



Compassion as Commodity

Middle-Class Women and Care Work in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

While it was common for Victorian working-class women to be employed outside of the home, a paid occupation spelled the end of gentility for their bourgeois counterparts. Yet many of these ladies found respectable alternatives to make a living. For our research of the nineteenth century, we rely to a great extent on numbers – census data, population statistics, percentages. However, few contemporary employment records give an accurate or reliable account of the respective household constellation, particularly with regard to women. Looking at these numbers, we have to bear in mind that we are also looking at numbers accrued with certain assumptions about the role of women in society. Unlike the New Woman of the fin de siècle, who is a typist or clerk, some held positions which fell outside of the common labor categories. From Charles Dickens to Neo-Edwardian literature, these ‘odd women’ appear as caretakers, companions, and assistants performing various duties. Broadening the scope of investigation into women and work in England during the long nineteenth century beyond considerations of manual and educational employment into the realm of emotional labor, we can obtain more information on the restrictions of contemporary ideology and the power dynamics of affective care.

Keywords: Middle-Class Women, Caregiving, Victorian Fiction, Ideology



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The giving and receiving of care in private households is commonly associated with the work of nurses as providers of in-home medical assistance. The same holds true for the Victorian Era, where prominent individuals like Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole, as well as fictional caricatures such as Dickens's Sairey Gamp, have become familiar figures. Other kinds of care work that fall outside the medical-physical have received little notice. Studies by Panchali Ray (2016) or Della Giusta and Jewell (2015) are among others that have drawn attention to the sociological, ethical, and phenomenological implications of caregiving in both historical and contemporary contexts. Yet emotional labor as performed by untrained personal attendants and lady's companions in the nineteenth century has been largely neglected. Owing to a paucity of private accounts and official records, precise figures as well as details of employment terms and conditions are scarce, whereas the personal and political implications prove to be more complex and significant than they initially appear. Existing in the interstices of Victorian society, impoverished gentlewomen employed in private households in non-educational domestic occupations held a position fraught with ambiguity: simultaneously employee and guest, stranger, and confidante, equal and subordinate they frequently served as emotional caregivers in a professional relationship marked by mutual dependence. The many facets of the patroness-attendant connection are comprehensively illustrated in fiction, which offers various depictions of an unusual occupation that masquerades as friendship. Genuine sympathy as well as underlying currents of disdain are well portrayed in mid-nineteenth century novels that feature paid female companions in both marginal and central roles. This paper aims to explore the types of affective and emotional labor performed by these women by combining an examination of their general role supported by descriptions from first-hand accounts with individual examples in Victorian fiction by English writers published in the second half of the nineteenth century. Instances of mutual dependency within the employment relationship and the connection between caregiver and recipient, like the need for affirmation and sympathy and the inability to provide either in Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872), or the emotional investments of the companion in Thomas Hardy's *Desperate Remedies* (1871) serve as relatable representations of the companion's work environment. Representing a small section of Victorian novels with characters in said occupation, both works offer illustrative depictions of companion figures and their efforts and shortcomings in meeting employment expectations. While fictional portrayals of the figure vary with genre and narrative role, their prominence in mid- to late nineteenth century sensation stories correlates with the ideological conventions that governed women's employment options, though companions appear in earlier and later publications as well. While it would be preposterous to take novelistic portrayals as accurate depictions of historical conditions, the interactions between characters embedded in a narrative context can offer helpful insight into the companion's work with regard to the more subtle details of her professional responsibilities. Albeit within limits, imaginary representations still demonstrate how middle-class women maintained their social status and continued to comply with contemporary ideological ideals despite their economic circumstances. Detailing the particulars of the employment relationship, the texts reveal which affective investments are made to sustain it, and the ways in which individuals modify their

personas to express or suppress feelings. We can use these portrayals to further deduce the obscured efforts made by Victorian lady's companions regarding emotional labor and its impact on the quality of their lives and personal relationships. Several characteristics—infinite workdays, lack of remuneration and recognition—are still found in modern debate on unacknowledged work performed by mothers, housewives, carers, and service workers.¹

Though fictional, novelistic renderings reflect ideological parameters and conceptions of Victorian gentlewomen and work, their ambiguous social position and employment prospects. Historical perception of working gentlewomen has been narrowed by a focus on governesses as its largest representative group. The comparably small number of middle-class women employed in private households in non-educational occupations has therefore largely been overlooked. My argument centers around the idea that the women obscured by the taxonomy of census records as well as those figures portrayed in contemporary fiction whose position and purpose in the household constellation lack a clear definition were nevertheless active care workers. Many refinements have been made to the early notions of working middle-class women, most notably by Lauren Hoffer (2009) and Talia Schaffer (2021) to the extent that we can accept the position of personal attendant and lady's companion as occupations in their own right.

Idealized Confinement

Women contributed notably to the household budget, whether through home-based occupations or participation in the family business, and female employment in the mid-nineteenth century was high. Domestic service as the largest sector comprised around 40 percent of the female workforce in 1851, with a slightly lower proportion engaged in textile and manufacturing industries (Tilly and Scott 1989). Yet while opportunities were plenty, a considerable part of the female population was denied access to the labor market through restrictions of contemporary ideology. With the Victorian reverence for the home as a haven separated from the world of work and commerce came the idealization of middle- and upper-class women as ladies of leisure, relieved from household duties by an array of personnel.

The actual realization of this model was the reserve of those situated at the upper end of the social scale, yet the image of the Victorian “Angel in the House” who devoted her time to maternal, social, and recreational activities persisted into the following century. Modern research into the socio-economic realities of working- and middle-class families has long rectified previous misconceptions about the involvement of female household members, with more accurate and plausible accounts of their daily lives (Anderson 1984; Langland 1992).

Although many women supplemented the family income in different ways, not all households were able to support unmarried daughters. Single gentlewomen and widows whose personal financial conditions necessitated the pursuit of paid employment were vastly restricted by conventions. Their dilemma consisted of more than skills and opportunities:

¹ See, for instance, Dalla Costa (1974) and Grossman (2012).

Single women had to tackle their marginal position ideologically, economically, and socially. First a rationale had to be found to justify creating a new role for women in which they could be both public, that is, paid workers, and feminine, that is, domestic. (Vicinus 1985: 12)

Employment outside of the home, in factories, mining, and agriculture, while acceptable for working-class women, spelled the end of gentility for their bourgeois counterparts. Exceptions were made for tasks performed within the domestic sphere, but opportunities were scarce and perspectives dim. In many cases, the few avenues available to unmarried ladies who could not depend on familial support were viable only under certain conditions. While it remained difficult for many contemporaries to reconcile gentlewomen with work, the contradiction inherent in the employment of a lady was graciously overlooked regarding non-manual domestic occupations. Engagements in wealthier homes allowed destitute ladies to provide for themselves while preserving their social status, and the private governess presented the most common and widely available position. Details of the often-dire living and working conditions are reflected in countless imaginary and documentary texts, from Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* to private diaries and public debates, making her a familiar figure for readers then and today. In addition to being a popular character in fiction, the governess has been a subject of various research fields within nineteenth century studies, from literary to economic and sociological investigations. By contrast, few companions have been the subject of literary analyses and critical studies concerning Victorian women and work despite their unique social position and versatility as narrative characters.²

The position of lady's companion or personal attendant in a private household offered a rare alternative to teaching, as it equally complied with conventional norms. Safely situated within the domestic sphere, it bypassed ideological restrictions in the same way as in-home education, securing livelihood and continued respectability. While private teaching remained the favored option, oversupply eventually created a highly competitive market which gradually excluded those who failed to meet desired standards. The ideal governess was childless, respectable, educated, and young—women between the ages of 25–30 were preferred, and ladies beyond these years often rejected on the assumption that “their energy or patience had worn thin” (Curran 1993:230). But even those who entered the profession early on were seldom able to make adequate provision for old age, relying instead on annuities from charitable institutions, or committing themselves to mental asylums as the cheapest form of lodging available (Hammerton 1979).

