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978-0-521-07159-8 - Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England

Ann Kussmaul

Excerpt

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PART I

Servants and labourers

1 *Servants: the problems*

This is a book about servants, as ‘servant’ was understood in the past. To the modern mind, ‘servant’ evokes images only of grooms, housemaids, cooks. Three centuries ago, it would have called forth the image of a host of ploughmen, carters, dairymaids, and apprentices. Servants were youths hired into the families of their employers. Hundreds of thousands of them were accounted for by Gregory King, and then concealed in his famous table of ‘Income and Expense of the Several Families of England, Calculated for the Year 1688’, subsumed under the caption ‘Heads per family’, just as the servants themselves were contained within the households of farmers, tradesmen, artisans, handicraftsmen, Temporall and Spirituall Lords.¹ Servants constituted 13.4 per cent of the population in sixty-three scattered listings of parish inhabitants, dating from 1574 to 1821;² from the figures available we can infer that servants, most of whom were youths, constituted around 60 per cent of the population aged fifteen to twenty-four.³ In other words, most youths in early modern England were servants; that so few are now is one of the simplest differences between our world and theirs.

That so many youths *were* servants has many consequences. As Macfarlane put it, ‘the institution of servants and apprentices helped solve the problem of what to do with children between puberty and marriage’.⁴ While servants and apprentices waited for marriage, they had opportunities to learn skills and save their wages, free from the responsibility of maintaining themselves.⁵ They formed a large and distinctive part of the labour force, differing from adult wage-labourers in the nature of their contracts, their residence, and their marital status. Because service was widely practised, farmers, craftsmen, and tradesmen could compose their household labour force independently of the numbers and skills of their children; their productive households could survive the death of any of its members; parents could send the children they could not support into the households of others.⁶ For all these reasons, this is not a book simply about servants: it is also concerned with population, family structure, inheritance, economic organization and agricultural practices.

Early modern England contained many varieties of service. Some

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servants were what the nineteenth century would come to call 'domestics', hired to establish and maintain the status of the family and to attend to its personal needs. These became, by the later nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of all servants, and thus bequeathed to modern language the present meaning of 'servant'.⁷ They are not the subject of this study. Our servants were called by Adam Smith 'productive', hired not to maintain a style of life, but a style of work, the household economy. Whereas most domestic servants were women and girls, more productive servants were male, and here the balance between numbers of males and females was more even. In 1851, for example, the ratio of male to female domestic servants was 13:100, while the ratio in farm service was 213:100.⁸ In the set of sixty-three parish listings referred to above, the overall ratio of male to female servants is 107:100, and the ratios in farmers' and craftsmen's households are 121:100 and 171:100.⁹

Within the category of productive service, marked distinctions existed. Rural service differed from formal urban apprenticeship. The masters of apprentices were paid by the parents of the apprentices to lodge, board and train their children; rural servants were paid by their masters.¹⁰ Formal apprenticeship tied master and apprentice, by written contract, to a term of several years; rural servants and masters were bound by verbal or tacit contracts for shorter terms, typically a year. Of rural productive servants, servants to farmers were the most numerous. Agriculture was early modern England's dominant occupation; farmers were more apt to hire servants than were craftsmen and tradesmen.¹¹

Service in husbandry was marked by several characteristics that distinguished servants from all other workers in agrarian society. Their annual contracts and continuously available labour set them apart from day-labourers. Their residence in the farmhouse protected them from changes in the cost of living. Unlike day-labouring, service in husbandry was the permanent occupation of only a small minority. For most servants, it was a transitional occupation, specific to their transitional status between childhood and adulthood. No one was born a servant in husbandry, and few expected to die as servants.

Between one-third and one-half of hired labour in early modern agriculture was supplied by servants in husbandry, and most early modern youths in rural England were servants in husbandry. Yet service in husbandry has been, heretofore, the subject of no intensive study. This is, at first sight, puzzling. Laslett and Macfarlane have provided introductions to the understanding of service, but Hasbach's study of the agricultural labourer, written three-quarters of a century

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ago, remains the most systematic treatment of farm servants.¹² Most general works on English agriculture draw distinctions between the various forms of agricultural labour, and then ignore the economic, demographic, and social implications of the existence of a large group of youthful wage-workers, fed and lodged by their employers.¹³

