

# ‘The Purgatory of Servants’ (In)Subordination, Wages, Gender and Marital Status of Servants in England and Italy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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## *Abstract*

Over the last fifty years, historians have been trying to understand differences between the characteristics of servants and their working conditions in different regions of pre-industrial and industrial Europe, differences which seem to be crucial to explaining discrepancies among those regions with respect to important aspects of life, such as the presence of the so-called European marriage pattern, the strength of family ties, the role of the family in providing assistance to its members in need of care. However, modern scholars are not the first to be interested in such diversity of domestic service: so were people who lived in early modern times. So far, their opinions have been neglected, yet they offer precious evidence of how our ancestors imagined European diversity, a crucial theme not only for cultural and social historians but also for contemporaries trying to understand continuities and discontinuities in representations of Europe. I will give examples of the ideas circulating in early modern Europe about servants and servant-keeping in Britain and Italy, making reference to other countries, too, especially France. The sources used are mainly printed texts, particularly travel books, a literary *genre* that often expresses prejudices and stereotypes. I will evaluate the perspectives of the authors used, drawing on my previous studies on the social history of domestic service, especially as regards the key issues of marriage and family formation.

*Keywords:* Britain, Domestic Servants, England, Italy, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries

## 1. *Introduction*

Especially during the last fifty years, historians have been trying to understand differences between the characteristics and conditions of servants in different parts of Europe, differences which have come to be considered crucial to explaining differences in important aspects of life in pre-industrial and



industrialising societies in various parts of the 'old continent': aspects such as the so-called European marriage pattern, the strength of family ties, the role of the family in providing assistance to its members in need of care, etc. (Sarti 2007 and 2014). However, it is not only modern scholars who have focussed on the diversity of domestic service in different areas: a number of authors who lived in past centuries also tried to pinpoint those differences. In 1814, for instance, *Abbé Grégoire*, the former 'constitutional' priest who took part in the French Revolution and fought against slavery, published a book entitled *De la domesticité chez les peuples anciens et modernes*, which described the transformation of domestic service over time and tried to make clear differences among the working conditions and legal positions of servants in different countries, regions and cities.<sup>1</sup> As well as, and possibly even more than scholars, travellers and visitors have also tried to identify servants in different contexts. Their opinions are precious sources for understanding the ways in which our ancestors imagined European diversity – a topic of deep interest to both cultural and social historians, and a crucially important issue for contemporaries (such as decision-makers) trying to understand continuities and discontinuities in the representation of Europe. Yet these opinions have so far been neglected by those who study domestic service.

In this article I shall give examples of the ideas that circulated in early modern times about the characteristics of servants and servant-keeping in Britain and Italy, making some reference to other countries, too, especially France. The focus is on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though I shall also be mentioning examples from other periods. During the early modern period the notion of 'the servant' was ambiguous and controversial (Sarti 2005b), but it was an expression in constant use, and one which some writers (especially jurists) went to some trouble to explicate. Different kinds of servants were ubiquitously present in early modern societies, as was the notion of service. The very fact that people made comparisons between the characteristics and status of (various types of) servants in a number of contexts and countries confirms that – despite its blurred boundaries – the category of the servant was a crucial one for early modern representations of society.

Many of my comparisons between servants and servant-keeping in Britain, Italy and, to a lesser extent, other countries, are taken from travel books, a literary *genre* that often expresses prejudices and stereotypes, and also contributes to circulating and strengthening preconceived ideas (see, for example, Speake 2003). This will not represent a problem for us here – rather the contrary – since the focus of the article is precisely on ideas and

<sup>1</sup> The book sought to contribute to the formation of 'good domestics' (Grégoire 1814, I-VIII). I am grateful to Patrizia Delpiano for her useful suggestions, and to Jeanne Clegg both for her suggestions and for revising my English.

representations. At the same time, however, I shall evaluate the specific vantage point of the authors of the books used as sources, comparing some of their views with the findings of historians of domestic service in early modern Europe and drawing on my own work in the field.<sup>2</sup>

First, I shall focus on ideas about servants and servant-keeping in England as expressed by both English and foreign writers, especially French and Italian, showing how these ideas evolved over time and the differences between the internal and the external gaze. I shall then focus on Italy, analyzing the views of Italian customs expressed by travellers from Britain. I will show both how they differ and what they have in common, and evaluate whether their representations of the differences between domestic service in the two countries were consistent with the points made by the observers of social conditions in England. Finally, I shall compare early modern representations of the national characteristics of domestic service with the findings of recent historians, showing that – at least in some cases – these early representations turn out to be consistent with modern ones, particularly as regards the (crucial) issues of marriage and family formation.

## 2. *'The Purgatory of Servants'*

According to an ancient proverb, possibly dating from the sixteenth century (Hyman 1962, 212), England was 'the paradise of women, the hell of horses and the purgatory of servants'. The *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake 2008) attributes the earliest known occurrence in print of this version of the proverb to Fynes Moryson (1617). Moryson mentioned the proverb in his well known *Itinerary* through Europe, explaining that English 'ride Horses without measure, and use their Servants imperiously, and their Women obsequiously' (1908, IV, 169). The proverb was cited in other books of the same period, such as William Camden's *Remaines concerning Britaine*, originally published in 1605. Camden presented the saying as a French one, and believed it to be fairly accurate: 'The Frenchmen are not altogether untrue and unfavorable to England in this their proverbiall speech, *England is the paradise of women, the purgatory of servants, and the hell of horses*' (1636, 16; italics in the text). French authors such as Jean Nicolas de Parival (1658, 25) do indeed refer to the proverb.

A slightly different version of the saying is also mentioned by the Italian historian and satirist Gregorio Leti (1630-1701). A convert to Protestantism, Leti spent several years in Switzerland, from where he was forced to flee first to France and then to England; there he published a work entitled *Del Teatro Brittanico* (1683) which offended Charles II, causing him to be expelled and to

<sup>2</sup> For the list of my publications see <<http://www.uniurb.it/sarti/>>.

take refuge in Amsterdam (Bufacchi 2005). *Del Teatro Britannico* commented extensively on the condition of servants in England, which, Leti maintained, was once said to be the purgatory of servants but was no longer so. Yet he believed that in England wages were better than in Italy and France, and that maid-servants in particular were so well-dressed that they looked like women of higher social strata. Servants were normally hired by the year and could leave their masters (or be fired) only after serving the whole of the agreed period (and giving warning three months in advance). On being hired, a certificate from the previous master was required. Thanks to these certificates, English masters placed greater trust in their servants than did the French and Italians, who were more cautious and suspicious. As a consequence, English servants were better protected by their masters than were the Italian and the French. Yet English masters forced their servants to work very hard, and punished them harshly if they were insolent or disobedient; killing one's master or mistress was punished as if it were a treason against the State. While on the one hand there were no longer slaves in England and foreign slaves became free as soon as they landed on its shores, the condition of some peasants – called villains (*villani*) – was truly servile. Another category whose condition appeared to Leti very harsh was that of apprentices. Yet while 'villains' experienced long-life bondage (*servitù*), apprentices were normally bound for seven years or even less, according to their contracts (1683, I, 454-456).

