servants will sometimes travel with them, however, it is quite common, for housekeepers and butlers to remain in the household. The lack of surveillance this generates provides fertile ground for servants to enact their agency, to organise their role in ways that work for them, and to reinterpret themselves. The evidence from the contemporary material also suggests problem solving provides opportunities for modern day domestic staff to act with agency, often for interpersonal reasons. Elizabeth, a housekeeper on a large country estate in the North West of England told me how one employer had informed her ‘the tennis court’s a bit of a mess, can we get that sorted out?” whereupon she thought to herself, ‘right, what do I know about tennis courts?’ With no further instructions from her employer Elizabeth understood that she must solve the issue herself, describing her thoughts thus: ‘“right okay - I’m it then” and [I] have to spend half the day researching tennis courts and [...] once you work out what they want, you start.’[[301]](#footnote-301)

Elizabeth’s willingness to take on household management with little guidance extended to taking issue with another employer’s approach to servant management. Elizabeth told me that a previous employer on an equally large estate ‘used to make people cry all the time [...] and I’d have to go [to him] and say “did you really have to do that, why don’t you tell me when you’ve got a problem and I’ll sort it out.”’ Her willingness to speak to her employer in such assertive terms suggests that she is not only capable of solving a given problem but also that she has more emotional intelligence than he does. In speaking to him so explicitly she also restructures the expected dynamic in the relationship. Rather as Clifford did in the previous section Elizabeth, on one hand, knows her place but, on the other, she acts in the interests of the household by adopting a more dominant role with her employer, in which he is told how she expects him to act, rather than the other way around. This challenges the natural order of things and the cultural script of service, but Elizabeth does so for the benefit of those around her, activating her agency but for interpersonal reasons, in order to protect the other staff and to maintain harmony within the household and, indeed, to protect the reputation of the employer.

Both examples invite a re-conceptualisation of the notion of the passive servant lacking an individuated voice. In each case the servant actively performs the role of knowledgeable agent and works to actively represent themselves as such. The ability to actively resolve conflict was a recurrent theme in this and several other contemporary servant interviews. In another example Elizabeth told me how her employer would often entertain people late into the night at dinner parties, for which she managed a team of people to serve him and his guests. Elizabeth positions both her employer and his guests as rather foolish when she tells me that they ‘would have a jolly good dinner together and talk about the most ridiculous things.’ Elizabeth continued to place emphasis on her employer being foolish and lacking in awareness when she described the events of one night in particular when her employer had been presented with a box of cigars by one of his guests. Elizabeth told me:

They must have been very good ones and he was very proud to hand these out which he always did along with the port. It was one of those occasions and they all started really smoking and with that I withdrew my staff [...] and he came out into the kitchen and said “we need coffee, we need coffee” and I said “well [...] I'm sorry I won't let my staff  go into that atmosphere - it's far too smoky.” You can't have a working environment like that [...] and then after that if ever he was going to smoke, if ever it got to the port stage he would say “Elizabeth if you’d just like to bring the coffee in then we're alright thank you” (meaning that they didn’t have to serve it directly to the guests). So he just got the message[[302]](#footnote-302)

This is not a situation Elizabeth could have predicted as the cigars were only given to her boss that evening. Despite this, Elizabeth expresses to me how she is able to act deftly when she withdraws her staff from the dining room and refuses to let them serve coffee when the room becomes too smoky.

In this moment she demonstrates how she was able to act nimbly to use her authority to act in ways that effected change on the events within the household that evening. Again, in this narrative the situational context afforded an opportunity for a servant to act with agency by challenging the accepted way of doing things and the manner in which it was presumed a servant should talk to their employer. There was a conflict to be negotiated between, on one hand, being compliant with her employer’s wishes and, on the other, pushing forward her own desire to care sensibly for her staff. Elizabeth is able to embrace both of these issues by influencing the actions of her master in order to achieve a desired outcome - to ensure that her staff would not be working in a smoky and potentially unsafe environment. As we shall see, this has implications for how Elizabeth constructs her identity. Elizabeth provides an example of where a supposedly weaker agent is able to negotiate with an ostensibly more powerful one to transform a situation in order to achieve a desired outcome. This is an instance of what Giddens calls the ‘*dialectic of control’* in social systems, whereby agency depends upon the capability of the individual to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events.

Not only is Elizabeth positioning herself to me during the interview as more capable and socially aware than her employer but, on that particular evening, she also positioned herself in the household as a person who held, at least, some of the power within the relationship. Elizabeth is thus able to construct an identity that centers on herself as the rational, competent and caring overseer of her staff. This is in stark contrast to her employer who was conversely characterised by Elizabeth as lacking in care and oblivious to the needs of the household staff who were serving him and his guests that night at dinner. Elizabeth creates an ‘us’ and ‘them’ situation where she and her staff are positioned in opposition to her employer and his guests. This is potentially risky as the polarisation created by Elizabeth has the potential to make her employer look as though he lacks authority in his own household. Yet, he takes on board her request and responds favourably by suggesting that in future the staff should deliver coffee to the dining room before his guests light their cigars and by offering to pour the coffee themselves. The interaction that Elizabeth entered into with her employer had a ‘transformative capacity’ because, as Giddens suggests, the transformative capacity of an interaction is ‘*harnessed to actors’ attempts to get others to comply with their wants’* (italics in original).[[303]](#footnote-303) Elizabeth has used her knowledge of the unacceptability and potentially unsafe environment of the smoky dining room in order to successfully challenge the authority of her employer and to get him to comply with her wishes in a way that, in turn, secures her own personal desired outcome.

A key concept in Giddens’ *dialectic of control* is the relational dependence of the more powerful on the agency and knowledge of the less powerful. In many of the servants’ narratives their knowledgeability held primacy in the successful performance of their role. Paul, a butler working on a large country estate, told me that the servant role was all about ‘using your knowledge’ and that a butler had to know ‘how to address’ his employers and their visitors, know what they liked ‘for pre-dinner drinks’, ‘what they have at dinner’ and that his work was ‘all a case of what you know.’ He told me ‘your catering knowledge has to be good, you have to know food, you have to know wine, you have to know how to marry menus up to wines, a good protocol knowledge as well.’ He described one of his previous employers who, in his words, did not know how ‘the system’ worked but told me that:

you can train those people, you can say “that’s not how it works” [and] if they say “oh we’re going to Ascot” it’s like “well sir you need a morning suit, you need a top hat, you need to take an umbrella with you, not a golfing umbrella a proper black umbrella, wooden handle[[304]](#footnote-304)

Exploiting his employer’s lack of knowledge about the correct attire in a given situation, rather as Clifford did in his overturning of Lady Carnarvon’s recommendation of the hall porter, Paul averts a potentially embarrassing situation for both while simultaneously availing himself of the opportunity to assert his own agency.

Paul highlights how he has acted well because if he had not been prepared to question his employer and instead allowed him to attend Ascot in the wrong attire he would knowingly have allowed an embarrassing situation to occur. Instead, he averts this by acting with professionalism, in turn, challenging the idea of the unquestioning servant. Recalling these events Paul described them in the way that he does because, like Elizabeth, he is telling me something about his position and identity in relation to that of his employer: that he can exercise some sort of power to present his employer as more dependent on his (Paul’s) knowledge than he may realise while, simultaneously, presenting himself a figure of authority in the household. When he suggests that ‘you can train these people’ and then provides evidence of this by explaining the appropriate clothes for Ascot he subverts the cultural script of the obsequious domestic ‘flunky’ acting with unquestioning submission and instead shapes his individual self as one who is knowledgeable about expected cultural norms and expectations.

For Paul, much of his self-identity is constructed, not only through his competency and knowledge, but also his ability to keep a level head and to remain calm in moments of crisis. He told me: ‘at the end of the day we are like ducks and swans on top and underneath it’s going like mad.’ He constructs himself as composed and able to perform under pressure and able to provide clarity and direction in complex situations; ‘I was in control of the whole thing - I was on stage […] if it was a film or a play I would be the main character, you are on stage, you are the point of contact, so you’ve got to keep a level head […] you’ve got to give off that calm persona and then you walk into another room and scream your head off and think “why me.”’ Paul’s censorship of his natural emotional reaction may at first appear to conform to the ideal of the docile servant and the constraints placed on them by their employers. An alternative reading of Paul’s narrative, however, is one in which, through a form of theatrical performance in which Paul regulates his emotional distress by masking it behind a calm front, he constructs an identity that depicts him as the rational, level headed agent.

Servants, however, revealed how they do not always enact the role of the unquestioning and docile servant if conditions became untenable. One of the most striking examples of this in the contemporary data is taken from the testimony of Arthur who had worked for a number of HNW families in London as a chauffeur. In this incident he describes driving his employer to a casino and waiting outside for him one Friday evening:

So we go to the casino on Friday and I'm waiting there until Sunday morning. He hasn't forgotten but it's the fact that obviously he was on a win, he was playing roulette and all the rest of it so he's winning winning winning and they have sleeping accommodation in these high-end clubs [...] so if you're going there and you're a high roller they have a suite laid on for you[[305]](#footnote-305)

In his narrative Arthur provides an example of how he performs relational work through the mitigation of his employer’s invisibilization of him. There is a suggestion implicit in his retelling of this incident that it is plausible why he (Arthur) had been left so long outside the casino - because his master was ‘winning winning winning’ and had ‘sleeping accommodation laid on.’ However, Arthur also evidences that he was prepared to tolerate this only up to a point:

I was there until Sunday morning and I had to eventually ring the [employer’s] personal assistant to say “look I need to go home" because I could go for a wee and get a cup of tea and all the rest of it but that's not the point [...] yeah it was about ten Friday night right so that's all the rest of that night, all Saturday, and then Sunday morning at about five I just had to call it a day[[306]](#footnote-306)

In this part of his testimony Arthur resists being cast in the role of the unquestioning and dutiful servant by acting with agency and calling an end to the situation he had been placed in. Following this, Arthur told me that, although his employer ‘liked [him] so much’, Arthur left this particular role and went back several times until eventually he left altogether because, in his words: ‘the job was ridiculous.’ His narrative provides evidence of how he is able to both shape the relationship with his employer who ‘likes him so much’ (presumably because of the relational work Arthur performs), but is also able to act with agency by leaving the role altogether when the situation becomes ‘ridiculous.’

The heteroglossic nature of his narrative and the subject positions he inhabits, the dutiful servant alongside the agentive servant, provide evidence of the multi-voiced dialogical self. Arthur is able to understand and even empathise with the viewpoint of his employer but is also prepared to act with agency (phoning the PA to ‘call it a day’), when the situation becomes ‘ridiculous.’ In leaving Arthur outside the casino for such an extended period of time Arthur’s employer avoids a dialogue with him which is in itself an act of suppression. As Edward E. Sampson notes, ‘[the] desire to repress dialogues [...] serves the purposes of domination of the other by those in power.’[[307]](#footnote-307) Indeed, although Arthur mitigates his employer’s behaviour, he also indicates his own preparedness to enter into a dialogue in order to change the situation that, in turn, allows him to resist his suppression (by a dominant other) and, in so doing, deflates his employer’s authority and power over him.

Lisa, a modern-day housekeeper of the twenty first century, who worked for a HNW couple in Surrey, also resisted the cultural script of the passive servant and described ways in which she shaped her relations with her employers in her interactions with them. Similarly to Ann, Clifford, Elizabeth and Paul she sought agency, particularly when her employers were away. She told me that she liked it when they went away as it meant she could ‘crack on.’ She told me:

Sometimes they’d go away in the summer for six weeks so I’d take two weeks [holiday] of that and then I got four weeks of being able to do the stuff that I hadn’t been able to do for a year in that house like clean the chandeliers [...] there were thousands of lights and they were all up-lighter ones and they would sparkle so that’s what I did when they used to go away[[308]](#footnote-308)

Lisa was able to refurbish entire rooms and make decisions about the garden and the house and told me ‘I loved the responsibility, I had a degree of respect.’ She also said of Fiona, her female employer, with whom she frequently fell out and had a strained relationship; ‘I was actually quite an important person [...] and she needed me.’ In times of crisis when their relationship became fractious Lisa would instead align herself with Andrew, her other employer and husband to Fiona. Through this positioning Lisa was able to represent herself as a subject worthy of respect and appreciation. This representation is designed to counter Fiona’s narrative that positioned her (Lisa) as a ‘legitimate’ target of discipline and authority.

The consistency with which Lisa resists herself as a target of discipline reflects her disavowal and rejection of the subservient position ascribed to her. She described the ways in which she performed this resistance, for example, sending clothing to the dry cleaners when she fell behind with the laundry. This did not go unnoticed and in an interesting denouement she was challenged by Andrew, who asked; ‘you’re not doing my shirts any more are you?’ Lisa lied to him: ‘it’s a one off Andrew.’

It is of course possible that Lisa lied to Andrew because, at the time he confronted her, she was too scared to tell the truth. An alternative reading, however, is that Lisa is telling this story in order to provide evidence of her agency and to present herself as someone who is not prepared to be cowed by her employer. Her narrative is an opportunity for Lisa to make meaning by representing herself to me as a competent and skilful laundress. She explains that the reason Andrew had detected that his shirts were being diverted to the dry cleaners to be laundered was because Lisa did ‘a better job’ than the laundry. She went on to describe how Andrew ‘used to like my shirts - I used to do the crease across the back and if I got it wrong I’d rewash it and do it again.’ Linguistically she represents her former employers as dependent on her intimate knowledge and capabilities, telling me ‘I used to get them ready for Goodwood races […] I would order her clothes for her, get his outfits for him, size-wise I knew Andrew’s neck size, I knew everything about Andrew.’[[309]](#footnote-309) Lisa is aware that her knowledge places her in a commanding and superior position. Linguistically, she authors an identity position for herself as holding an essential and crucial position in the household on the basis of, not only her knowledge of household routines and duties, but even her intimate knowledge of her employer’s corporality.

The language she deploys when discussing Andrew stands in stark contrast to the language she uses about Fiona who she depicts as her adversary. For example, she was keen to describe Fiona’s failings and shortcomings, variously describing her as ‘difficult’, ‘opinionated’ and ‘nasty.’ Lisa told me ‘I used to fantasise about her [Fiona] dying and then me just looking after the house and Andrew and the kids – oh it would have been so much easier.’[[310]](#footnote-310) How Lisa linguistically frames their relationship provides a key for understanding the power dynamic underlying it and how Lisa wants to be understood within that dynamic. Lisa and Fiona are inextricably linked due to their opposing social roles of ‘mistress’ and ‘servant’. Fiona’s role as the mistress of the household automatically implicates Lisa with an identity of ‘servant’ lacking in power and agency, an identity that Lisa resists. Lisa constructs her relationship with Fiona as one in which they are locked in combat, so much so that, in her retelling of events she suggests, rather matter-of-factly, that her life would have been ‘so much easier’ if Fiona was simply erased from the picture altogether. In this scenario, whereby Fiona is conveniently removed from the frame, Lisa creates a fantasy in which she has reinvented herself as the most powerful female in the household and what is implied in this is that Lisa wants to exercise her agency without interference.

As argued by Bell and Gardner dialogism ‘bespeaks of the necessity to overturn structures of domination, to challenge illegitimate curtailments of human freedom, and to establish more just and equitable relations of power between individuals and groups.’[[311]](#footnote-311) Lisa’s retrospective insults and rebukes of Fiona indicate the tension she feels between wanting to enact her agency but also the continuous struggle she entered into in order to achieve this. She told me: ‘I made a rod for my own back I did everything and found I couldn’t sustain that level all day every day, weekends and everything else and so we discussed it and she [Fiona] wanted to find out more ways that would make it easier for me, we never really resolved it because it all reverted back [to the way things had been] it really had got too much […] I left twice and the second time I never went back.’[[312]](#footnote-312) Servants are often acted upon by being subject to the systems and pecking orders of the household, and the authority of their employers, and we see in Lisa a deliberate resistance to that. The degree to which Lisa sought to define herself and her position in relation to her employers became a clash primarily about her attempts to establish more equitable relations of power in the household. She wanted to be in control of everything, she wanted to be the lynchpin, the primary agent in the house, but ultimately this was too exhausting for her. Fiona’s attempts to relieve Lisa of her work, however, are resisted because that would cast her [Lisa] back into the overworked servant role, which she refuses to inhabit.

Lisa frames her decision not to return to Andrew and Fiona’s house primarily as a rebuttal of the demeaning nature of the work that her role encrypts. Lisa said about Fiona that ‘she was very much of the ilk that I was her servant, I was at her beck and call’ but Lisa resists this representation, instead, offering an alternative depiction. Individuals can set out to project particular understandings of themselves by crafting representations of themselves to others. They can construct an image of themselves in such a way that they are presented positively, whereas others are presented negatively. Lisa acts in opposition and, at times, in competition with Fiona and is preoccupied with representing her negatively through polarized ‘me’ and ‘her’ discourses designed to enhance her own position in the household while undermining Fiona’s. Teun van Dijk's concept of the ideological square (1993, 1995, 1998 and 2008, 2013)[[313]](#footnote-313) is useful for unpacking what is happening here. It employs semantic macro strategies developed by Dijk for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. His ideological square sets out to show how individuals can emphasise positive characteristics of themselves while, at the same time, mitigating their more negative aspects.

Conversely, it also sets out how individuals can emphasise negative aspects of others and, at the same time, mitigate others’ positive aspects. According to Oktar[[314]](#footnote-314) in this line of reasoning ‘*us* is generally self-evaluated as holding better values [...], whereas *they* [others] are construed as ‘bad’ in the process of social comparison.’ This strategy, Oktar suggests, requires four moves: ‘(1) express/emphasize information that is positive about *us* ; (2) express/emphasize information that is negative about *them*; (3) suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about them; (4) suppress/deemphasize information that is negative about us.’ These four moves constitute van Dijk’s ‘ideological square’ and play a significant role in the contextual strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation.’[[315]](#footnote-315) As I will show in the next section, Lisa sets out to craft a representation of herself by, on one hand, emphasising her good qualities and, on the other, emphasising Fiona’s negative aspects.

Lisa told me, ‘once I’d been there a while I could reel off Andrew’s credit card number […] honestly I’ve still got it in my head […] when I left she [Fiona] accused me of stealing the card.’ After Lisa had left her employment with Andrew and Fiona she received a phone call from the dry cleaners who wanted to clear her former employers’ dry cleaning bill. Although, by this point, Lisa was no longer working for Andrew and Fiona, she told the dry cleaners: ‘not a problem’ and gave them the card number, the expiry date and the security number on the back. Her former boss, however, mistakenly thought she had taken the card with her and called her up to accuse her of doing so. Lisa told her, ‘no Fiona, I used that card twenty, thirty times a day and when I’m buying your Christmas cards for your family I would have to reel the card off.’[[316]](#footnote-316) The context in which this interaction is embedded is one that affords Lisa various opportunities to redefine how she is perceived and assert particular representations of both herself and Fiona.