The reasons for the disregard of service in husbandry are legion. Records of farm servants are scarce and fragmentary. Had servants in husbandry been more literate, we might have had scores of diaries, journals and memoirs to ransack for glimpses of the *mentalité* they reveal.¹⁴ Had servants been householders, we might have found them named in assessments for the hearth tax, window tax, and land tax.¹⁵ Had servants not been clustered in two of the three healthiest age-groups, and had they possessed property, we might have found their possessions listed in post-mortem inventories. What dead servants left behind, when recorded, is of interest, but few records exist. More often, we glimpse their lives through the diaries, account books, and inventories of their employers. Henry Best's inventory, for example, included 'the servant's bed in the stable' among the nine beds at Elmswell.¹⁶ Had service been compatible with marriage, we might have found marriage registers in which 'servant' was a common occupational designation. Because servants were highly mobile, their appearance in one record, whether poll-tax assessment, account book, census, or militia list, usually precludes their appearance in the next.

More serious than the problem of evidence is the problem of interpretation. Modern language and modern categories fail us. In their terms, service in husbandry is so ambiguous that it can hardly have existed. Consider, first, the language of the institution. When a seventeenth-century yeoman wrote of his 'family', he meant his wife, children and servants; when he wrote of his 'servants', he meant his carters and dairy-maids. 'Servant', 'labourer', 'domestic', 'menial', 'family': each word conveys a meaning to us that it did not bear in the past.

'Servant', as we have seen, now connotes a 'domestic' servant, a personal servant. In early modern England, the word had a doubly broadened set of meanings. The first, specific use was to denote all those who worked for one master, and were maintained by that master. William Harrison wrote in 1587 of the yeomen who keep 'servants (not idle servants as the gentlemen do, but such as get both their own and part of their master's living)'.¹⁷ No simple distinction was possible between productive servants and the servants Harrison called idle and Smith called unproductive. Ploughman and groom, dairymaid and housemaid: all were simply 'servants'. Fitzherbert's advice on the

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management of servants goes further, making no clear distinctions between the farm servants and personal servants of ‘the yonge gentlyman that entendeth to thryve’.¹⁸ All were, moreover, ‘menial’ or ‘domestic’ servants. The adjectives meant only that they lived in their master’s house. Thus Blackstone distinguished between ‘*menial servants*, so called from being *intra moenia* [within the walls], or domestics’, and labourers ‘who do not live *intra moenia*, as part of the family’.¹⁹ The poll tax of 1688 required masters to pay the taxes of defaulting ‘menial’ servants.²⁰ The Select Committee on Agriculture heard evidence, one and a half centuries later, of the farmers who were ridding their houses of ‘domestic servants’ and having ‘recourse to labourers’; the Report on Women and Children in Agriculture of 1843 noted the ‘house servants’ who provided all the labour on graziers’ farms in the Yorkshire Dales.²¹ ‘Menial’, ‘domestic’ and ‘servant’ were narrowed to their modern meanings only when productive workers ceased, while butlers and housemaids continued, to live in the houses of their masters.

The second early modern meaning of ‘servant’ extended still further to include all those who worked for others. Used in this general sense, ‘servant’ comprised both servants, in the specific sense of the word, and day-labourers. The two synchronous meanings can be confusing. Putnam found ‘serviens’ to have been most ambiguously used in the fourteenth century; it meant, she decided, both household servants and agricultural labourers.²² The 1495 Act against vagabonds and beggars referred to the ‘apprentice, servant of husbandry, laborer, [and] servant artificer’, and to the ‘maister of any the seid servaunts’.²³ The chapter in Burn’s *Justice of the Peace* (1755) dealing with all labour is entitled ‘Servants’, and under this heading are discussed labourers, journeymen, artificers, and servants. In an earlier chapter, however, Burn explicitly gave ‘servant’ its specific meaning: ‘in general, the law never looks upon any person as a *servant*, who is hired for less than one whole year; otherwise they come under the denomination of labourers’.²⁴

‘Labourer’, not ‘servant’, became the general term denoting wage-workers only in the nineteenth century. Earlier, ‘labourer’ had a restricted, specific meaning. The *Farmer’s Magazine* in 1779 defined ‘labourer’ as ‘a man hired to work by the day or week, or employed by the acre, rod, pole, etc.’.²⁵ It was in this sense that ‘labourer’ was used in most wage assessments taken under the Statute of Artificers from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. By the middle of the nineteenth century, ‘labourer’ had nearly displaced ‘servant’ in common usage. The framers of the 1851 census, working in the midst of the change in usage, confused enumerators and enumerated alike by asking first that