Thus Leti identified several types of workers who might be included in the wider category of servants: general servants (male and female), slaves, villains and apprentices. He also compared these categories with each other within the English context as well as with similar categories in Italy and France. Finally, he adopted a gendered perspective, dealing separately with menservants and maids. Trying to summarize his comments, one might conclude that, while he considered the economic and material conditions of English servants to be better than those in Italy and France, he judged their working conditions to be harsher because of the hard labour required of them, the strict obedience demanded by masters, the severity of punishments inflicted, and the lack of freedom to leave a place. In a sense, in illustrating conditions in England he describes a more paternalistic and hierarchical society than the Italian and French: a society where servants were more integrated into masters' households and received better protection, but were less free and independent. In the countryside, too, Leti noted the survival of 'villains', whereas rural Italy was in his view characterized by rent.

This effort to pinpoint differences is certainly interesting, particularly if one considers that Leti took – almost plagiarised – his information about England from Edward Chamberlayne's *The Present State of England* (first published anonymously in 1669 and then republished several times), which also included a chapter on servants. From this well-known book Leti made a kind of critical *pastiche*, translating some sentences, rendering words and

concepts that might have been obscure to the Italian reader with descriptive sentences, adding many comments and comparisons with Italy and France that allow us to understand how the condition of servants in England appeared to the eyes of an Italian who had lived both in Switzerland and France. For instance, Leti's argument that conditions in England were not better than elsewhere, since everywhere they were servile and down-trodden (Chamberlayne 1683, I, 454), was not to be found in Chamberlayne's account. On the other hand, the passages in which Leti argued that the present condition of English servants was better than it had been in the past, when England really was the 'purgatory of servants', are very similar to passages in his source (1676, 299).

### 3. *'The Proverb should be turn'd'*

From the late seventeenth century on the idea that England was no longer the purgatory of servants was becoming increasingly common in the works of English writers. There were in fact growing numbers of complaints that Albion had turned into a servant paradise, as was maintained by Daniel Defoe in 1724. In his well-known, anonymously published *The Great Law Of Subordination Consider'd*, he asserted that 'the Proverb should be turn'd, and we should say, it is the *Purgatory of Wives, and the Paradise of Servants*' (7). Through the fictional device of ten 'familiar letters' written to his brother by a Frenchman who had chosen to live in England (44, 199), Defoe argued that a dramatic change had affected the master-servant relationship, making it very different from what used to be and from what was in all other countries:

Nothing is more visible, nor indeed, breaks in so far upon our Civil Affairs in this Nation, as the surprizing Difference that there is in the Behaviour of Servants of every Rank and Degree among us, from what it was in former Times; from what it is now in other Nations; and from what, indeed, in the Nature of the thing, ought to be every-where. (8)

Defoe made clear that in speaking of 'Servants of every Rank and Degree' he meant first of all 'Apprentices, as well the Apprentices to Merchants, and more eminent Trades-Men, as the Apprentices to meaner People; such as Shop-Keepers, Handicrafts Artificers, Manufacturers, &c.:'; secondly 'Menial Servants such as Cooks, Gardeners, Butlers, Coachmen, Grooms, Footmen, Pages, Maid-Servants, Nurses, &c. all kept within Doors, at Bed and Board; that is to say, such as have Yearly or Monthly Wages, with Meat, Drink, Lodging, and Washing'; thirdly, 'Clerks to Lawyers, Attorneys, Scriveners, &c. and to Gentlemen in publick Offices, and the like' as well as 'the Labouring Poor, that is, of Servants without Doors'. In other words, the change had not affected only 'a few Footmen, and Cook-wenches', but 'the whole Body of the Nation' (8-9). This change, far from being welcome, was the cause of general complaint and grievance: despite the

fact that their wages had doubled or even tripled, servants had become insolent and saucy, prone to drunkenness and cursing, idle and neglectful. Defoe spent three hundred pages describing in detail the causes, features, consequences of, and the possible remedies for the crisis that had rendered England peculiar among nations: 'Servants are more at Command, and more subject to their Masters, or more easily to be punish'd in other Countries' (258).

The main cause of growing insolence on the part of servants was, Defoe thought, 'the unseasonable Lenity, Kindness, and Tenderness to Servants in this Country' (258): the English had 'the uneasiest Servants', because they were 'the easiest Masters in the World' (260). Another cause lay, however, in a misunderstanding of English liberty, and in the spread of swearing and drinking to excess that had started during the Restoration (59). While the English were 'universally bless'd with real and valuable Liberty, more than any Nation in the World', many made the mistake of thinking that this liberty authorised them 'to indulge their Wickedness' and 'Freedom to Crime, not a Security against Oppression and Injustice' (18). The consequences of the lack of subordination in servants were far-reaching:

Husbandmen are ruin'd, the Farmers disabled, Manufacturers and Artificers plung'd, to the Destruction of Trade, and Stagnation of their Business; and that no Men who, in the Course of Business, employ Numbers of the Poor, can depend upon any Contracts they make, or perform any-thing they undertake, having no Law, no Power to enforce their Agreement, or to oblige the Poor to perform honestly what they are hir'd to do, tho' ever so justly paid for doing it. (2)

Without effective remedies, the poor would 'be Rulers over the Rich, and the Servants be Governours of their Masters', Defoe denounced: 'Order is inverted, Subordination ceases, and the World seems to stand with the Bottom upward' (17-18). To stop all these abuses, he suggested that severe fines be imposed upon masters who did not dismiss or send before a Justice of the Peace servants who became drunk, swore and cursed, or who dismissed them with a certificate of good behaviour; in his view, such masters too should be 'liable to make good all Loss or Damage which the said Servant, or Servants, shou'd occasion in the next Place they go to, or where they were receiv'd by Virtue of that Certificate'. Certificates should be issued to all at the end of every hiring period, and nobody should be hired without a certificate (a Justice of the Peace being entitled to give a certificate if a master unjustly refused it); they should always mention the reasons why a servant had been dismissed, and those with negative certificates should not be allowed new places for six months. Servants guilty of swearing at, cursing or threatening their masters and mistresses, should 'upon legal Conviction, be transported for 21 Years, not to be in the Master's Power to remit the Sentence, and the Master not prosecuting to forfeit 500 l.' (294-297).