By emphasising that it was her (Lisa) who performed the important relational work of buying Fiona’s family’s Christmas cards, and that she had to use her credit card ‘twenty, thirty times a day’, Lisa reminds Fiona of her previous dependence on her. This, in turn, contributes to a construction in which Fiona appears to be the one with less capacity in their relationship. Furthermore, Lisa frames this interaction in such a way that implies that Fiona was attempting to assert some authority over Lisa and suggesting she has been dishonest in stealing her credit card. As Fiona is entirely wrong in her estimation, Lisa is able to, first, assert her own more knowledgeable position (that she knows the full facts of the case) and second, to resist the cultural script of the dishonest servant. Meaning is created here in how the self and other are represented. The misunderstanding over the credit card is an instance of how Lisa uses strategies designed to enhance positive aspects of herself while simultaneously emphasising negative aspects of her mistress.

Lisa constructs her mistress as careless with money by telling me that Fiona had extravagant tastes; ‘I mean bedding, two thousand pounds on silk bedding’ she told me. Again, Lisa sets out to criticise Fiona’s personality and preferences by saying, ‘she was a real snob you know.’[[317]](#footnote-317) In constructing Fiona as extravagant and a ‘snob’, similarly to Shannon in the earlier section, Lisa is trying to express something about herself through a ‘me’ and ‘her’ discourse. By implying that she (Lisa) doesn’t possess the same negative characteristics as Fiona (lack of thriftiness), by extension, she implies that she herself is frugal. Lisa told me, ‘Andrew is a saver so if I could save any money he always thought that was a bonus […] whereas she [Fiona] didn’t care, she didn’t care.’ Linguistically she aligns herself with her male boss Andrew, while her female boss Fiona is positioned on the outside, as the ‘other.’

As already discussed, individuals make linguistic choices in how they refer to others in ways that have implications for the construction of identity. As Wenger suggests, ‘we not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in, our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not.’[[318]](#footnote-318) The characteristics attributed to individuals affect, not only how they are represented but, by implication, also how the speaker is constructed. By affirming that she (Lisa) is ‘a saver’, like Andrew, Lisa emphasises a specific positive characteristic of herself, while at the same time focusing on the negative characteristics of Fiona; that she was careless and extravagant. What Lisa says about her employer helps to sustain the perceived difference between them.

To return to Bakhtin and the concept of the dialogic self, all his work underlines his essential argument, well-illustrated here, that when people recall events in everyday life, as Elizabeth, Lisa and Paul do in their retelling of various incidents, ‘they are rarely, if ever, simply describing or reporting an internal process or mental state: they are engaging in the rhetorical, and often contentious, activity of social life, and telling of, or expressing, something of their own position in the current scheme of things in relation to the others around them.’[[319]](#footnote-319) As Hermans & Gieser note, ‘this repositioning of self in relation to the dominant other implies that the participants are reasserting their power as agents capable of reshaping their assignations.’[[320]](#footnote-320) The dialectic of control can be resisted by employers who may seek to maintain a more asymmetrical relationship. Equally, domestic staff can resist societal expectations that they must defer to their bosses, and not conform to the ideal of the model servant.

In this section I have described how servants of both past and present were able to enact a dialectic of control and pragmatically create representations of themselves through their knowledgeability and agency in ways that reconceptualise them as competent and knowledgeable agents. In the next section I build on this work by exploring how one particular nineteenth-century servant was able to challenge the notion of the servant as submissive and docile and how he achieves this by positioning himself, not as transgressive or more powerful than his employers, but by attempting to close the hierarchical gap between them. Levelling and closing the hierarchical gap between master and servant is a theme I develop in more depth in my next empirical chapter when I examine what happens when the master-servant relationship ruptures altogether. Here, I introduce it as a concept in order to demonstrate how servant identity is interlocked with other identities in the household and co-created in dialogic ways. I will undertake this work through a fine grained examination of nineteenth-century letters written by John Kent, one of Lord and Lady Carnarvon’s upper servants, found in the Hampshire Record Office (HRO).   
**4.5 Resisting the Cultural Script.**Giles and Ogay (2007) suggest that the ‘more similar we are to our conversational partner, the more he or she will like or respect us, and the more social rewards we can expect.’[[321]](#footnote-321) In the field of linguistics, interpersonal relational strategies such as these come under the framework of Communication Accommodation Theory (see Giles, 2016). This is the framework that aims at ‘predicting and explaining many of the adjustments individuals make to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction.’[[322]](#footnote-322) I now provide evidence of how one servant from Highclere Castle adjusts his language to create, maintain, and decrease social distance with his employers. I pay particular attention to how he is able to act with agency (both linguistically and in other ways) as he negotiates his relationship *in situ* through his dialogical engagements with his employers, and how he asserts particular identity constructions linguistically, whilst resisting others.

John Kent first wrote to Lord Carnarvon (who he refers to as Lord Porchester) on 18 November, 1839, when Kent had just returned to England after working in Upper Canada. The letter details how he had practised law and had subsequently been employed by the Lieutenant Governor in Upper Canada in an administrative role. The 1830s was a time of political upheaval in Canada with armed uprisings in both provinces (Upper and Lower) that had led to a subsequent report by Lord Durham advising that there should be a unitary system in which the two Canadas be merged into a single colony and moved along the path to self-government. Kent’s letter explains how he was concerned about remaining in Canada under these new and uncertain circumstances and that this had precipitated his return to England. He shares his frustration about the idea of self-government in Canada in his initial letter to Lord Carnarvon, stating that ‘separation from, or rejection by, the Mother Country should put the finishing stroke to the blow inflicted by Lord Durham’s report.’ As he states to Lord Carnarvon, it was ‘under these circumstances [that he had] returned to England.’ He also explains what he is looking for and why:

In seeking to stake out a new path of life, - for I would not willingly resume the practice of the Law, bethought myself of the vague possibility there existed of your Lordship needing a Tutor for your son, or a Private Secretary for yourself, or perhaps a person who should unite the qualifications necessary for both. Catching at this surmise, I think it best to lose no time, I therefore venture to bring myself under your lordships notice at once.

A gentlemanly situation is more my object than a lucrative one. I desire to be placed in the way of gradually acquiring the confidence of those, whose Powerful assistance might, at some future day, be exacted in my behalf.[[323]](#footnote-323)

From this introductory letter enquiring about a position as tutor to Lord Carnarvon’s son, or as his (Lord C’s) Private Secretary, it is clear that John Kent has some social aspirations. He is more interested, as he explains to Lord Carnarvon, ‘in a gentlemanly situation’ than in ‘a lucrative one.’ It was his desire, he states, that he ‘be placed in a way of gradually acquiring the confidence of those, whose Powerful assistance might, at some future day, be exacted on [his] behalf.’ This would seem to suggest that John Kent was hoping to access the upper ranks for social advancement, in return for which, he was prepared even to forgo pay.

It is possible that Kent was a man of limited resources but was hoping that a position that benefitted his gentlemanly status would eventually prove to be lucratively beneficial. He goes on to say:

I am aware that this is a very strange sort of letter for me to write to a nobleman on whom I have no claim [...] Still I am conscious of no presumptuous intention, of no desire to take an undue liberty with your lordship[[324]](#footnote-324)

Kent must have been quite aware that writing to a person in the upper echelons of British society in order to secure employment for social advancement could be considered presumptive, or to use his description, ‘strange’, and so here performs the mitigation work of softening his earlier directness that revealed a rather more socially ambitious self. In this part of the letter, he refers to Lord Carnarvon as ‘a nobleman’ and makes clear that he has ‘no desire to take an undue liberty’ thus adjusting his language to create more of a distance between him and his Lordship and, in so doing, produces a more modest and humble self. The voicing of these different positions that constitute the self, demonstrates vividly how he can act dialogically by anticipating the range of ways in which the receiver of his letter might respond and how he should position himself within this range.

Kent was looking for a role that befitted a particular station in life, however, despite his extensive administrative experience and excellent references (that Kent also details in the letter), Lord Carnarvon was initially reluctant to appoint him. Confiding to his wife about his reservations, Lord Carnarvon wrote to her about Kent stating that ‘I am not without apprehension that from a reluctance to leave his native country so soon again he may be to a certain extent deluding himself as to his own views and wishes.’ Lord Carnarvon was concerned that Kent’s fear that he might have to leave England quickly after being back for such a short period if he did not secure suitable work may have meant he had ‘deluded himself’ as to how well he could cope with, what Lord Carnarvon perceived to be, the unexciting routines of private domestic work. As Lord Carnarvon goes on to say, the position he was intending to fill, involved ‘many, and perhaps rather desultory duties.’ He states, for example, that:

the gentleman whom I should engage would have to spend a portion of the day to the task of instruction, and he could have to occupy himself on a good deal in business of my own, such as writing letters from my dictation, or sometimes taking notes of my giving. Reading to me for presently my head and eyes will not permit me to read myself[[325]](#footnote-325)

Despite these desultory duties, Kent clearly gained the trust of Lord Carnarvon and persuaded him that he would be a good prospect because the Carnarvons employed Kent for a number of years at Highclere Castle. Kent was a regular correspondent and became fairly intimate with the Carnarvons, writing at times in quite familiar terms. One of his later letters to Lady Carnarvon written in 1849 takes the rare step of opening without the standard epistolary greeting (My Dear Madam or My Lady) and simply immerses itself immediately into the information that Kent wants to impart to his mistress.

This may have been a strategy designed to avoid making his letter too formal or stiff, however, not using honorifics in this way in nineteenth-century letters was highly unusual, not just for a person in service, but for anyone addressing someone in the upper echelons of nineteenth-century society. The practice of using honorifics as standard openings to letters stretched even to the wives of noblemen who would sometimes start their letters to their husbands with the opening ‘My Dear Lord.’ The use of honorifics (or not) can be treated as a way of understanding an individual’s affective stance towards another person (see Ochs 1990, 1993) and the more hierarchical their relationship the more the use of honorifics will reflect the deferential nature of the power dynamics inherent in the relationship. Using no honorifics at all could suggest that theirs was a closer and more ‘affective’ relationship or equally it could be seen as a sign of impoliteness or impudence (see Ochs, 1993).

Some servants, as Davidoff notes, ‘found their horizons widened by their experience of service, by having witnessed new ways of living, by having been introduced to new tastes, new forms of beauty in the furnishing, decoration, flowers and gardens of the houses where they worked.’[[326]](#footnote-326) This seems to have certainly been true for John Kent. He corresponded with Lady Carnarvon and, while her other servants’ letters were written to impart advice and filled with expressions of devotion and concern for her health, Kent’s letters were often characterised with elaborate references to social practices, such as reading and writing, and preoccupied with Indexing Kent’s sophisticated tastes. This is evident in a letter he wrote to Lady Carnarvon on October 12, 1849 in which he states:

all here wonder at my hand writing apparatus, duly sent forth and used for 3 hours every morning – [Lord Carnarvon]’s handsome African leather writing desk, and C Faber’s very nice Despatch box, now set right and full of papers. I only want your Ladyship’s inkstand to complete my Splendour[[327]](#footnote-327)

The prestigious items Kent references, such as the ‘handsome African leather writing desk’ and ‘C Faber’s very nice Despatch box’, I argue, are a way of indexing symbolic capital because, not only are these expensive commodities but they also possess distinctive cultural value.

As Bourdieu argues, ‘objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest to the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner.’[[328]](#footnote-328) Lord Carnarvon’s ‘handsome African leather writing desk’ and the inkstand Kent is waiting on to ‘complete his splendour’ are, in fact, directly appropriated from his employers. These are items associated with the upper classes and their existence in Kent’s life, therefore, serves to reduce the social divide between him and his employers and creates common ground between them. The pragmatic purpose of these speech acts and the discourses he draws on are deployed to signal something about his identity. Kent sets himself apart from the social position of the everyday servant through the mention of these items because they signal a way of, not only differentiating him from other servants, but also levelling the social gap between him and the Carnarvons. Kent produces a self that identifies with the tastes, behaviours and ideals of the upper ranks of society. In so doing, he challenges the notion that one must be a member of the nobility to appreciate their (supposedly) more sophisticated tastes. Kent appropriates these items to distinguish himself as an arbiter of taste in ways that construct a particular identity for him.

As writers adapt their language to their specific audience they construct, perform, and recreate different versions of the self. This is further evidenced when Kent references, not only the social practice of writing, but also the social practice of after-dinner reading. In the same letter to Lady Carnarvon he writes:

I trust that *Redgauntlet* whiles away the evenings most pleasantly. I quite miss the readings: but last night after dinner, my host of young ladies and I went into a little room, and, while the rest were at amusements, went on with *The* *Old Curiosity Shop*, I got much interested in the fortunes of Kit Nubbles[[329]](#footnote-329)

Kent is rhetorically expressing something of himself and his own position in relation to others around him. The after dinner reading of *The Old Curiosity Shop* appears to be reserved for a closed group. His mention of ‘amusements’ suggests that, while ‘the rest’ were engaged in more trivial activities, he is engaged in the more serious pastime of reading Dickens with his ‘host of young ladies.’ He points to a shared interest in after-dinner reading with Lady Carnarvon when he says: ‘I trust that *Redgauntlet* whiles away the evenings most pleasantly’, suggesting that he and Lady Carnarvon are on similar intellectual planes. Kent merges his interests with hers and in so doing linguistically enacts a specific social identity for himself.

When a recipient is well-known to a letter writer they can use their personal knowledge of that person in order to create closer connections with them. Kent’s communication is fuelled by both his knowledge of the Carnarvons’ interests (he knows what they are choosing to read after dinner, for example) and the need to decrease social distance between him and them. This, in turn, serves to benefit the construction of his social identity as much as his personal identity. Kent’s letters to Lady Carnarvon also afforded him the opportunity to develop a relationship that may have bordered on friendship. He is able to write from different subject positions and the multi-voiced nature of Kent’s correspondence, and how this performs different versions of the self, is evident. He performs a personal identity when he writes that ‘all here wonder at my hand writing apparatus, duly sent forth and used for 3 hours every morning’ and when he tells his Ladyship that he ‘got much interested in the fortunes of Kit Nubbles.’ At the same time he also projects a social identity, for example, when he says ‘my host of young ladies and I went into a little room, and, while the rest were at amusements, went on with *The* *Old Curiosity Shop*.’

His epistolary style demonstrates how his identity is interlocked with other identities (such as the Carnarvons and his ‘host of young ladies’) and, as such, co-created in dialogic ways. Despite his performative style of writing, Kent indexes a set of personal preferences in which he imparts something about the way he wishes to be perceived; a depiction that counters how servants have traditionally been represented in broader discourses. This chimes with the narrative of Lisa who resisted the idea of the servant at the beck and call of her mistress and instead would align herself with Fiona’s husband Andrew. Through these signals servants can use their agency to redefine how they are perceived, and thus resist the standard definition of the lowly domestic servant.

I return now to Kent’s first letter of November 1839 when he had just returned from living in Upper Canada and was enquiring about work as a tutor, or as Lord Carnarvon’s Private Secretary. The ‘powerful assistance’ Kent was seeking in that letter, which he hoped might ‘at some future day, be exacted on [his] behalf’, appears to have materialised for him. In the 1861 census Kent is listed as age 51 years old and a ‘visitor’ to Highclere - so presumably no longer in the employ of the Carnarvons and, moreover, able to visit them as a guest. This would suggest that the ‘gentlemanly’ position he set out to establish for himself when he wrote to Lord Carnarvon approximately 20 years previously may have materialised. John Kent must have been an ambitious and determined young man as the social aspirations that he was seeking appear, at this future point in time, to have come to fruition. In the census Kent’s profession (or occupation) is listed as ‘Fund Holder’, not servant, which suggests his social advancement is complete.

Although, when working as Private Secretary to Lord Carnarvon, the younger John Kent would have been considered an Upper servant, he nevertheless held a much lowlier position in the social order of the nineteenth century than the aristocratic Lord and Lady Carnarvon. Kent appears, however, not to let this stand in his way or to be constrained by his lowlier status relative to his employers. The resources he was able to acquire through employment at Highclere and through access to Lady and Lord Carnarvon’s largesse and presumably friendship, rewarded Kent in surprising ways that challenge ideas about servants’ agency and identity. Kent’s letters suggest that his identity and social standing were important to him as he set out to shape how he was perceived, both socially and personally, and seems to have succeeded in professionally working his way up through the societal and professional ranks.

We cannot know Lord and Lady Carnarvon’s true feelings towards John Kent as they are not recorded in the historical archive. Perhaps Kent appeared boorish when mixing with nobility, perhaps he invited himself to Highclere and the Carnarvons felt unable to refuse. A couple of factors, however, would suggest that this may not have been the case. Kent did reveal a more humble and modest self in his letters that suggested he was more than just an ambitious social climber. Second, the register and tone of his correspondence were of familiarity. Kent drew on his interpersonal knowledge about the Carnarvons, their shared interests and was able to engage in political discourse in ways that suggested theirs was a familiar relationship.

Kent appears to have had a long acquaintance with the Carnarvons over twenty years and was able to act with agency in powerful ways to change his position and circumstances during that time and perform a role that was not simply an adjunct to his employers nor just about facilitating their needs. Lord Carnarvon was initially reluctant to employ Kent as he was unsure that he would remain at Highclere due to the ‘desultory duties’ that he would have to perform. Kent, however, persisted in his application and eventually, by rising up the societal ranks, was able to effect a return to Highclere, not as a servant, but as a guest. This demonstrates how Kent was able to exert agency and mobilise the resources at his disposal to dialogically co-construct both his personal and social identity to create a particular evaluative position for himself.

It is presumed that employers of servants traditionally adopted and constructed identity roles in which they were their servants’ superiors and that, conversely, servants sought to utilise strategies in order to construct identities oriented towards submission and deference. However, servants do not always defer to their employers in the way that traditionally one might expect and, at times, adopted positioning strategies that allowed them to subvert and resist the traditionally submissive role ascribed to them by the domestic service cultural script.

