



Bodies in Service: Representations of the Servant's Body in Two Victorian Novels

DOI: 10.54664/CAIA4718

Maria Dimitrova

University of Sofia

The article discusses the representation of the servant's body in George Moore's *Esther Waters* and the Mayhew brothers' *The Greatest Plague of Life: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Servant*. It considers the various uses that the servant's body is put to, focusing in particular on the figures of the wetnurse (*Esther Waters*) and the footman (*The Greatest Plague of Life*). The article explores the numerous acts of appropriation and commodification of the servant's body – including its costing – and its peculiar vulnerability. It also considers instances of the body's intransigence: its refusal to abide by class boundaries and its subversion of the purposes it is required to fulfil. By addressing these issues, the article demonstrates the intimate connections which Victorian fiction traced between problems of class and social identity and problems of the body.

Keywords: Victorian fiction, social class, servants, appropriations of the body, George Moore, Henry and Augustus Mayhew.

Domestic service played a major role in the social and economic life of nineteenth-century Britain. It was, after agriculture, the most important occupational category, in which vast numbers of the population were employed; for women in particular this was the largest single employment – according to the 1851 census, about a quarter of all women in employment were full-time domestic servants (Burnett 129, 127). The growth of domestic service in the nineteenth century mirrored and paralleled the growth of the middle classes and the evolvment of middle-class domestic and familial patterns; servants not only were regarded as evidence of their employers' worldly success but actually attested that they belonged to the middle class (Burnett 128). Similarly, Davidoff suggests that being surrounded by “deference givers” and “deference occupations” was the most compelling proof of superior status (411). What made the nineteenth century different from earlier periods was the dramatic increase in the number of people with moderate incomes, whose newly evolved lifestyle relied crucially on the employment of servants (Burnett 128, 136, 139 – 47).

For servant-employing families, the resident servant was, then, a readily available deference giver – but he or she was also a potentially dangerous stranger who could disrupt the home's harmony and cohesion. Indeed, the servant as a “member of the family” was, along with the servant as a stranger, the most typical nineteenth-century representation of the master-servant relationship (O'Toole 341 – 42).¹ A “faithful servant” could be eulogized as the “next best blessing . . . after a faithful friend” or be credited with a capacity for doing good that exceeded that of any other creature (Craik 90, 105); and a lady's maid – to consider a specific servant type – could be described as the “officiating priestess at the shrine of her mistress's beauty” (“Maid Servants” 567).

¹ A bereaved and “ailing” master, for instance, could find in his faithful old maidservant a “mother, who would comfort him”; to his children, too, she would be a “parent” as well as a servant (“Maid Servants” 565).

CORRESPONDENCE: Dr Maria Dimitrova, Department of English and American Studies, University of Sofia, 15 Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., Sofia 1504, Bulgaria. @ maria.dimitrova@fcml.uni-sofia.bg

But beneath the various idealizations in which the servant-employing classes indulged, and beneath their self-serving glorification of menial work, one injunction to servants shows through: *Know thy place*. Mistress and maid may share a “common womanhood,” but this “by no means implies or commands equality”; the maid is never to forget “the great difference” between her mistress and herself – a difference “fixed” not only by Providence but by nature itself (Craik 97, 95, 110, 140).

The “great difference” was directly visible: it was, among other things, a difference of body. If a gentlewoman’s soul were to be found in the “uncouth” body of a servant, this could only be regarded as one of nature’s “freaks” (Craik 139). Class-related distinctions in the nineteenth century typically revolved around the appearance of hands – the gentleman’s or gentlewoman’s delicate white hands versus the servant’s coarse red ones (Davidoff 413). In fact, with respect to women, Victorian physicians “constructed two entirely different bodies” – an ethereal one for the leisure classes and a robust one for the working classes (Michie 30); while popular discourses like advertising systematically contrasted the middle-class woman’s ornamental body with her maidservant’s functional one (Chamberlain 296-98). Likewise, the world of domestic service was governed by hierarchies similar to those governing the social world at large: the distinction between upper and lower servants mirrored that between upper and lower classes. In each case, the distinction, made on the basis of the kind of work performed (or not performed), was legible in the body.

The literature of the time reflects the dramatic increase in the number of servant-employing households and the new scale of servant employment – servants are virtually ubiquitous in the Victorian novel, though, in accordance with their subordinate status in society, they are mostly given a subordinate narrative status as well. Typically, they provide comic relief to the grave, momentous events at the centre of the novel (the servant chorus in *Dombey and Son*, for instance), or act as faithful companions to the protagonists (Susan in the same novel or Rachel in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*). Occasionally, they attain a certain dramatic significance by committing acts of violence or meeting a pathetic end (Hortense in *Bleak House* and Fanny in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, respectively). Sometimes they act as chroniclers of the family’s fortunes (Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*). But novels in which servants are protagonists, or in which “the servant question” is the main thematic concern, are rare and deserve special attention.

This article considers two such novels – George Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894) and the Mayhew brothers’ *The Greatest Plague of Life: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Servant* (1847) – focusing on their representation of the servant’s body. Placing servants at the narrative centre, each novel highlights the servant’s body and the uses it is put to; between them, they illustrate two opposite ends of the spectrum of the servant body’s utility. Moore’s novel is concerned with the figure of the wet-nurse, whose body is exploited as a natural resource; the Mayhew brothers are preoccupied with the footman, whose body becomes the site of a symbolic display. Each novel also contains a further range of servant figures; together, they reveal the full complexity and the peculiar tensions of the nexus between body and class which the nineteenth-century servant represents.²

Esther Waters traces the life of its eponymous protagonist through a series of “situations” she occupies from youth to middle age. The novel opens with Esther’s arrival at Woodview – a busy estate most of whose wealth comes from its racing stable, and where she is to work as a kitchen-maid. This is a particularly low rung of the servant ladder, yet Esther is apprehensive – she has mostly worked as a general servant in cheap boarding houses, and she is not sure how she will cope with her new situation. In addition, she expects to be intimidated by the sophisticated servant world at Woodview, where an impressive number of servants are divided into various ranks and positions; where some of the servants have travelled abroad with the family; and where the housemaids change their clothes in the course of the day and wear the latest fashion on Sundays. After an inauspicious start involving an argument

² The two novels belong, of course, to two different periods in Victorian literature; but it would be hard to posit a fundamental change in the treatment of the servant theme in the intervening time. In fact, Moore’s novel is anachronistic in one important respect: by the 1890s the practice of wet-nursing was disappearing (Law 130; O’Toole 330). Even so, as will be seen, critics remarked on the novel’s topicality; and the servant question in general was becoming especially pressing towards the end of the century (Burnett 131 – 32).

with the cook, caustic comments on her shabby clothes and her religion, and the humiliating discovery of her illiteracy, Esther eventually settles down and makes friends with her fellow-servants. She also attracts the kindly, protective interest of the mistress of the house, Mrs Barfield; and one of her closest friendships – that with the footman William – gradually blossoms into romance.