In the last letter of *The Great Law of Subordination Consider'd* Defoe explains that, though he had intended to deal also with women servants, whose behaviour had 'grown up to be as great a Grievance as the other', he had already written more than he had intended to and therefore 'must forbear dwelling any longer upon this Part' (284-285). The following year, however, he published a pamphlet under the name of Andrew Moreton, Esq., complaining about 'the Pride, Indolence, And Exorbitant Wages Of Our Women Servants, Footmen, etc.' (1725). *Every Body's Business Is Nobody's Business* (another proverb) denounced the fact that

Women servants are now so scarce, that from thirty and forty shillings a year, their wages are increased of late to six, seven, nay, eight pounds per annum, and upwards; insomuch that an ordinary tradesman cannot well keep one; but his wife, who might be useful in his shop or business, must do the drudgery of household affairs; and all this because our servant-wenches are so puffed up with pride nowadays, that they never think they go fine enough: it is a hard matter to know the mistress from the maid by their dress; nay, very often the maid shall be much the finer of the two.<sup>3</sup>

'The fear of spoiling their clothes' had, Defoe accused, reached such a pitch as to make them 'afraid of household-work', while 'their extravagance in dress' caused masters' wives and daughters to indulge in excessive expenditure in order to 'go finer than the maid'.

Defoe also added that any maid newly arrived from the countryside would be advised by a 'committee of servant-wenches' 'to raise her wages, or give warning' and made sure by 'the herb-woman, or chandler-woman, or some other old intelligencer' that they could 'provide her a place of four or five pounds a year'; as a result she would immediately give 'warning from place to place, till she has got her wages up to the tip-top'. Another abuse took the form of the vails which, having originally intended 'as an encouragement to such as were willing and handy', had become a 'perquisite', while the rising wages of female servants were also making 'a mutiny among the men-servants', who wanted their wages raised too. The system had become one of 'a month's wages, or a month's warning': if maids were not happy with a master, they would 'go away the next day', whereas if the master did not like them, he 'must give them a month's wages to get rid of them'. This instability in staffing caused 'a great inconvenience to masters and mistresses'; employers were 'always at the mercy of every new comer' with power to inspect their private lives and divulge their family affairs. Even greater problems loomed: 'in a little time our servants will become our partners; nay, probably, run away with the better part of our profits, and make servants of us vice-versa'.

<sup>3</sup> For this and subsequent passages of *Every Body's Business* no page numbers are given. References are to <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2052/2052-h/2052-h.htm>>.

Another of Defoe's complaints was that in addition to demanding high wages, maid-servants saw themselves as entitled to so-called 'poundage', and would even rob a master's household. Besides, they often tried to seduce their master's sons and other young fellows, ruining many families. On the other hand some gentlemen were 'so silly, that they shall carry on an underhand affair with their friend's servant-maid', which led 'to their own disgrace, and the ruin of many a young creatures' who, being flattered, carried 'themselves with the utmost insolence imaginable'. Servants' restless habits often caused their own downfall: 'from clopping and changing, they generally proceed to whoring and thieving', being forced to 'prostitute their bodies, or starve' when they were out of place. Many servant women 'rove from place to place, from bawdy-house to service, and from service to bawdy-house again'; they lived an 'amphibious life', 'ever unsettled and never easy, nothing being more common than to find these creatures one week in a good family, and the next in a brothel'.

Yet these creatures had become 'their own lawgivers': 'nay' – Defoe added – 'I think they are ours too', even though 'nobody would imagine that such a set of slatterns should bamboozle a whole nation'. Despite 'all these inconveniences', however, he admitted that 'we cannot possibly do without these creatures', and went on to suggest some remedies. 'The apparel' of the women-servants should be regulated in such a way that the mistress could be clearly distinguished from the maid, a goal that could be reached by obliging the maid to wear a livery or a 'dress suitable to her condition', one which 'would teach her humility, and put her in mind of her duty'. In addition it 'would be necessary to settle and limit their wages' and some 'encouragements and privileges given to such servants who should continue long in a place':

Servants should be restrained from throwing themselves out of place on every idle vagary. This might be remedied were all contracts between master and servant made before a justice of peace, or other proper officer ... Nor should such servant leave his or her place (for men and maids might come under the same regulation) till the time agreed on be expired, unless such servant be misused or denied necessaries, or show some other reasonable cause for their discharge. In that case, the master or mistress should be reprimanded or fined. But if servants misbehave themselves, or leave their places, not being regularly discharged, they ought to be amerced or punished. But all those idle, ridiculous customs, and laws of their own making, as a month's wages, or a month's warning ... should be entirely set aside and abolished. When a servant has served the limited time duly and faithfully, they should be entitled to a certificate ... nor should any person hire a servant without a certificate ... A servant without a certificate should be deemed a vagrant; and a master or mistress ought to assign very good reasons indeed when they object against giving a servant his or her certificate.

Having complained – somewhat misogynously – almost only about maid-servants, Defoe made clear that 'though, to avoid prolixity', he had 'not mentioned footmen', 'the complaints alleged against the maids are as well



masculine as feminine', suggesting that both women and men servants should work 'under the very same regulations'.

Some of the claims by Defoe are consistent with the points made by Gregorio Leti forty years earlier: English servants' wages were good (too high, according to Defoe), and maid-servants were so well-dressed that they seemed ladies of a superior class. Other claims, however, are not. According to Leti English servants were disciplined, worked very hard, could not easily leave their masters before the end of the contracted term, and could be hired only if they produced a certificate from their previous master, whereas according to Defoe they were insubordinate, idle and unstable. Nor did Defoe refer to the issuing of certificates as normal practice, as did Leti (and Chamberlayne); rather, he presented it as a custom that ought to be reshaped in order to make it an effective means of controlling servants, and universally enforced.

We may therefore wonder whether during the roughly forty years that separated Defoe's books from Leti's much had changed in England, or whether the differences mainly depended on the different vantage points, expectations and cultural backgrounds of the two authors. Certainly, Defoe was not alone in complaining about servants. As noted by Turner, in almost any period of history 'it is possible to find the well-to-do sighing for the "constant service of the antique world", but in eighteenth-century England, indignation against the new breed of servants was unusually shrill' (2001, 13). Grievances about the (alleged) growing insubordination and insolence of servants had indeed multiplied.