Public demand for lady's companions, however, was low and those in search of a position found employment by means of relatives, acquaintances, agencies, and newspaper advertisements. The latter often put them into a delicate position, taking into consideration that “announcing that one was up for hire broke every rule of genteel behavior” (Hughes 1993: 44).

² The works of Lauren Hoffer (2009) and Deanna Kreisel (2012), however, provide valuable groundwork in their considerations of the narrative potential and economic role of Victorian lady's companions, respectively. Both examine the occupation in historical and literary contexts.

Despite appearing in the columns of enumerators' records and "Situations Wanted," reliable figures for the number of lady's companions employed in nineteenth century households prove problematic to obtain given the taxonomical inconsistencies of Victorian census data and the fact that many women who offered their services advertised as governess *or* companion. Although more dependable figures are available for the Victorian governess, even this comparably unequivocal occupation was not consistently documented as such³. Once the children had reached adulthood, some families continued to employ their governess in the role of personal attendant to the mother or eldest daughter; in these cases, her professional designation as related to census takers might not have been adjusted. Similar to public advertisements, impecunious gentlewomen maintained an ambivalent attitude towards monetary compensation, which—if offered—was occasionally even rejected (Curran 1993)⁴. The problem of reconciling paid employment with ideological conventions was not limited to young women who had never been married. Widows were commonly considered to have relied on investments, insurance benefits, or remarriage, though studies that have focused more exclusively on this population group draw other conclusions. Frequently facing the same economic hardship as single women and of more advanced age, their prospects were even less promising (Curran 1993; Moring and Wall 2017). But as nineteenth century census takers adhered to changing guidelines and regulations, with entries made by both enumerators and heads of household often being subjective assessments, the precise social, occupational, and marital status of lady's companions is difficult to discern.

Census Data: Lost in Tabulation

While undoubtedly an indispensable source, nineteenth century population statistics provide only a vague account of the number and specifics of residents' occupation and thus their social and economic roles. Historical relevance notwithstanding, modern research has questioned and re-examined census records, pointing to oversights and offering new approaches to reading the data and uncovering the economic contributions of population groups that had previously been overlooked. Notable publications on the subject include *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (2007), edited by Nigel Goose, and an examination of parallels between unrecorded female employment and infant mortality rates in Victorian Britain by Atkinson and his colleagues (2017). Multiple studies have explored the economic role of women and its concomitant effects since the publication of Edward Higgs's 1987 revision of census records paved the way for a more critical approach to decoding nineteenth century population

³ As Gordon and Nair (2003: 182) note, governesses were frequently registered as "servant" or "visitor."

⁴ Contemporary literature addressed the topic in various advice manuals and booklets, such as Elizabeth M. Sewell (1865). For more on the delicate matter of remuneration and the middle class's ambivalent attitude towards money see Elsie Michie (2011) and Peterson (1970).

statistics⁵. His seminal work relates the varying criteria and standards applied by enumerators as well as the ways in which changing guidelines affected their compilations. Decisions as to which activities and individuals were to be included rested with census takers and husbands, with definitions of work premised on subjective interpretations. This led to the exclusion of several forms of activity, both paid and unpaid, from the data set, much to the detriment of female household members, whose efforts were discounted. Higgs's (2016) recent reassessment of the original study, co-authored by Jane Wilkinson, has broadened the scope of investigation into occupational categories even further, while Kathrin Levitan (2008) brings census records into the broader context of Victorian anxiety over female surplus population and national strength.

Modern re-evaluation of the terminology and the inherent definitions of stated occupations reveal the statistics' deficiencies as well as misleading interpretations that have been derived from them. While capturing full-time work rather adequately, discrepancies in the specification of domestic occupations prevent census records from serving as a representative source for identifying the number of women carrying out informal activities. Occupational pursuits that were not recognized as labor, such as the care work performed by relatives as well as outsiders—predominantly women—were likewise precluded from registration.

Household members were to be organized according to their relation to the head of the household, a strategy that left little leeway for further differentiation among the actual type of work performed and individuals' positions within the hierarchy (Higgs 1987).

Regarding women's work, census takers and householders were directed to include only occupations not commonly considered to fall among general domestic responsibilities, which offered but a narrow window of occupations cited given the number of possible activities falling under this definition. Census data therefore lack more detailed distinction, as “[h]ouseholders and enumerators appear to have varied in the extent to which they regarded women's employment outside the home and paid work within it as an occupation overriding their domestic ‘duties’” (Higgs 1987: 63). Other aspects of categorization are similarly problematic, as the specifics of an activity were less relevant than a person's place within the domestic constellation “which could be seen in terms of a social as opposed to a productive role” (Higgs 1987: 63), obscuring both the individual's professional function and class status. Yet these factors are critical regarding the situation of lady's companions and attendants, whose background and thus class affiliation differentiated them from other domestic personnel. Their genteel birth seems to have not had any significance in census listings, where they appear under the same category as housemaids and charwomen, who were primarily working-class⁶.

⁵Higgs's (1987) study, though exhaustive and comprehensive, is not the first to recognize deficiencies and omissions in Victorian censuses. Among the early comments on the statistics' inaccuracies regarding women's employment are Sally Alexander, Anna Davin, and Eve Hostettler (1979).