The romance sours when Esther is seduced by William and becomes pregnant, while William runs away to be married to Miss Margaret – a young lady who has been staying with the family. Inevitably, Esther's pregnancy is discovered, and she is dismissed and forced to return to London, where she makes arrangements for the impending birth. When the child, Jackie, is born and Esther's meagre savings have dwindled away, her only resort is to become a wet nurse for the baby of the wealthy Rivers family, leaving her own son in the dubious care of slatternly and sinister Mrs Spires. From the very start, Esther is reluctant to part from her child; very soon, she realizes the full implications of the arrangement – for “the rich woman's little starveling” to live, her own baby must die of malnutrition and neglect (194).³ When she realizes this, Esther leaves the Riverses and retrieves Jackie from Mrs Spires, only to embark on a series of situations that involve gruelling work for obnoxious employers, with her child in the care of another woman, while the wages she earns only just suffice to pay for its care. The seventeen-hour working day “crush[es] all that [is] human out of her” (212 – 13) and her immutable position at the bottom of the household hierarchy makes her feel “the lowest of the low – the servant of servants” (221). At one particularly low point in her life, having been dismissed from one situation and unable to find another even months later, Esther wanders the streets of London exhausted and light-headed with hunger, and almost succumbs to the promise of “food and drink and rest” with which the soft voice of a stylish young man tempts her (229).

Esther's luck turns when she is employed by the kindly Miss Rice; and when one day she bumps into William, her life changes even more dramatically. Disillusioned with his cross-class, childless marriage and amazed to learn that he has a child with Esther, William begins to court her again. The two start living together, and after William is divorced, settle down as a proper family, running a business of their own – a small drinking-cum-betting establishment. William is, however, himself addicted to betting, and the vicissitudes of the gambling life, the costly contretemps with the law, the hours he spends working as a bookie on the race course in all weathers take their toll on his health. After several painful months of alternating hope and despair, William dies of tuberculosis and, having lost the business, leaves Esther and Jackie penniless. Esther has to start her life all over again, and, again, her primary concern is to provide for Jackie. After a period of relative prosperity as William's wife – after having had, even, her own servant – Esther is reduced to taking on the most menial of menial jobs, and is forced to live in even greater squalor than any she has experienced before. In her despair, she appeals to Mrs Barfield for help, and Mrs Barfield takes her back. The Woodview estate is now in ruin – the racing stable is gone, the father and the daughter of the family are dead, the son is estranged from the mother, the servants are dispersed. Living in almost perfect seclusion in the silent house and amid the half-tumbled outbuildings, mistress and maid – whose shared religion makes them sisters in spirit – take on the stoical duty of doing what little repairs they can, growing their little bit of food, and “[w]ork[ing] on, work[ing] on to the end” (506).

When it came out, *Esther Waters* enjoyed considerable success – as Moore remarked with satisfaction, literary and popular papers alike “had the same tale to tell, that a great novel had just been published; illiterate and literate liked it.” Moore's intuition that a servant girl's struggles were “the greatest [subject] that had ever been treated in literature” was apparently well-founded, and the novel was hailed as a pioneering exploration of that peculiar “*terra incognita*” – “the world below stairs” (Moore, *A Communication to My Friends* 73, 66; “*Esther Waters*” 10). At the same time, the book offended certain sensibilities and was subjected to various kinds of censorship. W. H. Smith, for instance, refused to stock the novel, explaining that “we are a circulating library and our subscribers are not used

³ All quotations are from the 1899 version of the novel. Moore revised the original 1894 text in 1899 and, more substantially, in 1920. In my choice to use an 1899 edition, I follow those critics who argue that, unlike the 1899 version, the more sophisticated 1920 version is hardly an improvement on the original, and that *Esther Waters* remains essentially a fin de siècle novel (Regan xxxiv-xxxv).

to detailed descriptions of a lying-in hospital”; across the Atlantic, too, publisher after publisher rejected the book, pointing out that readers would object to the lying-in scenes (Moore, *A Communication to My Friends* 74 – 75; *Esther Waters* v). And, like the negative reactions, even favourable reviews registered a distaste for the depiction of childbirth, the ravages of tuberculosis, or drunken vomiting (Regan xxiii, xxxv; “*Esther Waters*” 10). In other words, what many found disturbing was the stark representation of the body – the lower-class body – at its most naked and vulnerable.

Concern with the body seems to have been part of Moore’s conception from the start. His was a deliberate decision to challenge the literary convention of treating servants as minor comic figures and to make them protagonists because “they are human beings like ourselves, though reduced . . . to a sort of partial slavery” (*A Communication to My Friends* 65). The phrase “reduced to partial slavery” suggests Moore’s awareness of the peculiar degradation of a servant’s body – its objectification and expropriation, and the inevitable alienation between body and self. And indeed, the body becomes the novel’s most compelling spectacle and functions as the most reliable marker of the self’s servitude. Our first glimpse of Esther is not of her face, but of her back and shoulders straining under the weight of a heavy bundle; when we see her from the front, we see a “girl of twenty, short, strongly built, with short, strong arms” (1). In William’s eyes, too, when he first sees her, she appears as a “sturdily-built figure” (5). There is no mistaking Esther’s status – her body is marked by its functionality; it is a body as solidly serviceable as the brown wooden box in which she carries her luggage. Later in the novel, too, when William and Esther argue over his dalliance with Miss Margaret, his eyes rest on her “short, strong arms” (105) – a vivid reminder of the social contrast between his two lovers, of the difference between the drawing room, outside which a trespassing Esther has confronted him, and the kitchen, where she is forced to retreat. When Esther returns to Woodview near the novel’s end, the impersonal narrator’s description echoes the first description: we are shown a “woman of seven or eight and thirty, stout and strongly built, [with] short arms and hard-worked hands” (484); when Mrs Barfield, too, sees Esther after all those years, she sees a servant: “the thick-set working woman of forty” with “rough hands” (492).