#### 4. *The Gaze of Foreigners*

This self-perception on the part of the English was sometimes shared by foreigners, at least in part. The *Abbé Le Blanc*, who visited England between 1737 and 1744 and then published a description of the country, maintained, for instance, that because the English were intolerant of any form of dependency, they were the people least suited to being servants: they were good masters but bad *valets* (1745, I, 146). Later French writers, however, considered the treatment of servants in England to be particularly harsh. In 1797, for instance, Toussaint Guiraudet remarked that in England masters wielded greater authority than they did in France, and that servants were more disciplined, respectful and obedient (189). And in 1800 the baron de Baert-Duholant, who had visited Britain in 1787-1788, also stressed the authoritative status of English masters in his *Tableau de la Grande-Bretagne, de l'Irlande et des possessions angloises dans les quatre parties du monde*. On one hand he was very impressed by the enormous quantity of beer drunk by English servants and by their drunkenness (which is consistent with the observations of Defoe some years earlier). On the other, he noted the strict authority invested in the head of the family, and the fact that masters required

prompt submission and imposed exacting standards of service and decency on their servants, whom they kept at a distance withholding all signs of familiarity, though feeding, dressing and paying them well (1797, IV, 176, 196-197): a picture of master-servant relations similar to Leti's of almost a century earlier. Some forty years later, Tocqueville in *De la démocratie en Amérique* argued that France and England were the countries where master-servant relationships were respectively the most and the least hierarchic in the world (1848, 30).<sup>4</sup> Obviously we should take account of the fact that the comments by Guiraudet, Baert-Duholant and Tocqueville were all made after the French Revolution (which – despite all the emphasis on freedom and equality – had a contradictory impact on domestic service, see Sarti 2012). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries England appeared to the eyes of many Europeans to be the reign of liberty. In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, it was perceived as economically very dynamic, but often as socially and politically conservative in comparison with other countries, especially the United States and France. It is thus surprising that French and Italian writers frequently expressed ideas about English servants and servant-keeping that remained quite stable over time and often differed from British self-perceptions.

As already mentioned, some of the views the English held of themselves were developed through comparisons with what they believed was happening in other countries, so that by looking at how they saw servants and servant-keeping in other countries we can also learn a great deal about their self-perceptions. Let us now focus on British evaluations of Italy, which though obviously not as yet in the eighteenth century politically unified was nevertheless perceived as a nation.<sup>5</sup>

##### 5. *Servants and Masters in Italy: British Views*

'They [Italians] are very temperate in their Diet, and Drunkenness esteem'd the greatest of all Crimes; so that such as are given to drink are taken for Monsters, and judg'd unfit for human Society', writes Dr Ellis Veyard in his account of his journey through Europe and the Levant in the 1680s, in the course of which he also visited Italy (1701, 263; Villani 1996, 65-66). Some decades later Samuel Sharp, former surgeon at Guy's Hospital in London, asserted that in Naples servants did 'know nothing of the superfluities so

<sup>4</sup> 'J'ai toujours considéré l'Angleterre comme le pays du monde où, de notre temps, le lien de la domesticité est le plus serré, et la France la contrée de la terre où il est le plus lâche. Nulle part le maître ne m'a paru plus haut ni plus bas que dans ce deux pays'.

<sup>5</sup> On the tradition of the Italian tour see, for instance, Brilli 2006; Sweet 2012; on comparisons among nations Cabibbo 2010.

common amongst our poor; I mean the excessive use of strong and spirituous liquors: 'I do not remember' – he declared – 'to have seen in the streets one drunken man or woman, if I may except a few soldiers, and a few *Valets-de-Place*' (1767, 106). In Venice servants were 'never drunk', commented the British diarist, traveller and friend of Samuel Johnson, Hester Lynch Piozzi, who visited Italy in the 1780s (1789, 186). In sum, the very fact that Italian servants (like their masters) were usually not drunk was a kind of surprise for several travellers. The notice they take of Italian sobriety reveals and confirms that at home they were accustomed to drunken domestics. Defoe had associated drunkenness with insubordination and careless service, so one would expect that Italian servants, being sober, were more likely to be submissive and to serve carefully. English travellers often maintained that in Italy social hierarchies were undisputable; this was evident, for instance, according to several British writers, in the fact that Italians generally avoided marrying anyone of a lower social class.<sup>6</sup> Hester Lynch Piozzi argued that the 'gulph' between social classes was 'totally impassable', and 'birth alone' could 'entitle a man or woman to the society of gentlemen and ladies' (1789, 107). She believed that the efforts made by the arch-duke of Tuscany 'to close this breach of distinction, and to draw merchants and traders with their wives up into higher notice than they were' were destined to be unsuccessful, because 'the prejudices in favour of nobility are too strong to be shaken here, much less to be rooted out so'. 'The very servants' – she wrote – 'would rather starve in the house of a man of family, than eat after a person of inferior quality, whom they consider as their equal, and almost treat him as such to his face' (98). In Florence gentlemen's servants would even dispute whose master should be served first 'ripping up the pedigrees of each to prove superior claims for a biscuit or macaroon' (299). In her view there was in Italy 'a firmly-fixed idea of subordination' (107).

In a society that – in the eyes of many British travellers seemed rigidly hierarchic, servants were seen as playing a crucial role in the display of status and wealth. Italian nobles – so several British writers claimed – were fond of splendid and even extravagant equipages and employed large staffs: 'The Cardinals, and all the Italian Princes in general, spend the best part of their Revenues in expensive Equipages, and numerous Trains-of Attendants, to make their Greatness appear to the World', wrote Dr Veyard in 1701.<sup>7</sup> Several decades later, Arthur Young, who visited Italy in the late 1780s, confirmed that the greatest part of the incomes of Florentine elite families were 'consumed in keeping great crowds of domestics', though – at least in the case of the Ranuzzi family – he denied that they kept expensive equipages (1792, I, 246).

<sup>6</sup> Veyard 1701, 262; Nugent 1756, 17; Smollett 1766, 220.

<sup>7</sup> Veyard 1701, 201, see also 263; Molesworth 1738 [1694], xxii; Nugent 1756, 16, 153; Sharp 1767, 108-109, 113, 177, 209; Moore 1781, II, 132-133.