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'farm servants' be distinguished from 'agricultural labourers' on the basis of residence or non-residence in the farmer's house, and then that farmers report the 'number of labourers' employed on the farm, meaning in this context 'all kinds of workmen employed on the farm, whether they sleep in the house or not'.²⁶

Variant usages of 'servant' occasionally appear. On large estates in the northeast, married men, living in cottages provided by their employers, were called 'servants'.²⁷ It is likely that these were the early modern successors to the *famuli* of medieval England, full-time workers on a manor's demesne whose duties were centred on live-stock.²⁸ The process of ridding a farmhouse of its servants in husbandry gave rise to another variant. As a first step, servants often continued to be hired for the year, but were paid 'board wages', a money payment in lieu of room and board, in addition to their normal money wages, and were expected to fend for themselves. Sometimes the board wages were paid directly to a housekeeper who boarded and lodged several of a farm's servants.²⁹ These workers were still called servants; later, presumably when the memory of their having lived with the farmer had faded, they came to be called constant labourers.

It is fortunate for us that despite the several uses of 'servant' and 'labourer' the words were most often used only in their specific meanings in early modern works touching on agriculture. 'Servant' generally denoted a worker hired for the year, resident with the farmer; 'labourer' a worker hired for a shorter term and resident elsewhere.

'Family' presents the modern reader with a more difficult problem. We have little trouble extending our notion of the family to include the co-resident kin of the extended family. But to read that servants were part of the early modern family is to be tempted to think that they did not belong there, that they were not 'proper' members. To do so is to ignore both the early modern *mentalité* and the development of the meaning of 'family' before 1600. Slaves, *famuli*, were the original *familia*, a group of *famuli* living under one roof.³⁰ 'Family' later came to include all those, not just the slaves or servants, who lived under the authority of the *pater familias*;³¹ later still, the husband joined the 'family' of wife, children, and servants.

Early modern English had no word whose meaning was 'only kin', or 'all in the household except the servants'. 'Family' included them all. Mayo wrote in 1693 of the 'middling kind' of servants 'making up a part of every family'.³² To illustrate his scheme for a public granary, Yarranton imagined a 'family' of seven: 'the Self, Wife, a Man, a Maid, and Three Children'.³³ When Arbuthnot described the household of a large farm, he was at first ambiguous in his usage: 'His

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family will consist of himself, a wife, three children, 12 servants, and 10 labourers, each with a wife and three children'.³⁴ Whatever confusion this may have caused his readers, his tally of the number in the farmer's family makes its composition clear: 'Thus the farmer's family – 17.' Manuals of household government spoke of servants as they did of wives and children: all were subservient members of the family.³⁵

The problem of language can be solved. Servants include ploughmen and dairymaids, families include servants, and labourers live separately.³⁶ The problem of categories remains. Service in husbandry is, in terms of modern categories, painfully ambiguous. Servants in husbandry, wage-earners, were hired by contract into a status relationship, and became members of the family. But how, we may ask, can they really have been both family members and wage-workers?

Nature abhors a chimera. Macpherson dealt with the paradox by dismissing one of its elements. He argued that the 'annual patriarchal relation' of master and servant was incidental to the market relation between property-holders and those who 'had to sell their labour-power to others to make a living'.³⁷ Everitt dismissed the other half. On the first page of his major essay on farm labour,³⁸ he carefully distinguished between the farm workers who lived in the farmhouse and those who did not, but by the second page, the concept of farm servants appears to have evaporated, as if their living with the farmers' families made them unimportant as agricultural labour. Except for mentioning that servants might have been better fed than labourers, none of his subsequent discussion concerns servants. But because his estimates of the size of the labour force were based, in part, on the combined numbers of servants and labourers, he was left with another paradox, the 'intense patriarchalism' of a countryside in which one-third of the people were farm workers. Patriarchy begins at home, however, and it was in farmers' families that many of these farm workers lived.