Esther is thus mistaken when, in a private fit of jealousy against Miss Margaret, she thinks of the scorn with which “these fine folk” treat servants and asks herself, “was she not of the same flesh and blood as they? [Miss Margaret] wore a fine dress, but she was no better; take off her dress and they were the same, woman to woman” (104). Even if Esther herself were to take off her shabby dress, she would not become like Miss Margaret – her body would still be stamped for its usefulness and bear the traces of its use; standing next to each other, Miss Margaret and Esther would appear not as “woman to woman” but as woman to woman-servant.

Of course, the body can be put to a variety of uses, and the world of nineteenth-century domestic service was divided into a variety of ranks and positions, many of which depended crucially on bodies’ shape and size. If Esther’s stocky body and stubby limbs mark her as a general servant or kitchen-maid, William’s physique elevates him to a much higher rank – early in his life, his “splendid height and shoulders” (49) and “long legs” (63) “mark[...] him out for livery” (16); it is his handsome figure, too, that attracts Miss Margaret’s covetous attention. Such stark hierarchical distinctions between bodies and the uses made of them are suggestively mirrored in the distinction the novel draws between various types of horses – carriage horses versus race horses; the “stout . . . cob” (14) which Mr Barfield rides as he goes about his daily business or a mounted policeman’s “strong horse” (349) versus the beautiful “slender creatures” (86) bred for racing. In the end, however, carriage horses and race horses alike are broken by service: the novel offers the pathetic spectacle of both a “poor horse striving to pull a four-wheeler through the loose heavy gravel that had just been laid down” (255) and a “broken-down race-horse, his legs bandaged from his knees to his fetlocks” (110). In a similar way, by the end of the novel all servant bodies – the footman’s and the butler’s no less than the general servant’s and the various maids’ – are damaged or destroyed by toil, starvation, drink, or disease. One of the most dramatic transformations of the body in the novel is that of William’s once splendid physique: on her final visit to the hospital, Esther is “shocked at the spectacle of his poor body. There was nothing left of him. His poor chest, his wasted

ribs, his legs gone to nothing, and the strange weakness, worst of all, which made it so hard . . . to dress him" (476).

A servant's body, the novel reveals, is at once valued for its strength and extremely vulnerable; its existence is one of peculiar precariousness. A servant's well-being, to begin with, depends on the employer's fortunes – it is the decline of the Woodview estate and the breaking-up of the household that is directly or indirectly responsible for the former servants' ultimate ruin, with (for instance) one maid driven to prostitution and the butler's wife reduced to beggary. Furthermore, a servant is at once deeply dependent on her body and deeply alienated from it – a servant's body is a functional body, a tool, and it is treated as one both by the master and by the servant. The "worst of being a servant," a maid at Woodview remarks, is that one must work even through illness (96); and seeking a new situation, Esther – like any other servant – is "strangely dependent on her own health" (221).

The servant's body is also objectified in that it is required to meet certain criteria; and there is a direct correlation – sometimes expressed in starkly quantitative terms – between the body's physical features on the one hand, and, on the other, its precise position on the servant ladder and its monetary value. Not only is Esther rejected by a prospective employer because she is not tall, but, as she is told at the recruitment agency, if she were "only an inch or two taller," they could easily get her a situation as a housemaid (227). Remuneration can also be tied to a complete set of teeth – as another woman looking for a situation explains to Esther, she has lost her teeth, "and they means a couple of pound off" (235). But the one most important physical factor is age. Age can immediately decide which of two candidates will get the situation; it also decides what position a servant may occupy and how much they will be paid – "I'm too old for anything but charing," Esther's unsuccessful rival says sadly, and "You can't think of sixteen [pounds a year] once you've turned forty" (234 – 35). For male servants, too, "[o]nce yer begin to age a bit, they won't look at you"; and among the novel's most pathetic spectacles is that of "the old servant out of situation – the old servant who would never be in situation again" (326).

"You can't think of sixteen once you've turned forty": this bald arithmetic of body and value, the coldly appraising gaze, and the body's objectification in general reach their *ne plus ultra* in Esther's pregnancy and motherhood and her spell as a wet-nurse. In order to get a place in a lying-in hospital for the poor, Esther must secure a letter of recommendation from one of the subscribers, and this proves an arduous process. Even when she is met with a flat refusal because she is not married, the people she applies to – and their servants – still demand "information about her troubles" (153), treating the story of her body, as O'Toole suggests, as an object to whose consumption they have a right (341). Once she is in hospital, Esther's lower-class body is objectified even more directly: she is unceremoniously undressed by one of the nurses and becomes a case study and a topic for scientific debate for a crowd of medical students. And because she has to be chloroformed during labour, she is even further dispossessed of her body – her body is now a public object and a public spectacle in which she alone does not have a share.