Equipages and liveried servants in general were used to display status in public not only by the aristocracy, but also by other classes. Hester Lynch Piozzi observed that once, while going to church, her Italian servant explained to her that he could tell that an elegant woman walking near them with two liveried footmen was not noble (actually she was the wife of a rich banker) by observing the servants: 'you may see – added he – that she is no lady if you look – the servants carry no velvet stool for her to kneel upon, and they have no coat of armour in the lace to their liveries' (1789, 97-98). While, on the one hand the type of servant employed revealed one's status, on the other, according to Samuel Sharp, having a footman was a kind of prerequisite to distinguishing oneself at the lower echelons of society. This, at least, was the case in Naples: 'every body here has the rage of keeping a footman, down to a sett of housekeepers, who hire one for the Sunday only; and there are some who hire one for an hour or two only; so that there are servants who let themselves out to three or four different masters on the same Sunday, it suiting one master to have his servant in the morning, another at noon, and a third after dinner' (1767, 105). In other words, domestic servants were seen by English travellers as crucial in a society which paid as much attention to appearances as did Naples and Italy in general.

In the eyes of British tourists, Italian nobles appeared also very ceremonious, to the point that 'all persons of the first Rank' kept 'masters of Ceremonies' (*Maestri di Camera*) to instruct them how they ought to carry themselves on all occasion' (Veryard 1701, 263). Richard Lassels, a Catholic priest who served as tutor to several British nobles during their travels through Europe, also held Italians to be respectful people, with a 'Natural gravity and Civil Education' (1670, 14). He remarked that in Italy masters never beat their servants, but remitted them to justice when a fault required punishing. According to Hester Lynch-Piozzi, punishments inflicted on servants, as on other people who had committed crimes, were not too severe. Referring to Venice she noted that the authorities hanged nobody, and neither did they punish prisoners condemned to work on roads and public buildings who insulted passengers for refusing to give them alms. 'Here is certainly much despotic power in Italy, but, I fancy, very little oppression; perhaps authority, once acknowledged, does not delight itself always by the fatigue of exertion', she commented (1789, 108). Furthermore, despite the rigid hierarchies, there was a surprising degree of familiarity between masters and servants:

the strange familiarity this class of people think proper to assume, half joining in the conversation, and crying *oibò*\* [\* Oh dear!] when the masters affirms something they do not quite assent to, is apt to shock one at beginning, the more when one reflect upon the equally offensive humility they show on being first accepted into the family; when it is expected that they receive the new master, or lady's hand, in a half kneeling posture, and kiss it ... This obsequiousness, however, vanishes completely upon acquaintance. (7)

Another source of surprise was the fact that servants were often left without any particular task and were rather idle: ‘nothing conveys to a British observer a stronger notion of loose living and licentious dissoluteness, than the sight of one’s servants, gondoliers [she was speaking about Venice], and other attendants, on the scenes and circles of pleasure, where you find them, though never drunk, dead with sleep upon the stairs, or in their boats, or in the open street’ (186). Some years later, Arthur Young, clearly expressing ideas about productivity then becoming current, pronounced Florentine nobles’ employment of great trains of idle, lounging pensioners ‘taken from useful labour, and kept from productive industry’ to be ‘one of the worst ways of spending their fortunes, relatively to the public good, that could have been adopted’: ‘how inferior to the encouragement of the fine or the useful arts’, he concluded (1792, I, 246). Idleness in servants might also lead to lack of respect towards their masters: while sitting in antechambers they often played cards and seemed ‘but little inclined to lay them down when ladies pass through to the receiving room’ (Lynch-Piozzi 1789, 70).

The complaints that English servants were the laziest and least respectful in the world was not confirmed by British travellers’ observations and comments on the ways of a foreign country like Italy. In their view Italian servants were sober, and people had ‘a firmly-fixed idea of subordination’ (Lynch Piozzi 1789, 107), but at the same time appeared to their eyes lazy and disrespectful. While Leti had considered the master-servant relationship in England to be both more hierarchical and more familiar than in Italy, many British travellers turned this judgement upside down, arguing that in Italy social hierarchies were very rigid but that there was a great deal of familiarity between masters and servants.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, and despite their complaints about the laziness of English servants, while noting that Italian domestics were often idle and were not severely punished for their faults, they implicitly agreed with Leti’s idea that British servants were forced to work very hard and were severely punished. Another point made by Leti was that English servants were more closely integrated into their masters’ families than were Italians.

Other features of Italian servant-keeping that surprised the Britons indirectly confirm this point. Some travellers, for instance, were astonished to find that even the most elegant palaces were almost completely devoid of staff overnight due to the fact that many servants were married and/or had their own households in which to spend the night: ‘when evening comes, it is the comicallest sight in the world to see them all [i.e. all the menservants] go gravely home, and you may die in the night for want of help, though

<sup>8</sup> For a provocative analysis of master-servant relationships in eighteenth century England see Steedman 2007.

surrounded by showy attendants all day' (Lynch Piozzi 1789, 70). The very fact that in Italy many of those whom the Britons would define as 'indoor servants – were married and lived out was noteworthy to British visitors.<sup>9</sup> In Naples 'it is almost universal fashion to keep their men-servants at board wages, not admitting them to sleep in their [i.e. of the masters] houses', wrote Sharp (1767, 100); 'the greater number of men servants, belonging to the first families, give their attendance through the day only, and find beds and provisions for themselves', according to Moore (1781, II, 134); in Florence, many servants are 'married, with their families, as in Spain', commented Young (1792, I, 245); in Italy as a whole 'most of these fellows [servants] are married too, and have four or five children each', wrote Lynch Piozzi (1789, 69). The high numbers of men-servants was also stressed by English witnesses, implicitly suggesting that British domestic personnel was more feminised. 'If eight servants are kept, we will say, six of these are men', noted Hester Lynch Piozzi (1789, 69). It is significant that some twenty years earlier, writing of Naples, Samuel Sharp had considered the features and arrangements of domestic service in that city to be crucial to understanding its peculiar demography. His interesting analysis deserves to be quoted at length:

Naples contains three hundred, or three hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants ... and I suppose it is the only metropolis in *Europe* which furnishes its own inhabitants: All the others are supplied with people from the provinces, the luxury and expensiveness of large cities being so great an impediment to marriage and populousness, that they would all, in the ordinary course of nature, be depopulated in a few years, were they not annually recruited from other parts; but in *Naples* the case is different, from a singular custom amongst the gentry in hiring married, in preference to unmarried servants. In *Paris*, or *London*, very few servants can hope to be employed who are not single, and, therefore, an infinite number of this class of people pass their lives in celibacy, as the instances are but rare, in those cities, where footmen and maid-servants can support them-selves after marriage by a different occupation. In *Naples* it is almost an universal fashion to keep their men-servants at board-wages, not admitting them to sleep in-their houses: This naturally leads them into marriage, as it gives them a settlement so essential to the character required here by all ranks of masters; but what seems still more to facilitate matrimony, in this order of people, is, the prodigious number of young women ready to accept the first offer; for in *Italy* they are not taken into service, as in *England*. A Nobleman who keeps forty men-servants, has seldom more than two maids; and indeed, it is so much the province of the men to do the house business, that they are employed