**Conclusion**This chapter set out to offer fresh insights into the agency and knowledge of servants based on their social practices and their situated lived experience. It challenged top-down narratives that influence broader discourses that set out to infantilise servants and questioned hackneyed notions of servants as child-like. By examining their interpersonal discursive strategies I argued that servants were not simply passive subjects absorbing the trope of servanthood imposed upon them by prevailing societal discourses. Although there are two different perspectives through which we are able to view the material, in the letters the servants are directly constructing their agency in concert with their employers whereas in the oral histories the servants are reflecting on how they enacted agency within the relationship, both nineteenth and twenty-first century domestic servants were able, and do, act as knowledgeable agents in the dialogical process of social meaning-making,

From both sets of material it was possible to evidence how servants can act in agentive ways and to construct for themselves ‘professional identities’ based on their knowledge. I demonstrated how individuals can draw attention to particular aspects of their identity through the language they use and in so doing can choose to accept or reject definitions of the social category to which they are assigned. This challenges the notion that master-servant relationships are intrinsically coherent and fully comprehensible. This challenge also supports the understanding that all cultural representations of lived experience are only ever partial and fragmentary.

The notion that servants required constant supervision, authority and control in ways that reinforce the unequal power dynamic in the master-servant relationship was challenged in both sets of data through the testimonies of Lisa (in the contemporary material) and Ann Gaymour (in the historic material). Although Lisa’s understandings of broader historic social stratification, particularly within the institution of domestic service, ran the risk that she might internalise the cultural script of servanthood, I brought to light how she adopted creative ways of reinventing herself and resisted these scripts. Ann, on the other hand, I argue, did not set out deliberately to resist an internalised cultural script. She was simply carrying out her job by overseeing the staff and the move to Highclere Castle, and reporting back to Lady Carnarvon, however, her letter provided insights that demonstrated how even servants of the nineteenth century could operate in professional ways with little or no supervision. Both Lisa and Ann acted in ways that complicate stereotypical assertions that are based on a common monolithic servant identity.

The servants discussed in this chapter employed powerful strategies through acting as knowledgeable, competent agents and there was much evidence of Giddens’ theory of a ‘*dialectic of control’*, whereby agency depends upon the capability of the individual to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. In the historic data Clifford, for example, was able to overturn a decision made by Lady Carnarvon, while in the contemporary data Elizabeth comfortably and effectively challenged her employer in the case of the after-dinner cigar smoking. Clifford’s language was undoubtedly more deferential in his letter to his mistress than the way in which Elizabeth reported to me how she had set out to overturn matters in a contemporary household. Of course, as with all retrospective narrations, hers is not necessarily a reliable account. How events unfolded on that particular night may have been experienced entirely differently by the various individuals present, and Elizabeth’s narrative could have been carefully refined over a number of retellings. It is useful, however, to see how Elizabeth focalises her account and draws attention to certain aspects of her abilities.

As with each of the servants discussed in this chapter, Elizabeth presented herself as someone who could find creative ways to deploy her skills of negotiation while juggling the competing demand of negotiating the relationship with her employer. These various demands build on one another dialogically and reveal ‘the emergence of the multiplicity of the self.’ [[330]](#footnote-330) This was especially evident in Arthur’s narrative when he acted as both the dutiful and the agentive servant, and resisted his own suppression after waiting for his employer for two days outside a London casino. The experiences of each of the servants have similarities but they are not identical and cannot be reduced to one version of what it is to be a servant. This is a significant finding, however, because it moves us away from the idea that what it is to be a servant can be reduced down to an all-encapsulating narrative. As historian of emotions Rob Boddice notes ‘what makes human experience and its history so profoundly interesting and important is its irreducibility.’[[331]](#footnote-331) Each of the servant narratives discussed here highlights the specificities of their individual experiences as they depend on different mechanisms to manage the peculiarities of their relationships with each of their employers.

Linguistically the message that servants communicate about their identity they can do so by selectively communicating certain attributes and characteristics about themselves while resisting others. This was especially evident in the letters of John Kent that highlighted how the linguistic practices of social actors do not always follow the social type or category to which they were traditionally assigned. As Bucholtz and Hall note, cases in which this occurs ‘are striking because they sever the ideologically expected mapping between language and biology or culture; that is, they subvert essentialist preconceptions of linguistic ownership.’[[332]](#footnote-332) In this section I considered how this particular servant situated himself dialogically in relation to others, how he was able to reinterpret the self through his interactions with his employers and how, through these processes, the construction of identity occurs.

Kent attempted to decrease the social distance between himself and the Carnarvons in order to become upwardly mobile. His letters demonstrated how his identity was constructed partly in concert with his employers and partly in concert with others in the household. His letters revealed how identities emerge through social acts, making meaningful contributions to the collective, and participating in the social practices of the group. Such identity constructions may be partly deliberate and partly unintentional, however, what this chapter has set out to show is how servant identity is dialogical and an emergent phenomenon. This is a line of analysis I develop further in the next chapter. I explore what happens when identities constructed through these processes are shattered when ruptures occur in the master-servant relationship. The relationships that are created through the interpersonal and relational labour invested by servants contribute extensively to their identity. When the relationship comes under threat, therefore, it is inevitable that this can be a significant event and require greater negotiation and adjustment for the servant.

**Chapter 5: Shattered identities: ruptures in the master-servant relationship**

In the previous chapter I revealed how servants could make meaning in their lives by acting as knowledgeable agents. I evidenced how servants can respond in a range of ways to discourses that situate them as a social category (with abject qualities) and to the negative ideologies associated with those discourses. I discussed how servant identity is emergent and forged in interaction and in social practice to bring us closer to their lived experience. I have shown how servants can shape who they are and how they are perceived through their interactions with their masters and mistresses and that this is not a deterministic process but subject to constant change and flux.

In this chapter I set out to highlight how this construction of servant identity becomes deeply problematic when master-servant relationships fall apart and servants have to linguistically navigate the complexity of making entreaties to their employers without setting themselves adrift from them. As Bourdieu argues, the ‘relationship between language and experience never appears more clearly than in crisis situations in which the everyday order, is challenged.’[[333]](#footnote-333) I argue that such crisis moments are exceptional because often, for the first time, servants are brought into direct conflict with their employers in ways that can shatter the illusion of the servant as a ‘treasured family member’ (even if only a pseudo family member) or as a person acting as a knowledgeable agent for the benefit of the household. These moments of crisis I refer to as rupture and argue that they offer servants the chance to speak the unspoken and, therefore, challenge the servant’s status as part of a social category and also, importantly, as part of the communal group.

I seek to explicate the polyglossic nature of the servant voice by examining what happens when ruptures occur in the master-servant relationship. I characterise moments of rupture as instances in which previously close relations were abruptly disrupted or severed when servants transgressed rules regarding conduct, fell unexpectedly from favour, or were summarily dismissed for misdemeanours. The closely entwined nature of the master-servant relationship and the strong emotional ties to the household can complicate attempts at disentanglement in highly charged moments. As noted in the last chapter and as Davidoff notes, ‘the whole of the life of the servant [...] from material support to human surroundings, depends on the household of which she [or he] happens to be a member [...] when this relationship is broken it is, therefore, bound to be more traumatic and to require greater adjustments for the subordinate.’[[334]](#footnote-334) As such, in this chapter I consider how these moments were often dramatic and painful for the servant and I provide further evidence of how different representations of the servant are continually and creatively re-formulated. These have a tendency to become amplified in ‘moments of rupture’; when the conventions of expected behaviour are endangered or undermined by events that threaten the continuance of the relationship - the uncovering of wrongdoing or dismissal being two cases in point.

In this chapter I first discuss the implications for nineteenth-century servants when they lost their positions by discussing the Poor Laws of 1834 and the significance of the ‘Character’ in order to provide context for the chapter as a whole. Following this, I examine the narratives of four nineteenth-century servants who each wrote letters to their masters when they had been, or when they were at the risk of being, dismissed. These particular letters were chosen because they powerfully exemplify how the conventions of expected epistolary behaviour are endangered or undermined when events threaten the continuance of the relationship. The letters provide compelling evidence of how servants discursively constructed appeals to their masters and used strategies of restraint in their writing to show respect for the social distance that existed between them and their master, but equally how they attempted to close that gap when articulating their distress despite the risks this might entail. There is little doubt that servants had to tread a fine line in their letter writing at such moments, balancing the deference society expected from them with the need to ensure their version of events received a fair hearing. A finely grained linguistic analysis of the rich personal testimonies contained in letters from servants to masters in such moments reveals the pragmatic linguistic strategies servants employed to first, disclose or defend their ‘true’ identities and second, persuade their masters to think or act in alternate ways.

The dialogic nature of the letters serves to recast servants as individuals whose lives were jointly constructed with those of their masters. The letters from servants include detailed expositions on what they see as the injustices visited upon them that are expressed with an assorted mix of familiarity, obsequiousness and veiled instruction. Discourses of loyalty, justice, personal dignity and reparation emerge from these previously overlooked servant writings and are exemplars of the complex combination of intimacy and formality inherent in the relationship. The precarity of domestic servants in such moments (when facing or appealing dismissal) prevented them from using clear directives. Most resorted instead to indirect linguistic strategies that evidence their need to balance deference with a desire to be heard. The letters are replete with lively personal content that demonstrates the rhetorical devices servants employed to simultaneously evidence the disagreement or misdemeanour and dialogically shape their masters’ perceptions of, and responses to it. The letters show how servants were looking to remedy their situation, to elicit a direct solution for their troubles and to rehabilitate their reputations.

Following this I provide comparative evidence from the narratives of four contemporary servants who describe their experiences of being dismissed from twenty-first century elite homes to show how servants can have multiple and diverse responses to moments of rupture at different times. Moments of rupture occurred frequently in all the oral history accounts, however, these particular interviews were chosen because they provide evidence of how servants’ lives are jointly and dialogically co-constructed in concert with, not only their employers, but also others in the household too. Through an examination of the discourses of crisis and loss that emerge in their narratives I will also show, similarly to the historic servants, how there can be a significant sense of loss when the contemporary master-servant relationship breaks down. I examine the linguistic adjustments servants make to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in such moments.

Many of the contemporary subjects of my research interviews were no longer working for the employers they discussed with me and it could be argued that they, similarly to the letter writers, were using the interview as a redress for past experiences. Their intent can also be considered as a way of eliciting sympathy for perceived injustices, however, they are not able to seek redress directly from their employer and may simply want their narrative to be heard. As Maynes, Pierce and Laslett suggest, the motivation for some interviewees to narrate their life stories ‘is simply the opportunity to get a hearing [...] or to set the record straight after conflicts and misunderstandings.’[[335]](#footnote-335) Similarly to letter writing, the interview becomes, in this sense, a vehicle through which an individual can have their experience witnessed and through which to draw attention to their plight. In this chapter as a whole I provide evidence of how moments of rupture, both past and present, can shatter the servant identity.

**5.1 Implications of Ruptured Master-Servant Relations in the Nineteenth Century.**The reform of the Poor Laws in 1834 stipulated that the poor and homeless were no longer to be given settlement rights, without which the local parish was not under any obligation to provide welfare. Although poor laws prior to 1834 were justifiably criticised (see footnote), the new laws of 1834 meant that the ‘irremovable poor’, who would once have been entitled to parish welfare and, what was termed, ‘outdoor relief’, could now be sent to the workhouse.[[336]](#footnote-336) The Commissioned report of 1834 recommended the ‘placing of all paupers in new workhouses where conditions were intentionally worse and more humiliating than those to be found outside.’[[337]](#footnote-337) Fuelled by the belief that it was relatively easy to find work and that ‘those who sought work could find it,’[[338]](#footnote-338) the intent of the new Poor Laws was malign. It was predicated on the belief that the poor had a choice about whether to work or not and that, as such, if they were not working it was clearly because they had chosen not to and therefore could and should be punished by having to endure workhouse conditions. Given this, it is clear that servants had ample reason to fear expressing their candid thoughts. As Simon Fowler (2014) notes in *The World of the Workhouse*, the workhouse was an ever-present threat and as such, the poor ‘would either find gainful employment or turn to charities and each other for support.’[[339]](#footnote-339) It is understandable, therefore, that domestic servants wanted to ensure that they were not cut off from their source of income or social support and consequently used letter writing to appeal to their masters not to let them go or to ask them for support in finding new positions in service.

In the nineteenth century, with no welfare state, no social housing, no disability benefits and no way of fighting a case of unfair dismissal, the life of a servant was a precarious one.[[340]](#footnote-340) The letters surveyed in this chapter were written by a variety of servants with varying degrees of literacy and they clearly reveal their fear and anxiety at the idea of unemployment. An example of what this could mean for an individual who had been summarily dismissed and could find no further work is evidenced in a letter written to the Countess of Derby at Hatfield House in 1875. A person by the name of Ralph Ouseley wrote to the Countess asking for employment to prevent him ‘from starving.’ His desperation becomes more apparent in his letter as he entreats her:

all I should require My lady is my meals and somewhere to lay my Head. [...] My Lady at this present moment my position is so bad that I am compelled to dispose of my clothes and worst than all a violin which I had for years and which I dearly loved to keep [indecipherable] to obtain my meals[[341]](#footnote-341)

Ouseley, uses his loss, the loss of his single most important possession, to attest to the depths of his desperation, evidencing the hardship that could befall a person with no alternative form of income. He focuses on the particulars of his situation, what he needs and why he needs it, but at the same time the letter is highly interpersonal in that Ouseley signals something about himself: that he is musical and can play a violin, which is dear to him, and which means more to him that the clothes on his back. This correspondence affectively showcases how letters written in moments of rupture from servants to masters, both outline specific incidents and, in more interpersonal ways, draw the reader closer to the actual lived experience of the writer and to the indignity or injustice they have suffered.

***‘The Character’***As I shall illustrate in the forthcoming sections, letters from servants such as Ouseley, written to masters in moments of extreme stress, are comparatively rare, particularly in comparison to those written by the aristocracy about their servants. Matters relating to the recruitment and retention of staff were the subject of a large number of letters written by and circulated between what Pamela Sambrook refers to as, ‘an aristocratic network of kin and friends.’[[342]](#footnote-342) Servants’ personal attributes, including their cleanliness, honesty, diligence, and very commonly sobriety, were examined, noted and shared between the upper classes and landed gentry. The sharing of this information via letter writing served as a kind of commons for the aristocracy to establish the value of particular servants and their place within this economy, particularly whether they should be maintained or let go. For example, in the Savernake collection, a neighbour wrote to Lord Bruce in the late 1800s asking about a Frederick Barker who had offered himself as a servant. The writer states that Mr Barker had informed him that ‘he lived three years with Lord Bruce’ and that ‘his Lordship had offered to provide him with a character, ‘I have therefore, to request of you’ the writer asks, ‘if he is sober, honest, cleanly, [and] diligent.’[[343]](#footnote-343)

In another letter Lord Bruce is asked whether ‘a person named Charles Smith who has offered himself as an under butler can be recommended and ‘whether he behaved himself with honesty and sobriety’ during the time he lived with Lord Bruce and whether he was ‘discharged for any misconduct that might render it improper for him to be received in another Gentleman’s home.’[[344]](#footnote-344) In another, an employer by the name of Middleton, replying to a request to provide a Character for a servant called Thomas Knapps, wrote to Lord Bruce at Tottenham House (known as Savernake House 1861-94), on the Savernake Estate in 1820 that ‘Thomas Knapps’ could not be recommended as he was ‘unsteady and given to liquor’ and was discharged by the housekeeper ‘as he had disabled himself by falling downstairs in a state of inebriety.’[[345]](#footnote-345) The information that was passed between the elite servant employers of the nineteenth century was not being shared between a disparate group of disconnected individuals operating in singular ways but rather between cohesive groups of the upper ranks who shared details of servants’ moral qualities as a collective resource.

While servant behaviour was the subject of continued review and appraisal, servants themselves found few avenues through which to explicate their concerns about employer behaviours or to identify or address any injustices visited upon them.[[346]](#footnote-346) Much correspondence enacted from servants to masters was concerned with executing directives on household management or reporting on progress towards those objectives. For a servant to take it upon themselves to correspond directly with their masters to appeal transgressions including unfair dismissals or sudden falls from grace was, for many, a high risk strategy that, despite varying degrees of literacy, required them to bring to bear highly sophisticated and nuanced linguistic strategies. These are clearly evident in these distinctive and unusual letters.