After the baby is born, Esther receives a visit from her younger sister Jenny, and Jenny too treats the sight of Esther breastfeeding as a curious "spectacle," in which the baby itself is reduced to a pair of "gluttonous lips" (166). The reason for this detachment is the fact that Jenny's sisterly feelings are superficial at best and that she has her own agenda to pursue – Jenny has come to extract half of Esther's last savings, and for that reason she needs to appraise the state of her body and her baby very carefully. "Your baby do look 'ealthy," Jenny remarks as a prelude to suggesting that Esther can afford to part with her money because she could get a well-paid job as a wet-nurse (166); when Esther tells her how badly she needs her money, Jenny observes, "You're nearly well now" (168). In her cynical evaluation of Esther's body with regard to its capacity for work and of the baby's body with regard to its chance of survival, and as evidence of Esther's employability as a wet-nurse, Jenny is no less pragmatic than any prospective employer – or than the nurses on the ward when they consider at what point to discharge Esther and the other women, how capable the women are now of work, and whether or not they qualify for assistance. The matron does apologize at first that she has to "get rid" of Esther even though both she and the baby are still weak, but the pressure of new patients waiting for beds leads the nurses to exaggerate Esther's

strength – “Oh, you are as strong as they make ‘em; you might have gone two days ago” – and to bundle her and the other women into the street (175 – 76).⁴

When Esther is compelled to take on a job as a wet nurse, the objectification of her body is complete – the criteria that her servant body must meet are at their most stringent; her body, so far treated as a tool, efficient and somewhat specialized, is further rarefied to the status of inert natural resource; and it is subjected to a rigorous regimen in which Esther herself has no say. In addition, the fact that she is parted from her baby and all bonds are suspended means that her body is now thoroughly severed from her self, and in her employer’s eyes she is all body. During her interview with Esther in Esther’s own lodgings, Mrs Rivers – a Mayfair lady dressed in beautiful silk – is appalled by the poverty in which her prospective wet nurse lives, but is reassured by the examination she conducts. After an opening series of brisk, matter-of-fact questions, she asks to see the baby and concludes that he “seems healthy enough” – a testimony to the quality of Esther’s milk. The one most important question she has to ask of Esther she asks in a particularly curt, clipped way: “You have a good supply of milk?” Such curtness suggests that the subject, though vitally important to Mrs Rivers, is distasteful to her and she would rather distance herself from it. Immediately after Esther’s positive reply, Mrs Rivers declares in the same elliptic manner: “Fifteen shillings, and all found” (181), wishing to conclude the transaction as soon as possible. Esther does tentatively ask for a more generous pay but, according to the inexorable arithmetic of body and value, the milk of a wet nurse who has only had her first baby cannot be converted to more than fifteen shillings; the request is summarily rejected and the first stage of the transaction is completed. There is also a second and crucial stage – though that is announced rather than narrated – involving a second examination; the second examination, performed by a doctor, is far more specific and searching than the examination that any other type of servant would be subjected to.⁵ And even when she is already installed in her employer’s house, Esther is still subject to the scrutinizing gaze – watching her suckle her charge for the first time, Mrs Rivers regards her small breasts with suspicion and asks her to confirm that she does indeed have “plenty of milk” (186).

That Mrs Rivers views Esther as an impersonal natural resource – a “good supply of milk” – is also obvious from the fact that during their first interview she never asks for Esther’s name: her opening words merely require confirmation that Esther is “the young person who wants a situation as wet-nurse” (180). She only requests to know Esther’s name when she enters her employment, and even then she only addresses Esther as “Waters” a couple of times; for the most part she addresses Esther as, simply, “nurse” – a bald designation of her function. As regards Mr Rivers, he hardly even sees Esther; though Esther is vital to the life and well-being of their baby, Mrs Rivers only introduces her to him in passing, quite literally – as the two women pass him by on the stairs on their way up to the nursery, Mrs Rivers informs him that “This is the new nurse.” To Esther herself, too, Mr Rivers remains that single glimpse of a “tall, handsome gentleman” (186). During her employment by the family, Esther appears merely as a depersonalized, inert body that has been transplanted from its native environment to another, completely alien to it; and she only perceives this environment – the beautiful ornaments, the soft hangings, the fine porcelain – in fleeting glimpses through half-open doors.

⁴ In addition, rather like her sister or like an employer, Esther herself comes to objectify her body, treating it and its resources as entirely subservient to the baby’s needs. She tells Jenny, for instance, that “I can’t argue – I ‘aven’t the strength, and it interferes with the milk” (169). The particular form the mother-baby symbiosis takes in the novel is discussed in Jules David Law’s *The Social Life of Fluids: Blood, Milk, and Water in the Victorian Novel*. Law suggests that even before Esther starts working as a wet nurse, her own suckling baby is presented as “a kind of vampire”; in his reading, the novel emerges as a subversive critique of the nineteenth-century conception of the “ostensibly unique, natural, and exclusive dyad of mother and child” (128).

⁵ Contemporary baby manuals specified a number of criteria that a prospective wet nurse ought to meet with regard both to her physical constitution and to her moral character and temperament. With regard to her body, it was desirable that the wet nurse’s constitution and age should be as close as possible to the constitution and age of the baby’s mother; that the two women should have been confined as close as possible in time; that the wet nurse should not have resumed menstruating; that the wet nurse should have a good complexion and a good appetite; that she should be free of such signs of disease as poor digestion, bad breath, etc. The appearance of her breasts and nipples was also to be considered, as well as, of course, the appearance and quality of her milk (Roberts 281 – 82).

At this stage of her life, Esther's relationship with her body is, in fact, the very opposite of Mrs Rivers's relationship with hers: where Esther's body is reduced to a natural resource for the use of another, Mrs Rivers – who, as Esther can see, is quite healthy and could easily nurse her child if she wanted to – exercises complete control over her body. “[R]ich folk don’t nurse their own,” as Mrs Spires puts it bluntly (190); and, indeed, the employment of a wet nurse in nineteenth-century England was a luxury reserved for the privileged few.⁶ If Esther is reduced to being all body, Mrs Rivers carefully rations or suspends her bodily functions to achieve a degree of dis-embodiment. This relationship with her body is no less an index of her social status than is her fine house. In the intricate economy of bodies and class, a woman's milk is both a raw natural resource and a luxury item.

In order to get the full value of Esther's body, however, Mrs Rivers subjects it to a rigorous regimen; this involves, most importantly, the regulation of food and exercise. Esther is methodically fattened up through a constant and plentiful supply of food – so unnaturally constant and plentiful that she regards it as an insult to her self-respect; and she is only allowed the minimum of exercise that will keep her in good health. So seriously does Mrs Rivers take the well-being of Esther's body that she even supervises the cooking of her food in person and pours out the porter herself. Such curious privilege – a reversal of traditional master-servant roles – would, in other circumstances, suggest that a person is being honoured; here, it stands for Esther's depersonalization. Mrs Rivers is, of course, anxious about Esther's meals in the same way as a farmer will take special care of his chicken's feed if he wants prime eggs. As regards the walks that Esther is allowed, those too are carefully monitored – Esther is never allowed out alone for, one can imagine, any number of reasons.

