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Upstairs, Downstairs, and In-Between: Louisa May Alcott on Domestic Service

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In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the “servant problem” was a hot topic in the United States. Servants, though, had little to say about the matter. Some were illiterate or, if they were literate in their native tongues, could not read or write English. Many others, however, were silenced by fear. When Lucy Maynard Salmon, a professor of history at Vassar College, launched a study of domestic service in the 1880s, she found many employers willing to complete her questionnaires but hardly any servants who chose to cooperate. “[O]nly very ignorant persons would ask such questions or expect to get them answered,” one cautious yet indignant servant replied. Middle- and upper-class women organized societies to discuss problems with hiring or training good servants—or, in some cases, to fix prices—but servants, unlike their working-class counterparts in other fields, rarely enjoyed any kind of sustained solidarity. Most were the sole paid staff person in the home in which they were employed, and they encountered only limited opportunities to share ideas about their working conditions. Despite these obstacles, a few servants—generally from middle-class backgrounds—did write about their experiences. Louisa May Alcott was among them.


2Quoted by Dudden, Serving Women, pp. 237–38.

3Dudden, Serving Women, pp. 52–53.

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In 1851, eighteen-year-old Louisa went into service; twenty-three years later, in 1874, she issued "How I Went Out to Service," her first-person account based on that experience, published in the June issue of the Independent.4 In the interim, Alcott occasionally employed servants herself, and she commented on the value of work in its various forms in many of her novels and stories.5 As Marmee reminds her daughters in Little Women, "Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone; it keeps us from ennui and mischief, is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion."6 Although Alcott’s middle-class background occasionally blinded her to some of the challenges ordinary servants faced, her experience in service and her ability to imagine the lives of others who passed through or were permanently consigned to it offers an important perspective on the midcentury servant "problem."7

Bronson Alcott’s failures as a provider are, of course, legendary; however, the teenage Louisa entered service as much for the adventure as for the money. In “How I Went Out to

4Louisa May Alcott, “How I Went Out to Service,” Independent, 4 June 1874, reprinted in Alternative Alcott, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 352. Further quotations from this work will be cited in the text as “Service,” followed by the page reference. In her journal, Alcott states that she published this and two other pieces for money (“I wrote for St Nick Graphic, Independent & Ford as expenses were heavy mother being ill & comforts needed” [Journals of Louisa May Alcott, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1989), p. 193]. That the events and the anger they produced were still so alive to Alcott, however, leads me to believe that money was not the only factor motivating her to write her account.

5For more on Alcott’s views about work in general, see the chapter “Little Women and Working Girls: Louisa May Alcott on Women and Work.” In my Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Alcott on Work and the Woman Question (New York: Routledge, 2004).

6Louisa May Alcott, Little Women (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1868/1869; reprinted, New York: Signet Classics, 1983), pp. 110–11. I have chosen to use this edition because it has a fine introduction by Ann Douglas. Further quotations from this work will be cited in the text as Little Women, followed by the page reference.

7Katzman makes a similar observation in his discussion of the work of two other middle-class servants, Lillian Pettengill and Inez Godman (Seven Days a Week, pp. 5–6).
Service,” she states explicitly that she needed “something to do.” After rejecting teaching (“hated it”), sewing (unhealthy), and story writing (unprofitable), and after shocking “certain highly respectable relatives” with talk of becoming an actress, Alcott was left with few options. “I was ready to work, eager to be independent, and too proud to endure patronage. But the right task seemed hard to find, and my bottled energies were fermenting in a way that threatened an explosion before long” (“Service,” p. 350). Misled by her future employer that light housework and attending his sickly sister, Eliza, is all that would be required, Alcott admits that, although such labor lacks excitement, it will be “better than nothing.” Indeed, two points particularly recommend the live-in position: it will bring her financial independence, and it will leave her, she believes, the leisure to read and write (“Service,” p. 352). Dismissing the protests of some family members, who were horrified that one of their own would disgrace them by “going out to service,” she counters that no honest work is “degrading,” for “[e]very sort of work that is paid for is service” (“Service,” p. 352). Besides, any honest work is always more respectable than idleness or dependency.⁹

Alcott remains in the household of the Honorable James Richardson, referred to as “Mr. R.” or “the Reverend Josephus” in her published account, for only seven weeks. In that short time, however, she encounters several problems common to service, including overwork, isolation, sexual advances from her employer, and a loss of self-possession. Issues begin to surface even before she leaves her home. Richardson sends her several letters, allegedly to familiarize her with the house and the family, but he uses these letters to sow discord between Louisa and

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⁹This need is echoed by the character Tribulation Periwinkle in the opening line of Alcott’s Hospital Sketches. Frustration over women’s limited opportunities for employment is also evident in Little Women and Work.

⁹The negative view of service was common in working- as well as in middle- and upper-class circles. Katzman cites several examples of working-class girls who would not go into service “at any price” because it would lower their social position and make them unmarriageable to most of the men of their acquaintance (Seven Days a Week, pp. 15–16). Even work that offered lower wages was frequently seen as preferable to going into service (pp. 241–42).
Puah, the other servant in the house. His warnings about “this old hag” and her “evil plots” are effective. When Louisa arrives at his home, she is filled with doubts about Puah and sees Richardson as her only ally. Capitalizing on his advantage, Richardson proffers frequent “fraternal” invitations to his study, but his overzealousness almost immediately unmasks him. His actions, coupled with her own instincts, soon encourage Alcott to change her mind about the faithful, “motherly” Puah. “I soon repented of my first suspicions, and grew fond of her, for without my old gossip I should have fared ill when my day of tribulation came” (“Service,” p. 358).