The place of servants in the early modern social order is equally difficult for us to understand. Servants had no independent place within it. In this sense, their taking of wages was seen as incidental to their dependency within their employers' families. Chamberlayne's *Body Politique* has as its Feet 'the lowest member ... the Day Labourers'.³⁹ Servants, wives, and children were discussed by him in a separate section; their place was derived from their dependence upon their masters, husbands, and fathers, and from the status of their masters, husbands, and fathers, in the social hierarchy proper.⁴⁰ King's economic ordering of the English population ranked adult male householders according to the net contribution of their families, and

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simply attached the total of wives, children and servants to the ranks attained by the householders. The 1801 census was similarly compiled by listing households by the occupation of the householder and counting the number of males and females within each household.⁴¹

Servants did not understand themselves, and were not understood by early modern society, to be part of a labouring class, youthful proletarians.⁴² Servants were not unfree simply because they had been reduced to the status of wage-takers. As members of the family, they were politically invisible. Of course they controlled no property: they were unmarried youths, not adults. Of course they were subject to the political authority of their masters: they lived as dependent members of their families. Families at every level of early modern society sent their children into the households of others, and families at all but the lowest levels brought others' children into their own.⁴³ The opinion that all youths, whether children of nobles, gentry, yeomen, craftsmen, labourers, or paupers, became members of the labouring class by entering service was inconceivable.

This chapter began by stating that the existence of service in all its forms in early modern England is one of the simplest distinctions that can be drawn between the modern and early modern worlds. It is also one of the greatest obstacles to the simple application of modern categories to early modern experience. How large was the early modern proletariat? If we mean by proletariat a class of poor labouring families, having the power to produce, by themselves, only children, our account must exclude servants. The Hammonds, in *The Village Labourer*, and E. P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, are scrupulous in their usage.⁴⁴ When they write of the increasing differentiation between classes, they mean the growth of a class of ever more propertyless labourers. What was the condition of the working class? If we mean by this the condition of all wage-workers, we must differentiate between the condition of constantly employed servants, boarded by their employers, and seasonally unemployed labourers, feeding themselves and their families.⁴⁵ How large was the early modern labour force? If we mean by labour force the numbers willing to work for wages, we must include servants, which means in practice prising them out of the categories into which many early modern records placed them.

The problems of language and categories begin to evaporate in the nineteenth century, as 'servant', 'labourer', and 'family' take on their modern meanings, and as servants in husbandry come to be seen, in the south and east of England, as labourers in an unimportantly variant guise. By the mid century, most servants were female domes-

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tics. By the 1830s, most servants in husbandry in the southeastern half of England were sons and daughters of labourers, destined to become labourers themselves. The social and economic gap between servant-supplying and servant-hiring families widened, stretching to the breaking point the notion that servants became members of their employers' families. By 1851, few servants in husbandry were hired in the south and east. Most poor youths worked as day-labourers; only a few were plucked from this mass and placed at the farmer's table.

In the final chapter of this book, the decline in the practice of service in husbandry, its virtual extinction in the south and east, is explored. The five chapters that precede it are a search for an understanding of the place of service in husbandry in early modern England.

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2 *Incidence and understanding*

Service in husbandry was a major form of hired labour in early modern agriculture and the typical experience of rural youths. By the mid nineteenth century, however, this was not true of the south and east of England. This second statement is far simpler to demonstrate, thanks to the wealth of detail provided by the 1851 census. Our best early modern estimates, by contrast, are drawn from samples resulting from historical accident.

Local censuses of parish populations were compiled for reasons as varied as tax assessment, the mustering of militias, and inquisitiveness. Relatively few survive. Fewer still are detailed enough to identify servants in husbandry, day-labourers, and farmers. Of the several hundred listings collected by the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure,¹ only fifty-five, dating from 1599 to 1831, contain both occupational designations of the heads of households and the identification of the status of those within each household (Table 2.1). The simplest conclusion to be drawn from the listings is the large number of farm servants, especially in relation to the age group (15 to 24) in which most servants were concentrated. At most, approximately 19 per cent of the population was of this age.² The listings, moreover, reflect only the momentary status of individuals and households, and thus underestimate the proportion of youths who were at some stage servants in husbandry. The servants were diffused throughout each parish's households. Almost half (46.4 per cent) of the households of farmers contained servants, and most of these held no more than two servants (59.0 per cent). Once again, the momentary estimate represents the minimum figure for the proportion of farmers who ever employed servants.

The relative importance of servants in the agricultural labour force is more complicated to gauge. We are concerned with the functional categories of farm servant, day-labourer, and farmer, while the list-makers were concerned with the status of those listed. When we map the status designations of the lists into our own categories, errors of estimation arise. The number of farmers will be greatly underestimated. Any of the gentlemen, clergymen, widows, craftsmen, and tradesmen of the lists may have been farmers, either as their principal