This systematic regulation of the servant's body is mirrored – to extend a parallel suggested earlier – in that of the horses bred and trained for racing. The horses' exercise at Woodview is carefully planned to ensure optimal performance in impending races; and as regards body mass, not only does everyone hope for “[a]nother pound of muscle in [the] superb hind-quarters” (62) of the favourite for an important race, but, when necessary, race horses may be made to lose weight by being subjected to a Turkish bath, as “[e]very pound of flesh off the lungs is so much wind” (380).

Mrs Rivers also takes care to secure for Esther that fine emotional balance which will make possible the maximum productivity of her body – “I don’t want you to agitate yourself,” she tells Esther on one occasion (188), and on another reproves Mrs Spires for “troubling” and “upsetting” Esther with the news that Jackie is ill (192). On both occasions, Mrs Rivers is willing to sacrifice some of her money or convenience – she offers to write a letter for Esther herself, and thus assume a menial position towards her again – in order to restore Esther's emotional equilibrium and ensure that the “good supply of milk” will continue, and that this will be good milk.⁷

The cynical Mrs Spires has a shrewd comment to make on this too: “they ’ates their nurses to be a-’ankering after their own, they likes them to be forgotten like” (202); and indeed, unable to allay Esther's anxiety about Jackie, an irate Mrs Rivers declares that the next time she employs a wet nurse, she will “get one who has lost her baby, and then there’ll be no bother” (193). In imposing a separation between Esther on the one hand and her child and entire environment on the other, Mrs Rivers is following a common nineteenth-century practice. As Victorian wet nurses came from the lower classes, employing them involved a fear of infection, both in the sense of the transmission of physical disease and in the sense of moral and social contamination (Roberts 290; Law 130) – a wet nurse was the ultimate dangerous stranger threatening a family's integrity (O’Toole 342), and the separation was a way to minimize the danger. The separation also ensured that the wet nurse's physical and emotional resources were reserved for the sole use of her charge, and that, untroubled by other attachments, she would produce better milk. Indeed, as Roberts shows, some doctors recommended employing unmarried wet nurses, because in the

⁶ As Roberts shows, employing a wet nurse involved expenses and arrangements that could cause inconvenience even to the comparatively well-off (291). Moore's novel, too, explicitly relates the practice to the world of the titled and the fashionable (179, 194).

⁷ A wet nurse's emotional state was regarded in the nineteenth century as crucial to the quality of her milk: doctors believed, for instance, that “milk given in a fit of anger or extreme distress would be poisoned, and cases were constantly quoted of children who were supposed to have died from this cause” (Roberts 283).

absence of a husband to worry about, their milk was bound to be of superior quality (284). What makes it easier for Mrs Rivers to impose the separation is her implicit belief that her own maternal feelings and those of Esther and her class are not of the same kind; Mrs Trubner, who subsequently employs Esther, too, dismisses her appeal to their common motherhood – motherhood for the two of them, she says, is “quite different” (218). The “great difference” between mistress and maid (Craik 110) extends, then, even to their relationship with their offspring: women of Esther’s class are regarded in Moore’s novel as almost a different species.⁸

It is on the same belief that the entire wet-nursing and baby-farming system depicted in the novel is founded – the system according to which a wet nurse is separated from her baby and puts it out to nurse, to be cared for in often dubious conditions. And, as both Mrs Spires and Mrs Rivers suggest, even if women in Esther’s position were capable of maternal feelings, they could not afford to entertain them. Babies, Mrs Spires declares, “is a awful drag on a girl who gets her living in service” (190); Jackie will “only be a drag to you,” Mrs Rivers tells Esther, “[y]ou’ll never be able to bring him up, poor little bastard child” (194). In fact, for Mrs Spires it is nothing short of “providential” (190) that rich women do not nurse their babies, thus creating work for women like Esther and saving them from ruin. Only one thing is necessary for the system to operate with perfect efficiency, and this is that the wet nurse’s own baby should die. It is, indeed, in everyone’s interest that it should die. With the baby “out of the way” (198), the employer can be sure that the wet nurse will not fret unnecessarily. The wet nurse is saved the disgrace of having an illegitimate child; and, more importantly, instead of costing her money, the baby brings her money. Death is also the best that could happen to the baby itself, for who would care for it? “[T]here is ’undreds and ’undreds of them – ay, thousands and thousands every year” (199); the kindest thing to do is “to let them go off quiet” (198). Mrs Spires accordingly suggests that if Esther were to pay her five pounds, she could get rid of Jackie – by, she says, finding someone to adopt him, but in reality by letting him die of starvation and neglect. Esther, who from the very start is reluctant to be separated from Jackie because children who are put out to nurse are known to die, and who later learns that the babies of the two wet nurses who preceded her in the Rivers’ household both died, arrives at the novel’s most brutal arithmetic of the body – it is “a life for a life” (189); worse, it is the life of three poor children for the life of a rich one.⁹

Esther refuses to participate any longer in this “violent economy of bodies” (Law 127), even though this means that she and Jackie end up in the workhouse. After the workhouse, she enters a series of situations, struggling for Jackie’s and her own survival; later, as William’s wife, she is even able to send him to school. In the end, however, Esther is proud not so much of Jackie’s education (though that is a huge advance on her own illiteracy) but of his body. Jackie has inherited his father’s physique – he is a “great tall fellow” with slim legs (463) – and he has now reached manhood; Esther revels in the thought of having produced this beautiful body and nourished and sustained its life until it has reached mature perfection. In some ways, then, she never breaks free from the economy of bodies. And nor does Jackie himself – in other circumstances, his physique would destine him for livery; in the dire poverty in which he spends most of his life, it destines him for a soldier’s uniform. At the same time as Esther sees the handsome soldier in his red cloak, she recognizes that this beautiful body may soon become cannon fodder; nevertheless, she is proud of her achievement.