**5.2 Rehabilitating the nineteenth-century servant.**In this section, discourse analysis is applied to five archived letters written by nineteenth-century servants. These letters were chosen as they were written by servants who had been or were about to be dismissed by their employers and, therefore, provide valuable evidence of the linguistic strategies utilised by servants in these precarious and fearsome moments. All the letters examined contain the accepted nineteenth-century practice of distinctive epistolary conventions, such as particular forms of address and standard openings and closings. For example, writers would address the recipient as ‘My Lady’ or ‘Your Lordship’, and openings might take the form of an apology for the imposition of ‘addressing’ the recipient or by asking forgiveness for taking up their time. In addition, letters were signed off, ‘Your Lordship/ Ladyship’s most humble and obedient servant’ or ‘I remain your Lordship/ Ladyship’s most humble and obedient servant.’ Although these standard forms served to reinforce the hierarchical relationships of the time, this practice was undermined during moments of rupture by the need to close the social gap between writer and recipient in order to create a sense of obligation in the master. By deploying discourses of justice, solidarity, and reparation, and through the crafting of multi-faceted identities, the letter writers attempt to rehabilitate their reputations often through forms of ‘whistleblowing’, for example, seeking to place the blame on others or suggesting that others have behaved more badly than they have. In so doing, the letter writers attempt to rehabilitate their own reputations and characters. In exploring these servant letters, the aim is to complicate existing, rather simplistic collective accounts of the master-servant relationship and to place servants as individuals in their own right, rather than as ‘appendages of their employers.’[[347]](#footnote-347)

In 1807 a liveried servant Thomas Howard, wrote to Lord Bruce at Tottenham Park on the Savernake Estate to appeal his recent dismissal and the associated refusal of a character reference:

My Lord,

I understand from very good authority that your Lordship said before you would give me a character that you would die. I sometime ago wrote to Mrs. Smith concerning that, but having received no answer I have presumed to address you, wishing to know your Lordship’s sentiments on that.  
Had your Lordship had the candour to have seen me with your steward I could have explained myself in a manner that would have satisfied you, and confused him your Lordship is pleas’d to put so much confidence in. Had your steward been sober I should have been submissive but know my Lord I am that man who will never submit to intoxicated insolence my mind is not to be swayed by an impervious upstart Boy. Although I am but a livery servant yet My Lord when I am wronged I have the feelings of a man and nor do I mind the threats of anyone while I am conscious I’ve justice on my side. However there is enough said on that account, and all that I wish to know is what your Lordship means respecting me that I may with confidence proceed to looking after that which may be serviceable to me   
I am my Lord   
Your Lordship’s   
most hble and obet servt   
Thomas Howard [[348]](#footnote-348)

Thomas resorts to blaming another servant and suggests that the intelligence on which Lord Bruce is working comes from a steward who was not sober and was in fact: ‘an impervious upstart Boy’ who has wilfully misrepresented the facts. The ‘voice’ that Thomas adopts in this letter is an authoritative one. He does not use hedged assertions, for example, he does not state that he *thinks* the steward is ‘an impervious upstart Boy’ but, instead, uses categorical assertions that suggest to the reader that this is indeed who the steward is. These claims have a strong rhetorical force that make clear that only one meaning is intended by Thomas. He could have framed this in a more ambivalent way that allowed for more than one interpretation, for example, by using the auxiliary verb ‘may’, which would have reduced the illocutionary effect of his language, but he chooses instead to adopt an approach that emphasises the rhetorical force of his utterance (see Leech 1983).[[349]](#footnote-349)

As Cissie Fairchilds has argued, servants were known to adopt and internalize ‘their masters’ ideals and values displaying, for example, an aristocratic disdain towards the lower classes [...] from which they themselves had come.’[[350]](#footnote-350) Thomas’s adoption of disparaging language, with which his master may have been familiar, can be viewed as a strategy that acts to reduce the social distance between them by conveying the subtle assertion that they share similar perspectives. This strategy is emphasised when he states: ‘I am but a livery servant but when I am wronged I have the feelings of a man.’ On one hand, Thomas invokes the lowliness of his position when he refers to himself as a ‘livery servant’; while on the other, he asserts the corporeality of his masculinity by referring to himself as a man with heart and feelings who possesses heightened ideals of justice. Livery was used in the nineteenth century as a symbol or advertisement of a master’s wealth and social status. As Kristina Straub notes, a key part of the role of liveried servants was ‘looking good, [as their] attractiveness supports their reputation as sexual players while simultaneously upholding and extending their masters’ upper-class masculine status.’[[351]](#footnote-351) However, livery consequently had the effect of reducing them to a mere adjunct of their masters, rendering them all but ‘invisible to their masters; their masters saw them to be sure, but they did not recognise them as individual human beings.’[[352]](#footnote-352)

Thomas’ use of the phrase ‘livery servant’ therefore performs two functions; on one hand it is a form of self-erasure, on the other, it draws on affective ties of loyalty and is designed to remind Bruce that Thomas remains bound to him and is the subject (hopefully) of his pity and largesse. His reference to being a man is simultaneously a cry against this marker of servitude that represents an attempt to collapse the entire master-servant relationship by levelling the social positions between them through an appeal to basic humanity, the suggestion being that, ultimately, they are both simply men with feelings who share similar values.

Thomas also uses another tactic of social levelling when he attempts to discipline Lord Bruce for failing to take sufficient account of Thomas’ assessment of the steward with whom he (Thomas) was more familiar than his master. Thomas states ‘had your Lordship had the candour to have seen me with your steward I could have explained myself in a manner that would have satisfied you, and confused him [in which] your Lordship is pleas’d to put so much confidence.’ Thomas is suggesting in a surprisingly bold manner that he (Thomas) was more knowledgeable and had made a more astute assessment of the steward’s character than had his master in this circumstance. By implying the steward was drunk and that Lord Bruce has been hoodwinked by him Thomas is dialogically anticipating and responding to ‘absent others.’ For example, Thomas draws on facets of interaction between each of the social actors who were involved in the incident that led to his dismissal (himself, the steward and Lord Bruce) in an attempt to influence Lord Bruce’s mind. This demonstrates how relationally and dialogically his language is part of a chain of events, it is produced out of what has already occurred but is also an anticipation of what is to come, in this case, what he anticipates Lord Bruce’s response to be. Although we do not know the outcome of Thomas’ letter it provides persuasive evidence of how servants’ written language could be dialogically constructed.

Attempting to reveal a more multi-faceted self was difficult, but was a strategy that servants sometimes employed when seeking to appeal potentially catastrophic downturns in favour or fortune. In the early 1800s Brompton, another of Lord Bruce’s Tottenham Park servants wrote to his master to try and establish why there had been a demonstrable change in his Lordship’s favour towards him and his wife. He begins:

May it Please yr Lordship,  
I was with Mr Ward this morning to endeavour to find out the sudden change your Lordship has made with me, he informed me he had not authority to tell me, but there were many charges against us[[353]](#footnote-353)

In constructing his appeal against these unspecified charges Brompton needs to finely balance competing demands. The dynamics of the hierarchical relations of the time demanded that nineteenth-century servants remain deferential to their masters. If he was not to lose his position, however, Brompton had no option but to challenge Lord Bruce’s actions by countering the allegations raised against him. This tension is evidenced in the subject/identity positions Brompton variously adopts: the unfairly treated subordinate, the dutiful agent and the loyal husband. He goes on:

As my Lord we are in ourselves conscious that we never did anything wilfully to injure your Lordship we sincerely beg of your Lordship to allow Mr Ward to lay the charges to us and see if we cannot confute them or at least make it appear that they are cruely laid

Your Lordship remembers when you allowed me to give Henry warning that you ordered me to tell him for what reason it was done - I hope you will not refuse your Principal Servants here the same indulgence [[354]](#footnote-354)

Phrases such as ‘you allowed me’ and ‘you ordered me’, as invoked by Brompton, serve to remind Lord Bruce of his servant’s subservient, dependent position. The interlocutory voice that states; ‘I hope you will not refuse your Principal Servants the same indulgence’, is an attempt to induce a sense of obligation in Lord Bruce, but is also, subtly, disciplinary in tone as it points to potential wrongdoing on Lord Bruce’s part.

Brompton attempts to invoke a sense of solidarity with his master by drawing on a previously shared experience: ‘the time when Henry was given warning.’ He uses this to generate multiple constituted and nuanced perspectives on his situation. The modal expression ‘I hope’ serves a number of purposes in that, on one hand, it suggests powerlessness and an incapacity to direct action. On the other, it also indicates the writer’s judgement, not only on what action he would prefer his master to take but, more importantly, is suggestive of the moral obligation he feels Lord Bruce is under to act. In this sense the tone is clearly, and surprisingly, instructive. Brompton is here holding his master to account, to the standards, he himself had set in their earlier shared encounter when Brompton was informed that it was only right and just to hear the testimony of the accused servant Henry. Brompton expects Lord Bruce to provide clear and explicable reasons for his actions and suggests that not to do so would be unjust. He astutely avoids, however, the risky strategy of directly using utterances such as ‘justice’ and ‘duty’ preferring instead to make oblique but powerful suggestions of reputational risk - that Bruce could come to be viewed by others (his peers or staff) as a dishonourable employer. The reference to himself and his wife as ‘Principal Servants’ also serves to position them as closer in the hierarchy to Bruce than to those further down the household ranks, a strategy that subtly introduces unspoken expectations of reciprocity between them.

This relates in part, to the social paternalism of the early Victorian era. Paternalism, a revival of a Western European feudal system, asserted that each individual’s social position in the hierarchy of society was pre-ordained and underpinned by an ideology that suggested relationships between ordinate and subordinate were based on moral duty and protection. According to historian David Roberts; ‘[those] who held a paternalist outlook believed in the body politic, one in which every part had an appointed and harmonious place. Whether a plowman or a bishop, each individual had his function, his place, his protectors, his duties, his reciprocal obligations and his strong ties of dependency.’[[355]](#footnote-355) In terms of the relationship between masters and servants this meant that masters and mistresses were socially obliged to act with protection and kindness towards their servants while, in turn, their servants were obliged to gracefully accept their lowly position in the social hierarchy and to work dutifully and diligently for the benefit of their employers. It is this expectation that Brompton is invoking.

By subtly admonishing Lord Bruce for not granting the same favour that his master had previously instructed Brompton to bestow on another dismissed servant, Brompton attends to his own deferential position, whilst manoeuvring his Lordship into that of charitable master who, in his benevolence, will offer up suitable justification for the dismissal. He counters this, however, with an acknowledgement that this would be an ‘indulgence.’ If Brompton was indeed the beneficiary of particular indulgences and special treatment, it must have been difficult to have been dismissed so abruptly. Brompton finally retreats to affecting a more emotional tone in which he draws his master’s attention to their shared experiences, their interpersonal relationship and connected lives, and one that Bruce is now probably attempting to escape:

I should not my Lord ask it on my own account but my wife who your Lordship knows has been so ill all the season is so much affected by the sudden turn of your Lordship’s favour. As she is so sensible of the indulgences your Lordship has granted her in her illness that I cannot help it [[356]](#footnote-356)

This is an emotionally laden plea to shared values and, as Bendelow and Williams suggest:

An emotional appeal may be likened to an appeal to fundamental beliefs which are either shared or are believed to be shared; it is an appeal to common sense. In this respect an emotional appeal is no different, in principle, from any other communicative appeal. All argument must appeal to what is commonly held to be true - to the assumptions of the life-world.[[357]](#footnote-357)

As such, in positioning his wife as the desperate party, Brompton invokes their former intimacy while simultaneously distancing himself from the purported transgression. His strategy works as a form of self-erasure, reminding Lord Bruce that he is not acting with purely individualistic intent: this plea is not for him but for his sick wife. He distances himself from his role as servant by drawing instead on another identity; that of the good husband, consideration of which, he hopes, might persuade his Lordship to re-evaluate his decision. Brompton’s letter provides evidence of how servants wrestled with expressing gratitude to their employer for their benevolence, despair at their own precarious circumstances, while all the while cognisant of the need not to set themselves adrift from their masters.

**5.3 Discourses of justice and reparation: Discrediting other servants.**Not all servants were in the fortunate position of being Principal Servants and were, therefore, unable to draw on a range of shared memories to argue their case. Some were forced to creatively utilise other strategies to align themselves with their masters and improve their perceived social standing. One common method was to discredit other servants by reporting their misdemeanours and by actively drawing on debates of justice and reparation to inculcate a sense of obligation in the recipient.

A typical example of this type of letter was written in 1800 to the Earl of Romney, Viscount Marsham of The Mote in Maidstone, Kent by a servant who signs himself W. Servington. It begins:

My Lord

I most humbly beg pardon for presuming to address you but my knowledge of your love of Justice emboldens me state my case to your Lordship I am to be discharged to Night by your lordships orders as a quarrelsome man I most sincerely wish your Lordship had been Witness of the Transaction I trust my lord but my Temper is mild and my Disposition peaceable but Woolwin appears to have come to me that day either to spend his time or to fall out with me for it was not in his way Either to or from his work and he accused me of Making my Mate a Shucking fellow like myself it irritated me so fast that I said if he said so again I would give him a smack on the head and if any thing more was represented to your Lordship it is false and your Lordship has been imposed on [[358]](#footnote-358)

The letter tells us that Servington is due to be dismissed from his employment at The Mote due to some sort of quarrel or fight with another servant called Woolwin. Similarly to Thomas Howard at Tottenham House, Servington expresses a wish that his master had witnessed the altercation presumably because he believes that his Lordship would then consider Servington not to be at fault.

Servington also implies that Woolwin appears to have purposely sought him out to make trouble as the location where the quarrel happened was ‘not in his way Either to or from his [Woolwin’s] work.’ Here, he suggests that the Earl of Romney should resist the temptation of thinking that Woolwin is free of blame and, in so doing, implies that in fact it is he (Servington) who is the one who has been wronged. Servington’s aim throughout is to re-establish his good character in Lord Romney’s eyes and persuade him to reconsider his decision to discharge him. It would not have been sensible to expressly criticise Lord Romney’s decision and, although Servington does not avoid an implied hint of criticism completely, he avoids openly suggesting Lord Romney is at fault. Instead he suggests that his Lordship has been misled: ‘if anything else has been represented to your Lordship it is false.’ In so doing, he strategically positions Lord Romney as being as much a victim of Woolwin as he is himself. Servington’s assertion that his temper is ‘mild’ and his ‘disposition peaceable’, is immediately undercut by the confession that he was ‘irritated so fast’ that he would have given Woolwin ‘a smack on the head.’

In the last section of the letter Servington actively adopts discourses of justice and reparation, employing words such as ‘conduct’, ‘proof’ ‘innocence and ‘disgrace.’

if your lordship will condescend to investigate my conduct by proof from which I will not shrink. Innocence has no fear I think your lordship will commend rather than disgrace [[359]](#footnote-359)

Servington’s epistolary style had to be suitably deferential: ‘if your lordship will condescend to investigate my conduct’, he states, rather than employing more forceful directives such as: ’you must investigate my conduct’ or a request: ‘would you investigate my conduct?’ The use of this type of phrasing cements the power dynamic on which the social hierarchy of the time was built, while also working to align the values of writer and recipient. Despite their two very different social positions, Servington attempts to reduce the social distance between them by positioning himself and Lord Romney as equals both eager to see justice done. By emphasising their shared commitment to, and appetite for justice, Servington attempts to bolster his own position while discrediting Woolwin, the author of Servington’s fate, and positioning him as the outsider, the troublemaker, whose fault it is that justice has not been properly administered.

Further evidence of how servants discredited other servants to bolster their own position is found in a letter written by Jane Dedman to Lord Bruce in 1819. Jane was discharged on 4April 1819 by Mrs Davis, the housekeeper, after being employed at Tottenham Park at Savernake for five years and eight months. Jane, a stillroom maid, wrote to Lord Bruce with many grievances, mostly about other servants, but concentrated primarily on the housekeeper who dismissed her.[[360]](#footnote-360) In comparison to Brompton’s letter, Jane’s letter is characterised by non-standard spelling and grammar:

My Lord iham sorry to inform you that iwas discharged from your services on the 4 of April by mrs davis your housekeeper after being in your services five years and eight months and not guilty of any thing but being sent from your house like a dog my Lord and worse ithought it propper to inform your Lordship of it mrs davis told me time after time that your lordship desired her to discharge me the first time your lordship came to tottenham park after mrs davis came and after itold her it was not true [...] she should do what pleas as will your lordship’s bailef and his wife and stanley desired that she would send me away saying that I had been there longenuf the reason was isupose she did not like for me to now how they did go on inow they all disliked me it was because inow what they all where when they came into your lordship services and they say send her away and have afresh one for idont like for her to be hear my lord iwas with mrs knutley the ole time she was thear if your lordship will ask of her to know if iever did any thing amis the ole time she was there my lord I think it avery hard thing to take a poor girls bread away from her in such abad way [indecipherable] have only my hands to get my liven icant get me another place without sending to mrs davis and she say she will keep me from ever having another place [...]

My lord I ham sorrey that iwas obliged to do any such athing as this but to be served in the way as mrs davis yuesd me iwas obliged to do it I no mrs davis is avery bad disposed person to any one that will not do everey thing that is bad like her self she told me inever should stay another whinter with her because she say itook no deal of what she did in the time you had the [indecipherable] made for the foar people she took part of two loins of the mutton to cook for her self and likewise three or four larg pieces of beaf and chicken besides which she thought I never took any notice of it until I told her about it and then she told me sunday that ishould leave on tuesday and never come near the hous aney more[[361]](#footnote-361)

Like Servington, Jane distances herself from the other servants by placing the blame for her dismissal on them, in particular, on his Lordship’s bailiff, the bailiff’s wife and another servant called Stanley. Using the direct reported speech of the other servants, Jane states that they had said of her; ‘send her away and have a fresh one for I don’t like for her to be hear’ and that this dislike of her was because she had information about ‘what they all where’ before these servants came to work at Tottenham Park. She mischievously hints that she has valuable information that Lord Bruce does not have access to and which she might be willing to share or exchange. Jane’s attempt to exchange gossip about the other servants was a high-risk strategy. In these close communities formed below stairs in the country house it was essential to forge at least cordial, if not loyal and committed relations with other servants. These were essential survival tools needed to navigate the disagreements that were commonplace and, as seen here, could result in dismissal or reprimand.

Her letter continues with the allegation that the housekeeper is a ‘very bad disposed person’ and a thief who ‘took part of two loins of the mutton to cook for herself and likewise three or four larg pieces of beaf and chicken besides which she thought [Jane] never took any notice of.’ Working on a country estate such as Savernake would have carried with it a certain prestige; dismissal for the semi-literate Jane could have had disastrous consequences, especially as she did not hold a position of responsibility, such as housekeeper or cook, and was largely unskilled thus meaning finding other employment in a rural area would prove difficult.

Like Brompton, she also makes an emotional appeal: ‘my lord I think it avery hard thing to take a poor girls bread away from her in such abad way [...] have only my hands to get my liven icant get me another place without sending to mrs davis and she say she will keep me from ever having another place.’ Her language, however, is less subtle and more direct than Brompton’s as Jane attempts to shame her employer while attempting to maintain her own personal dignity. It should be noted also that Jane seems to have been quite content to keep quiet about the housekeeper’s pilfering habits until she needed to use this information as a form of collateral in order to repair her own damaged position. Rather like Servington, Jane’s deliberate attempt to apportion fault to another servant acts also to mask a more obscure counter-narrative - that just because others may have behaved badly it cannot automatically be assumed that Jane did not somehow contribute to events.

As a scullery maid Jane is clearly a servant of lowlier status in the household than many of the other historical servants that have been discussed in these chapters. It might be argued that it is due to her much lowlier status that she has no alternative but to resort to reporting the bad behaviour of other servants in order to recover her reputation. However, in 1849, lady’s maid Harriet Everett wrote to her former employer Lord Romney using a similar strategy after being dismissed from Mote House, thus demonstrating that even servants placed higher up the ranks in the hierarchy could also resort to maligning others. Like Jane this letter-writer also obscures any wrong-doing on her part by seeking to place the blame on others. In this fourth letter I examine, however, it was not the other servants who Harriet chose to discredit, but in fact her former employers and other aristocratic members of the household where she had worked. In this particular letter, Harriet was writing to Lord Romney to request a second Character, as her first Character, as we shall see, had been destroyed.