<sup>9</sup> The theme was also present in French publications: an anonymous article published in 1759 in a section called 'Extrait des Livres, Journaux et Lettres d'Italie' of the *Journal Economique* observed that in Rome cardinals and princes had domestics 'qui sont en grand nombre, sont presque tous mariés, & tiennent leur ménage en ville, où ils se retirent le soir, après avoir fait leur service pendant la journée' (Tableau 1759, 417).

all over the country, even to the making of the beds. This circumstance, with the difficulty a woman has to acquire her living here by any other means, is the reason why they seldom make an objection to the certain poverty attending matrimony. The swarms of children in all the streets, inhabited by the poor, are such as will necessarily result from this practice; and as a married couple, though they have six or seven children, never occupy more than one room, the extreme populousness of *Naples* must, consequently, follow from such causes. (1767, 100-101; italics in the text)

Sharp here associates the composition of the Neapolitan domestic servant population as to gender and marriage status with the peculiar demography of the city. As we shall see, modern scholars too often use domestic service to explain the demography of pre-industrial Europe. But before moving on to that issue, let us consider some other features of Italian servant-keeping that surprised English visitors.

According to the doctor James Moore, Neapolitan aristocrats kept huge staffs: 'no estate in England could support such a number of servants, paid and fed as English servants are'. In his view, they could only employ so many domestics because 'the greater number of men servants, belonging to the first families, give their attendance through the day only, and find beds and provisions for themselves', and because 'here the wages are very moderate indeed' (1781, II, 134). A few years earlier, Sharp had mentioned the wages of servants in Naples to give 'an idea of the starving life of the major part of the poor', adding that 'fashion of vails' was 'in a manner unknown, except by great chance, or at the beginning of the year, when they receive a few trifling perquisites' (1767, 103-104).<sup>10</sup> A couple of decades later, Thomas Watkins asserted that in Rome the wages of the 'numerous beggars in livery' were

<sup>10</sup> See also Sharp 1767, 103-105: 'SIR, To give you an idea of the starving life of the major part of the poor, I shall only mention the wages of servants ... A *Neapolitan* Gentleman pays his footman five ducats a month; a Nobleman, perhaps, fix: All the Quality who keep pages, give them six or seven ducats, with a livery once in two years, and another for *gala* days only, which lasts ten years; but neither shoes, stockings, nor washing; With this sum they subsist themselves and families, for their pay includes board-wages; nor are the tables or the Gentry so amply provided here as to admit of the least depredation, as is the case in *England*, where married servants generally maintain their wives from their master's larder. Now a ducat is about three shillings and nine-pence, five of which make something less than nineteen shillings, the whole monthly income of far the greater number of livery servants in *Naples*'; 'The generality of servants marrying very young; their wives are, for the most part, blessed with numerous progeny, the cares of which are a sufficient occupation for the wife, so that the labour of her hands can add but little to their stock. The rent of a room for a month, is a ducat, which leaves exactly fifteen shillings for cloathing and maintaining the whole family. After this detail, it will not appear strange that they seldom have either meat or fresh fish, but find themselves under the necessity of feeding chiefly on the produce of gardens, a cheap sort of cheese, salt-fish, and a coarse bread, the last of which articles is unfortunately as clear or dearer at *Naples* than at *London*'.

'small'. Yet, in contrast to Sharp, he thought that they were low because of 'the certainty of their being made up to them by the contributions they draw from foreigners' (1794, 403) in the form of vails (*mancia*). Wage rates were commented on by other travellers too: according to both Ellis Veryard (1701, 201) and Thomas Nugent (1756, 17, 41) domestics of the Italian aristocracy were generally hired at board wages, that is given cash in lieu of meals (Hill 1996, 70). Sharp in effect confirmed this tendency, though his picture was more nuanced: in Naples, 'in the great families a few of the upper servants are not at board-wages, but are dieted by their masters, for the convenience of consuming what remains at table'. The rest, however, were at board-wages: 'I shall close this account of the lowness of servants wages, with remarking, that they all prefer a carline (four-pence halfpenny) a day for board-wages, to the being maintained by their masters; by which one may judge with what vile provision they can subsist' (1767, 105-106). A few years earlier, Nugent had reported that in Rome the so-called *staffieri* (footmen) were paid two and a half or three *julios* a day at board wages (1756, 41). In the 1780s, Hester Lynch Piozzi reported that in Milan the pay of the 'principal figures in the family, when at the highest rate', was 'fifteen pence English a day, out of which they find clothes and eating – for fifteen pence includes board-wages' while the wage of a footman was 'a shilling a day, like our common labourers, and paid him, as they are paid, every Saturday night'. In addition, 'his *livery*, mean time, changed at least *twice a year*, makes him as rich a man as the butler and the valet' (1789, 69-70; italics in the text).

Summing up, British visitors generally considered the wages of Italian servants to be very low, sometimes similar to those of English staff, never higher. In this their comments tend to confirm the idea suggested by Leti that servants' wages were normally better in England than in Italy. Furthermore, while visiting Italy they did not on the whole (Rome was an exception) complain about vails, whereas these were a source of much discontent in eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>11</sup> English visitors frequently remarked on the

<sup>11</sup> For further comments on perquisites in Italy see Brillì 2006, 127, 149; Sweet 2012, 71. In the 1750s and 1760s especially English masters and servants engaged indeed in the so-called 'great vail controversy'. Vails claimed by servants from their masters' guests were not only a burden that visitors increasingly judged to be intolerable: they also constituted an income that undermined masters' authority by making servants almost independent of them, or so claimed John Shebbeare, interestingly writing under the pseudonym of an alleged Italian Jesuit, Batista Angeloni (1756, 41). Though initially not unanimously, masters subsequently made huge efforts to eradicate the use of tips, which was strenuously defended by servants in protests and riots such as those which took place in Edinburgh in 1759-1760, and in Ranelagh Gardens in London in 1764. Yet by the 1780s the practice had been almost entirely rooted-out, especially in upper-class households; see Marshall 1929, 23-26; Hecht 1980, 158-168; Hill 1996, 74-90; Meldrum 2000, 202; Horn 2004, 206-210; Straub 2009, 131-137, *passim*; Richardson 2010, 88-89.