When Nancy R. Cirillo remarks that “nobody of Esther’s class makes anything or produces anything: they merely serve” (80), she is therefore only partly right. Moore’s novel demonstrates that a servant body is good not just for maintaining the life and comfort of superior bodies: it is also eminently

⁸ Mrs Rivers and Mrs Trubner are representative of a culture which assumed, in O’Toole’s formulation, “a privileged relationship to the maternal” for middle-class women (344). Roberts, too, reveals that some nineteenth-century doctors involved in the selection of wet nurses argued that the mother of illegitimate children was unlikely to feel their absence keenly (284). To O’Toole, Moore’s achievement consists precisely in portraying an “exceptional” working-class mother (345).

⁹ Esther’s fears are well-founded: as contemporary reports reveal, the children of wet nurses made up a considerable percentage of the numerous infant deaths that resulted from the children being put out to nurse (Roberts 290). For nineteenth-century baby-farming and contemporary attitudes to it, see Roberts 286 – 90 and Law 139.

suited for producing more menial bodies, whether those are meant for domestic or military service. It also reflects the nineteenth century's meticulously economic approach to the servant body, which involves the quantification of its vitality and utility and their conversion into monetary value. It suggests, too, that it is impossible for a servant to escape the economy of bodies, especially as a servant is so utterly dependent on his or her body. Finally, the novel is permeated both by a sense of the fragility of the servant body and by a suggestion of its expendability – as a natural resource the servant body is, after all, renewable. In all this, Moore's poignant realist study of the peculiar nexus between body and class anticipates such dystopian explorations of the issue as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.

Caroline, the narrator protagonist of *The Greatest Plague of Life*, certainly values the physical strength of her prospective servants – she regards a “tall, strong, big-boned” body as a guarantee that the person will not be “afraid of work” (47). This is an important consideration for her, as she believes in extracting as much labour as she can from any single servant – indeed, as her husband Edward remarks, she treats servants as “mere bundles of muscles” (79). The one type of servant that Caroline prizes above all, however, fulfils a purpose that is ornamental rather than functional; and this hierarchy of servant value reflects Caroline's particular social position and aspirations.

Written as a book of advice on relations between mistresses and servants that narrates Caroline's own extensive experience for the edification of the less experienced, *The Greatest Plague of Life* is a comedy of social climbing, in which the increasing number and variety of servants employed by the family reflect the family's rise in the world or, rather, Caroline's soaring ambitions. Caroline's origins are modest enough: her father is a petty coal merchant with “three barges and one wagon” (183) who sells coal of dubious quality. Though she is at great pains to conceal her background by exaggerating the scale of her father's business and his clientele, she cannot fool anyone, not even her servants, who counter her exaggerations by diminishing her family to “coal-[h]eavers” (183). The beginning of Caroline's married life also marks the beginning of her effort to climb the social ladder; the couple's pretty “cottage orné” in the swanky Park Village area and the fact that, on their return from their honeymoon, they are driven up to it in a post-chaise are only the first in a series of badges of status she assiduously collects. Caroline tries to establish her social credentials in every possible way. In one of the opening chapters, for instance, she wants to make a display of the portrait of an illustrious ancestor supposed to have come to England with William the Conqueror, in order to demonstrate to her husband's friends that he has married no ordinary person and that her family “were not mushrooms who had never been heard of” (34) – though the plan goes comically awry. Near the end of the novel, Caroline embarks on a much more elaborate scheme, pretending she is spending the season on the Continent while she is, in fact, stuck at home (this plan, too, goes spectacularly wrong). She also gravitates towards fashionable places and cultivates the right acquaintances – the reason why she selects “the two Misses B-yl-s” for her bridesmaids, for instance, is that they are “carriage people” (22).

The one most important badge of status Caroline aspires to, however, is a “large retinue of servants,” without which even the possession of a “great, big, grand house” would be incomplete (274). The novel, accordingly, traces her pursuit of the ideal servant and the gradual extension of her “proud empire” (11) as she systematically manipulates her husband into increasing the number of servants they employ. Caroline's notion of ruling her own proud empire is, of course, quite conventional: it typifies the Victorian division of life into gendered spheres and the aggrandizement of the narrow domestic sphere assigned to woman through regal metaphors – as, for instance, in Dinah Craik's assertion that “every family is a . . . kingdom in itself” (124), in which there must be only one ruler: the woman (148).¹⁰ Caroline subscribes, too, to the idea that in families, just as in kingdoms, the art of government consists, most importantly, in the successful governing of servants (Craik 124). But she is also a glaring example of misgovernment – in Craik's typology of mistresses, she is the worst type: the mistress who changes her servants all the time (125 – 26).

¹⁰ The logic of this aggrandizement is similar to the logic of the aggrandizement of menial work discussed at the beginning of the article: just as the latter protects the interests of the servant-employing classes, the former protects the interests of the patriarchal order.

Because to Caroline it is vital that social boundaries between her and her servants should be clear and firm (especially as her own origins are none too exalted), one of her most traumatic experiences is with a maid who blurs those boundaries. To begin with, the maid offends by carrying the “stuck-up” name “Rosetta” – a problem which Caroline remedies by promptly renaming her “Susan” (85 – 86), the generic name for a maidservant. But Susan also poses another and more intractable problem. Even though she appears for her interview wearing appropriately neat but simple and quiet clothes, once she is employed, she dismays Caroline by adopting a conspicuously elaborate style of dress that makes her look “as if she was the mistress instead of the maid” (87). As regards physique, too, while Caroline admits that Susan’s figure is “very good for a person in *her* station of life,” she is quick to rationalize that “things have lately come to *such* a pretty pass” that even a servant can afford a good-quality tournure. Anyone, in other words, can now “buy a figure” and it is no longer possible to tell what is “natural” – that is, what is middle- or upper-class – from what is not (86; emphases in the original). Susan is also pretty – in a fresh, healthy way that Caroline declares vulgar – and attracts a posse of followers, who soon become a nuisance. But what particularly outrages Caroline is that Susan starts imitating her bonnets, which she flatters herself to think are quite “*distingué*” (89); and that Susan’s imitation of her mistress’s style is so skilful, and the blurring of boundaries so successful, that one of Susan’s admirers actually takes Caroline for Susan.