Even more than Richardson’s sexual advances, Alcott resents his attitude: to him, she is “a passive bucket” or a mound of clay. “I was not to read; but to be read to. . . . I was to serve his needs, soothe his sufferings, and sympathize with all his sorrows—be a galley slave, in fact” (“Service,” p. 358). Upon realizing the true intent of Richardson’s invitations, Alcott avoids the study, but he follows her to the kitchen. He reads poetry to her while she washes the dishes, and he leaves notes for her under her door, notes “in which were comically mingled complaints of neglect and orders for dinner” (“Service,” p. 359). When Richardson comes into the kitchen one time too many, Alcott stops scrubbing the hearth and delivers “a declaration of independence,” reminding him that she was there to be “a companion to his sister, not to him.” Alcott does not explain why this particular visit finally causes her to lash out, but there are conspicuous gaps at the end of the story that suggest the provocation was sexual. Of the ordeal, Alcott writes: “A girl’s heart is a sensitive thing. And mine had been very full lately; for it had suffered many of the trials that wound deeply yet cannot be told” (“Service,” p. 363). She returns home and confides her “pathetic tale” to her parents, but she does not share that exchange with her readers. “[O]ver that harrowing scene I drop a veil, for my feeble pen refuses to depict the emotions of my outraged family” (“Service,” p. 363). Beyond whatever transpired that “cannot be told,” Alcott takes the opportunity in her “declaration” to complain about the workload and the misleading description of it Richardson had given her. He reminds her
that he offers her "lighter tasks," which she refuses, but she counters that they are "much worse than hard work." "Do you mean to say you prefer to scrub the hearth to sitting in my charming room while I read Hegel to you?" "Infinitely," she responds ("Service," p. 359).

Although it was a rare master-servant relationship that would give rise to the choice between hearth and Hegel, the intrusions Alcott had to endure from her employer were far too common. Many servants had every aspect of their lives controlled. The employer dictated their choice of food and clothing and regulated their ability to visit or receive friends and relatives. Moreover, since servants could be called upon around the clock, they did not even own their own time, which explains why many young women preferred the long but fixed hours of factory work. As one servant of the period commented, "My first employer was a smart, energetic woman . . . [b]ut she had no more thought for me than if I had been a machine. She'd sit in her sitting-room on the second floor and ring for me twenty times a day to do little things, and she wanted me up till eleven to answer the bell, for she had a great deal of company."10

Most servants found it dehumanizing to wear livery and objectionable to have strangers, including delivery boys and shopkeepers, call them by their first names.11 In her novel Work, Alcott writes about an employer who even insists on renaming her servant "Jane," after a previous servant, because she is used to it and because it takes less time to say than "Christie."12 Although extreme, the example conveys the callous, yet all too common, presumption that servant "girls" were interchangeable. Alcott was spared many of the more demeaning conditions servants suffered, including eating at a separate table from the rest of the household, but her anger two decades later, when she writes about her experience, seems to support Sarah Elbert's con-

10Quoted by Katzman, Seven Days a Week, p. 12.
11Katzman, Seven Days a Week, p. 13.
tion that Alcott denounces her employer because he "thought he had bought her selfhood when he had only hired her labor." 13

Richardson’s Pygmalion fantasies—his patronizing attitude about "raising" Louisa and his inability to understand why she might prefer physical labor to being read to and lectured on various subjects of his choosing—reflect the era’s culture. Advice literature asserted that servant girls’ association with refined upper- and middle-class families tended to uplift them. In their *The American Woman’s Home* (1869), Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe specify the employer’s duty: “The first business of a housekeeper in America is that of a teacher. She can have a good table only by having practical knowledge, and tact in imparting it.” That duty is especially pressing when dealing with the large number of servants drawn from “the raw, untrained Irish peasantry” who are naturally filled with “the unreasoning heats and prejudices of the Celtic blood.” 14 Therefore, Beecher and Stowe asserted, the woman in charge of the household had a responsibility not only to her family but to her nation to help mold the character of her servants.

The mistresses of American families, whether they like it or not, have the duties of missionaries imposed upon them by that class from which our supply of domestic servants is drawn. They may as well ac-

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14Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home* (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1869; reprinted, Hartford, Conn.: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1987), pp. 313–14. Stereotypes about Irish domestics or “the Irish Biddy” abound in the period’s literature on domestic service. But no class had a monopoly on prejudice. Katzman cites the story of an Irish cook who refused to work for one family, even though they were "nice appearing people enough," when she found out they were Jewish (Seven Days a Week, p. 37), and there are several examples of servants from one ethnic group objecting to sharing living space with servants from other backgrounds. Alcott’s novel *Work* also portrays ethnic prejudice. When Christie first begins to look for work as a domestic servant, Alcott describes her as taking “her place among the ranks of buxom German, incapable Irish, and ‘smart’ American women; for in those days foreign help had not driven farmers’ daughters out of the field, and made domestic comfort a lost art” (p. 17). When Christie learns that Mrs. Stuart’s cook is black, she also learns that that fact “had been an insurmountable obstacle to all the Irish ladies who had applied” (p. 19). Although Christie is, like Alcott, sympathetic to the situation of the African American, later, when deciding against another service position, Christie reflects Alcott’s peculiar bias: “She knew very well that she would never live with Irish mates, and could not expect to find another Hepsey” (p. 30).
cept the position cheerfully, and, as one raw, untrained hand after another passes through their family, and is instructed by them in the mysteries of good house-keeping, comfort themselves with the reflection that they are doing something to form good wives and mothers for the republic.15

David Katzman, in *Seven Days a Week: Women in Domestic Service in Industrializing America*, characterizes such attitudes, attitudes expressed by many mistresses, as maternalism. Although maternalism could have positive results, particularly with child and teenage servants, it was driven by an unmistakable condescension. As one mistress quoted by Katzman assumed, because servants “live with people of higher refinement and education than themselves,” they receive—in addition to their room, board, and wages—a priceless “beneficent” influence.16 For that very reason, as Sarah Elbert points out, some members of the upper class considered domestic service to be “privileged” work for young women; “elevated by the discreet gentility” around them, they would, when they eventually left their employment to get married, carry their improvements with them “as a sort of dowry.”17

Alcott’s refusal to play Richardson’s pupil does not go unpunished. Even after she has decided to quit the job, she is determined to fulfill her commitment through the end of the month. Richardson again takes advantage of her, adding “the roughest work” to her share, including digging paths, splitting kindling, making fires, and, most humiliating of all, boot-blacking, which Alcott refuses to do (“Service,” p. 362).18 When her last day arrives and she is finally on her way home, Alcott opens the purse that Eliza and Puah had nervously handed her, hoping for, “if not a liberal, at least an honest return for seven weeks of the hardest work [she] ever did” (“Service,” p. 362). What she finds

16Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, p. 156.
18In “Service,” Alcott admits that she doesn’t know why boot-blacking is considered to be a humiliating chore for women, “but so it is, and there I drew the line” (p. 360).
instead is four dollars. After telling her parents about her travels, including the “wrong” that outrages them, she sends back the insulting four dollars, “and the reverend Josephus never heard the last of it in that neighborhood” (“Service,” p. 363).