⁶ Census returns of 1871 list 2,901 lady's companions, grouped among “Domestic servants;” the same category explicitly distinguishes nurses as “not domestic servants” (Vision of Britain 2017). Whereas other studies suggest that most lady's companions and attendants came from a middle-class background, their social status and professional

Over the last decades, several studies have addressed the economic importance of the work of female household members, both related and employed, despite it not being “productive” in the sense of generating capital. These findings highlight the effects and importance of women’s domestic activities both in relation to the household budget—supervision of staff, regulation of consumption and management of reproduction—as well as their involvement in family businesses; for example, trading and hospitality (Horrell and Humphries 1995; Higgs and Wilkinson 2016). What has been long neglected, but recently received more attention is the non-physical, emotional work of caregivers such as companions. Studies of these women’s work are often set within the framework of literary analysis or nineteenth century socio-economic discourse⁷. Whereas some analyses such as Lauren Hoffer’s (2009) study of fictional companions and sympathy focus on singular aspects of the employment relationship, a systematic study of the working conditions, agreements, and duties as well as the effects on caregiver and recipient are difficult to realize with such few personal records. Closer consideration of the occupation itself in reference to the larger social scene and the position of the personal attendant within the context of affective labor would thus contribute to our current knowledge of nineteenth century opportunities for middle-class women. Research on the Victorian governess has noted the amount of extra-educational work and its impacts, particularly regarding employers’ demands and expectations as well as teacher-pupil relationships, while the history of the nursing profession has likewise made note of the mental and emotional strain of caregivers (Hughes 1993; Heggie 2015). In both teaching and nursing, however, interpersonal affective connections are basic employment stipulations. “Attendant” and “lady’s companion” serve as vague descriptions of ambiguous positions that range from familial visitor to genteel maid-of-all-work and bullied retainer. What sets it apart from comparable positions is the occupation’s concept, that is, the hiring of a stranger to serve as friend and confidante, which conceals any underlying economic agreements. Emotional attachment on the side of the attendant made the connection to her patroness seem elective, whether the enjoyment on display was genuine or not. Expectations, purpose, and pay varied widely, as did employment duration, which depended on personal preferences as much as on alternative options, to be terminated by either party at any time. As the position resists capture in terms of professional designation, such exploitation of impecunious middle-class women is difficult to trace historically, let alone measure quantifiably.

Literary and historical investigations have asserted and corrected depictions of “the governess’s plight,” offering additional insight into middle-class women’s socio-economic position in the mid-nineteenth century (Hughes 1993; Wadsö-Lecaros 2001). Comprehensive investigations into the ideological conventions governing Victorian middle-class women’s social position and their involvement in the labor market have since revealed further details, notably

responsibility are not discernible from the statistics (Peterson 1970; Hoffer 2009). The majority of fictional employers appears to be of middle- or even upper-class origin.

⁷ For the socio-economic conditions affecting nineteenth century women see Humphries (1995). For analyses of personal attendants and care communities in Victorian fiction, see Hoffer (2009) and Schaffer (2021).

Jeanne Peterson's (1970: 7) complex analysis of nineteenth century governesses and their "status incongruence." The attendant's position within the private household resembles that of the governess in many respects, placing her in the ambiguous situation between employee and equal as a gentlewoman employed by a middle-class family. Companions and attendants, unlike private teachers, appear to enjoy a more privileged, leisured existence, co-habiting with their employer unencumbered by professional responsibilities. Yet the outward appearance of the occupation—its title, image, and prevalence—denies the restrictions and requirements enforced by employment terms as much as conventional norms. The image contrasts with the employees being registered within the same category as charwomen and housemaids, positions which involved arduous physical labor performed by members of the working class. Census records, when regarded as public documents that constitute, shape, and reflect popular conceptions of society rather than social reality, can therefore tell us little about the conditions surrounding various occupations and the circumstances of the individuals performing them. Among the reasons why women working as lady's attendants and companions did not attract widespread interest is their inconspicuous public persona: neither particularly radical in their demands nor well-connected among another, they lacked the support systems that had developed for governesses.

The Companion's Role and Position: Occupational Profile

Paid female companions fulfilled a variety of functions in a role that changed from the ornamental to the practical. Initially present to provide company and entertainment, the array of assignments broadened as the labor market offered more opportunities for women, and preferences for steady hours and regular pay led many to seek work outside of private homes (Lethbridge 2013). As a consequence, personal attendants functioned as inexpensive substitutes for other employees, taking on secretarial tasks, housekeeping, and light nursing, as employers utilized the versatility of the position to avoid additional costs. Linking ideal femininity with the domestic gentlewoman thus provided cheap labor in the guise of the charitable offer of a reputable situation. Although socio-economic changes affected the companion's position with regards to daily duties, the personal relationship between employer and attendant remained distinct. In addition to the chores of household management, she remained a source and repository of emotions for her mistress. Motives for hiring and terms of employment, the two women's individual situation with regards to familial and social ties, age difference and personality all affected the work environment and emotional investments made by both parties.

In a feature on "Women who Work" (Gwyn 1875: 248) that ran in *Cassell's Family Magazine*, Miss Gwyn describes her experiences as a paid companion to several employers "and the 'trying' elements therein, that others may see what they are, and be warned or cheered thereby." Instead of being a burden to her married sister, she decides against becoming a governess for fear that her education should not meet market standards. While she notes the kindness of some patronesses and their relatives, she makes no pretense of the hardships involved:

Women who Work! Well, I've seen the words stuck up in big red letters on hoardings and dead walls every time I've taken the dogs out during the last three months; and I certainly think we ought to be included in the list; for companionship is work, and hard work sometimes, and one which none but women undertake as a profession. (Gwyn 1875: 248)

Although in some sense a member of the domestic personnel, it appears that the companion's professional duties were non-essential; unlike servant, nurse, or governess, she held no function relevant to the operation of the household. Nor were her activities required exclusively for the observance of standards decreed by conventional norms, such those of a chaperone. Though contemporary ideals stipulated that gentlewomen were not to socialize alone in public, the accompanying party did not have to hold a particular status. A lady's maid sufficed, but educated women of genteel background were the preferred conversation partners (Wagner 2017).

Depictions of companions in early twentieth century literature, however, differ: a growing range of professional duties has companions increasingly performing secretarial and organizational tasks, such as the overseeing of personnel. This was partially owing to the staff shortages of a wartime labor market, though companions were spared manual labor comparable to the tasks of cook, gardener, charwoman, or butler. The services provided by companions in the early and mid-nineteenth century, however, were mainly limited to leisure activities, such as reading, conversation, or entertaining employers' friends and visitors. Assignments were often contingent on the nature of the professional relationship as well as the respective household constellation. As representatives of an ideologically atypical group—working middle-class women—companions had to be pigeonholed into the hierarchy of the household based on their employers' personal preference. Instructional material comparable to advice manuals offering guidance for employers of governesses and domestic staff is sparse, though companions find mention in contemporary periodicals, such as Miss Gwyn's (1875) report, as well as reference books detailing the particulars of various occupations⁸.

Overall, the companion's purpose consisted in being a near-constant presence, attentive and compassionate, offering sympathy, kindness, and allegiance on demand. This form of patronage in the guise of acquaintance or friendship fastened those who received it onto a wheel of loyalty and commitment that denied the economic nature behind the association. The appearance of voluntariness in many people's eyes sanctified it as an act of charity, when in fact room, board, and the preservation of reputability were paid for in subservience and the surrender of personal identity. Working for a lady whose active and social lifestyle is initially a welcome change, Miss Gwyn (1875: 251) finds herself compelled to leave when she is unable to repress grief upon learning of her sister's death, her mistress having "such a dislike to gloom and depression." Initially, though, she tries to endure: "I worked harder than ever; I went out, laughed, sang, and talked as desired; and sat up at night in my own room, burning out the last end of candle over the mourning I could hardly see through tears" (Gwyn 1875: 251).

⁸ Philipps' (1898) "Dictionary of Employments open to Women," published by the Women's Institute London, is one such example of informational material.