The problem of the servant who dresses above her station was apparently a common one – Craik cites as a familiar type maids who “dress quite as finely as ‘the family,’ go out with parasols on Sundays, and have their letters directed ‘Miss’” (130); and so was the problem of the servant who copies her mistress’s style (126). But while Craik advises a condescending toleration for such flaws – by adopting the fashion of her superiors, a maid will only make herself appear “ridiculous” as “the sham fine-lady” (144 – 45) – Susan’s shamming is far too successful for Caroline’s comfort.

Susan’s offence, in the last analysis, is that she challenges Craik’s “great difference” by taking control of her body and the uses it is put to – she assumes for it an ornamental purpose that clashes with the purely functional purpose her mistress has in mind. This tug-of-war over the use and control of the servant body provides some of the novel’s richest social satire, and it extends beyond the maid who dresses above her station to servants whose bodies Caroline does intend as ornamental but who fail to perform their intended function.

The first of these servants is the page. Getting her own page is for Caroline a twofold achievement – she scores a victory over her husband, who is opposed to ostentation and unnecessary expense, and she keeps up with the Lockleys. The services of a page are a classic example of conspicuous luxury consumption – the page, in his “handsome livery,” is supposed to follow Caroline when she goes to church, carrying her prayer books, or even simply when she goes for a walk in the street (221). Caroline acquires this luxury item in a transaction marked by a degree of commodification of the human body which rivals that in *Esther Waters*. As she does not believe in paying a lot of money for a small body – she has no intention of paying ten pounds a year for “a little chit of a thing, that would have to get on a chair to rub down my parlour tables” (223) – Caroline decides to get her page from a workhouse. At the workhouse, she asks to review the available “stock” of boys to see if it contains “anything like the very attractive sample” displayed outside the door; when she finds nothing inside that is “equal to [that] pattern,” she insists on getting one of “the best-looking show ones” (223).

Once she has obtained her boy, Wittals, Caroline promptly orders a beautiful livery – with its “sugar-loaf buttons” and its attractive shades of red, it is “the sweetest thing” she has ever seen (223). Wittals, however, frustrates Caroline’s expectations by failing to exude any stately distinction or even just look presentable. He refuses to keep still for a minute, running in and out of the house “like a dog at a fair” (224), or sliding down the banisters “like a monkey” (224), or “making himself as knock-knee’d as a frog. . . , turning his toes in and his elbows out” (225), and pulling hideous faces. His beautiful livery, too, is soon covered in stains, and the sleeves are “black and shiny with grease” (224). Most unforgivably of all, Wittals keeps growing. As Caroline is forced to let out tuck after tuck, her lovely livery ends up as an unsightly motley of fresh and faded colours; and whether she pulls the too-short trousers down or up, this only means that an extra bit of shirt shows below the too-short jacket, or the tops of Wittals’s dirty

socks show above his boots. The boy so utterly fails to give Caroline a “stylish appearance” (226) that she is actually afraid to have him follow her when she goes out. As Wittals keeps growing and romping, he completes the ravages to the livery Caroline so cherished; his mobile body thwarts her attempts at objectification and control, and refuses to be consigned to any particular function.

Undaunted by this debacle, Caroline goes on to throw all her energy into another, even more ambitious project involving the display of the servant body as an index of social status – the acquisition of a footman.¹¹ With his tall stature and athletic build, and the sumptuous livery, a footman was, of course, the classic adornment of the wealthy nineteenth-century household. In *Esther Waters*, too, Esther’s younger sisters, eager for stories of the magnificent Woodview household, regard the footman as a figure of distant glamour and a byword for male beauty. (In Moore’s novel, however, the footman’s ornamental function produces unexpected and undesirable results in blurring class boundaries, as William’s good looks prove irresistible to a social superior.)

Caroline considers the acquisition of a footman as the pinnacle of her social achievement in the sphere of domestic service; and indeed, a footman is an even more striking example of conspicuous luxury consumption than a page. Like a page, a footman is expected to perform petty yet highly visible services – Caroline wants someone who will open the door to visitors and, again, follow her with her prayer books when she goes to church. But a footman’s physique is far more conspicuous and costly than a page’s; with footmen, one paid for a shapely figure and for height – payment could be tied quite precisely to feet and inches (Burnett 142) – so the degree of expense incurred was immediately visible to all. Very importantly, too, Caroline wants to advertise the fact that she can now afford a male servant rather than a mere “pack of females” (242) – as men in domestic service were typically paid more than women, the gender of the servant body, too, was a ready sign of privilege. Caroline may grumble about “the high wages we are now giving for men-servants” (256) – and there was also a tax on the employment of male servants – but she flatly rejects her husband’s suggestion that they get a parlour-maid instead of a footman. She similarly rejects Edward’s suggestion that, rather than livery, the footman they employ wear plain clothes. To Caroline, the purpose of livery is to highlight social boundaries and safeguard her own newly attained position: if the footman were to wear plain clothes, she points out, he could be mistaken for one of her relatives. Its purpose is also to proclaim the family’s standing as loudly as possible – Caroline’s *nouveau riche* mentality impels her to order for the footman, Duffy, a suit of as many different colours as possible. The end result, as Edward remarks, is that Duffy will look “more like a Macaw in such fine feathers than a Christian”; but then, as Caroline argues, of course she wants the entire world to know that she has a footman, and she wants to advertise it “as conspicuously, and in as many colours, as a Vauxhall posting-bill” (252). She even contrives a visit by Mrs. Lockley for the express purpose of showing Duffy off to her. The footman thus becomes almost literally a poster for the family’s affluence; a centrepiece for visitors to the house to admire.¹²

But, like Susan and Wittals before him, Duffy thwarts Caroline’s plans. It turns out that the only reason why, when he is first interviewed, Duffy appears fairly slim is that he has been out of situation for months and is malnourished; once secure in his new situation, with plenty to eat, he starts gaining weight uncontrollably and is soon transformed into a “lazy porpoise” (263). Instead of the footman of her “genteel” dream, tall and handsome, with powdered hair and a pair of shapely legs (243), Caroline gets a man with four chins, greasy curls, and “great big lumpy legs” (254). Duffy is no more capable of giving Caroline’s household a stylish appearance than Wittals is, and his burgeoning body ruins his livery just as dismally as Wittals’s ruins his. What is more, both footman and page fail to show Caroline the token signs of deference she demands. Like Susan before them, then, Duffy and Wittals subvert Caroline’s ef-

¹¹ Caroline is, of course, an overreacher: the very fact that she aspires to a domestic staff far larger than the two or three servants typical of the nineteenth-century middle-class household (Davidoff 412) attests to that.