The four dollars and their return represent the disadvantage Alcott faced in being new to the labor market but also her overarching middle-class advantage. When Richardson first proposes his job offer to Louisa’s mother, Abba, she inquires about its wages; he responds that “in a case like this” such words should not even be used. “Anything you may think proper we shall gladly give. The labor is very light, for there are but three of us and our habits are of the simplest sort . . . and any one who comes to lend her youth and strength to our feeble household will not be forgotten in the end, I assure you” (“Service,” pp. 351–52). Trusting his gentlemanly qualities—his “impressive nose” and his “fine flow of language” (“Service,” p. 362)—Louisa and Abba naively accept Richardson’s vague assurances. In the end, however, Alcott is able to salvage her pride by returning the money and publicly chastising Richardson, a path not open to the average servant. As Faye Dudden points out, financial need would have compelled most to keep the money, and without parents to turn to—parents with the influence in the community to affect a minister’s reputation—they would have had nowhere to apply for satisfaction. 

Precisely because Alcott’s position is different from that of most servants, then, she is able to speak for them, for she has the means to publicize her exploitation and contradict the prevailing view that working in genteel homes is safe, or even beneficial, for young women.

99Two years later, when Alcott spent a summer working as a “second girl” in the home of a distant relative, she was paid two dollars a week, in addition to room and board (see Alcott, Journals, p. 69); in her novel Work, the main character Christie is paid two and a half dollars per week (p. 19).

Dudden, Serving Women, p. 88.

Dudden notes that although reformers were concerned about domestic servants turning to prostitution, they usually refused to acknowledge the problem of sexual exploitation within “genteel” homes as one of the phenomenon’s underlying causes. Dudden points out that Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell discovered, while working in a women’s syphilitic ward, that “a large proportion of the women had lived in service “and been seduced by their masters” (Serving Women, p. 215). Servants who claimed they were raped or taken advantage of by employers generally were not believed. The reputation
In the final paragraph of “How I Went Out to Service,” Alcott reveals that although she long “mourned” her experience as a “dire failure,” in later years she was grateful for the lessons it provided. “One of the most useful of these has been the power of successfully making a companion, not a servant, of those whose aid I need, and helping to gild their honest wages with the sympathy and justice which can sweeten the humblest and lighten the hardest task” (“Service,” p. 363). In her mature view of her youthful endeavor, then, Alcott reflects Beecher and Stowe’s maternalistic predisposition. Ultimately the lesson of her text is addressed to middle- and upper-class employers: treat your servants well. Indeed, Alcott values her unfortunate experience because it has made her a better mistress. Although Alcott moves beyond Beecher and Stowe and other advice writers to expose the hazards of a life in service, her own service is but a temporary experiment. And even if that experiment contributes to a greater understanding and critical perspective of middle-class mores and behaviors, Alcott the servant is subsumed within Alcott the narrator: the middle-class writer is free to value as educative an experience working-class servants must simply endure.  

Throughout her career, Alcott insisted that work was both universally beneficial and noble, a view that, at times, was tinged with the hauteur of privilege. In her novel Work: A Story of Experience (1873), that privilege is evident but so, too, is an attempt to address it. As the story begins, Christie Devon announces that, having come of age, she will leave the home of her aunt and uncle, where she has lived since her parents died, and make her own way. Although she believes that she is a burden to her uncle and that he doesn’t love her, she is not forced out of his home nor is she required to be self-supporting; of Alcott and her family, however, made it difficult to dismiss her allegations of mistreatment.

22In discussing Lillian Pettengill’s domestic service following her graduation from Mount Holyoke, Katzman argues that she most likely viewed the experience as “participant-observer research” as well as gainful employment (Seven Days a Week, p. 5).
rather, she leaves with the knowledge that she can return. Indeed, as she departs, Uncle Enos calls after her, "I wish you wal, my girl, I heartily wish you wal, and hope you won't forgit that the old house ain't never shet against you" (Work, p. 16). In addition, the money he gives her as a going-away gift buys Christie a week's respite in the city and the flexibility to refuse undesirable employment. When it becomes clear that Christie's "old-fashioned" education does not qualify her for the governess position she desires and when she rejects sewing as simply not acceptable, she decides to swallow her pride and "go out to service," pleased to have a chance to "begin at the beginning, and work [her] way up" (Work, p. 17).23 Like Alcott, Christie goes into service as a temporary measure, one that, while not ideal, is preferable to idleness or to feeling dependent upon others.24 Also like Alcott, Christie finds no disgrace in service: "Housework I like, and can do well, thanks to Aunt Betsey. I never thought it degradation to do it for her, so why should I mind doing it for others if they pay for it?" (Work, p. 17).

Christie has her first hint that service might not be as pleasant as she had imagined during her interview with Mrs. Stuart, who inspects her like "a new bonnet, a necessary article to be ordered home for examination" (Work, p. 18). Despite her employer's superior airs, Christie accepts the position—even acquiescing to Mrs. Stuart's insistence on renaming her Jane—and she moves into the house that afternoon. When he arrives home that evening, Mr. Stuart rings the doorbell and waits for Christie to answer it; he then instructs her to pull off and clean his muddy overshoes and to ensure that the boots he "sent

23Later in the novel, Christie reverses this view, valuing the role of seamstress for the ability it gives her "to return at night to her own little home" and avoid getting "mixed up with family affairs" (Work, p. 102). This insight comes only after she has tried several domestic roles, including governess and companion in addition to servant, roles that cause her to understand what many reformers and mistresses could not: why young women frequently preferred almost any other work to the (too) personal, "comfortable" surroundings offered the domestic servant.

24Throughout her writing, Alcott expresses her view that women's dependency is unwanted and disempowering. In first announcing her "Declaration of Independence" to Aunt Betsey, Christie points out that not only is she old enough to take care of herself, but, had she been a boy, she "should have been told to do it long ago" (Alcott, Work, p. 5).
That morning are "in order" (Work, p. 20). After tossing the overshoes onto the kitchen floor, Christie asks Hepsey, the African American servant, whether she is expected to be "boot-jack" and boot cleaner "to that man." In response to Hepsey's "I 'spects you is, honey" and her reassurance that "de work ain't hard when you gits used to it," Christie declares, "It isn't the work; it's the degradation; and I won't submit to it" (Work, p. 21). Although refusing to black Richardson's boots had marked Alcott's triumph over him, Alcott does not reward Christie's indignation; she tempers it. Volunteering to shine the boots, Hepsey redefines the terms of degradation: "dis ain't no deggydation to me now; I's a free woman."

