

*Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* [2003], for instance, receives only a passing mention.) For those who wish to revisit Bell's life and its telling by Stansky, *Julian Bell* will prove refreshing, shedding further light on a figure whose aunt's star continues to outshine his, but whose life and death affected her final years in indelible ways.

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## Works Cited

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- Woolf, Virginia. "Memoir of Julian Bell." *The Platform of Time: Memoirs of Family and Friends*. Ed. S. P. Rosenbaum. London: Hesperus Press, 2007. Print.

*The Labors of Modernism: Domesticity, Servants, and Authorship in Modernist Fiction*. Mary Wilson (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013) x + 176pp.

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The Vanessa Bell painting (*Interior with a Housemaid*, 1939) that ornaments the cover of Mary Wilson's lively and instructive book shows, in the upper half of the canvas and to the left, a cluttered desk, reasonably well lit; next to it an open door, better lit, dividing the painting in half; and in shadow, to the right, an aproned housemaid, standing and cleaning with a mop. In the bottom half of the painting, its vertical legs and slats thrusting upward into the painting's center, is the chair that goes with the desk. Draped over the chair is an article of clothing, perhaps a coat or shawl. Its form and color echo the shadowy housemaid, though like the desk and door it is much brighter, as if the inanimate object were intended to reveal how much more interesting the housemaid might look if she were ever to emerge from the shadows. All in all, the cover is an astonishingly apt crystallization of Wilson's argument. According to Wilson, modernist fiction continues the long literary tradition that represses and marginalizes the lives of all working people while at the same time it also finds formal means of hinting that these lives are not marginal after all: for example, by suggesting that there exists a rich if mysterious relationship between the servant's labors with the mop (a visual rhyme with the chair) and the mistress's writing at the desk. Thus in *Mrs.*

*Dalloway*, Wilson argues, “Lucy’s housekeeping work, preparing for the party, enables Clarissa to engage in the creative labor of buying the flowers” (42).

Beyond the fact that their work frees their mistresses to do other, more creative things, what does it mean to say that these servants are not, after all, marginal? The declared assumption behind these four chapters, covering Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Nella Larsen, and Jean Rhys, is that servants were “necessary laborers in the creation of modernist domesticity and the conditions of production of modernist fiction” (3). Necessary? Well, yes, but in what sense exactly? When Woolf visited the Docks, she proposed to the readers of *Good Housekeeping*, how ironically it’s impossible to say, that the system of world trade displayed in London’s ships, cranes, and warehouses depended on their habits of consumption—that they were necessary to it, hence possessed the power to change it. Are prosperous consumers (Woolf makes it clear she is addressing women with some purchasing power) “necessary” to the capitalist system in the same sense of the word that would apply to domestic servants? If they are, then necessity does not signify, as it might seem to, labor, or suffering, or exploitation. Marx observed in *Capital* that for all the harshness of their lives, domestic servants weren’t necessary to the system at all. What drives the system is the profit motive; servants are a way of disposing of your profits, not making any. Employing them is no more necessary to capitalism than, say, building bonfires of pound notes in your backyard and inviting the neighbors in to watch. To see this is to see that the sort of necessity Wilson has in mind has less to do with labor than with gender: “a domesticity supported by servants actually helps to make possible both [the] critique of domesticity and the ideal of middle-class women’s fiction” (3). In other words, she asks how women’s writing was inflected by the fact that it depended on servants who were also women and who did the labor that would otherwise have filled the writers’ days and thus prevented them from writing. Is their shared gender strong enough to override the overwhelming difference in class, even if (as she suggests) its force is too weak to oblige servants’ lives to be represented fully and directly?