fact that most Italian servants were at board-wages, implicitly suggesting that this arrangement was not as common at home. Their comments on this arrangement were often interspersed with remarks on the fact that Italian servants were mostly men, who were often married and did not live with their masters (Sharp 1767, 101). The impression one gets from reading their reports is that domestic service as performed in Italy appeared to their eyes a more proletarianised and monetised occupation than in Britain. Their reports typically focus on those servants who, according to British classifications, belonged (or should belong) to the 'indoor' staffs of noble households. In Italy, they observed, such servants were, with only a few exceptions, poor men who received low monetary wages and (paradoxically?) were live-outs: they were married, had children and were themselves heads of their own families. In a sense, they were 'masters' in their own homes and appeared to be quite independent. Although they did not question the social stratification of society, they were not particularly subservient. Like 'modern' proletarians, they went to work in the morning and went home in the evening, providing for themselves and their families the means of subsistence. They were poor, but they were breadwinners: their wives did not work as servants before marrying, nor did they have an occupation other than caring for their numerous children thereafter.<sup>12</sup> To a certain extent, one could say that being a servant in Italy conflicted less with the status of an independent adult man than it did in Britain where, according to the British themselves, domestic personnel was indeed more feminised.

On the other hand, in reading the comparisons between Britain and Italy in the texts I have analysed so far, one gets the impression that, though paid better than their Italian counterparts, British servants appeared (implicitly or explicitly) to be more 'infantilised': in the 'posture of children', to use a well-known description by Defoe (1715).<sup>13</sup> In general they lived in, ate and slept in the master's house, got an important part of their income from vails (features of gift economies rather than commercial ones), and were normally unmarried. They seemed to be more integrated into their masters' households as 'one of the family', but in subordinate positions. Their strenuous defense of vails (which made them in part economically independent from masters), as well as their efforts to transform tips from gracious donations into obligatory taxes on guests and rights for themselves, were probably a way of expressing their growing dissatisfaction with their subordinate position and desire to affirm their independence. Rather surprisingly, while visiting Italy British travellers did not (as far as I can tell) comment on servant stability

<sup>12</sup> See note 9.

<sup>13</sup> 'So that you put the Master entirely upon the Father's Place, and the Servants in the Posture of Children' (Defoe 1715, 276); on this issue see Straub 2009, *passim*.

or mobility, a matter which, back in Britain, was a source of great concern, and which was probably yet another way by which servants were trying to assert their autonomy. Perhaps just because they were travelling from place to place British tourists may not have been in a position to assess the degree of servant mobility – but more research is needed on this issue.

It might be surprising to find that Italian domestic service seemed to be more monetised and proletarianised than did the British. Yet we have to remember that Italy was a highly urbanised country whose economy was commercialised early. At this point however, it is time to compare the observations made by early modern writers with the findings of contemporary research.

#### 6. *The Ideas of our Ancestors and the Ideas of Contemporary Scholars Compared*

Sharp's extremely negative picture of Italy provoked the reaction of an Italian intellectual who spent much of his life in London, was appointed Secretary to the Royal Academy of Arts and became acquainted with (among many others) Samuel Johnson and Hester Lynch Piozzi. As a riposte to Sharp, Giuseppe Baretti published a two volume *Account of the Manners and Customs of Italy: With Observations on the Mistakes of Some Travellers, with Regard to that Country* (1768). The book included a discussion of some of the points made by Sharp about domestic service and marriage, and challenged his – and other Protestant writers' – attacks on the Italian custom of sending girls to nunneries. Sharp (1767, 108-109) had indeed accused Neapolitan nobles of making 'no great demands for the education of their children' because they disposed 'of all the girls in Convents, upon very easy terms, whilst they are children, where they are left all their lives, unless they provide them husbands'. As we have seen, he had also asserted that girls did not generally work as servants. Baretti claimed that Sharp had exaggerated the numbers of women in convents both as nuns and pensioners or boarders. As for servants, he did not contest Sharp's assertion, but, on the contrary, recalled his point about the absence of unmarried servants to argue that the Italian system was better than the English one; in Italy women with no chance of marrying often became nuns and spent their lives in the protective environment of the cloister, making older spinsters almost unknown, whereas in England many women were forced to remain unmarried and, if they were poor, had to spend their whole lives toiling as maid-servants. Neither in Italy nor in England was it possible for each and every woman to become a 'lawful mother' and thus contribute to increasing their nation's population; Baretti estimates that in England as many as 5-6 per cent of women were destined to be life-long singles (1768, II, 1-9).

It is not possible within the scope of this article to compare all comments on domestic service made both by writers observing their own countries and by visitors with the findings of contemporary historiography. I shall therefore devote my remaining pages to a closer examination of an issue which has

been crucial in historical debate during the last fifty years: that of marriage and celibacy among male and female servants.

In 1965 an influential essay was published by the demographer John Hajnal, who wrote that Western Europe was characterized by a peculiar marriage pattern with a high proportion of single people and marriages at a late age. In Hajnal's view, these two features reduced birth rates, contributing to slowing down population growth and reducing population pressure. According to Hajnal, Western Europeans married late because they had to acquire the ability and means to support a family before marrying, a goal they often achieved by working as servants. Life-long single people were often servants, too. Domestic service was thus at the core of Hajnal's theory. During the years that followed, Hajnal (1983), Laslett (1983) and scholars of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure developed this model further by introducing the concept of life-cycle service, namely service performed during the juvenile phase of life, typically before marrying (Laslett 1977a, 1977b). These theories generated huge field of research. The homeostatic mechanism initially suggested by Hajnal has been found to work effectively in North Western and Central Europe, but not in other parts of the continent, such as the Eastern and Southern Europe (especially in the Mediterranean region), and life-cycle service has not been found to be common everywhere (Sarti 2007; Sarti 2014, with further references).

Interestingly enough, however, some early modern authors too had noticed the high proportion of singles among domestics, and they too had considered it a hindrance to population growth. Yet, while contemporary scholars generally think of this high celibacy rate as a positive contribution to keeping a balance between the resources available and demographic growth, early modern authors, who on the contrary usually valued population growth, took a negative view of it, and also denounced it as a source of immoral behaviour (Sarti 2008). David Hume, for instance, in his essay *Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations* (1752), argued that ancient slavery was a hindrance to populousness because it was more convenient for masters to buy grown up slaves than to breed them: 'the same reason, at least in part, holds with regard to ancient slaves as modern servants'. Moreover, noting that 'at present, all masters discourage the marrying of their male servants, and admit not by any means the marriage of the female, who are then supposed altogether incapacitated for their service', Hume argued that 'our lackeys and house-maids, I own, do not serve much to multiply their species' (1987, II, XI, 13 and 23). Even more explicitly, Moheau, in his *Recherches et considérations sur la population de la France* (1778), declared that the high number of *domestiques* was deleterious to population growth, because masters preferred unmarried servants, so that many domestics remained single and/or had no children (1994, 117).