Hepsey goes on to recount her escape from slavery and her goal of saving money to free her mother. Christie, ashamed that she had "complain[ed] about such a little thing" as boot blacking, resolves no longer to "feel degraded by it" (Work, pp. 22–23). Like Alcott, Christie instinctually rebels against her employers' failure to recognize and treat her as a fellow human being, but Hepsey, although she agrees that people sometimes forget "we've got feelin's," shows that a healthy self-respect allows one to preserve one's dignity and to rise above thoughtless insults (Work, p. 21). Christie learns the lesson quickly; she returns the favor by referring to the kindly older servant as "Mrs. Johnson" on their first night together, an unusual sign of respect, and by suggesting that they dine at the same table.

Once Christie is able to sidestep the slights that annoy her, she finds "both pleasure and profit" in her work (Work, p. 23). Keeping the Stuarts' beautiful rooms in order gives her a sense of accomplishment, and she enjoys spreading out their "bountiful meals" in the dining room. Compared with Aunt Betsey and Uncle Enos's old farmhouse and the shabby boardinghouse in which she lodged, her surroundings are gloriously luxurious. Despite these benefits, it is the education Christie receives from her experience—though it is far different from the kind of education many employers thought they were bestowing—that Alcott highlights. In observing Mr. and Mrs. Stuart, Christie learns, in due course, how not to behave. Serving as "table-girl" during Mrs. Stuart's evening receptions, Christie takes "notes
on all that went on in the polite world” (Work, p. 24). She remarks how the women dress and behave, and she “improves her mind” by focusing on the “fine discourse” she overhears while passing out drinks and while eavesdropping through the crack of the door (Work, p. 25). Christie believes that her “studies” will help her in the future when she fulfills her ambition and attains her rightful place as a gentlewoman: “My father was a gentleman; and I shall never forget it, though I do go out to service. I’ve got no rich friends to help me up, but, sooner or later, I mean to find a place among cultivated people; and while I’m working and waiting, I can be fitting myself to fill that place like a gentlewoman, as I am” (Work, p. 24).

Once the newness of these gatherings wears off, however, Christie learns a more valuable and unexpected lesson: leading a meaningful life will, for her, require more than the “elegant sameness” the Stuarts and their friends pursue. Frustrated by their repeated conversations about rarified subjects such as art, music, and poetry, Christie mumbles to herself: “The papers are full of appeals for help for the poor, reforms of all sorts, and splendid work that others are doing; but these people seem to think it isn’t genteel enough to be spoken of here” (Work, p. 25). Ultimately, Christie chooses the kitchen and Hepsey’s “bitterly real” experiences as her school, and through this encounter she learns that she wants something more than the vapid existence of a gentlewoman like Mrs. Stuart.

Hepsey, who has been Christie’s “teacher,” in turn becomes her pupil; and in that kitchen where both servants learn their share of life’s lessons, Christie finds an entrée into pursuits more consequential than those she observes or those she has experienced. She starts devoting her spare time to tutoring Hepsey in reading and math so that the former slave, who has been cheated by unscrupulous “brokers” offering to help her free her mother, can protect herself. Christie also begins saving a portion of her own wages for the cause. Teaching “with an energy and skill she had never known before,” she finds the receptions upstairs ever more lifeless and uninteresting, which reinforces her desire to perform meaningful work. Although Christie is soon forced out of the Stuart home by her difficult,
impetuous employer and gives up service altogether, Alcott portrays her experience as an important stage in Christie’s development. “Providence had other lessons for Christie,” the narrator comments, “and when this one was well learned she was sent away to learn another phase of woman’s life and labor” (Work, p. 27). Both here and elsewhere Alcott consistently seeks to demonstrate that a variety of employments—and the contact with others that such employments provide—is necessary to young women’s growth and improvement.\(^5\) Toward the end of Work, Christie, too, will understand this point, as she encourages other working women to see labor as their best teacher and to have confidence that, “no matter how hard or humble the task at the beginning, if faithfully and bravely performed, it would surely prove a stepping-stone to something better, and with each honest effort they were fitting themselves for the nobler labor, and larger liberty God meant them to enjoy” (Work, pp. 332–33).

Although Christie has discovered her need to be useful and is no longer “fitting herself” to be a gentlewoman when she leaves the Stuarts’ home, her freedom to view labor in general, and domestic service in particular, as a “stepping-stone to something better” separates her experience from Hepsey’s. It also distances Alcott’s view of service from its working-class realities, as glimpsed in the comment of one servant who did respond to Lucy Maynard Salmon’s survey: “I should prefer to housework a clerkship in a store or a place like that of sewing-girl in a tailor-shop, because there would be a possibility of learning the trade and then going into business for myself, or at least rising to some responsible place under an employer.”\(^6\)


\(^6\)Quoted by Katzman, \textit{Seven Days a Week}, p. 7.
Upon leaving the Stuarts, Christie is able to move “one round higher on the ladder she was climbing” (Work, p. 30), and although toward the end of the novel, she occupies a position in between the middle-class “ladies” and the working-class “women” of the reform association meeting she attends, she achieves her goal of finding “nobler labor” than service. When Hepsey leaves the Stuart home, on the other hand, it is for another position in domestic service, and while she is able, finally, to free her mother—with the help of additional cash from Christie—the novel never suggests that Hepsey has been able to work her way up the employment ladder (Work, pp. 101, 288). There is no evidence that Cynthy Wilkins, the washerwoman Christie befriends, is able to better her position either, a comparison Alcott may have intentionally drawn to indicate that, although certainly a factor, race alone does not account for Hepsey’s lack of opportunities. Thus, while celebrating Christie’s passage through a series of jobs and subsequent fulfillment as an exemplar for other workingwomen, Alcott’s novel simultaneously acknowledges this route as unlikely for the most needy women in the mid-nineteenth-century workforce.