Fiction offers illustrative examples of the ways in which employers deny the companion any individuality yet continue to include her into daily activities beyond the services of other domestic employees. Leisure pastimes were made a part of her employer's own recreational pursuits, or simply prescribed: in Trollope's (Trollope [1872] 1996: 168) *The Eustace Diamonds*, the compliant Miss Macnulty devotes her private time to horticultural diversion, "having received a suggestion that it would be well that she should do a little gardening in the moat." Miss Gwyn (1875: 250) makes similar observations, remarking that her mistress "never contemplated for a moment the idea that a companion could expect to have even the smallest modicum of time to herself." Unless she joins her on a rare outing, Miss Gwyn is required to spend her time beside her patroness, allowed to do nothing "but talk, talk, talk the idlest gossip; or sit still and silent while she dozed" (Gwyn 1875: 249). The monotony eventually takes its toll: realizing that her "health and spirits suffered so much from the confinement and uncongeniality combined" (Gwyn 1875: 249), she resigns at the insistence of her family.

Within the larger household constellation, the companion was lodged between the upstairs and the downstairs, an isolated figure that often troubled existing structures, with senior staff members taking umbrage at the proximity and privileges she enjoyed. Drawing on her own time as lady's companion, Mary Wollstonecraft ([1787] 2014) succinctly summarized the awkward occurrences and heightened vulnerability brought about by the ambiguity of the position. Regarding social situations as well as the emotional impact, she reports:

It is impossible to enumerate the many hours of anguish such a person must spend. Above the servants, yet considered by them as a spy, and ever reminded of her inferiority when in conversation with the superiors.... Painfully sensible to unkindness, she is alive to every thing, and many sarcasms reach her, which were perhaps directed another way. She is alone, shut out from equality and confidence, and the concealed anxiety impairs her constitution; for she must wear a cheerful face, or be dismissed. (P. 69)

Decades after Wollstonecraft wrote down her experiences, the conditions had changed but little; both fictional and historical depictions of the companion's situation frequently illustrate the awkward hierarchical liminality and feigned emotions as having considerable impact on their work environment and personal well-being. Miss Gwyn's (1875: 251) employer expects "those about her to be lively, well dressed, and always at her service," while she is eyed with the utmost suspicion by the servants, who suspect her of being amorously involved with the mistress's son. Sometimes serving the same family over decades generations, butlers and lady's-maids were often closer to their employers than companions, dedication at times growing into a mutual friendship that was quietly acknowledged (Lethbridge 2013). Since the companion's social position was as hard to gauge precisely as were her employment duties and duration, her entire *raison d'être* within the setting could affect its hierarchical stability.

This is not to say that all relationships between mistress and attendant were marked by undercurrents of antipathy on the side of the latter. Patronage and complaisance could transform into something else—correlative dependence, affection, or feelings of parental love. Maternal

fondness could be felt by either party, mostly based on differences in age; fictional examples are plentiful and reveal novelist's use of this unusual association for a variety of narrative purposes. Whereas Hardy (1871), in *Desperate Remedies*, combines consanguineous and amicable relationships between Miss Aldclyffe and her young attendant Cytherea, in whom the former sees a prospective daughter-in-law, Collins' *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) demonstrates the degree of authority assumed by Madame Pratolungo in her efforts to care for the eponymous heroine, for whom she works as companion and caretaker.

The desire to provide for the other is nevertheless frequently undermined by the volatility of personal feelings; the professional quality of the relationship defined the role of provider and dependent, the latter constantly at risk of being dismissed or reprimanded for her actions or lack thereof. While this applies to all domestic staff, proximity, and exposure to the more public events such as visits and travels as well as amorous or even criminal affairs intensify this aspect. The wealthy Miss Aldclyffe, infamous for her rash dismissal of lady's maids who fail to suit her temper, still shares her most intimate thoughts with her companion, jeopardizing herself in the process. That she avoids attempts at blackmail or exposure is solely owing to Cytherea's benevolent attitude towards her patroness. Without being made an explicit employment condition, the "keeping up appearances" as represented in fiction is a distinct trait of the occupation pertaining to both the professional relationship—obscuring amicable affiliation or hidden hostilities—and the companion's delicate status as poor but genteel. Similar observations are also found in non-fictional sources: her employer's "dislike to gloom and depression" (Gwyn 1875: 251) results in Miss Gwyn's resignation after she finds herself unable to repress her grief when she receives word of her sister's death. Expected "to dress, not only well, but stylish" (Gwyn 1875: 251), she also suffers the financial effects of conforming with her patroness's fashion. Maintaining an air of domestic leisure, appropriate manners, and reputability, against the odds, was much lauded and denied the personal and economic conditions of the companion. Yet the delicate differences between her and other domestic personnel were anything but clear-cut. The traditional model of master and servant based on class status was not easily transferred to the mistress-companion parallel. For instances in which there was no disparity in social origin between wealthy patroness and impecunious attendant, both parties had to determine their place in the system of authority and submission. For the companion this implied navigating the minute gradations underpinning the hierarchy among domestic staff as well as balancing her demeanor in the presence of and interaction with guests and visitors. Physical and emotional proximity and class affiliation made the employment relationship one of such inconsistent complexity that every attempt at a definition is thwarted by contrasting instances. For each case of verbal abuse or negligence there is another of deep appreciation, care, and fondness. Employment duration allowed for the development of a thorough reciprocal understanding, even if the relationship retained its formal characteristic on the outside.

At first glance, companions would seem to defy conventional norms of female middle-class domesticity and leisure by seeking paid work in exchange for services. Their status is vague, however, as the range of responsibilities, place and perception within the household setting and

nature of the emotional connection to employers could vary substantially. Although some appear as decorative and ornamental, seemingly void of purpose, the mental and emotional adjustments necessary in compliance with the respective role assigned as well as the expected function within the employment relationship involve a greater effort than initially visible. Fictional characterizations capture the thought processes and mental strain of the companion, often embedded in humorous scenes ridiculing the employing family rather than their humble dependent. The latter's presence in the household is not always explicitly clarified and there appears to be little consistency as to employers' motivation for hiring her. From an authorial perspective, companion characters offer a range of narrative possibilities as the parameters of personal history, age, and professional purpose are more modifiable than those of a fictional governess, whose primary duties are determined by occupational standards. Similar prerequisites apply for the employing household, which must perform include underage children.

The Patroness and her Protégé

Careful Company

Carers are commonly defined either in terms of familial or occupational roles—"wives," "mothers," "daughters;" and "nurse," "nanny." Both groups, although providing different dimensions of care, are commonly identified with affective labor based on kinship or profession. Although not hired on the grounds of providing care to a vulnerable and dependent individual, the companion's basic function—regardless of the respective duties she was assigned to fulfil—was to act and respond empathetically to her employer's emotional needs. She was expected to *care for* her mistress, which necessitated some form of action—whether she *cared about* her, that is, had a motive to deliver genuine, quality care does not alter the fact that she performed caring activities. Emotional assistance occurred in different forms: companionship, moral support, bolstering self-esteem, or underpinning hierarchies all require the investment of time, energy, and affective response. In addition, the companion had to bear the frustration, irritation, and envy of her mistress and sometimes that of other staff. Based on these factors, the lady's companion's work—a term that has been applied sparingly—was an economic practice in the form of caregiving, even without direct financial compensation⁹.