¹² In reality, Duffy ends up performing other, more utilitarian services as well – in more modest nineteenth-century households which only employed one male servant, the footman typically did the combined work of footman, butler, and valet; his duties included, for instance, cleaning shoes and polishing the silver (Burnett 142). It is, however, telling that when Caroline pictures her ideal footman, she focuses exclusively on the ceremonial and ornamental uses.

forts to establish firm, unambiguous social boundaries, and foil her attempts to discipline and appropriate their bodies for her purposes. In Davidoff's terms, Caroline's servants sabotage both the simpler rituals of deference-giving and the "elaborate rituals of 'Society'" that Caroline undertakes in order to claim admission to the social elite (411 – 12).

In addition, the (failed) appropriation of the servant body in the novel is paralleled, as in *Esther Waters*, by the (failed) appropriation of animal bodies. In *The Greatest Plague of Life*, this is a mostly comic parallel with a lamb valued not as draft power or a source of financial gain (like the horses in Moore's novel), but as an ornament and a token in a symbolic social exchange – the "beautiful little love of a pet lamb" is a present for Caroline's young daughter from one of Caroline's uncles, who is "rolling in it" and whose friendship therefore must be carefully cultivated (265). Like the page and the footman with their liveries, the pet lamb thwarts all attempts to keep its white fleece nice and clean, and is covered in smut within minutes of being given a bath. Like the page and the footman, too, it refuses to remain nice and small – though Caroline tries to stunt its growth by giving it gin, the little love of a lamb is soon transmogrified into a "great waddling monster of a sheep" (266). (This latter brutal form of body control would be at home in Moore's novel, where a race horse may be subjected to a Turkish bath and Woodview's prize jockey is made to lose weight through forced exercise, fasting, purging, and induced sweating.)

Like the servants, then, the pet lamb defies Caroline's attempts to control and contain its body and frustrates the purposes she assigns to it. Caroline's failure to dominate servant bodies is a crucial part of the failure of her attempts at gentility. All her carefully contrived performances of status and style end in disaster, making her ridiculous in the eyes both of her own servants and of the class of people she would like to think she belongs to. Caroline's servants do not merely refuse to further her social career but actually subvert it; their unmanageable, indecorous bodies compromise her social credentials. On the metatextual level, the fact that Caroline writes a book about her experience with servants addressed to other, less experienced mistresses, may be an index of social achievement – it shows that she belongs to those fashionable circles in which the servant question in its various forms is, as one review of Moore's novel put it, a "staple topic of discussion at afternoon teas" ("Esther Waters" 10). But her actual dealings with servants and their bodies expose the whole array of her social and personal flaws. What the novel's wilful, unruly servant bodies reveal, in the last analysis, is that Caroline is not even a social climber so much as a social clamberer – clumsy and ineffectual.

Esther Waters and *The Greatest Plague of Life* are both crucially concerned with questions about servants, revealing the extent to which those are, ultimately, questions of the body. They review the various uses to which the servant body may be put and the various forms of its subjection and appropriation, ranging from its reduction to sheer depersonalized corporeality exploited as a natural resource to its utilization as a salient, readily legible sign of social privilege. The successful management of servants, they suggest, is first and foremost the successful management of bodies; and servant rebellion is necessarily a rebellion of and through the body. In their exploration of the intersection between body and social identity, body and social structure, body and social stricture, the two novels reveal the various ways in which servants' bodies both define and undermine class boundaries.

Works Cited

- Burnett, John, editor. *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s*. Routledge, 1994.
- Chamberlain, Erin D. "Servants' Bright Reflections: Advertising the Body in Victorian Literature and Culture." *Dickens Studies Annual*, vol. 45, 2014, pp. 293 – 309.
- Cirillo, Nancy R. "A Girl Need Never Go Wrong, or, The Female Servant as Ideological Image in *Germinie Lacerteux* and *Esther Waters*." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1991, pp. 68 – 88.

- Craik, Dinah. *A Woman's Thoughts About Women*. Hurst and Blackett, 1859.
- Davidoff, Leonore. "Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1974, pp. 406 – 28.
- "Esther Waters" (unsigned review). *The Times*, 15 May 1894, p. 10.
- Law, Jules David. *The Social Life of Fluids: Blood, Milk, and Water in the Victorian Novel*. Cornell UP, 2010.
- "Maid Servants" (unsigned article). *Fraser's Magazine*, November, 1843, pp. 564 – 72.
- Mayhew, Augustus, and Henry Mayhew. *The Greatest Plague of Life: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Servant*. Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1864.
- Michie, Helena. *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*. Oxford UP, 1989.
- Moore, George. *A Communication to My Friends*. The Nonesuch Press, 1933.
- . *Esther Waters*. Herbert S. Stone and Company, 1899.
- O'Toole, Tess. "The Servant's Body: The Victorian Wet-Nurse and George Moore's *Esther Waters*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 25, 1996, pp. 329 – 49.
- Regan, Stephen. "Introduction & Note on the Text and Reception." *Esther Waters*. By George Moore, Oxford UP, 2012, pp. vii – xxxix.
- Roberts, Ann. "Mothers and Babies: The Wetnurse and Her Employer in Mid-nineteenth Century England." *Women's Studies*, vol. 3, 1976, pp. 279 – 93.