As she does with both Hepsey and Cynthy in Work, Alcott marks the speech of Little Women’s Hannah with evidence of her lack of education, thereby distinguishing her from the Marches and from servants like Christie (and the teenage Alcott). Even when the girls adopt some of Hannah’s mispronunciations, such as referring to Mr. Laurence’s “charèbanc” as a “cherry-bounce,” they do so affectionately, as families sometimes adopt the malapropisms of young children, with everyone but the source recognizing the error (Little Women, p. 240). Certainly, Hannah has the love that Christie lacked, both for and from the family she serves, but even in this most idyllic of settings, Hannah is and remains a paid domestic. Despite Alcott’s attempts to downplay inequalities within the March home, the text contains frequent reminders of Hannah’s station. That Hannah never seems to mind or even notice, as when the girls order her around, suggests, perhaps, a blind spot in Al-
cott's thinking about service and the experience of "ordinary" servants. As Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe argue in The American Woman's Home—published the year after the first half of Little Women was issued (1868) and the same year as the second half (1869)—if only mistresses were kind and thoughtful, servants would be content and faithful; there would be fewer who would see service only as "a stepping-stone to something higher," almost the exact words Christie uses. In developing the character Hannah, Alcott seems to overlook the needs and ambitions she herself held when she entered service in favor of creating the ideal servant in the ideal middle-class home—a servant who is skillful, but not so skillful as to have aspirations beyond ministering to the March family.

Hannah is first mentioned near the end of chapter 1: while Marmee sits in the big chair by the fire surrounded by her daughters, "old Hannah" clears the table (Little Women, p. 11). Almost immediately, however, Alcott qualifies this image of Hannah, writing a few pages later that she "had lived with the family since Meg was born, and was considered by them all more as a friend than a servant" (Little Women, p. 14). But in the very next sentence, that statement is deflated when sixteen-year-old Meg instructs Hannah to "fry [her] cakes, and have everything ready," for she expects Marmee back soon and wants to welcome her with a Christmas breakfast. Later, while Marmee is away caring for her injured husband, the letter Meg writes to her not only reinforces Meg's own sense of the distinction between herself and Hannah but Hannah's as well: "Hannah is a perfect saint; she does not scold at all, and always calls me Miss 'Margaret,' which is quite proper, you know, and treats me with respect" (Little Women, p. 157). When Beth becomes ill, Hannah devotes herself to the child, caring for her as if she were her own, and the servant refuses to allow anyone to notify Mrs. March for fear of worrying her and taking her away from her husband unnecessarily. As Beth's illness worsens, however, the Laurences, neighbors and family friends, decide that "Han-

nah was overdoing the authority business,” and they take it upon themselves to send Mrs. March a telegram (Little Women, p. 173). Hannah is, as the senior Mr. Laurence had written in a previous letter to Mrs. March, “a model servant,” but she is a servant nonetheless (Little Women, p. 161). Though Hannah has overstepped her authority and is clearly no substitute for Marmee, when Beth’s fever finally breaks, the girls do turn to Hannah “to be kissed and cuddled,” demonstrating the genuine affection they feel for and receive from her (Little Women, p. 175). In many ways, Hannah is like a fifth protégé of Marmee’s: she is efficient at carrying out the orders she is given, but like Meg attempting to “head the table” in Marmee’s absence, she comes up short in her independent efforts (Little Women, p. 158).

Because she believes that “work is wholesome” and promotes independence, Marmee requires that the March girls, unlike many of their middle- and upper-class peers, contribute to the housework. When they rebel against their chores and experiment with “doing nothing” for a week, they learn that boredom gives birth to mischief. Marmee reinforces the girls’ appreciation for labor—their own as well as others’—when she gives Hannah a holiday. As the March sisters awake the next morning, no hot breakfast, or even a fire, greets them. Forced to fend for themselves, the girls realize “the truth of Hannah’s saying, ‘Housekeeping ain’t no joke’” (Little Women, p. 105). Later, as everyone is preparing for Meg’s wedding and comparing her one part-time errand-girl with Sallie Moffat’s four servants, Marmee reveals how she arrived at her own opinion of work:

“When I was first married, I used to long for my new clothes to wear out or get torn, so that I might have the pleasure of mending them, for I got heartily sick of doing fancywork and tending my pocket handkerchief.”

“Why didn’t you go into the kitchen and make messes, as Sallie says she does to amuse herself, though they never turn out well and the servants laugh at her,” said Meg.

“I did after a while, not to ‘mess,’ but to learn of Hannah how things should be done, that my servants need not laugh at me. It was
play then, but there came a time when I was truly grateful that I not only possessed the will but the power to cook wholesome food for my little girls, and help myself when I could no longer afford to hire help [in addition to Hannah]. You begin at the other end, Meg, dear, but the lessons you learn now will be of use to you by-and-by when John is a richer man, for the mistress of a house, however splendid, should know how her work ought to be done, if she wishes to be well and honestly served." [Little Women, p. 226]

Marmee’s tale of turning to Hannah for instruction is touching, and she is obviously closer to Hannah than to the other servants in the home, who remain anonymous. But it is also clear that Marmee views Meg’s need to perform her own housework early in her marriage as a kind of apprenticeship, a temporary state that will make her a better mistress in the future. Meg’s experience, in other words, will provide her with the “practical knowledge” that Beecher and Stowe consider essential to understanding, caring for, and managing servants.28

Marmee, who uses the knowledge she gains from Hannah wisely, goes beyond the obligation to be a competent mistress to become a benevolent one. The distinction, for Alcott, is crucial. In Work, Christie is dismayed that Mrs. Stuart, believing herself a member of a “superior race of beings,” has “no desire to establish any of the friendly relations that may become so helpful and pleasant to both mistress and maid.” Beyond giving them her orders and criticizing their performances, Mrs. Stuart “took no more personal interest in her servants than if they were clocks, to be wound up once a day, and sent away the moment they got out of repair” (Work, p. 23). Although Alcott certainly glosses over some of the more problematic or unappealing realities of servant life, when viewed together, her literary explorations of domestic service—both positive and negative—form a clear message. What “crushes the spirit” is not the work itself but being treated as an inferior.29

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28Beecher and Stowe, American Woman’s Home, p. 314.