The tasks performed by companions reflect the "immaterial labor" referred to by Hardt (1999: 96) in his study of affective work in the capitalist economy, who locates instances of emotional effort in health services, entertainment, and culture industries. The immateriality of this type of work, "even if it is corporeal and affective" results from the fact "that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community." The companion's activities align with other types of work geared to effect and supply

⁹ In his study on the commodification of care, Rutger Claassen (2011) distinguishes between pre-existing relationships between caregiver and recipient as characteristic of informal provision and contractual agreements between both parties as market provisions. Given the undefined and ambiguous position of the companion and the frequent absence of actual contracts, her work falls along a continuum between both forms of caregiving.

emotional response, such as professional entertainers, but also other occupations within the service sector. Regarding the need to regulate private feelings and simulate sentiments to elicit or deliver appropriate response, the companion's professional efforts resemble those of modern women employed in care and service jobs. Like the flight attendants interviewed by Arlie Hochschild (1983) a century later, they created an atmosphere of well-being and comfort by performing the respective action required—to flatter, soothe, or reassure. In the absence of adequate payment and private time, were other aspects offering a form of compensation? Very little is reflected of the rewarding effects which the position offered. The few fictional instances in which companions benefit emotionally from the work performed are embedded within a maternal connection to a younger woman for whom they were hired or as close bonding which developed over time¹⁰. More often, though, companion characters face social inequality, challenging demands and ingratitude. The unwaged condition of their work is based on the assumption that the emotional labor she performs is not work, but natural response. Complaints or obstreperous behavior is effectively ridiculed, and fictional companions portrayed as difficult, disgruntled spinsters.¹¹ Rather than a personal choice to satisfy altruistic penchants and derive a sense of moral utility, the companion's efforts are often motivated by the absence of alternative opportunities. Frequently met with indifference and reservedness as her patroness's response fails to convey appreciation or at least indicate contentment, emotional rewards and a “warm-glow effect” rarely materialize¹². The absence of mitigating impacts on the strain of emotional caregiving thus exacerbates the attendant's already dismal situation. The knowledge of at least conforming to contemporary moral and social standards by entering a reputable position of domestic idleness is but a crumb of comfort.

A Marriage of Convenience

The bond between mistress and companion could vary considerably, their association manifesting as camaraderie, maternal affinity, or even a form of emotionally distant co-habiting. A significant variable within the constellation is “dependency status” as both sides are recipients of care. Although falling outside of common definitions of dependency groups such as frail, elderly, or chronically sick individuals, the connection between the parties rested on mutual dependency, in economic and emotional terms. Whereas the financial aspect was an essential factor for the companion, she was socially isolated as a consequence of her status as an unmarried, unrelated

¹⁰ Fictional examples of mistress-attendant relationships of amicable or maternal nature are found in Elizabeth Gaskell's *My Lady Ludlow* (1858) or Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* (1872).

¹¹ This assumption—women deriving sufficient personal satisfaction from domestic activities to compensate for the absence of financial reimbursement—has been debated in other studies on women and housework. See, for instance, Federici (1974), Dunaway (2001), and Della Giusta and Jewell (2015).

¹² Della Giusta and Jewell (2015: 700) define the “warm-glow” effect as “the increase in personal self-esteem from knowing that one is acting according to his or her moral principles.”

impecunious gentlewoman living and working in another's household. With limited agency to pursue recreational activities that would bring her into contact with outsiders, she existed in a niche between family and personnel without being part of either. Her patroness, on the other hand, may be motivated to employ a personal attendant to relieve loneliness, vent frustrations or channel her own insecurities; if devoting her time and energy towards others within her social environment, she could thus secure support for herself. Societal and ideological norms affected mistress and companion in similar ways. With contemporary culture idealizing the caring and domestic nature of women, even the wealthy lady of leisure was at times feeling the effects of adhering to contemporary conventions. These pressures could therefore likely have contributed to the prevalence of paid companions during this period, as Hoffer (2009: xix) points out: "For these mistresses, burdened with the responsibility of providing sympathy themselves, the companion could fulfil their own needs for attention, emotional connection, and control which they were not able to access from their families or social circles." Between them they reflect the burdensome and paralyzing expectations of Victorian ideology, pondering both the public and personal costs of being reliant on the benevolence of a stranger. This parallel may have played a part in the evolution of the position as well as in individual decisions to advertise *for* or *as* lady's companion. The similarities between mistress and employee regarding class status, isolation, and dependency could have opposite effects: while they may tighten the bond through the sharing of difficulties, they could also generate condescension and resentment. In this respect, both parties define their own positions by their difference from the other; the companion's predicament is the indeterminate status that she acquired, or lost, by accepting financial compensation for her work. Her patroness may have to acknowledge the need for emotional support, lacking the skills, resources, and appeal to create and maintain familial or amicable connections. Tension in the employment relationship was not simply an effect of the proximity and individual character traits but also a symptom of cultural and social anxieties, with the ambiguous position of the attendant within the domestic hierarchy contributing to a sense of intrusion and imbalance.

Within the discourse of care work and its commodification, a regular concern are the impacts of market-based services as they potentially "undermines the caring motives essential to care, one of them because of its reliance on contracts and the other because of the corrupting influence of payment on motivation" (Claassen 2011: 43). In this context, the case of the companion emphasizes other aspects influencing her emotional work. Due to the frequent absence of both contracts and payment that regulate or incentivize particular efforts, relationship quality as well as individual disposition and aim take on greater significance. In view of the precarious situation of impecunious gentlewomen in Victorian society, whose social status was tied to this particular form of employment, the motivation to provide satisfactory services appears to lie in reciprocity and respect rather than financial reward.

Remunerative options varied from small sums to generous annuities, although more often than not, room and board were considered sufficient compensation. Yet even with no monetary value attached to the companion's work, its respective quality and purpose could vary widely. The closed and intimate setting offered avenues of power which attendants could pursue to their own

advantage—fraud, manipulation, and subtle blackmailing all feature in fictional portrayals of mistress-attendant relationships, revealing the vulnerabilities involved in giving and receiving emotional care. At the same time, what originated as an economic arrangement could develop into friendship, erasing, or at least levelling social differences. Once equality was established, affective response would accordingly be authentic rather than generated and modified to meet professional demands.

Even though occupational alternatives were scarce, compliance with social norms was both a driving motivation and mitigating factor for the discomfiting effects of the position. The endurance to sustain and navigate difficult situations and to provide care over a prolonged period of time in spite of these may well be entrenched in the consolation derived from the knowledge to act in accordance with normative conventions. Analyzing the supply of unpaid eldercare and the well-being of caregivers, Jewell and Della Giusta (2015: 702) found a significant correlation between individual satisfaction and overall agreement with social norms regarding the supply of care by adult children. Their study concluded that social conventions influenced “the decision to supply care, the amounts supplied and the effect on caregivers” and that “agreeing with the norm...significantly reduces the burden of caring.” It is therefore worth taking into consideration that hired lady’s companions may have been inclined to deliver emotional care and obtain a sense of reward operating under the same principles. Moreover, these social conventions at once restricted and preset middle-class women’s role, with varying effects on individuals’ private attitude towards their situation which, in turn, affected the employment relationship.