Some of the authors of travel books analysed here also associated the gender and marital status of domestic servants with rapid/slow population growth as well as with wealth. Samuel Sharp, in particular, considered the absence of female servants and the marriage of males at a young age to be one of the reasons for the populousness of Naples and the poverty of its lower strata.<sup>14</sup> That in Southern Italy female domestic service was not as common as in Northern Europe has been confirmed by modern scholars (Sarti 2007, with further references). Unfortunately domestic service in Naples has not so far been studied in detail, but research on other Italian cities shows that male domestic servants were common and were indeed often married and live-outs. This was the case, for instance, in eighteenth-century Bologna (Sarti 2005a). As for Rome, Angiolina Arru has shown that in the eighteenth century male married servants were numerous, yet at the same time marriage was an area of conflict between masters and servants. According to Arru conflict surrounding marriage was one of the most important factors that contributed to the feminisation of domestic personnel in the nineteenth century, when unmarried female servants living with their masters became increasingly common (1995).

Although data on this issue is quite fragmentary, and the different criteria used by different scholars limit the possibility to make geographical comparisons, it seems that Arru was not too far from the truth when she wrote, some years ago, that 'Italian cities had a higher percentage of male servants ... than other European cities' (1990, 549). Certainly, until more or less the mid-eighteenth century, quite high percentages of male servants were present in other cities as well. In Paris, for instance, according to the eighteenth-century demographer Louis Messance, in 1754 male *domestiques* were even more numerous than female ones (respectively 50.4 and 49.6 per cent), (1766, 186). Yet, after the mid-eighteenth century, Italian cities indeed had a higher percentage of men among their domestics than elsewhere (Sarti 1997; Sarti 2007). In London, however, women were the large majority of servants even in the second half of the seventeenth and in the eighteenth century (about 80 percent according to Meldrum 2000, 16), and they generally were young and unmarried (18-19) – a finding consistent with the surprise of the British travellers observing the high numbers of men among Italian staffs.

We can speculate about the reasons for this gender composition. The data available for Florence and Venice show that in the Middle Ages maid-servants were numerous; the numbers of men-servants grew from the sixteenth century onwards. By that time, demographic recovery had annulled the long-

<sup>14</sup> This interpretation would support the hypothesis – recently put forward in a highly controversial article by De Moor and Van Zanden (2010) – that, because of its system of family formation, Southern Europe, did not enjoy the advantages of the 'European marriage pattern' that they consider as a stimulus to economic development. It is not possible to discuss this hypothesis within the scope of this article.

term consequences of the Black Death, which, had made manpower scarce and created job opportunities for women in domestic service. In addition, the republican and mercantile societies of Italy underwent a process of aristocratisation that probably resulted in increasing recourse to men-servants along lines similar to the pattern followed by Northern European aristocracies in the late Middle Ages. Furthermore, the marginalisation of the Italian economy after the conquest of America lack of alternative employment may have pushed not only women but also men into the domestic sector, while the late start of industrialisation in Italy probably contributed to keeping up numbers of men-servants in the eighteenth century (Klapisch-Zuber 1986; Romano 1996, xxi, 229-230; Sarti 1997).<sup>15</sup>

In reading the comments of British travellers on the gender composition of Italian domestic staffs, one has the impression that women made up only a small minority. These comments normally referred to aristocratic households, which my own research on parish registers, censuses and account books and other sources concerning late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bologna confirms to have been largely made up of men: women usually constituted a third or a quarter of the staffs of such households (Sarti 1994, 70; 1999). Maids were in fact particularly numerous in non-noble families. As already stated, quantitative comparisons among different periods, cities and nations is difficult because of the blurred boundaries of the notion of what is a servant: findings depend very much on who is counted. However, we can argue that, in Italy, maids generally made up (significantly) more than half of the servants and urban domestic service was more likely to have been performed by men (of all ages), who often were married and heads of their own families, than in England. Though the feminisation of domestic personnel that was to take place in the nineteenth century was a complex – and by no means linear – process, with local peculiarities, it was a process that would reduce the size of this group of servants (Sarti 1997, 2005a, 2005b). As a result the young, unmarried, live-in maid-servant became the most common type of servant: an outcome that (paradoxically?) would associate domestic service more closely with co-residence, with strict subordination to masters (inasmuch as the number of servants who were themselves heads of families decreased), and

<sup>15</sup> Comparing domestic service in the industrial town of Prato with that in the ‘aristocratic’ city of Florence in 1841, Maria Casalini found that in Prato domestic service was more feminised than in Florence (2001). It was not until the early twentieth century, by which time Italy was making up for its late start in economic development, that the Italian ‘difference’ as to numbers of men-servants diminished. It must be stressed, however, that the interpretative framework according to which economic development and modernisation *always* imply first a feminisation of domestic service and eventually a marked reduction in numbers of servants, or their disappearance, has proved to be incorrect; see Dubert 2006; Sarti 2014.

with female gender, thus strongly contributing to the so-called feminisation of dependency (Sarti 2003; Fraser and Gordon 1994, 309-314).

### 7. Conclusion

Let us go back to the comments made by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors. On one hand they shed light on the ways domestic service was perceived, both by those writing of their own countries and by travellers: they allow us to understand which features of service they perceived as problematic and which they found surprising. At the same time, however, they reveal that perceptions were rooted and influenced by the contexts considered. When authors compare their own countries with others, their evaluations are likely to change; for instance, complaints about English domestics being the most insolent in the world appear in a different light after reading how Italian servants were considered by British travellers. Comparison leads to inconsistencies and contradictions that disclose the relativity of all such judgements. This is indeed one of the reasons for the interest of the literature analysed in this article, which has focused on a series of early modern texts in which servants and servant-keeping in Italy and England were compared. Nevertheless, many commentators agreed that domestics were paid better in England than in Italy, where numbers of men-servants (often married and live-out) were higher than in Britain. This last point is consistent with the findings of contemporary historical research based on other sources: many other comments made by our ancestors might thus be taken as stimulating suggestions for new research.

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