Without a Character Harriet would have been unable to find further work in service after her dismissal from Mote House. Although it is unclear how the letter containing her Character came to be destroyed, Harriet suggests that it may have been due to another person acting in bad faith:

My Lord

When I wrote to your Lordship last I was not aware I was saying anything more than the words I had from your Lordship's own mouth, or I should not have said so. I did not understand the letter was destroyed but that any Lady may have/ harm it with the Duchess saying what she liked and as far as I remember your Lordship added that is all I can do for you after what I have heard, I was too much agitated at the time to say much. I well remember her Grace shaking her finger in my face and saying I will do for you, so far she is as good as her word[[362]](#footnote-362)

In this section of the letter Harriet is performing the transactional work of commenting on the destroyed letter. Harriet suggests that it is other people who are blameworthy for the destroyed letter and presents herself as the unfortunate victim of these circumstances. She explains to Lord Romney that she had not understood that the letter had been destroyed, or who had destroyed it, but that ‘any Lady may have/harm it.’ The capitalisation of ‘Lady’ suggests that Harriet is referring to other members of the gentry, possibly women who she had previously worked for in the household, or maybe upper-class servants, and that they may be responsible for its destruction. Harriet also takes the bold step of implying that the destruction of the letter may even have been directly due to the actions of ‘the Duchess’ or ‘her Grace.’ She shifts the weight of blame largely to ‘her Grace’, who she well remembers ‘shaking her finger in [her] face and saying I will do for you.’ Significantly, Harriet directly quotes both Lord Romney (‘that is all I can do for you after what I have heard’) and also the words of her Grace (‘I will do for you’) to argue her case.

We do not know what Harriet’s misdemeanour was that led to such emotionally charged words being exchanged, and we cannot know if the words she quotes are accurate, however, her strategy of directly reporting the speech of her former employers is an interesting approach as it does not present Harriet in the most favourable light. This raises the question of why she would choose these rather damning assassinations on her character to persuade Lord Romney that he should act in her favour. It is possible that she wanted to remind Lord Romney of his, and other household members’, harsh treatment of her or it may be that she considered that she had been verbally abused by them and the direct quoting of these exchanges were designed to remind him of this verbal abuse. It is also notable that Harriet says that she felt unable to say anything at the time because she ‘was too much agitated.’

It is possible that Harriet felt compelled to silence herself at the time of the incident because she was afraid that she might say something she would later regret or, possibly, she felt unable to voice her true opinion simply due to the inherent power dynamics at play in the household at the time. Possibly later, Harriet may have wished that she had spoken up for herself especially if she had felt that the accusations being levelled at her at the time were truly unjust. Perhaps she simply felt bullied. Whatever the case, her letter provides compelling evidence of a struggle between what a servant may want to say in a given situation and what she (or he) is able to. Whatever the cause of her silence at the time of the letter she has written describing this incident at this later date allows her the space to give voice to her feelings and is an opportunity for redress in that she can assert her version of events.

In the next section of the letter Harriet intensifies her argument, in an attempt to rehabilitate her reputation, by steering Lord Romney’s memory away from the altercation and instead towards her dedicated service and good conduct over the years she has worked at Mote House.

I told your lordship in my past I was obliged to take another situation your Lordship is well aware I cannot get one without it without a Character. I served in your family between eight and nine years I was not aware but that I [gave] satisfaction as I heard no complaint. Seven years out of that time I attended on Lady Romney and was never absent from her Ladyship but two nights (on my own account) after that your Lordship saw me at any time you sent for me that you could see and judge for yourself what my conduct was[[363]](#footnote-363)

The section continues with the same direct tone Harriet used in the first part of her letter as she reminds Lord Romney that she will not be able to obtain another situation in service if he refuses her a second Character. When she states that her master ‘is well aware’ that she cannot get another position in service without a Character, she is holding Lord Romney directly accountable for his actions. Harriet refuses to allow her former master to hide behind any shroud of ignorance about what the withholding of a second Character will mean for Harriet in terms of securing further employment in service.

Harriet then sets out to challenge the unfavourable view presented of her by her employers that serves as a disjuncture between their version of events and her own. She provides a counter-narrative to the unfair way she suggests she has been treated and thus calls her former employers’ harsh judgement of her into question. In order to achieve this, Harriet draws on her previous loyalty and dedicated service to Lady Romney over seven years when she had never ‘been absent from her Ladyship but two nights’ during that time, in an attempt to defend herself and divert the attention away from any shortcomings they may perceive she possesses. If the facts of the case are such that Harriet has indeed conducted herself impeccably throughout her service at Mote House this testimony of her diligence and dedicated service calls into question the validity of the disparaging comments directed towards her by her Grace and, furthermore, queries why Harriet has become the target of her mistress’ displeasure. It also implies that any accusations that have been levelled at her are false. As we have seen with other servants, this is a risky strategy. By calling her mistress’s judgement into question and using such direct linguistic strategies Harriet does not adhere to the notion of the silent and obsequious servant who should accept her (or his) station in life without complaint.

In the next part of the letter Harriet adopts a softer approach and invokes her own personal circumstances as a relational tactic to elicit sympathy from Lord Romney in an attempt to recover the unfortunate situation. She utilises emotive language, indicating distress over comments that have been made about her and, as we shall see, draws attention to the unfortunate circumstances she has been left in:

I am well aware where you are not obliged to give a second Character at the same time I'm aware I have no friends or relations I can make a home with what am I to do at my age, have lived in four families and been respected all my life now no one [in] the world no one to apply to for a character. Ladies that I know will speak for me and [indecipherable] themselves which I am very thankful for but that is all they can do if your Lordship will not give me a Character to get me a place I do not know what steps to take next[[364]](#footnote-364)

In this last part of the letter Harriet softens her earlier more diverse approaches and mitigates them by drawing on her quite blighted circumstances in emotive language that appears to be designed to invoke pity. She states that she has ‘no friends or relations’ with whom she can ‘make a home’ and that although she has ‘been respected all [her] life’ she has ‘no one [in] the world no one to apply to for a character.’ She also amplifies her sense of isolation by implying that her age may also be a preventative factor to gaining further employment when she rhetorically asks: ‘what am I to do at my age.’ These statements are persuasive in that they are designed, not only to elicit sympathy from Lord Romney for her circumstances, but also they cleverly draw him back into the narrative. The two previous sections of the letter were fairly confrontational as Harriet defended herself and made her case but now, in true dialogical form, Harriet seems to anticipate that perhaps this strategy may have caused her to lose Lord Romney’s support and, as such, she emphasises how adrift she will be without his assistance.

In this letter Harriet occupied three separate subject positions that were each interwoven to produce a skilfully persuasive letter. Harriet variously occupied the subject position of the abused and mistreated servant, the dedicated and long-serving lady’s maid, and finally the isolated and beleaguered woman whose life and identity have been shattered. The ability of Harriet to deftly, and quite ingeniously, linguistically switch between these different subject positions showcases the polyphonic nature of her voice. Harriet is interacting with Lord Romney in a dialogical fashion as each of her selves takes up a separate dynamic position as she enters into the negotiation process of persuading her former master to provide her with a second Character even though, he is under no formal obligation to do so. Each of these various subject positions provide different knowledge and information about her situation to Lord Romney and, in so doing, she constructs a narratively created self.

In this chapter so far I have evidenced how nineteenth-century servants could assert themselves when dealing with cases of dismissal by examining the linguistic strategies that they employed when the master-servant relationship threatened to break down or fracture altogether. I examined the adjustments servants made to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in such moments. In the next section I examine the narratives of four twenty-first century servants who describe how even modern-day servants can be fired without warning and the profound sense of shock they feel when this occurs. I examine the polyphonic nature of their voices, examine their discourses of crisis and loss, and discuss the profound sense of hurt that is felt when the master-servant relationship ruptures. I demonstrate how servants have the capacity to be strategic in such moments, despite the risks this might entail.

**5.4 Ruptures in Contemporary Domestic Service.**What resonates in both the archival and the contemporary data is the fundamental instability of these relationships that are woven together through loyalty and fidelity but, nevertheless, are subject to continual renegotiation. The lived experiences of contemporary domestic staff provide invaluable insights into the interpersonal ties that currently exist between domestic staff and their employers, and the anxieties that are produced when ruptures in these relationships occur. Perhaps surprisingly, dismissals can happen with the same abruptness and immediacy in the contemporary world of domestic service as they did in the nineteenth century. In contemporary Britain many forms of professional employment now entail continual assessment and feedback; 360 degree appraisal procedures and performance development reviews are commonplace in certain white collar industries. As such, it can be difficult to imagine how it would be possible to still fall unceremoniously from favour without any explanation and treated as an expendable and invisible servant. Yet surprisingly, this is exactly what the data suggests is occurring in domestic service in elite households today.

Tara, a nanny who had worked for a number of HNW families, told me of one dismissal that had happened in an instant; ‘you’re just gone and it’s that easy. You’re literally gone.’[[365]](#footnote-365) She explained that she was paid ‘hush money’ as used in non-disclosure agreements and that ‘sometimes you’re paid a sizable amount of money to just go quietly.’ Tara talked of a fellow nanny, employed by the same family, being escorted off the premises with little prior warning who was ‘paid out’ because the employers prefer to ‘just cut the ties.’ Hush money is paid when one individual possesses information about another that, if revealed publicly to the community at large, could be damaging or embarrassing. The payment is designed to secure secrecy - it is a deal that one will not reveal secrets about the other.

Despite the acceptance by both parties of such payments to cut ties there is still a huge sense of shock felt by domestic staff. Tara’s testimony demonstrates how monetary compensation cannot obliterate the affective ties servants had forged with a household. I suggest that the shock is felt more acutely due to the relational work they invest in those relationships when power appears to take precedence. The enmeshment of the emotional and the rational can thus create a complex dynamic. Tara had worked for one particular family for four years and had not had a Christmas off in that time. One year her mother surprised Tara by arranging to fly from Australia to spend Christmas with her in the UK. Tara consequently asked her employers for eight days off over that period. This request led to her immediate dismissal. Tara went on to describe the impact this had on her, explaining that ‘a lot of hurtful things were said’ and that she ‘was shocked, absolutely shocked.’ She confided in her partner at the time saying; ‘they’re going to sack me over this, they’re going to tell me to leave.’ Tara’s prediction proved to be correct when five days later she received an email saying; ‘we think it’s in our son’s best interest if he starts the New Year afresh with no nanny.’[[366]](#footnote-366) Tara’s testimony draws attention to her incredulity over the fact that the family were prepared to simply erase both her position and its significance to their child by simply expunging her position as his nanny.

Personal bodyguard Michael, who had provided close protection to a wealthy family on a large country estate over a number of years similarly described the shock he felt when he was asked to leave his role suddenly and with no prior warning. Close protection roles are by no means common, and Michael worked for one of the most formal and highly staffed households encountered in the interviewing process. He was a highly trained professional with a military background and had worked for this particular family for four years, sometimes in complex and potentially dangerous situations. Despite his loyalty to the household Michael was sacked without prior warning by his supervisor for being half an hour late after getting caught in traffic one morning on his way to work.

Michael told me that the master of the house ‘was a very busy man’ so he just took directions from the supervisor because ‘whatever he [the supervisor] said kind of went’ and that the master ‘never questioned anything.’ Interestingly, this circumstance has comparisons to the historical data at Tottenham House where Brompton was sacked, not by Lord Bruce but by his steward, Mr Ward. Rather like Brompton who went directly to his employer to plead his case, Michael explained that he also tried to appeal directly to his mistress (who he was directly employed by) and as a result:

there was an argument that ensued. [...] it turned out that she took directions from her husband and her husband had said “no, [the supervisor] has agreed that he didn’t make it on time.” [The supervisor] blew everything out of proportion so I was let go and it was as simple as that[[367]](#footnote-367)

When I asked how this had made him feel he said ‘yeah it was a shock I tried to make some phone calls to see what could be rectified or anything else but there was nothing anybody could do.’ Although, as with the nineteenth-century servants, Michael sought to find a way to repair the rupture that had occurred, the register of language he adopts is quite different, it is more dispassionate and composed, yet there is still evidence of the multi-voiced self. Michael is not pleading for his job back as Brompton was, however, despite his apparent composure, Michael spoke of his shock over being so suddenly dismissed. This tells us that what he feels is quite significant and personal. The shock, to which both he and Tara refer, is an involuntary and biological reaction to feeling threatened but it is presumably also reflective of how profoundly they were affected by these acts of dismissal that they both seek to highlight this in their discourse about the events that occurred. In both cases, Tara and Michael had built interpersonal relationships with their employers and had invested much relational work into the sustainment of those relationships.

**5.5 Resistance and rebellion: discourses of crisis and loss.**

Other modern-day servants were more willing to use language that explicitly described the strong emotional ties that they had formed with their employers and the profound personal impacts it had on them when these ties were broken. They also revealed various diverse iterations of themselves as also evidenced in the nineteenth-century letters. Vinnie, a chef, prided himself on being able to adapt to the subservient position he was expected to fill working in a private household in the south of England:

they were really old school and when I think about it they were quite well ... I don't know if barbaric is the right word ... but they would blow a whistle if they wanted me and I was expected to go running and when I used to mow the lawn [my boss] would stand at one end of the lawn with a white handkerchief and I had to look at the handkerchief and not the ground to get a straight line. It was an odd existence[[368]](#footnote-368)

The blowing of the whistle and holding the white handkerchief are designed to channel Vinnie towards norms of behaviour that are performative in nature and shaped by an incarnation of domestic service from a time when masters exercised considerable control over their domestic staff. Even though he wrestled with the notion that his treatment could conceivably be considered ‘barbaric’, Vinnie’s subservience acts to legitimize and affirm his employer’s superiority over him that, in turn, shapes both his identity and that of his employer. There are parallels here between Vinnie’s employers and Beatrice, Pam’s mistress (in Chapter 3), whose behaviour was redolent with, and echoed, broader traditional understandings of service in residual and anachronistic ways although in Vinnie’s case, unlike Pam, when he states ‘it was an odd existence’ he appears less convinced.

As Scott argues, and as I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the powerless have limited resources on which to draw in challenging authority. This relates to Judy Giles’ discussion on ‘structures of feeling that involved deeply felt ideas about obligation, privacy, authority and “place” and [how] these might manifest themselves in contempt and deception.’[[369]](#footnote-369) Servants who are not prepared to directly challenge their employers can instead subvert authority by acting in disturbing and troublesome ways that threaten the order of the household and, in turn, create problems of reputational risk for employers. This is evidenced in the following extract in which Vinnie explains the behaviour that led to his dismissal from his post:

It was a bit messy [...] because it was drug related and I was accused of intent to supply and I didn’t actually get done for that in the end but it became quite well known within the village and they were embarrassed as much as anything and they kept me on for a bit but in the end ultimately it ended up in a blazing sacking and they were so embarrassed they sold up and moved[[370]](#footnote-370)

The fact that Vinnie’s employers were ‘so embarrassed’ by his drug related activities in the wider community that ‘they sold up and moved’, provides compelling modern-day evidence of the anxiety about the ‘servant problem.’ It is revealing of how ‘bad’ behaviour of servants could potentially pose reputational risks to a family and may suggest why many employers still believe the close regulation of servant behaviour to be necessary. It also provides evidence of the dialogic nature of the master-servant relationship. Employers demand conformity and still hold expectations of how servants should behave with serious implications if they do not conform or acquiesce to the often arbitrary social practices of the household. Vinnie’s narrative evidences his shifting personal morality and a multiplicity of diverse representations of self, demonstrating how various contrasting subject positions can exist within one individual: for example, the obedient employee, the person of doubtful morals, and the lawbreaker.

Vinnie’s narrative draws on the continued contradictions of employing servants: on one hand, they are a marker of status but, on the other, their conduct can pose threats to that status thus demonstrating how they can exercise power in the relationship in unexpected ways. Historically, the nineteenth-century aristocracy were considered agents of social control with an obligation to act as exemplars of moral behaviour. Servants, through their access to the intimate inner sanctum of the private household and via behaviours that were considered unsavoury, carried with them the power to contaminate the neatly ordered domestic space of that household. Vinnie enacts two contradictory positions: on one hand, a submissive position of servitude inside the house, in which he was ‘expected to go running’ when his employers blew a whistle while, on the other, an alternate position outside the house, in which he clearly posits himself as master of his own identity.

If not actually involved in supplying drugs, Vinnie was at least found in possession of them and cautioned as a result. His behaviour perhaps reflects a perverse determination on his part to ‘perform’ the presumed behaviour of his historical counterpart; the historical aberrant domestic servant (in their case insobriety) even if that might unintentionally or even deliberately risk the employers’ reputation and apparent good name in their local community. The fact that he seeks to convey this in his account to me as an interested listener suggests perhaps that he is employing this as a linguistic strategy by which to construct for me a multi-constituted identity, not just that of loyal servant but, like Clifford, a man who has his own position as an autonomous individual. As Vinnie explained, ‘I accepted the bullshit as I saw it was just how the job was [...] I could take it because of my military background and having worked in these sorts of environments.’ This evidences then how Vinnie’s submission to his employer was in reality a form of faked submission that he simply performed.

This speaks to Goffman’s argument that within ‘the walls of a social establishment we find a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation.’[[371]](#footnote-371) As Goffman further argues, however, social action can be ‘acted out’ and once individuals withdraw from ‘being on stage’ they can ’buffer themselves from the deterministic demands that surround them.’ As Edward Sampson notes, ‘much of the story of human endeavour involves dominant groups constructing serviceable others’[[372]](#footnote-372) and, as evidenced here, Vinnie’s employers indeed acted in ways to construct him as ‘serviceable’; acts which he considered to be ‘bullshit.’ His employers held the power to make him act in particular ways but this did not translate into being able to make him perform these acts with sincerity. His employers had bought into the notion of the obedient servant but Vinnie had not. They were not able to suppress Vinnie wholly, nor entirely limit his actions and, therefore, through his drug taking behaviour, he was able to shatter the construction of, not only his own identity, but also that of his employers.

Vinnie was able to forge a new and more equitable relationship with his next employer. A HNW family bought the house from the previous owners and Vinnie took the opportunity this afforded to recover his position:

A really nice chap, a hedge fund manager bought [Anonymised] House and I went to him and said “nobody knows the place better than me I'd really like my old job back.” Told him all about the drugs and everything and he took me on and it was about 16 years I was with him and that role was supposed to be a gardener but because there was only me and the housekeeper I just did everything really. I suppose I spent about fifty per cent of the time in the garden and then it was maintaining the cars, looking after the horse, the swimming pool, plumbing, electrics and just learning all the time[[373]](#footnote-373)

According to Vinnie’s account this appears to be a rather idyllic arrangement where he is given autonomy, variety and the opportunity to learn. Through this new opportunity Vinnie reveals another incarnation of himself in which he is placed in a responsible position that carries more autonomy and thus provides a chance for him to rehabilitate his sense of self. This strategy worked well for Vinnie who was re-employed and given a cottage to live in on the grounds of the estate:

a really really big thatched cottage [...] about 500 yards from the main house but it had its own garden and it was overlooking fields and you couldn't see work and it felt like I was going home each night and I really loved it, It was really really good, they were particularly good to me. I always thought that I would be leaving in a box you know I thought that's where I was going to be to the end of my time[[374]](#footnote-374)

However, his position was threatened by a newcomer who succeeded in usurping Vinnie’s position within the inner sanctum of the household. Vinnie had always had a close relationship with the wife of his employer and he believed that this was a relationship built on intimacy and trust: As he explained:

We'd always been really close but she started moving in different circles and just got completely brainwashed by this chap who was a horse healer [...] and this guy suddenly yeah came to [the house] and changed or tried to change everything and it really ruffled everybody's feathers but [my boss] stood by his wife as it was what she wanted to do and so all these things felt like everything I painted green for 16 years was suddenly getting painted yellow and it was out of my control and it was awful[[375]](#footnote-375)

Despite the historic closeness between his mistress and Vinnie, the affective tie in which Vinnie acted as her confidante was disrupted with the arrival of the ‘horse healer’ that, in turn, created uncertainty and precarity for Vinnie.