29In her discussion of the humiliation that Christie finds in all of her jobs, Sarah Elbert paraphrases Theodore Parker’s remarks that “it was not work that crushed the spirit of laboring people” but the view that actions performed for money rather than love were seen as “low” (A Hunger for Home, p. 245). In her important text Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America (Berkeley: University of
“friends,” as Alcott argues she has learned to do through the experience she recounts in “How I Went Out to Service” and as the Marches claim to do in *Little Women*, may smack of noblesse oblige, but treating workers with respect and showing appreciation for their labor was surely a worthy, achievable—and democratic—goal. As the March sisters learn to fend for themselves, they finally understand “why servants ever talked about hard work” (*Little Women*, p. 105). Realizing and acknowledging the value of the work others do for them is an important lesson for the girls, one Alcott seeks to convey to her middle- and upper-class audience.

In the young adult novel *Eight Cousins* (1875) and its sequel *Rose in Bloom* (1876), Alcott floats a proposition that is at once encouraging and disturbing: “class” is not a matter of economic or social status but, rather, an innate quality of character. In the first chapter of *Eight Cousins*, readers meet “Two Girls”: Phebe, a servant girl who, as an infant, had been abandoned on the poorhouse steps, and Rose, also an orphan, an heiress recently taken to live at the estate of her extended family (the Campbells), where she is surrounded by adoring aunts and seven boy cousins. In response to Rose’s list of “troubles”—being bored, getting fussed over by the aunts—Phebe cites only her lack of education. As Uncle Alec, Rose’s guardian, points out, Phebe apparently doesn’t consider abandonment and poverty “troubles.”\(^3\)

In addition to being emotionally stronger,

\(^3\)Gillian Brown notes that the view that work is “damaging” to the individual—particularly women—is found throughout nineteenth-century thought (see chap. 3). Alcott’s writing directly challenges this view, suggesting instead that it is the lack of meaningful work that is damaging.

\(^3\)Louisa May Alcott, *Eight Cousins; or, the Aunt-Hill*, 1874. As the editors of Alcott’s *Journals* point out, there was a bidding war over the right to serialize *Eight Cousins*. It appeared in installments in both *Good Things* (from December 1874 to November 1875) and *St. Nicholas* (January to October 1875). It was first published as a book in 1875 by Roberts Brothers of Boston and Sampson Low of London. See the edition published in Boston by Little, Brown and Company in 1927, p. 26. Further quotations from this work will be cited in the text as *Cousins*, followed by the page reference.
Phebe is physically healthier than Rose, who, Alec explains, has been treated like a delicate flower and “saved” from physical exertion.

Apprenticed to Phebe, Rose takes lessons in housework, but whereas Rose approaches housework as entertainment and “gymnastics,” for Phebe housework is a necessity, as she reminds Rose on one particularly beautiful day when Rose “feels like having a good time”: “I often feel that way, but I have to wait for my good times, and don’t stop working to wish for ’em” (Cousins, pp. 93–94). And despite the fact that Alec views a healthy body and a strong pair of arms as “real beauty,” it is also clear that when he encourages Rose to learn the “accomplishment” of housekeeping, he does not mean the daily scrubbing Phebe must perform but, rather, household management. Just as Hannah teaches Marmee the details of cleaning and cooking in *Little Women*, so Rose learns from Phebe and Debby, the other servant in the home; still, it is Aunt Plenty who is charged with training Rose “to look well after the ways of the household” (Cousins, p. 187), which includes not only overseeing the storerooms and cellars but also, albeit subtly, managing the servants who assist her.31

When Rose discovers a frustrated Phebe trying to teach herself to read with an old almanac and to write by copying recipes into a notebook made of scraps of paper ironed and sewn together, the heiress excitedly offers to teach her friend. In addition to being motivated by her genuine affection for Phebe, Rose also frankly acknowledges that she wants “something to do.” Alcott seems to present this arrangement as an even exchange: Rose has become healthier and more independent from “studying” with Phebe, and now Phebe has the opportunity to become educated. But despite Rose’s insistence that “she adopted Phebe and promised to be a sister to her”—a somewhat condescending claim, given that Phebe is the older

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31 Although Debby is presented somewhat comically as ruling over the kitchen, she is actually “managed” by Aunt Plenty, “the one person whom she obeyed” (Cousins, p. 182).
of the two girls—Rose’s teaching emphasizes, to some extent, her role as boss (Cousins, p. 262).

When the “school” opens, it is evident that thirteen-year-old Rose enjoys being in charge. She warns Phebe, fifteen, that she plans to be strict and promptly “orders” her to sit down and wait silently while she gathers her books and other supplies. This is, of course, fairly typical child’s play, and we should not overinterpret Rose’s posture of superiority. Indeed, Rose seems pleased not only to have something to do but, finally, to have something to give (Cousins, p. 257). When Aunt Plenty discovers the “school,” however, her response reveals her own view of the girls’ current and future roles. She beams “approvingly” at them. Telling Phebe that she is pleased with her interest in learning, she nonetheless adds: “My blessed mother used to sit at work with her maids about her, teaching them many a useful thing in the good old fashion that’s gone by now. Only don’t neglect your work, dear, or let the books interfere with the duties” (Cousins, p. 258). Throughout the novel, Aunt Plenty is presented as a benevolent, kindly force, even an indulgent employer, but her comment is clearly and rigidly class-informed. It also suggests a unidirectional flow of knowledge, knowledge being something the upper classes can dole out to their eager servants as a kind of bonus. Aunt Plenty’s attitudes (along with those of other family members) are reaffirmed in the sequel, Rose in Bloom, when her nephew Archie announces that he is in love with Phebe and wants to marry her.

By this point, Phebe has been formally educated. Having revealed herself to the family as a gifted singer and a “brave, bright lass,” Phebe had earned the right, according to Uncle Alec, to have “a fair chance in the world” (Cousins, p. 262).32

32Interestingly, this is not a right that anyone ever discusses with regard to Debby. Of course, Debby is a much older woman, but age is not the only aspect that seems to make Phebe stand out among the servants. In addition to her extraordinary singing, one of the distinguishing features that separates Phebe from Debby—causing some friction between them—is her speech. Despite her background, Phebe has worked “to talk like educated folks,” which prompts Debby to call her a “stuck-up piece of baggage who didn’t know her place” (p. 257). Debby’s speech, like Hepsey’s and Hannah’s, is marked by her lack of education. Thus, despite the fact that Phebe is lower class, one reason she is perhaps able to transcend the class barrier, like Christie and Alcott, is her ability to
Acting on his observation, he had taken Phebe abroad, where in addition to serving as Rose’s maid she studies music. When the young women return from Europe several years later, as the opening chapter of Rose in Bloom recounts, “Phebe had long since ceased to be the maid and become the friend, and Rose meant to have that fact established at once.”33 But a few pages later, Phebe is described as “walking down the hall beside her little mistress,” as she continues to refer to Rose throughout the novel (Rose, p. 24). She also continues to wait on her, despite the fact that new servants have been hired: “‘Jane may take my place downstairs; but no one shall wait on you here except me, as long as I’m with you,’ said stately Phebe, stooping to put a hassock under the feet of her little mistress” (Rose, p. 35). No longer the chambermaid in Aunt Plenty’s house, neither is Phebe a member of the family, as Rose believes.