Some of the conditions surrounding the companion’s situation have been, and are still, familiar patterns in caregiving; while societies ascribe “a ‘natural’ proclivity for caring” to women, Claassen (2011: 47) emphasizes that these views “have had the effect of translating supposed ‘innate needs to care’ into social obligations hard to escape.” Combined with the limitations of Victorian ideology which tied status to domesticity, scorning financial remuneration for providing reputable services considered inherently female, these restrictions had destitute ladies virtually trapped. The absence of alternative occupations offering a similarly decent position annuls the tendency to obtain personal satisfaction from fulfilling altruistic tasks; without the voluntary decision to perform selfless acts, employees aim to meet employment expectations rather than act on humane motivations. Neither does the companion necessarily operate according to her own moral principles—these, in fact, are frequently in conflict with the demands for sympathy and compassion on the patroness’s side. Being torn internally between one’s own ethical convictions and the preservation of status is reflected in fictional representations in which the companion figure functions as the narrator’s medium, giving depth and nuance to the portrayal of other characters.

Care and Concern: Fictional Portrayals

In Ellen Wood’s 1868 *Anne Hereford*, Emily Chandos lists common employment duties to her new companion, the novel’s eponymous heroine. With her forthright demands and heightened

sense of superiority, the patroness acts as a foil to the humble Anne, who adapts to circumstances, eager to please family and personnel.

You must amuse me when I am tired, read to me when I feel inclined to listen, play to me when I wish, be ready to go out when I want you, give orders to my maid for me, write my letters when I am too idle to do it, and post yourself at my side to play propriety...
Those are the onerous duties of a dame de compagnie, are they not? (Wood [1868] 2006:124)

Also the story's narrator, readers are privy to Anne's emotions and sentiments as well as the efforts required to meet social and professional expectations. While creative liberties at times generate characters and constellations that bear little resemblance to historical individuals and conditions, literary depictions like Wood's reflect the range of emotional demands and affective investments that characterize an otherwise unspecified occupation.

Adaptive Roles and Functions

Through her fictional incarnations, the figure has most commonly been associated with the "odd woman" whom misfortune brought under the protection of a wealthy patroness. As an inconspicuous marginal character who blends into the setting, she enhances and complements the actions of her mistress, usually the novel's heroine. When featuring as protagonist herself, the story traces her life from early adversities that compel her to seek paid employment through a career as lady's attendant before rewarding her patience and humility with a prosperous husband and the restoration of her original, genteel status. With a narrative trajectory of this kind, the texts thus affirm existing conventions rather than raise controversy.

At times portrayed as gullible, gossipy, and good-natured, she contrasts her employer's worldly, sophisticated demeanor, enriching the narrative as a humorous, though simple, character. Other representations come closer to their historical counterpart in bringing the companion's individual circumstances and her role and activities within the household into view. The few non-fictional texts concerned with the occupation offer only limited insight into the specifics of employment terms, working conditions and subjective impressions. Appearances in fiction, however, cast companions and attendants in a variety of roles: from devoted youngster to revolutionary whirlwind, Victorian and Edwardian novels feature an array of characters that fall behind depictions of the governess in quantity, but not complexity.

In addition to reflecting contemporary circumstances for unmarried middle-class women, attendant and governess are transmitters of social tensions and concerns as well as authorial opinion. At the receiving end of the antipathetic sentiments of mistress and personnel yet expected to be forbearing and solicitous, the companion channels her own affective oppositions in both directions. Concerns over changing socio-economic circumstances resonate in the employer's expressions of discontent, while the hired gentlewoman harbors resentment at the condescension from one who is, or once was, a social equal. Unlike cross-class sympathy, the relationships between employee and mistress are often marked by the latter's projection of her own defects onto

the other woman. This pseudo-antipathy serves to indicate the flaws in a silent social commentary by way of the acquiescent attendant. In her work on depictions of sympathy in the Victorian novel, Audrey Jaffe (2018) emphasizes the parallels between the Victorian unease towards changing socio-political conditions and contemporary fiction. Observer and affected, both as literary characters and actual readers, are mirrored in the texts, which inevitably reflect historical circumstances and concomitant sentiments. As Jaffe (2018: 8) notes: “Victorian representations of sympathy are...specular, crucially involving the way capitalist social relations transform subjects into spectators of and objects for one another; they are also spectacular, their representational dimension reinforced by the spectatorial character of Victorian culture.” Although appearing frequently in sensation novels, other genres such as tragedy and romance include companion characters, providing multifaceted portrayals. Certainly, the texts are not a transparent window onto the historical reality of Victorian companions; they can, however, illustrate the mutually constitutive relationship between mistress and companion, social household constellations and material conditions to offer an understanding of the complexities involved.

The Inapt Attendant

An illustrative example of the conflicting impulses of conformity and contravention experienced by the attendant can be found in Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872). Although the plot centers on the controversies surrounding the eponymous jewels, the novel contrasts the lives of three women of similar social background and their differing careers. While the young widow Lizzie secured her place among the upper class by marrying Lord Eustace, her childhood acquaintance Lucy Morris, governess to a wealthy family, continues to work as lady’s companion after the end of her previous engagement. Ambitious and attentive, Lucy’s offers are continually rejected by the cantankerous Lady Linlithgow, whose motives for hiring the young woman are as difficult to comprehend for Lucy as they are for the reader. In contrast to the eager young woman is Julia Macnulty, poor but genteel, who carves out a middling existence as Lady Eustace’s humble(d) attendant. The expectations and offers of emotional as well as informational services are humorously illustrated in various scenes. Despite their fictional nature, the passages depict the companions’ respective purpose and duties as well as individual attitudes towards professional expectations—or the absence of such—which they are able or unable to meet.

Employed by Lady Eustace, whose desire to remain in possession of the family diamonds induces her to engage in duplicitous activities, Miss Macnulty offers a comprehensive portrait of the position’s personal and moral challenges. As readers learn, she:

was as utterly destitute of possessions or means of existence as any unfortunate, well-born, and moderately-educated, middle-aged woman in London.... As to earning her bread, except by that attendance which a poor friend gives, —the idea of any possibility that way had never entered her head. She could do nothing, —except dress like a lady with the smallest possible cost, and endeavor to be obliging. (Trollope [1872] 1996: 36)

While she enjoys the privileges of participating in social events, dinners and travels, Miss Macnulty is usually required to echo her patroness's opinions. Described by the narrator as "humble, cowardly, and subservient" (Trollope [1872] 1996: 43), she is also "not a fool" (Trollope [1872] 1996: 44) and regularly displays a solid sense of discernment regarding her social environment. Lady Eustace's estimation of Miss Macnulty offers a view into the professional requirements and the varying quality of the employee's affective performance. Bestowing emotional comfort and sympathy regardless of personal beliefs were commonly among a companion's vital responsibilities, providing the mistress with a constant and reliable ally. Miss Macnulty, while having the narrator's sympathy as to her own destitute situation, is portrayed as lacking in competence. Dismissed by her previous employer after a dispute, she puts her current position at risk with her frank manner, a fact which Lady Eustace laments:

Miss Macnulty was as hard as a deal board. She did as she was bidden, thereby earning her bread. But there was no tenderness in her; – no delicacy; – no feeling; – no comprehension. It was thus that Lady Eustace judged her humble companion, and in one respect she judged her rightly. Miss Macnulty did not believe in Lady Eustace, and was not sufficiently gifted to act up to a belief which she did not entertain. (Trollope [1872] 1996: 152)

In contrast to other fictional companions who feign sympathy in pursuit of various personal objectives, any potential rewards for the performance of compassion fail to incite Miss Macnulty's inner thespian. Aware that "worthlessness, cruelty, and falseness had to be endured by such as she" (Trollope [1872] 1996: 158), she is nevertheless disinclined to support her employer unquestioningly or to display any sentiments she does not truly harbor herself. This trait—her authenticity—is a most undesirable quality for a paid companion who is expected to bring solace to her distraught mistress. Rather than for reasons of propriety, Lizzie's interest in employing a companion lies in her constant need for an audience from which to receive validation, whether this be a reaction to her poetic showmanship or an approval of her delusional ideas. Indifference and aloofness towards her mistress's need for reassurance manifest Miss Macnulty's disapproval of her patroness's comportment, underscoring Trollope's critique of affectation and mendacity. Yet she is equally able to restrain herself for the sake of domestic harmony and the preservation of her employment. Her remarks and subtle irony are humorous complements to Lady Eustace's rigid pursuit of recognition, designating the companion as the true lady. Commenting on the author's use of honesty in his fictional characters, John Kucich (1989: 595) notes the gentlemanly dislike for lying as a human quality "similarly essential to Trollope's ideals for female conduct." The recurring scenes of discord reflect the inner strife of the attendant who is expected to be compassionate and empathetic on demand and her own moral principles. Differing views on literature, art, and ethics occasionally result in verbal banter which, despite its comical undertones, brings so humilatingly to light the discrepancy between the two women's respective social positions and cerebral competence. The attendant's expendability becomes apparent in Miss Macnulty's instant dismissal upon her patroness's engagement, leaving the reader without further information on her future. In losing the position, she simultaneously loses her identity as

companion to Lady Eustace; lacking the agency for autonomous career choices and equipped with limited means and options for personal fulfilment, Miss Macnulty vanishes into obscurity, sharing the fate of countless Victorian middle-class women whose status and subsistence depended on narrowly prescribed forms of domestic employment.

The Obsequious Observer

Thomas Hardy's (1871) first published novel *Desperate Remedies* depicts the intense fluctuations which could keep the emotional atmosphere in a state of near-permanent tension. At the mercy of the volatile affective impulses of the wealthy Miss Aldclyffe, young Cytherea Graye navigates through a labyrinth of passions, fulfilling demands for affection, absorbing frustrations, and providing stability for her temperamental employer. The infamous "bedroom-scene" widely discussed by contemporary and modern critics serves as one such example; Miss Aldclyffe's desire for intimacy and belonging manifests itself in her physical advances towards her companion, demanding to be kissed and embraced. When her patroness requests to enter Cytherea's bedroom, she finds herself ambivalent, considering professional and private concerns: "The young woman paused in a conflict between judgment and emotion. It was now mistress and maid no longer; woman and woman only. Yes, she must let her come in, poor thing" (Hardy [1871] 1998: 82). Weighing the various factors involved—prudence, expectation, and empathy—against one another, Cytherea reacts in accordance with her instinct and responds sympathetically. Though feigning compassion despite holding contrary views, she still yields to her natural emotional impulse even if common sense suggests otherwise. Due to her dependency, potential repercussions have perforce to be borne.

While the authorial intention behind this scene, which appears as an isolated incident in the narrative, is still debated, it highlights other facets of the relationship¹³. Whether as the result of long-lasting proximity, sexual orientation or genuine friendship, certain living conditions and personal preferences could turn the practical into the passionate. Aware of this, Cytherea hesitantly complies with her mistress's demands, yet still draws boundaries to protect herself from making involuntary concessions. By displaying confidence, she simultaneously rises in her employer's esteem. Miss Aldclyffe's own reflections on the scene disclose the emotional impact of having let down her guard: pondering her actions on the "morning after," she endeavors to restore her composure:

Though practical reasons forbade her regretting that she had secured such a companionable creature to read, talk, or play to whenever her whim required, she was inwardly vexed at the extent to which she had indulged in the womanly luxury of making confidences and giving way to emotions. Few would have supposed that the calm lady sitting aristocratically at the toilet table, seeming scarcely conscious

¹³ Compare, for instance, the different interpretations of Patrick Roberts (1992) and Kirsti Bohata (2017). Their respective analyses attribute the sensual undertones to events in Hardy's upbringing (Roberts 1992) and connections between eroticism and class-related power dynamics in domestic employment relationships (Bohata 2017).

of Cytherea's presence in the room, even when greeting her, was the passionate creature who had asked for kisses a few hours before. (Hardy [1871] 1998: 93)

The bestowal of confidences on the attendant, deliberate or not, highlights the mistress's vulnerability and involuntary exposure of the outer and inner workings of her mind in the presence of domestic personnel. Just as Cytherea witnesses the weakness and insecurity Miss Aldclyffe's is so eager to conceal, concerns over servants' insight had long troubled Victorian employers. As Mary Elizabeth Braddon ([1862] 2018: 336) so succinctly illustrates in *Lady Audley's Secret*, a lady's maid "knows by the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hair-brush, or chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast—what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain." In his study of nineteenth century relationships between employers and domestics, Brian McCuskey (2000) relates public concern over servants' insight. Addressing family and staff, periodicals and household manuals respectively warned and cautioned both parties over a possible breach of privacy. From an outside perspective, such advice proved rather comical, as McCuskey (2000: 360) notes, "in warning servants what not to observe, the manuals acknowledge and articulate precisely the guilty secrets—alcoholism, illness, adultery, domestic violence—that middle-class households were so determined to suppress." Lady's companions were equally privy of flaws, weaknesses, and intrigues. Personal opinions and fears had to be held back; concealing private feelings required companions to invest emotional energy in the same way as simulating compassion or other types of affective response. The transgressive nature of the attendant's position and her employer's concern over the degree of access to spatial and emotional realms is indicative of contemporary anxieties over class identity and social norms. Control and agency are subject to unforeseen changes, and the fragile power balance in the private home constantly at risk. In their opposed but complementary ways, fictional companions offer versions of the uneasy relationship between mistress and employee as two people dependent on another's support.