The arrival of the horse healer was an intrusion into their relationship and clearly trespassed on Vinnie’s sense of self as he suggests that the mistress of the house and the horse trainer formed a close relationship, one from which he was excluded. As his previous closeness to his female employer gradually eroded, Vinnie suggested to me that he began to be treated with indifference. Although his mistress had clearly formed a close interpersonal relationship with Vinnie, she equally proved she was able to psychologically distance herself from him when a more attractive substitute appeared. It can be deduced that the trust Vinnie had built in his relationship with his employers did not occur in a vacuum but was a dialogical response to the efforts of both him and his employers to create an intimate and trusting relationship: a relationship that mattered so much to Vinnie that he ‘always thought that [he] would be leaving in a box’ and that this house would be where he would stay ‘to the end of [his] time.’ Just as Vinnie’s submission to his previous employer consisted of a faked pseudo-subservience, it could be argued then that this mistress’ closeness to Vinnie was also a form of pseudo-intimacy, or even an illusion. Vinnie implied that in his last position he was faking subservience, but here he has bought into the idea of intimacy and permanence that he discovers in reality to be false.

The trust that he had placed in his relationship with his employers left him vulnerable when the horse trainer arrived and yet, by his own account, his employers were insensitive to his feelings and his loyalty to them, for there appeared to be no attempt at reconciliation despite his deep distress.

it really affected me mentally more than anything it just had me in pieces it destroyed me as I saw it at the time he just destroyed everything and ultimately I asked [my boss] to make me redundant and he came back with a figure and said ok he didn't want to let me go but he did[[376]](#footnote-376)

Vinnie presents himself as powerless, choosing to withdraw in silent indignation; ‘it was out of my control and it was awful’ he states, as he disassociates himself from the job in a form of self-protection. His position within the household had been undermined and any ability to recover his lost position had been compromised by all concerned. Perhaps Vinnie hoped to elicit sympathy, and for his position to be ‘rescued’ when he withdrew from the relationship but even this is dialogical in the sense that he is acting in the expectation of a response to the unfolding events.

Similarly to his historical counterparts (Jane, Thomas and Servington) Vinnie blames another employee, a newcomer, for his unjust treatment. Furthermore, despite her apparent pseudo-loyalty to Vinnie, he defends his female employer by positioning her as a passive victim stating that ‘she was brainwashed.’ Equally, he defends his male boss by positioning him as the loyal husband stating that ‘he stood by his wife as it was what she wanted to do.’ Even though his employers had failed to protect or defend Vinnie’s position within the household and despite his deep hurt; ‘it just had me in pieces it destroyed me’, rather like Servington, Vinnie frames the situation such that both his employers are positioned as being as much victims of the horse trainer as he is. What he objects to most is, not his employers’ apparent lack of interest for his difficult situation within the household, but the horse trainer’s powerful influence within it. Additionally, this also demonstrates how Vinnie’s relationship with his employers was so much an integral part of his working life that when the relationship broke he was unable to carry on working for them. When the relationship broke down his identity was shattered because, as he told me, leaving his role ‘had him in pieces’ and ‘destroyed’ him, powerfully demonstrating how his relationship with his employers, his role and his identity were all closely intertwined.

As discussed in my second empirical chapter (Knowledgeable Agents), the management of large households is contingent on servants’ participation within them. Vinnie identifies with the collective household; he holds a position of status and therefore is recognised as a core member of that community. The horse trainer, however, is an interloper to the community who threatens Vinnie’s position. This newcomer, rather than taking his place on the periphery of that community, takes a central position and usurps Vinnie and his trusted place as confidante of the mistress of the house. As Etienne Wenger notes ‘even when the practice of a community is profoundly shaped by conditions outside the control of its members [...] its day-to-day reality is nevertheless produced by participants within the resources and constraints of their situations.’[[377]](#footnote-377) Vinnie’s day-to-day reality is produced partly by the horse trainer who employs the financial and affective resources at his disposal to make Vinnie feel powerless, unable to act and without a voice. As Vinnie recounts:

you very much get emotionally attached to these things or at least I did and I thought I was really stupid because I decided that I was nothing more than a luxury but I didn't think that I was replaceable and I learnt very quickly that everybody is replaceable. It's a really scary place to be, it's a really scary position to take on. You don't realise until you're in it - you do feel trapped because particularly with live-in positions - definitely with live-in positions you are very aware that if you lose your job you lose your home and you're scared every single day that you're putting a foot wrong as time goes on. As you get closer to the family - like I did in [place name anonymised] - you believe that that will never happen, I know differently now. So I'm kind of back to square one with the sort of scare factor you don't earn enough to buy a mortgage and have a second house so you've got a fall back plan. I'm very aware if this goes wrong that's it I'm in the shit[[378]](#footnote-378)

When Vinnie states ‘you believe that that will never happen’ he expresses a confidence in the permanence of the master-servant relationship that seems a key factor for the hurt he feels. The expression of this emerges through the emotive language he uses; presenting himself as ‘emotionally attached’, ‘really stupid’, ‘replaceable’, and ‘scared.’ He clearly explicated to me that he felt unjustly treated, yet he did not make attempts to express these feelings directly to his former employer.

I suggested at the start of this thesis that nostalgic media representations of history can offer a stability or an ‘escape in the mind from a harsh reality’[[379]](#footnote-379) in a way that provides meaning when things seem chaotic or disordered. The need for stability and a fixed state of affairs was evident in Vinnie’s telling of events and in the shock he felt when his deliberations with his employers did not result in the outcome he desired and events seemed unfair to him. It is notable that Vinnie behaved differently with his two different employers. His differing responses - a faked subservience in the previous role, followed by a cheeky confidence in this (when asking if he could be re-employed in the household) followed by a desire for intimacy and permanence, and finally fear and vulnerability when the relationship broke down - provide powerful evidence of the dialogical servant and reveal how there is no fully ordered structure to the master-servant relationship. It is a relationship that is co-constructed and shaped by the dialogical reactions and responses of the various social actors involved.

The varying responses from servants to ruptures in the master-servant relationship are clearly embedded in the specific cultural contexts of the two different time periods. One of the primary reasons for these differing responses are the prevailing norms and values regarding appropriate behaviour for these two communities and their range of experiences that are clearly separated by time and distance. As discussed previously, prevailing historic discourses about domestic service frequently depict servants as lacking agency and as powerless in ways that remove any sense of a servant’s individuality. Whereas previously Vinnie had acted with confidence, for example, when he approached the new owner of the house to ask for his position back, confessed about his drug dealing, and made clear that nobody knew the house better than him; when the relationship breaks down Vinnie reproduces historic discourses of servanthood that resulted ultimately in his expulsion from the household.

In my last example from the contemporary data I reveal how unfair treatment of members of staff was a matter sometimes frowned upon by other servants who could often feel protective over individuals when they witnessed such occasions. In this example the data provides evidence of how, not only in moments of intimacy, but also in moments of potential rupture, servants’ lives and identities are jointly and dialogically constructed in concert with, not only their masters, but also others in the household.

Sarah worked as head gardener for a high profile British family. In this case, it was not Sarah who was at risk of expulsion from the house but her assistant. Sarah’s contribution to unfolding events and her anticipation of what she thought was to come provide compelling evidence of how a servant’s reactions to others in the household contribute dialogically to the formation of the master-servant relationship. Sarah told me how her assistant gardener was shortly to be evicted from the cottage he rented on their employer’s estate. Sarah’s view was that the eviction was due to this assistant’s particular religious beliefs. She told me ‘I think they are wanting to get rid of this assistant, they have evicted him from the flat and his wife is pregnant at the moment so that is not going down very well and I think they ultimately want to get rid of him completely so they are doing it stage by stage so I think they were picking on him a little bit.’ As Sarah told me, this was unsettling for her:

I mean I'm horrified actually if I'm honest - absolutely horrified [...] it won't happen because he's a [name of religion redacted] and they abhor any sort of conflict so [he] would not fight back but I think they [her employers] are very foolish - because hypothetically if it were anybody else he's got the keys to the property, he knows all the codes, he could sell it all on, and he knows who he is [the male boss] and who he is going to become and you can just imagine the *Daily Mail* Headline. So I think they're quite foolish and I'm horrified I'm absolutely ... I didn't believe that they would do something like that so privately I'm absolutely horrified and quite upset[[380]](#footnote-380)

Sarah refers to being ‘horrified’ four times in this section of her interview emphasising how deeply distressed she is by her assistant’s treatment by their employers. Sarah’s sympathetic response works in relational ways to provide the assistant gardener with a continued relevance in the household and an identity as a person worthy of fair treatment.

As discussed previously, servants can gain power and subvert the authority inherent in the relationship by acting in disturbing and troublesome ways that can create problems of reputational risk for employers. Sarah suggests that if he were a different type of person (not such a decent one) her assistant could furtively return to the house once he had been evicted (as he knows all the codes and has keys to the property) and implies that he could injure his employer’s reputation by telling his story to a *Daily Mail* reporter. The suggestion that he would not resort to such underhand practices further acts to construct her assistant as a person of good value, in contrast to her employers whose actions she describes being ‘horrified’ by.

Sarah’s distress over the unfair treatment of her assistant ultimately culminated in a lack of respect for her employers. This is emphasised when Sarah describes how, against her own better judgement, her employers agreed to let both her and her assistant take the same holiday period as each other, resulting in no-one being on site to tend the gardens in their absence. When Sarah returned from holiday her assistant made urgent contact with her as he was concerned that their employer was unhappy with how the gardens had become overgrown in their absence. He was worried that the lady of the house wanted to see Sarah when she returned to work to fire her. Sarah described the follow-up meeting with her female boss to me:

Well I'm pretty upfront and honest I'm too old to worry about things and being ticked off and I just said "When I left for holiday everything was fine, we had worked around the house to make sure everything was neat and tidy around the house. Had that really extraordinary weather and then [...] there was some rain and everything goes bonkers and that was why everything was a bit weedier than usual - we have just both been off at the same time - nobody's been in the garden, that is going to make it look little bit different you know the grass is still growing.” And I think she accepted it but she was a little bit ...  I felt a little bit like a school child sitting there at a desk being told off by the schoolmistress[[381]](#footnote-381)

In this meeting it is clear that Sarah’s position and, in turn, her identity as a competent and diligent gardener, are being contested by her employer who is attempting to place a negative spin on her work. Her employer produces a situation in which the problem lies, not with her own self, but with Sarah and her assistant, even though it was the mistress of the house who had agreed to both gardeners having time off at the same time, which ultimately was the cause of the untended gardens. Sarah, however, resists this representation of events and refuses to allow herself to be ‘ticked off’ by reconfiguring both hers and her assistant’s work in the garden as good. In order to do this, Sarah must rely heavily on her interpersonal and relational skills to avert a complete breakdown in the relationship and to prevent one or the other, or both of them, from being fired.

When she relates to me how she told her mistress that they ‘had worked around the house to make sure everything was neat and tidy’, she resists her mistress’ version of events, and the suggestion that they (the gardeners) were at fault, by making clear that the problem was not due to a lack of attention or hard work on either her part, nor on the part of the assistant gardener. In so doing, she presents herself as an individual who will not settle for the narrative that is being imposed on her and will not have her identity blighted by her employer’s version of events. Equally, by drawing the assistant gardener into the narrative through the use of the pronoun ‘we’, she acts to protect him from any unfair representations that might be generated by her employer. In some ways, Sarah may be using this meeting as a form of ‘proxy’ hearing in which she can attempt to conduct some repair work for the perceived injustice of the assistant gardener’s eviction from the estate. Although he is not present in the meeting, he is tangentially involved as Sarah’s words and actions dialogically have direct effects for him. In the same way that historic servant letters provided a platform for redress and a chance for them to ‘set the record straight’ in moments of rupture, this meeting also affords Sarah a similar opportunity, not just on her own behalf but also on behalf of her assistant.

Sarah explained to me that she thought that maybe her employer had accepted her explanation because, at the end of the meeting, Sarah was handed a ‘jar of honey’, possibly as a peace offering. Despite this, Sarah was now distrustful of her employer’s intentions. She told me that she (Sarah) ‘just sensed something had upset her [boss]’ beyond what had been discussed in the meeting and Sarah now wondered whether her employer was planning on asking her to leave too, possibly due to her age as Sarah was now approaching 60 years old. Sarah also said that she ‘felt quite irritated by being made to feel awkward’ at the meeting and that, for her, there was ‘a certain amount of distrust creeping in.’ She told me: ‘I wonder what her game is.’ Here, Sarah queries her mistress’s intentions and calls her judgement into question.

In true dialogic form Sarah uses first person information about her own personal situation with, what Hermans and Hermans refer to as, ‘imagined third-person information (from the side of the other)’ in order to try and understand her employer’s intentions. In other words, Sarah is now curious as to the intention of her employers as the two perspectives (hers and her employers’) do not match and this disjuncture creates grounds for misunderstandings and, therefore, for distrust to build up. This uncertainty was destabilising for Sarah’s identity as head gardener but she manages this awkwardness relationally by creating a distance with her employer but, at the same time, an expressed closeness and loyalty to her assistant.

Sarah evidences how individuals use relationships with others to produce various versions of the self and to construct for themselves, particular identities. Through a combination of her distrust of her employer and her loyalty and defence of her assistant, Sarah invites us to think of herself as a supportive and loyal individual, which she undoubtedly is. The evidence Sarah provides demonstrates how, in moments of rupture, servants are able to recast depictions of, not only themselves, but others too, as their lives are jointly and dialogically constructed in concert with, not only their employers, but also others in the household.

**Conclusion**In this chapter I have sought to examine what happens when ruptures occur in the master-servant relationship by explicating the polyphonic nature of the servant voice. I discussed the significant sense of loss when the master-servant relationship breaks down through an examination of the discourses of crisis and loss that emerge in their narratives to show how the servant story is a more complex and messy one than nostalgic accounts suggest. Servants are clearly individuals with the capacity and wherewithal to be strategic and to candidly and creatively draw on a diversity of voices in flexible ways in attempts to leverage sympathy from their masters despite the risks this might entail.

I examined how nineteenth-century servants used letters to articulate their distress at perceived unjustness, or to invite feedback from their masters, and how the vulnerability of the servant position often prevented them from using direct linguistic strategies. Most resorted instead to indirect linguistic strategies that revealed a struggle between their need to balance deference with a desire to have their narratives heard. There was unexpected evidence, however, of servants employing direct linguistic strategies, such as in the case of Harriet, who was unafraid to quote her master and mistress’ words verbatim even though this did not present her (or them) in a particularly favourable light.

When historical servants articulated their experiences in their letters and, in so doing, attempted to repair their fractured relations, they did so within the limits imposed upon them, including expectations of conduct, social constraints and the discourses available to them. Despite this, the strategies the historical servants employed, whether appeals to justice and reparation, expressions of loyalty, shared experience and flattery, or the discrediting of fellow servants (or members of the gentry), all carried risks. The vulnerability of the master-servant relationship and an acute consciousness of the consequential fear of a breakdown in these connections, from the servant’s perspective at least, was a continual concern. Consequently, there is a dichotomy between what the writer wants to say and what he/she is able to express. Much of this is dictated by inherent societal power differences that existed in the nineteenth century between master and servant, and which, in some ways, continue to exist today.

One of the most striking elements of the letters are the servants’ portrayal of personal loyalty and deference to their masters and the implied responsibility of the master to treat the servant with dignity and justice. Although this responsibility is related to early Victorian ideas of paternalism, the ideology of this model suggests that subordinates were all treated equally as members of a collective group, rather than as individuals who could construct relationships with their masters through interpersonal and affective bonds. The letters evidence, however, how such interpersonal bonds were indeed formed between master and servant and that these created common ground where servants felt able to negotiate the estrangements and breakdowns that take place between them. The relationships between employer and servant, as evidenced in the archives used here, were dependant on an economy of interpersonal intimacy that created a sense of obligation on both sides. As such, servants could resort to writing styles that placed emphasis on reciprocity and a mutual commitment between the two parties.

Rhetorical devices contributed to the persuasiveness of the letters as the writers attempted to increase their social standing or draw attention to their blighted circumstances via particular linguistic strategies. These performances reveal evidence of a conflict between various identity positions in which an individual’s conduct, beliefs and values were continually challenged and undermined by their role as servant. I suggest that, it is not enough just to know that servants were in precarious positions, by furnishing the reader with first-hand particulars about indignities, maltreatment or injustices, and their responses to them, the reader comes closer to the reality of their lived experience, thus creating a more meaningful engagement with them.

The twenty-first century material built on the historic data demonstrating how the relationship between master and servant is not a unified fully-ordered phenomenon but emerges dialogically out of social practices that servants and their masters and other social actors in their worlds all contribute to. Both Tara and Michael’s narratives evidenced this as they described how modern-day servants can be fired without warning and the profound sense of shock they felt when this occurred. I suggested that it was due to the relational work they performed in households that the shock was often felt more acutely. In Tara’s testimony she spoke of ‘hush money’ that was paid to servants who were asked to leave suddenly by their employers. I argued that although monetary compensation was often offered to staff to prevent them from revealing damaging or embarrassing details about the family to the wider community, this did not serve to obliterate the affective ties servants had forged and the consequential sense of loss and distress they felt as a result of dismissal. I drew a parallel between Michael’s experience and how it was closely aligned with Brompton from the historical data, where a middle manager was used to carry out dismissals but that, in both cases, Michael and Brompton appealed directly to their employers in their attempts to be reinstated. I evidenced how Michael’s language was dispassionate and composed as he presented himself to me as a professional individual. Despite this composure, his expression of shock reverberated with other servants’ experiences from both the historical and the contemporary data, such as Tara and Brompton.