The answer is interestingly unclear. That Woolf’s conscience was troubled by the fact that Sophie Farrell and Nellie Boxall devoted their entire lives to her family’s welfare is well documented in Alison Light’s *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: An Intimate History of Domestic Life in Bloomsbury* (2008). As Light shows, Woolf’s emotions on the subject were extensive, powerful, and complicated. She was immensely exasperated both at her servants and at herself for accepting what she perceived as their tyrannical irrationality. In this she was largely a creature of her class and time. Wilson cites Victoria Rosner’s comment that to offer as evidence of momentous social change “the character of one’s cook,” as Woolf famously does in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” is to assume that one is speaking

to women whose meals are prepared by cooks and that cooks themselves will not be raptly listening in the audience (33). This is not quite the assumption one would take away from Woolf's picture of a new democratic age in which the cook emerges from her dark basement to borrow the newspaper. On the other hand, there was something unbearable to Woolf in the idea that Sophie Farrell, after a lifetime of service, decorated her room with nothing but the photos and hand-me-downs of the family she had served. "Her mind is like a family album," Woolf writes in the unpublished second draft of her sketch "The Cook," usefully edited in these pages by Susan Dick (127). Biddy Brien, a thinly disguised Sophie, is given no inner life or working-class consciousness but considerable power to annoy, achieved by claiming and exaggerating the genteel standards of a previous generation of employers. As Dick astutely points out, Woolf's criteria in revising the story seem to have included a desire to remove as far as possible her own naggingly class-ridden perspective, the voice of "the bemused mistress" (133). Dick further speculates that Woolf's formal goal of experimenting with a narrative prose that was all style and no character may have been encouraged by its association with servants who, having given their life over to others, putatively had no character of their own.

Like Dick, whom she credits appropriately, Wilson wants to connect servants with innovations in literary form. Where Woolf is concerned, it's not so much mops and desks as doors and doorways that seize her imagination. Borrowing from Rosner the figure of the threshold, she lays out a brilliant hypothesis suggesting that servants are formally present in Woolf's use of parenthetical asides: "Woolf physically separates what is contained within the parentheses from what surrounds them, and in so doing creates a series of narrative thresholds which the reader must cross" (50). This entails "writing servant labor into the structure of the novel" (54). Snobbery passes, but form is forever.

The chapter on Stein offers repetition as a resonant formal parallel to Woolf's parenthesis. While emphasizing the distinctive racial or ethnic foreignness of young women in service in the United States, it also makes a daring argumentative move. The fact that a woman serving someone else's family cannot have a family of her own (as was the case for the two servants Woolf knew best) might be expected to register as a sign of unequal opportunity and social injustice. But if domesticity signifies compulsory heteronormativity, then the servant's alienation from it can be re-coded as something positive. Wilson finds ample evidence in Stein of a queer ethic. Downplaying the much-discussed "Melanctha" in favor of the other two stories in *Three Lives*, which have been neglected in part because (like Woolf's "The Cook") they feature submissive, utterly accepting characters, Wilson delicately raises the question of whether servitude looks better when the idealized and presumably preferred alternative—marriage, a home of one's own,

children of one's own—comes to be seen as socially destructive. Is there a sense in which servants benefit from silently embodying the writer's queer transvaluation of values? Or is the new anti-domestic framework merely a backhanded excuse for telling them they are better off than they might have felt they were?

Queerness as ethic and aesthetic is also central to Wilson's reading of Larsen's *Passing*—more central than the maid who crosses thresholds and picks up broken crockery or than Larsen's use of the dash, a formal habit that Wilson again tries to map onto the servant presence via its effect of marking interruption and ambivalence in the mistress. In the reading of Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, on the other hand, the theme of queerness disappears, replaced by a new interest in the alienated sense of the home produced by servant voices (the acquisition of voice representing a kind of progress over the silence of servants in Woolf) and a return to the book's initial focus on thresholds and spatiality. By ending the chapter with a reflection on Grace Poole, Wilson anchors her neatly phrased conclusion: "the woman in the attic is not alone, though she may appear to be" (125).

In her conclusion, Wilson suggests that gender changes everything. It's not just that women writers are different, but women servants do different things than male servants for fiction, just as they do different things in the household. This point is well taken though it doesn't really answer the question that seems to underlie the project as a whole: to what extent does common gender override class difference?

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## Works Cited

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