Sensation novels which peaked in popularity during the 1860s are particularly reflective of socio-political developments in the greater context of the Second Reform Act of 1867 extending suffrage to male householders and lodgers paying more than £10 annually as well as owners and tenants of small amounts of land. Loss of identity and status are themes that feature prominently in sensational narratives; affecting poor middle-class women restricted by Victorian ideals of femininity and class, lady's companions whose original status equals that of their employers vividly personify these fears. In his study of the parallels between politics, ideology, and literature in the mid-nineteenth century, Jonathan Loesberg (1986) observed the prevalence of particular themes in popular fiction correlating to contemporary socio-political developments and the concerns over class identity. These are themselves tied in with individuals' affective response to changing circumstances as represented in sensation fiction. The genre appealed to middle-class readers for its treatment of class fear "as an occasion for deliberately non-serious, emotional evocation is part of this ideological ambiguity, a part that accounts for both the distinctive place sensation fiction has in the literary canon and for its occurrence in one particular historical period" (Loesberg 1986: 118f). Popularity was moreover related to the successful targeting of current

concerns, not least since, as Loesberg (1986: 117) points out, “sensation novels evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity.” In addition to ambiguities about social status, middle-class women working as companions and attendants confront questions of personal and professional identity. Lack of recognition of their affective services can be ascribed to employers’ unquestioned expectations of deference and compliance as well as the common conception of women’s innate nurturing qualities which negate the active performance of emotional work as an integral part of their occupational duties. The effects of the widespread assumption of care as a female predisposition remains relevant in modern day discourse on caregiving. Examining the relationship between gender and service work, Babs Grossman (2012) notes the ramifications of prevailing opinions on gender and care, pointing out consequences on both financial compensation and public image of female care workers. Referencing the low wages of health care workers, she attributes inadequate payment to the fact that “the emotional labor involved is imputed as an ascribed identity trait of the worker” (Grossman 2012: 71) adding that women “are seen as naturally caring or nurturing, thus the service they provide is seen as an extension of their intrinsic skills rather than the cultivation of professional competency” (Grossman 2012: 71). By providing detailed descriptions of affective interactions between individuals, Victorian fiction as a cultural product of its time documents and reflects contemporary conditions and opinions in ways that are more relatable than historical records. While in-home care has since undergone considerable changes regarding its commodification and professionalization, individual circumstances, emotions and reactions of caregiver and recipient remain comparable variables across time. Despite women’s professional and political achievements and their increased presence on the labor market, certain assumptions about their role as carers remain. Although ideological conventions no longer confine women to unpaid domestic occupations, the strain and efforts of their affective labor continue to be discounted.

Conclusion

Compared to other Victorian working gentlewomen, lady’s companions as a group have received little consideration in literary and sociological studies of the nineteenth century, and modern impressions of the figure stem largely from fictional sources. More recently, critical works on Victorian women and non-medical care, such as those by Hoffer (2009) and Schaffer (2021), have raised awareness of the position itself and its ideological and emotional complexities. Numbering few, with undefined duties and indistinct status, Victorian companions have not drawn much contemporary interest owing to their quiet existence in an age of rapid development and socio-political reform. Lacking formal organization and leading representatives, they have not taken public action in their own interest in the same way as nurses or private teachers. As a means for impoverished middle-class women to find accommodation and/or payment while retaining social status, the occupation also mitigated the uneasy association of gentlewomen and work that so troubled ideological conventions. Since research into nineteenth century governesses and their employment conditions helped draw attention to the hardships endured by countless Victorian

women, it simultaneously rid modern perception of any romantic notions. Fictional portrayals of naïve and clumsy attendants who, though submissive, fail to satisfy their patroness' needs abound in early twentieth century novels, and have contributed to the figure's unfavorable image. Other representations convey the emotional labor required to meet employers' individual needs; these affective procedures were at the same time tied in with the socio-political developments that gave rise to contemporary concerns over class identity. Despite her popular image, the personal attendant was not particularly different from her superiors. Of similar social origin, she was usually well-educated, adequately dressed, and able to conduct herself appropriately among society. Such features, however, occasioned fears of hierarchical instability which novelists frequently utilized for suspenseful as well as comic narrative incidents. But in assessing the emotional work of the companion, it is important to underscore the position's use value not only to literature, but to Victorian middle-class women seeking a way of securing livelihood and class status. As reluctant as many were to accept employment, the occupation at least protected for them the social standing that they—and the public—so esteemed. Reading fictional portrayals more closely, we find “lady's companion” to be a profession rather than a specific identity: the malleability, the unknowability of her place between employee and friend could be strategically adopted in pursuit of individual ends. The companion, then, was a site of affective agency, a focal point for the needs and desires of her employer.

The concept of separate spheres and the feminine ideal of domesticity and leisure affected middle-class women in more ways than one. Supposed to be safely situated in the home, they were practically debarred from public areas of work and business. Given the fragility of personal finances considering the legal status of women in the nineteenth century, adhering to contemporary ideology was oftentimes impossible. Lack of economic resources not only reduced prospects of remarriage but compelled those affected to pursue one of the few avenues open to middle-class women to ensure suitable employment. Educational services as provided by governesses evolved into regular professions that implied a more refined approach to selecting prospective applicants as well as official institutions offering specialized training. Nursing underwent a similar process of professionalization, including more specified requirements and expert training, consequently attracting applicants from the middle ranks of society who met the financial and educational criteria. The position of lady's companion began to lose its appeal when changing socio-economic developments created more opportunities for women to find employment in retail and clerical positions, allowing following generations to choose alternative careers.

The question to be examined is not whether lady's companions performed work, but what their work entailed. What did these women do and how did they meet employment expectations? The fact that companions were, for the most part, invisible and had no organized network indicates that their overall number was low and their purpose irrelevant to the daily operation of the household. Yet the companion is crucial to understanding the impact of contemporary ideology and the delicate status of Victorian middle-class women, because she succeeds to actively perform work while preserving her place within the domestic sphere. At the same time, the affective exertions of emotional labor, which fiction can convey in scenes more relatable than official

surveys, facilitates our understanding of care workers' conditions. The personal implications as well as the possibilities of managing emotions as a professional occupation are always connected with prevailing social and political conditions and, as modern studies suggest, continue to be of interest to various disciplines.¹⁴

The novels portray feelings of compassion, fondness, and sympathy occurring as both genuine reciprocations and as a means to an end—fulfilment of employment expectations, social advancement, monetary or informational gain. Upsetting social order and individual agency, the mistress-companion dyad constitutes a self-reflective processing of the power dynamics involved in non-kin based emotional labor. With due regard to artistic license and the creative liberties authors took in shaping the characters to achieve different narrative ends, the portrayals emphasize the mutability and vulnerability of individual agency. Although an attempt has been made here to outline a previously neglected segment of Victorian society, many questions remain. A look into the different conditions of urban as opposed to rural settings would be enlightening, especially considering the growth of cities over the course of the nineteenth century. The restrictions impecunious gentlewomen were confronted with contradict the picture of the pleasant English country house. Even though the image of Victorian women contentedly occupied with maternal and domestic matters has long been dispelled, there remain the odd individuals of whose role and identity little is known. It is important to acknowledge these women and to continue to search for further details of their private and professional lives. Once situated at the seam of the social fabric, they deserve to be brought into the historical view, to enhance our understanding of the economic, social, and cultural aspects of the Victorian household and the hidden labor of the women therein.

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¹⁴ See, for instance, Ray (2016) and Grossman (2012).

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