Vinnie’s narrative evidenced a shifting personal morality and a multiplicity of diverse representations of the servant, demonstrating how various contrasting subject positions could be enacted by one individual: for example, the obedient employee, the person of doubtful morals, the lawbreaker and the victim. Vinnie’s identity took shape in an unfolding series of events. He used a range of social actors and circumstances to articulate his lived experience and to construct various identities that were each shattered in the end. The chain of events he described; from a role in which he performed a type of pseudo-submission that he remained unconvinced by; to a ‘rebirth’ of himself in his next role where he repositioned himself and began to buy into the permanency of the master-servant relationship; to the final circumstance when, due to the arrival of the horse whisperer who usurped his position, Vinnie was cast out of the house and his identity consequentially shattered.

In the process of describing his experiences to me Vinnie also demonstrated how servants could, not only construct their own identities, but also co-construct the identities of their employers. His first employers were not able to suppress Vinnie wholly, nor entirely limit his actions and, therefore, through their embarrassment over his drug-taking behaviour, their identity and social standing in the local community was shattered. Their withdrawal from the house echoed the historic nature of the relationship between masters and servants where masters could be held accountable for their servants’ behaviour; and bad, dishonest or intemperate servants reflected badly on the household as a whole and were, therefore, regularly dismissed. Interestingly, in the case of Vinnie, although he is dismissed from their employment, he is able to reinstate himself back into that particular house when a new family move in. Paradoxically, it is his employers who leave ultimately revealing how servants can also hold considerable power in the master-servant relationship.

The contemporary data also demonstrated how servants are able to dialogically recast depictions of themselves in concert with, not only their employers, but also other staff in the household. Sarah struggled to comprehend her mistress’ treatment of the assistant gardener who was about to be evicted from the flat where he lived on the estate with his pregnant wife. Her horror over his treatment was then dialogically reflected in a loyalty and defence of him through which she constructs both him and herself as loyal and hardworking members of staff. Sarah resisted being cast in the role of the incompetent servant and pushed back at her employer when she suggested that it was a failure on either Sarah, or her assistant’s part that the gardens were not in an adequate shape following their period of leave. In so doing Sarah performs vital identity work for both herself and her assistant, making clear that they had worked hard on the gardens and that they were in an acceptable state when they each left for their respective holidays. I suggested that, in the same way that historic servant letters provided a platform for redress, the meeting with her employer also afforded Sarah a similar opportunity, and that she was able to use the opportunity to defend her assistant in a way that perhaps acted as a ‘proxy’ hearing for his eviction. By characterising him as good, hard-working and loyal she also raised questions about the morality of their employers and the ethics surrounding whether it was right to evict the assistant gardener and his wife from their home on the estate.

In summary, by charting what happens when ruptures occur in the master-servant relationship I was able to recast servants as individuals whose lives are jointly and dialogically constructed in concert with those of their masters and others in the household. In the modern day narratives, the capacity of employers to sack their employees for questionable reasons without notice evidences the unchanged power dynamic of these relationships that perhaps unexpectedly continues to mirror the master-servant relationship of the nineteenth century. Evidence revealed how the relationship is continuously and dialogically created and re-worked in interactions. Instead of seeing social structure or supposedly more powerful influences (such as their employers) as characterising servants’ place in the world, I argue that how they describe and talk about the events in their lives, in turn, influences and constructs their lived reality.

**Conclusion to the Thesis**

This thesis began with the observation that contemporary culture is dominated by two apparently incompatible depictions of domestic service: the first, a nostalgic reading in which service, and servants, are largely idealised; and a second, in which the latter are unflatteringly portrayed as obsequious domestic flunkies. Neither, it seemed to me, provided fully rounded accounts of all that the servant experience and identity could be, deferring instead to stereotypes that sat at polar opposites of a spectrum. Further investigation revealed a significant void in knowledge and understandings about the actual lived experience of domestic servants and the master-servant relationship as a site for the construction and contestation of servant identity.

My overarching aim thus developed as one designed to unearth more granular information about the ways in which servants produced understandings of their own experiences, and through this began to perform their identities. I undertook this work by examining the relationships between domestic servants and their employers in elite British households during two separate time periods, and by asking a set of questions about how they author their social identities within the shared cultural and social contexts of the households in which they worked. I asked, first, how do servants of both the past and present adopt or resist the identities constructed by popular and dominant discourses in British cultural and societal life? Second, how do servants challenge boundaries and create meaning *in situ* within the established power hierarchies inherent in the master-servant relationship; and third, what strategies do servants employ to resist damage to their identity when the master-servant relationship threatens to rupture? In summary, I set out to derive new perspectives on traditional conceptions of the master-servant relationship that are robustly underpinned by a detailed examination of their lived experience. By privileging the relational individual I brought to light how the relationship between master and servant operates as a site for the construction of servant identity.

Through the use of diverse sources, including archived servant letters from the nineteenth century and oral history interviews conducted with contemporary servants working in elite homes in Britain today, I reconsidered traditional perspectives on servants, their lived experience and how they make meaning in their lives. I examined and evidenced the intimacies and distances in the master-servant relationship in both contexts by accessing elements of the elusive “servant voice.” By looking closely at their linguistic traces I was able to challenge reductive readings of their role and their ability to shape their world and position within it. Through an examination of their interactions, I employed the themes of interpersonal relations, identity, representation and agency as axes along which to chart the continuities and discontinuities that emerge in master-servant relationships producing, in the process, the concept of ‘the dialogical servant.’

Although the data I worked with (letters and oral history interviews) are different types of source material, I nevertheless asked of them the same questions and applied a similar methodology to each. Working with two sets of data was an iterative process. While I began with an analysis of the historical material, which informed my understanding of the contemporary, I later returned to look again at the archival material to see how and in what ways the experiences of contemporary servants informed and refined my understanding of the nineteenth-century servant experience. Engaging with the contemporary data enabled me to pick up themes in the historical material that I would not otherwise have noted. For example, it was straightforward to see deference enacted in the historic letters but after examining the contemporary oral history interviews and finding evidence of how servants expressed their expertise and knowledge, I was able to return to the historic material and find evidence of enacted agency there as well.

The narrative nature of both sets of material enabled me to demonstrate that within the deference/defiance debate, servants can occupy different positions across their employment cycle. One of the most compelling findings was that, although there were repeating patterns of pressures on servants, no two responded to situations, requests or demands by their masters and mistresses in the same way. The interpersonal bonds of affection demonstrated by the historical servants towards their employers, particularly, for example, in the case of the servants of the Carnarvons, suggest that some had close relationships with their employers, despite the unequal power dynamics. In Miss Davies’ letter, for example, expressions of shared emotional distress sat with ease alongside discourses of affection and kinship. Furthermore, in the contemporary data, as in the case of Vinnie, the findings show that a single servant might have multiple and diverse responses to the service relationship at different times, depending on the context. Although all such interactions are highly context specific, each of the servants, whether past or present, evidently managed their daily lives and relationships and curated their identities in a multitude of different ways. Despite this, several core and unifying themes emerged that have helped to tie this study together.

In my first empirical chapter I analysed the emotional displays of servants in the relational work they performed. I evidenced how servants made clear that contemporary employers seemingly, or perhaps even wilfully, confused the boundaries between family member and employee through dialectic processes of intimacy and distancing that demanded continuous negotiation and re-negotiation. In this chapter, I examined how servants’ ambiguous position, situated as they were on the edge of family life yet simultaneously and conflictingly, positioned and narrated as core members of the family, had direct consequences for how they performed their roles and negotiated their relationships with their employers.

As ‘pseudo’ family members, they were charged with the responsibility of looking after the most personal, private and intimate aspects of their masters’ lives, yet their presence was frequently, and expediently invisibilized and they were relegated to the periphery of family life when it suited. It was not evident in the historic data whether masters and mistresses of the nineteenth century also blurred boundaries between the roles of family member and servant (although there was some suggestion that this may have been the case in Brompton’s letter in a later chapter). I argued however that, without more formal stratification in place to prevent a blurring of social positions, effort was put into distancing strategies by modern-day employers in order to create distinctions from their staff, and thus maintain the relationship as one of difference.

This could be problematic, however, as there is also the need for servants to work at the core of their families’ lives and thus they share an intimacy with each other that it is difficult for employers to deny. Although this intimacy was often encouraged by employers, as in the case of Caroline’s employers who suggested she might be the husband’s ‘second wife, it would seem as if creating a distance with servants was sometimes useful for employers. Due to the more formal nature of the nineteenth-century domestic service relationship, there may have been less need for employers to deliberately create distance and difference with servants as the social stratification of the times already did that work for them. The blurring of boundaries found in the contemporary material may, therefore, be a unique aspect of neo master-servant relationships and thus a clash of traditional and modern domestic-service practices.

Despite this, significant patterns emerged in the relational strategies that servants of both eras utilised in navigating these relationships. These included the avoidance of disagreement and the strategic suppression, or expression, of their emotions. The findings derived from my data demonstrated that this was because the precarity inherent in master-servant relationships is all-pervasive and, therefore, a servant’s position is one that they must continually assert, moderate, perform and defend.

This chapter provided new critical perspectives on the relational work performed by servants of both eras, which demonstrated that this capacity to form and maintain affective connections with their employers was at the very heart of their relationships. Rather than relying on the maintenance of a formal distance, the findings demonstrate that closeness and rapport between master and servant often proved central to the successful maintenance of their relationships. As Ann Gaymour’s letter revealed, openness and frankness, which might be expected to be more a feature of familiar letters between close friends, also formed part of the repertoire of linguistic devices a servant could employ to create connections with their employers.

There were additional similarities in the two sets of data: for example, the way in which servants construct themselves as competent and caring individuals, and employ mitigation and repair work for relational purposes. Mitigation was a relational strategy that was common to both data sets although, strikingly, the contemporary servants used it more to mitigate the actions of their employers, whereas the historical servants, as in the case of Miss Davies and the wrongly opened letters, used it more to mitigate their own behaviour. It is quite possible, of course, that nineteenth-century servants also used mitigation to excuse their employers’ behaviour when they discussed their working roles with other social actors in their lives, but substantial evidence of this was not found in these particular letters. The mitigation of employers’ behaviour and actions, when modern-day servants discussed their roles with me, may have been driven by an awareness of the negative views of domestic service seen in Britain today. I suggest that modern-day servants dialogically anticipate that wider perceptions of their role are that of subservience and being at the beck and call of employers in ways that, they may feel, do not sit comfortably with a twenty-first century audience. They can mitigate this, however, in the oral history interview, when treated in such ways, by suggesting that their employers’ behaviour is somehow excusable. In turn, this also mitigates their own behaviour in acquiescing to their employers’ demands. The key is that all forms of mitigation, whether used by servants to mitigate their employers’ behaviour or their own behaviour, serve interpersonal and relational purposes.

In my second empirical chapter I reconsidered the agency of servants and argued that servants construct their own identities through a nuanced, but vigilant, negotiation of status. Through a bottom-up methodology I was able to reveal how servants found ways to express their own views, a finding that stands in contrast to dominant historical accounts that promote the notion that the perspective of the employer always carries the most weight. I examined how servants had to resolve and carefully manage tricky situations to avoid the potential for misunderstandings to arise. This careful management meant that servants had to assert themselves by making decisions about the household that frequently overrode those made previously by their mistresses and masters. By providing evidence of how nineteenth-century servants asserted themselves and acted as ‘knowledgeable agents’ I challenged one-dimensional portrayals of them in which they are seen as ‘skivvies’ to be pitied or disparaged, or as facilitators existing solely to cement the power dynamics on which the privileged status of their employers’ lives are based. Instead, I produced the idea of the servant as a self-governing individual, demonstrating how they were able to claim a particular self-identity based on their knowledge and agency, and in so doing, threw light on the master-servant relationship as one built on inter-dependence.

Drawing on Giddens and the ‘dialectic of control’ in social systems, whereby agency depends upon the capability of the individual to make a difference to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events, I evidenced how servants were able to redefine what it meant to be a servant. Clifford’s letter to Lady Carnarvon regarding the recommendation of a porter to Lord Darby was a case in point. Clifford had to juggle several competing demands when he made the discovery that the porter his mistress had recommended, had a ‘habit of intemperance.’ In essence, Clifford exerted his own authority and agency, overruling Lady Carnarvon’s recommendation in the best interests of the household, while simultaneously paying attention to the deference expected of him. Clifford’s agency and knowledgeability affords us the opportunity to reimagine how we understand what it meant to be a nineteenth-century servant. This ‘dialectic of control’ was also evident in the contemporary data; for example, when Elizabeth withdrew her staff from the dining room and refused to let them serve coffee, when the room became too infused with cigar smoke. These findings demonstrate how both Clifford and Elizabeth were able to use their authority to act in ways that changed events within their cultural and social worlds. The range of experiences and commonalities in this chapter help to broaden and nuance understandings of servant agency and how it can be performed.

My third empirical chapter built on these arguments, evidencing the ability of servants to assert themselves when dealing with difficult situations, by examining the linguistic strategies that they similarly mobilised when the master-servant relationship threatened to break down or fractured altogether. Through an investigation of social positioning, I provided evidence of how moments of rupture, both past and present, could unexpectedly shatter servants’ identities. I examined the adjustments servants made to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in such moments.

In the contemporary data, Vinnie was ‘in bits’ when he had to leave the much beloved house in which he had worked under the authority of two different employers, over many years. Equally, Harriet in the historical data, who had been respected all her life and had worked in four different houses, now had no one to defend her or speak for her and had to humble herself to her master when appealing for a second Character. Both Harriet and Vinnie adopted a range of different subject positions in appealing to their employers. While acknowledging that their cultural and social circumstances are different, I argue that the powerful sense of loss and helplessness apparent in both testimonies provides compelling evidence of how servant identity could be shattered when the relationship between master and servant ruptured. Moments of rupture were significant as servant identity emerged out of these traumatic events and contexts, as servants occupied different subject positions in their defence in these times of crisis.

Although, in the historical data, employers held, at least superficially, more power over their servants than contemporary employers, whether deliberately or not, in both data sets there was evidence that servants also held various forms of power. Vinnie, was willing to demonstrate pseudo-submission to his master’s eccentricities when required, while simultaneously following his own interests (including drug-dealing). Although ostensibly occupying a more lowly position, his actions ultimately compromised his employers’ reputation to such an extent that they sold their house and moved away. Equally Harriet also disrupts notions that nineteenth-century employers held absolute power over servants when she actively shifts the blame for her missing Character to ‘her Grace.’ What is notable here is her bold reporting of her Grace’s actual speech act: ‘shaking her finger in [her] face and saying I will do for you’ which works both to undermine at a local level this member of the aristocracy’s reputation and, in turn, to obviate her purported moral superiority over Harriet.

The findings derived from each of these three empirical chapters highlight how self-representations of servants emerge dialogically in interactions, and out of the events, that take place in their everyday lives. New perspectives were gleaned that suggest that servant identity is not a final and fixed subjectivity, as nostalgic or wider cultural discourses might have us believe, but instead is emergent and dynamically managed in servants’ interactions and can be contested and reworked through their dialogical relationships. I have responded to Jerome de Groot’s suggestion that ‘contemporary society demands new ways of thinking about old things’, to produce a more organic ‘behind the scenes’ perspective on servants’ relationships, identity and lived experience. I set out to examine how servants construe their lived experiences from their interactions, and how they talk about them. By using insights from contemporary twenty-first century servants’ lives I attempted to show historical servants in a new light and to argue that they were not simply part of a distant world that contemporary life imagines, and with which we have no connection.

In conducting this particular study I have been able to determine that, in both time periods, there are multiple meanings that can be drawn from the data and social actors’ lived experiences are highly context specific. It might have been easier to have argued that historical servants were simply all deferential, obedient individuals or, alternatively, that they were all able to act in unexpected ways with agency and authority. Equally, it would have been more straightforward to have found that contemporary domestic service has undergone a major overhaul in which modern-day servants have managed to slough off the old identity of ‘flunky’ or ‘skivvie’ and are now all well-paid professionals. I recognised, and the data confirms, however, that this is not the case.

Running the two sets of material together enabled me to generate new perspectives although I always remained cognisant of the dangers of anachronism. The stories and narratives of the servants, whether in their letters or their interviews, were different enough for diverse themes to be uncovered, yet there were also enough similarities for one set of materials to provide ways to interrogate the other. What are arguably inherent in the relational/ transactional relationships that notions of service set up, are the aspects of affection, emotion, and warmth between master and servant that sit alongside the instability, precarity and sudden ruptures of servant life.

Speech communities change over time and individuals engage dynamically with the cultural norms of what is considered appropriate in a particular moment. Furthermore, all social relations are influenced by historical accounts and cultural templates that are often internalised and, therefore, difficult to shed. Some, if not all, of the contemporary servants were aware of the ways in which their positions were traditionally conceived and the contemporary data demonstrated that, in some cases, there was a deliberate resistance on the part of servants to casting their identities in conventionally subservient terms. Lisa, for example, was uncomfortable with the idea that she must perform traditional notions of service in her relationship with her mistress and, therefore, constructed their identities in polarised terms, with Fiona as ‘bad’ and Lisa as ‘good.’ Others basked in the *Upstairs Downstairs* account of service to the point of role play, such as Pam who constructed an ‘exceptional identity’ for her mistress and expressed how she had ‘always wanted to be a lady’s maid.’ Nikolas also engaged with traditional notions of service when he discussed how he had once been prepared to put the family he worked for before his own family and children, noting that when his daughter now phoned him, he would ‘drop anything and everything’ to see her. What is notable about Lisa, Pam and Nikolas’ narratives is the extent to which these neo-servant relationships are a clash of the fantasy of traditional and modern domestic service practices.

Taking a micro-level approach allowed me to use primary material, not simply to illustrate specific points, but to add insights to the ‘grand narrative’ of history by providing a bottom-up ‘behind the scenes’ perspective. By working with material that provided direct evidence of the servants’ interactions with their masters, I was able to show how, against the backdrop of larger macro-processes, their lived experience was the product of dynamic micro-practices to which they contribute, rather than an impersonal structure imposed by an abstract state or market. Examining how servants articulated their experiences; how they situated themselves dialogically within events, how they positioned themselves in relation to others, and the discourses they used in order to achieve this, provides a closer understanding of how servants constructed and performed their complex everyday identities.