That Phebe is in a strange, in-between place is obvious immediately. Aunt Plenty welcomes back and embraces both of her “dear girls,” but she then asks Phebe to dust, explaining, “I haven’t had anyone to do it as I like since you’ve been gone, and it will do me good to see all my knickknacks straightened out in your tidy way” (Rose, p. 30).34 When neighbor Annabel visits, she tries to dissuade Rose from pursuing her plan to have Phebe accompany her into society. Annabel’s prediction of the risks is borne out: “The young men privately pronounced Phebe the handsomest—‘But then you know there’s neither family nor money; so it’s no use.’ Phebe, therefore, was admired as one of the ornamental properties belonging to the house, and let respectfully alone” (Rose, p. 47). Later, cousin Mac reports a conversation with a society belle who applauds Phebe because she

33Louisa May Alcott, Rose in Bloom: A Sequel to Eight Cousins (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1876; reprinted, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1927), p. 7. Further quotations from this work will be cited in the text as Rose, followed by the page reference.

34Aunt Plenty also asks Rose to fix her bonnet, and both young women, we are told, feel “honored by their tasks,” but there is a difference between the genteel work of attaching ribbons and the manual labor of dusting, a subtle but important reminder of the distinction between the two women.
"kept her place" and "dressed according to her station" (Rose, p. 97). Rose finds such attitudes objectionable; but although she does not consider Phebe beneath her—and she certainly doesn't view her as a decorative household object—she refuses to come to terms with the realities of Phebe's situation. Rose is naïve to think that Phebe will be accepted in "society," or even in her own family, as a potentially suitable bride. But Rose is also blind to the import of her own actions. In continuing to insist that Phebe is her friend and not her maid, Rose seems oblivious to the work that Phebe does for her; and while she repeats her claim that Phebe is "like a sister," she continues to have Phebe serve her and her guests (Rose, pp. 90–91).

Rose's naïveté, however, is not quite Alcott's. At the beginning of chapter 7, Alcott writes:

Proud as a princess was Phebe about some things, though in most as humble as a child; therefore, when each year lessened the service she loved to give, and increased the obligations she would have refused from any other source, dependence became a burden which even the most fervent gratitude could not lighten. Hitherto the children had gone on together, finding no obstacles to their companionship in the secluded world in which they lived: now that they were women their paths inevitably diverged, and both reluctantly felt that they must part before long. [Rose, p. 99]

Despite the girls' mutual affection, from Phebe's perspective, they cannot be sisters because they are not equals. Although there is a place, outside of service, that Phebe believes "she was meant to fill," she must attain it on her own, through her "one gift": her singing. Her understanding of her difference from the Campbells is confirmed when Archie declares his love for her, which only hastens her departure. As Phebe explains to Rose, a marriage with Archie would cause dissension in the family, and they would be right to be disappointed. "If you had been taken into a house, a friendless, penniless, forlorn girl, and for years been heaped with benefits, trusted, taught, loved, and made, oh, so happy! could you think it right to steal away something that these good people valued very much? To have them feel that you had been ungrateful, had deceived them, and meant to
thrust yourself into a high place not fit for you?” (Rose, p. 117). Rose doesn’t understand Phebe’s burden, and she thinks she can persuade her to stay if she simply shows her that the family would accept her. When Rose approaches Aunt Plenty, though, she learns that Phebe’s fears are justified. Although she is fond of Phebe, Aunt Plenty insists that in contemplating “taking a wife from the poor-house,” Archie is forgetting his duty to the family (Rose, pp. 120–21).

After leaving the Campbells, Phebe pursues a career as a singer and teacher. Her example inspires Rose to seek out her own “gift that could be cultivated” (Rose, pp. 129, 283). When Archie visits Phebe a year later and asks if she is ready “to come home,” she tells him that she will not deserve to be welcomed until she is able “to make some sacrifice for Rose, and, if [she] can, to have something to give up for [his] sake.” This, as Phebe rightly surmises, will allow her to enter the relationship—and the family—as a true partner rather than a beneficiary of patronage (Rose, pp. 271–72). Phebe does eventually earn her place in the family; however, it is not through her singing but by risking her life when she nurses Uncle Alec through a grave illness. Only then does Aunt Plenty apologize for her “silly prejudices” (Rose, p. 295).

Although the novel portrays Aunt Plenty as being wrong to discourage Archie’s courtship of Phebe, it also indicates that Phebe’s ultimate reward for achieving her financial independence is the opportunity it affords her of returning to care for the Campbell family—not for pay, but for love. Of course, there is nothing wrong with sacrificing oneself for one’s family, and in marrying into the Campbells, Phebe finally gains the family she never had. But in happily relinquishing her career, Phebe betrays that it was the Campbells’ approval, not independence, that she was seeking all along. This rather improbable conclusion allows Alcott to reward Phebe’s self-reliance without sacrificing the Campbells. Phebe can be both ambitious and faithful, and thus she is shielded from the charge of disloyalty frequently leveled at workers who aspired to a life outside of service. While Alcott has fashioned a tidy resolution for the novel—addressed, after all, to “other roses” (Rose, pref-
ace)—it does not offer a practical solution to the conflict, as Alcott well knew.