The particular letters and themes drawn from the interviews were chosen because they provided useful insights into my research questions. There is no way of knowing how reliable the ‘narrators’ of the letters and interviews were, and whether, for example, the stories that domestic servants told me were factually accurate. This, I would argue, is unimportant for my methodology. The narratives of contemporary servants do not necessarily reveal the ‘truth’ about modern-day service, in the same way that the letters of the historic servants do not, represent a singular reliable version of the past. Nevertheless, they both provide insights into how a seemingly powerless or marginalised group can author their identities and make meaning in their lives, and, thus, construct their social worlds.

There is, of course, a risk of bleaching out the historical differences in context between the two different time periods, however, the methodology I used gave me insights from two different perspectives that allowed me to use one set of material to provide insights with which to interrogate the other. When historical servants wrote to their masters, what we witness is the direct performances of these roles, their relational work and the construction of their identities, in practice. The narratives of the contemporary servants reveal a different perspective from which we can glean insights into how servants talk about their roles, what they deem important in the master-servant relationship, and the peculiarities of their lives that provides a more ‘behind the scenes’ perspective. Using a linguistic methodology captures a level of detail that allowed me to amplify a relatively small amount of material and to interrogate the dynamics of what is going on in these relationships.

Through my methodology and analysis, I was able to contribute to previous overarching narratives and to find, I hope, a nuanced understanding of servant identity that brings us closer to their lived experience. The micro-analysis of servant interactions in this thesis does not confirm whether all nineteenth-century servants, for example, wrote to their employers to recover their reputations when they had been dismissed, nor whether all twenty-first century nannies were as emotionally invested and as committed to the families as the nannies to whom I spoke. I do not seek to generalise from the findings of this thesis but instead to show how unpacking these relationships in more depth can bring to light striking and unexpected elements of this service relationship.

There are significant differences in the lives of each of the servants as objects of study, however, I hope to have shown that there are also significant points of convergence. Collectively, the findings in this thesis call for new understandings, not only about the lived experience of domestic servants themselves, but also about the master-servant relationship more widely.

**Directions for Further Study**

This thesis pays attention to the “servant voice” and the self-performances of servants, however, there is a danger that, in attempting to provide a more balanced account of servants, one not defined by the masters’ standpoint, we reach too easily for the ‘other’ side of the story. The risk of this is that depictions of servants can deteriorate into a tidy narrative in which masters are the ‘villains’ and servants are the ‘heroes.’ Given this, the archived letters and the narratives of modern-day servants could also be used to bring to light the self-performances of masters, mistresses and employers and, therefore, a worthwhile avenue of further research may be to consider how masters’, mistresses’ and modern-day employers’ identities are also dialogically constructed through their employees’ representations of them. This could also challenge reductive readings of their role too. This was touched on to some degree in some sections of this thesis (Lisa’s representations of Fiona, for example) but could be a fertile area to explore in more depth.

This study is relatively small scale, however, by using my particular methodology it has the potential to be scaled up in future research. In particular, it would be interesting to go back into the archives and extract some more of this material to examine whether, with additional data, more generalisable evidence of a diachronic change in the master-servant relationship over time can be found, or whether the relational and interpersonal work that servants perform are due to power differentials that are inherent all domestic service relationships.

Taking a linguistic approach to the study of the history of emotions might also shed further light on how the performance of emotion accomplishes the maintenance of social relations. Building on the themes discussed in this thesis, it would be interesting to examine how, and in what ways, members of other marginalised groups who expend emotional labour in the course of their employment (e.g. health or social care workers) utilise linguistic strategies to express or deny their emotions in either maintaining or challenging existing regimes of hierarchy and authority in their workplaces.

Furthermore, micro-level investigations of the emotional expressions found in interactions helps to nuance and sharpen our understanding of relationships, and thus, historical events. Another direction for further study, therefore, might be to apply the methodology in this thesis to examine how the expression of emotions in interactions found at a micro-level explain or inform wider social practices and to connect these findings to broader social or historical processes.

Lastly, billionaires’ wealth was recently reported to have increased by an astonishing 27 per cent since the Covid19 pandemic began.[[382]](#footnote-382) Huge differentials in wealth, coupled with associated issues in the hospitality industry, could lead to more individuals choosing to work for the super-wealthy as housekeepers, butlers and chauffeurs etc., thus accelerating the need to unpack these asymmetrical relationships in more depth. Until recently, these kinds of roles have been a relatively ‘hidden’ part of the ‘service’ industry. As my research highlighted, contemporary employers of servants (Caroline was a case in point) did not want to ‘admit’ to the media that they had help, which contributes to servants’ continued invisibilization; just as nineteenth-century servants were historically erased as they were not considered, or counted, as part of the traditional workforce.

As the twenty-first century unfolds with growing differentials in wealth in Britain, and increased pandemic unemployment, it is possible that hiring servants might become, once again, more socially acceptable, or even fashionable. The need to fully understand, analyse and explicate the dynamics of master-servant relations will thus remain, I believe, an important exercise for some time to come. The methodology developed in this thesis, with its emphasis on the interpersonal; the significance of the interactions between interlocutors; and the importance of analysing and explicating how individuals exercise their agency within particular localised constraints, will, I hope, provide a platform for other interdisciplinary studies that seek to unpack the complex underlying dynamics of similarly asymmetrical employer-employee relationships across a wide variety of social fields.

**Appendix 1**

**Letters cited in this thesis**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Carnarvon of Highclere Papers, Hampshire Record Office (HRO)** | | | |
| **Finding number** | **Date** | **Author** | **Recipient** |
| 75M91/E29/1 | 18 Nov, 1839 | John Kent | Lord Porchester |
| 75M91/E29/6 | Undated | Lord Porchester | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L31/1 | 26 Aug, 1846 | W. Clifford | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L31/3-6 | 12 Oct, 1840 | Miss F S Davies | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L31/4 | October, 1849 | Miss F S Davies | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L31/8 | 1 May, 1839 | Ann Gaymour | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L32/8 | 26 Oct 1846 | Hohl | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L31/8-10 | 11 July, 1839 | Ann Gaymour | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L31/11 | 12 Oct, 1849 | John Kent | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/L31/13 | October, 1835 | Ann Moore | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |
| 75M91/N10/2 | 1832 | Lady Isabella Howard | 3rd Countess of Carnarvon |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **The Savernake Estate Collection, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre (WSHC)** | | | |
| **Finding number** | **Date** | **Author** | **Recipient** |
| 9/35/62 | 17 Nov, 1807 | Thomas Howard | Lord Bruce |
| 9/35/62 | 9 Nov, 1801 | Brompton | Lord Bruce |
| 9/35/62 | 1 Nov, 1819 | Jane Dedman | Lord Bruce |
| 9/35/62 | 24 July, 1820 | Middleton | Lord Bruce |
| 9/35/62 | 25 Jan, 1807 | Unknown | Lord Bruce |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Romney of the Mote Manuscripts (1461-1957), Kent History and Library Centre (KHLC)** | | | |
| **Finding number** | **Date** | **Author** | **Recipient** |
| U1515/ E143 | 1849 | Harriet Everett | Earl of Romney |
| U1515/E163 | 1800 | W. Servington | Earl of Romney |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **The Pratt Manuscripts (1375-1968), Kent History and Library Centre (KHLC)** | | | |
| **Finding number** | **Date** | **Author** | **Recipient** |
| U840/C569/2 | post 1804 | James W Donnell | Lady Frances Pratt |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **The Lady Derby Collection, Hatfield House Archives** | | | |
| **Finding number** | **Date** | **Author** | **Recipient** |
| MCD 261/1 | 9th February 1875 | Ralph Ouseley | Lady Derby |

**Appendix 2**

**Interviews cited in this thesis**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | **Date** | **Role** | **Structure** | **Length** |
| Arthur | 06/09/18 | Chauffeur | Face to face | 1:00:02 |
| Caroline | 09/04/17 | Nanny | Face to face | 1:07:08 |
| Elizabeth | 08/05/18 | Housekeeper | Face to face | 1:51:28 |
| Frances | 10/04/17 | Servant-employer | Face to face | 44:08 |
| Lisa | 12/05/17 | Housekeeper | Face to face | 1:47:56 |
| Nikolas | 06/02/18 | Head Butler | Face to face | 34:12 |
| Pam | 07/03/19 | Housekeeper | Face to face | 1:01:03 |
| Paul | 15/06/17 | Head butler | Face to face | 1:07:38 |
| Sarah | 09/10/18 | Gardener | Face to face | 1:39:24 |
| Shannon | 13/11/18 | Nanny/ housekeeper | Face to face | 49:42 |
| Michael | 12/04/17 | Body guard | Face to face | 1:25:31 |
| Tara | 12/03/17 | Nanny | Face to face | 1:50:02 |
| Vinnie | 07/03/19 | Chef | Face to face | 51:42 |

**Other interviews undertaken for this thesis**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | **Date** | **Role** | **Structure** | **Length** |
| Andrea | 04/05/17 | Norland nanny | Face to face | 50:17 |
| Beth | 13/01/18 | Nanny | Face to face | 1:02:36 |
| David | 01/05/18 | House boy | Phone | 30:12 |
| Ian | 06/02/18 | Trainee butler | Face to face | 23:08 |
| Stefan | 06/02/18 | Trainee butler | Face to face | 20:18 |
| Rachel | 17/11/16 | Nanny | Face to face | 1:30:16 |
| Sylvia | 06/02/18 | Female butler | Face to face | 20:27 |
| Thomas | 06/02/18 | Head Butler | Face to face | 50:30 & 26:57 |

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145. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, most research on contemporary elites is primarily economic in nature and conducted by urban geographers, economists and sociologists (see Burrows, Webber and Atkinson), but does not concern itself with how the rich are attended on by their domestic staff. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. **Would you be interested in sharing your experiences of working in private households?** We have been approached by a student, Sally Eales, who is hoping to do a PhD, with the aim of unveiling how domestic service is practiced at the highest level in the UK today and to contrast how and in what ways, if at all, it is distinct from that practiced historically. The success of the project depends on Sally being able to conduct interviews with current or former private household employees and to record the narratives of their experiences. Any participation would, of course, be completely anonymised and confidential and handled sensitively, and be used purely as part of her research! If you are interested, please do email Sally Eales *(email link here)* with your details. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
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149. Dörnyei (2007) p 247 [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
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152. One interview was unusable: this was the only one conducted by phone and due to the interviewee speaking so quietly it was impossible to transcribe. Not all of the remainder are discussed in detail in this thesis due to the depth and richness of the data they produced, however, all of the interviews informed my analysis. Additionally, some interviews are considered in more depth than others. My approach was to pull out the most pertinent extracts relating to the themes I had chosen to address for analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
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217. Caroline (09/04/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Tara (12/03/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Tara (12/03/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Langlotz & Locher (2013) p 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Shannon (13/11/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Shannon (13/11/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Shannon (13/11/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
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230. Nikolas (06/02/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Nikolas (06/02/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Light (2007) p 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Paul (15/06/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Pam (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Caroline (09/04/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Caroline (09/04/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Pam (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Pam (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Locher (2006) p 251 [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Pam (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Ann Gaymour (75M91/L31/8-10) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. The four sisters were; Henrietta Anna Molyneux-Howard (17 July 1804 – 26 May 1876) who had married Henry Herbert, 3rd Earl of Carnarvon and self-styled Lord Porchester; the author of the letter, Isabella Catherine Mary Howard (29 September 1806 – 20 June 1891); the recipient of the letter, Charlotte Juliana Jane Howard (February 1809 – 15 December 1855); and Juliana Barbara Howard (31 March 1812 – 27 December 1833). [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Lady Isabella Howard (75M91/N10/2) Carnarvon of Highclere papers [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
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245. Juliana Barbara Howard (31 March 1812 - 27 December 1833), was the wife of Sir John Ogilvy a Scottish Liberal, and MP for Dundee. According to ancestry records Julianna died the year after this letter was written, on 27th December 1833 aged just 21 - she had given birth to her second child (also called Julianna) earlier that month on 11th December. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Carnarvon of Highclere Papers held at the Hampshire Record Office (HRO) 75M91 (HRO) [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Lord Porchester and Lord Carnarvon are the same person [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Miss F S Davies (75M91/L31/4) Carnarvon of Highclere papers [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. It is difficult to ascertain with the passage of time and without evidence from Lady Carnarvon herself whether it was true that Lady C did in fact give Lady Evelyn permission to open letters that were not addressed to her. It seems unlikely, however, as Miss Davies goes on to perform a great deal of repair work in order to neutralise the situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. It is worth noting that it could equally have been equally as risky to implicate herself in the unfortunate accidental opening of the letters. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Miss Davies (75M91/L31/4) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Langlotz & Locher (2013) p 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Langlotz & Locher (2013) p 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Miss F S Davies (75M91/L31/4) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. MacArthur (2014) p 119 [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Miss F S Davies (75M91/L31/4) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Earle (2016) p 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. ‘Unlike primary emotions, secondary emotions (embarrassment, guilt, pride, etc.) are learned through experience and socialization’ (see Culpepper, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Hochschild (2012) p 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Ann Moore (75M91/L31/13) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
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263. Two letters found in the Carnarvon of Highclere Papers held at the Hampshire Record Office (HRO) and one found in The Pratt Manuscripts (1375-1968), Kent History and Library Centre (KHLC). [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Elizabeth, Paul and Lisa [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
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279. Newby (1975) p 143 [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Newby (1975) p 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. de Fina (2010) p 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
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290. Ann Gaymour (75M91/L31/8) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Ann Gaymour (75M91/L31/8-10) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. ‘Cryptogamae’ is a Greek term and means ‘hidden reproduction.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. James Donnell (U840/C569/2) The Pratt Manuscripts   [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Frances Molesworth married Sir John Pratt of Camden Place in Kent, 2nd Earl and 1st Marquess Camden, and became Lady Frances Pratt. They had three daughters Caroline, Frances and Georgiana. John Pratt held the Lord Lieutenancy of Ireland during the time that rebellions broke out in the late eighteenth century. His term as Lord Lieutenant was not brilliant or effective. He was not the type of man to deal with the situation. His pleas for help were disregarded and when rebellion broke out in Ireland in 1798 he requested to be replaced.” (Pratt Manuscripts (1375-1968), *U840: Manorial and Estate records, deeds papers and correspondence.* Kent Archives and Local History.) [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. These are plants that reproduce through their spores rather than by propagating seeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. W Clifford (75M91/L31/1) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Delap (2011) p 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Delap (2011) p 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Hermans, Hermans-Konopka (2010) p 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. W Clifford (75M91/L31/1) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Elizabeth (08/05/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Elizabeth (08/05/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Giddens (1979) p 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Paul (15/06/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Arthur (06/09/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Arthur (06/09/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Sampson (2008) p 158 [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Lisa (12/05/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Lisa (12/05/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Lisa (12/05/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
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312. Lisa (12/05/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
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316. Lisa (12/05/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Lisa (12/05/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Wenger (1998) p 164 [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Bell & Gardener (1998) p 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Hermans & Gieser (2011) p 124 [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
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322. Giles (2016) p 293 [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. John Kent (75M91/E29/1) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. John Kent (75M91/E29/1) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Lord Carnarvon / Lord Porchester (75M91/E29/6) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Davidoff (1995) p 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. John Kent (75M91/L31/11) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard university press. p 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. John Kent (75M91/L31/11) Carnarvon of Highclere Papers [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Hermans & Gieser (2011) p 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Boddice (2018) p 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2010). Locating identity in language. *Language and identities*, *18*, 28. p 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Vol. 16). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Davidoff (1995) p 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Maybes et al (2008) *Telling Stories* p 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Criticism of the old poor laws (pre 1834) related to yearly service. To receive settlement - on receipt of which the local parish had to provide welfare or ‘outdoor relief’ if one fell on hard times - an individual had to be ‘hired for a full year, on a continuous contract, and receive the full year’s wages [...] One or two days less than a year, let alone other periods, would make the hiring legally ineligible for settlement. That is what often happened. One can find many examples of restrictions against servants [...] gaining settlements. [...] Towards the later eighteenth century, the practice of hiring servants for less than a full year became increasingly common, notably in southern England, and this developed further in the nineteenth century. “No man will hire either labourer or servant for a year from another parish”, wrote the Revd G. Glover of Southrepps, who was describing a problem that was especially acute in his county of Norfolk. Settlement examinations document growing numbers of fifty-one week hirings, sackings a few days short of a year [...]’ (Snell, K.D.M., *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales* p 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Fowler, S. (2014) *The Workhouse: The People, The Places, The Life Behind Doors*. Pen and Sword p 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Fowler (2014) p 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Fowler (2014) p 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. There was ‘outdoor relief’ for the poor through the Poor Laws which was administered by local parishes. The Poor Laws changed quite dramatically in the nineteenth century, a matter I will return to later in this section [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Ralph Ousley (MCD 261/1) The Lady Derby Collection [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Sambrook (2005) p xvi [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Middleton (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Although they might have done so verbally and in person but this would be limited by location and geographical constraints [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Delap (2011) p 221 [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Thomas Howard (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
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350. Fairchilds (1984) p 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
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352. Fairchilds (1984) p 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Brompton (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Brompton (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Roberts, D. (2016) *Paternalism in Early Victorian England*. Routledge. p 3

     Brompton (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection

     . [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Brompton (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Bendelow, G., & Williams, S. J. (eds.) (1998) *Emotions in social life: Critical themes and contemporary issues*. Psychology Press p 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Servington (U1515/E163) Romney of the Mote Manuscripts 1461-1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. KHLC, U1515/E163, Romney of the Mote Manuscripts 1461-1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. A Still Room Maid worked in the Still Room making cakes, sandwiches and jams, and preparing beverages [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Jane Dedman (9/35/62) The Savernake Estate Collection [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Harriet Everett (U1515/ E143) Romney of The Mote Manuscripts [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Harriet Everett (U1515/ E143) Romney of The Mote Manuscripts [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Harriet Everett (U1515/ E143) Romney of The Mote Manuscripts [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Tara (12/03/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Tara (12/03/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Michael (12/04/17) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Vinnie (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. L. Delap, Ben Griffin, and Abigail Wills eds., *The politics of domestic authority in Britain since 1800*. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Vinnie (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
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372. Sampson, E. (2008) p 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Vinnie (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Vinnie (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Vinnie (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Vinnie (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Wenger (1998) p 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Vinnie (07/03/19) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Tosh (2015) p 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Sarah (09/10/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Sarah (09/10/18) Personal Interview [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. <https://www.ft.com/content/c4c427e5-3e81-4013-8ea3-866d20ff6f98> [↑](#footnote-ref-382)