More problematic is the way in which Rose is credited throughout the novel with Phebe’s success. Phebe tells her friend that she would “still be scrubbing floors” if not for her; without Rose, Phebe would not have dared dream of a better life than that into which she was born (Rose, p. 115). And when Rose contemplates taking on the responsibility of a small, abandoned child (a convict’s daughter), Mac motivates her by telling her “I’m sure Phebe has turned out splendidly, and you began very early with her.” Rose agrees, remembering her “adoption” of Phebe and congratulating herself on the favorable progress of her “childish offer” (Rose, pp. 233–34). In her own search for a calling, Rose is encouraged by Uncle Alec to embrace her gift of “living for others,” and she is ultimately convinced of “what a noble profession philanthropy is” (Rose, pp. 283–85, 290–91). Although she learns “how wide [is] the influence” and “how rich [are] the returns” of charitable work from the numerous individuals who arrive to inquire about Uncle Alec during his illness, she also learns this lesson from Phebe, who, when she returns a recovered Alec to her, tells Rose that she did it for her. In retrospect, then, Phebe becomes Rose’s first professional accomplishment.

Unlike those of the Reverend Richardson, Alcott’s own hated employer, Rose’s Pygmalion fantasies are condoned and rewarded. An important distinction, to be sure, is that Phebe wants the education Rose can provide, and it is given with affection, not imposed with condescension. And yet Alcott herself cannot be cleared of the charge of condescension. Beyond her perfectly justified disgust at Richardson’s sexual advances, Alcott resents his refusal to acknowledge that she is already a refined and cultured young woman; although she lacks money, she doesn’t need him to “raise” her. In creating a character such as Phebe, Alcott suggests that other servants would be in need of and happy to have such assistance; thus, she seems to concur with the household guidebooks of the period, which advise female employers to mold the characters of their servants according to middle-class standards of decorum. Rose in Bloom
surpasses these manuals, however, insofar as it depicts a servant from the most humble beginnings raised not merely to be a better member of her own class but to be an accepted member of her employer’s, thus indicating a much more fluid view of class distinctions.

If the purpose of her portraits of domestic service is to give voice to the average servant’s experience, then Alcott surely fails. If, however, the point is to provide some glimpse of life in service and thereby influence the behavior and the attitudes of employers, then Alcott’s collective writings on the topic are important for the problems they expose. Like Christie’s at the end of Work, Alcott’s unique experiences qualify her, to some extent, to position herself as an interpreter between domestic servants and the middle- and upper-class ladies who employ them. She believes, along with other thinkers of the period, that domestic service can offer satisfying, respectable work—work that can contribute to the development of the worker—but unlike them, she demonstrates that the conditions necessary to realizing those benefits are rarely present.

For Alcott, self-reliance, in both a philosophical and a financial sense, is always preferable to any kind of dependency. Yet, as she discovers through her own experiences, working for money alone, while superior to indebtedness, does not in and of itself create the sense of accomplishment required for intellectual growth and spiritual independence. Nothing makes work important and beneficial as much as the worker’s belief that she is making a useful contribution to others. Although Christie’s service introduces her to and enables her to help Hepsey, waiting on self-important, cold people leading empty lives adds nothing to her self-development beyond confirming how not to behave in the future. Hannah, on the other hand, though not quite the “friend” or family member Alcott (or at least the Marches) would have us believe, has the satisfaction of knowing she contributes to the good work of Mrs. March, both her charity work (even if Hannah occasionally has reservations about it)
and her raising of four accomplished young girls. Her genuine interest in and love for the Marches (which, as Christie notes, can only exist when the feelings are mutual) allow her “a share in the family joys and sorrows,” and she beams with pride when Beth is rewarded with Mr. Laurence’s “pianny,” for example, or when Jo has her first story published (Little Women, pp. 59–60, 144). Though Hannah is downstairs in the kitchen preparing the Christmas meal on the night Mr. March returns, when she sends it up, the perfectly browned turkey and delectable puddings and jellies are commented on and praised, and Hannah has the satisfaction of knowing she has had a role in his joyful homecoming (Little Women, p. 204).

It is possible to see in Alcott’s responses to the “servant problem” an argument for a return to some elements of the earlier model of “help,” prominent from post-Revolutionary America until the 1850s, in which workers were celebrated for their self-reliance and independence and “no social chasm between employer and employee” existed. Working as “help,” as Faye Dudden argues, was usually seen as a useful way of assisting one’s neighbors and gaining valuable experience before marriage. It was primarily a temporary state, like Alcott’s foray into domestic service. Families who employed their neighbors’ daughters tended to treat them as extended family members, bringing them to the dinner table and into the parlor. The Campbells employ a similar model with Phebe. Although she is not a neighbor and does not earn her place at the dinner table until the end of the second novel, she is included in family outings and sent to school. As Alcott’s journal of 1873 reveals, she tried to follow this model of “help” in her own home. “Settled the servant question by getting a neat American woman to cook

35Katzman, Seven Days a Week, p. 151. This is contrary to the advice of Beecher and Stowe, who believe that, unlike in “simpler days,” relations with servants—though perfectly respectful and friendly—must be of a “business character” (American Woman’s Home, pp. 325–26).

36Elbert points out that “May family pride” (Louisa’s mother was a May) is assuaged when the relatives objecting to Louisa’s service are reminded “that an earlier generation of honest rural folk sent their daughters into service in their neighbors’ households” (A Hunger for Home, p. 193).
and help me with the housework. . . . Good meals, tidy house, cheerful service, and in the P.M. an intelligent young person to read and sew with us.”37 As it turns out, “A. S.” had read Alcott’s novel Work and, tired of teaching and sewing, had been inspired by Christie’s willingness to try anything; she advertised her services, and Alcott was the first to respond. Far from underwriting her leisure, Alcott’s good “helper,” as the novelist refers to A. S., frees Alcott to devote more attention to her ill nephew and dying mother.

Although most of Alcott’s working-class characters do not enjoy the mobility of that earlier model, through characters like Hannah, Alcott is able to present the possibility that domestic service can be useful and fulfilling work—a possibility tied directly to the attitudes and behaviors of employers. Of course, as an oft-frustrated employer of servants herself, Alcott can be accused of having a keen interest in presenting the potential advantages of such work (perhaps especially to “American” women like A. S.). Nevertheless, in celebrating the benefits, despite the many hazards and hardships, of domestic service, Alcott folds it into her other explorations of women and work. In appealing to her readers to adopt the egalitarian and, from her perspective, distinctly American view that “all work that is paid for is service,” Alcott addresses the “servant problem” by suggesting that the social barriers between employers and their “helpers” be not reinforced but loosened. Her most optimistic portraits of service demonstrate that the benefits of a benevolent approach yielded significant rewards—for servants, for masters and mistresses, and for the ever-evolving American republic.

37Alcott, Journals, p. 188.

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