

IMPERIAL LEATHER

RACE, CROSS-DRESSING AND THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY

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Wife and servant are the same, but only differ
in the name.

—*Lady Chudleigh*

The wife became the head servant.

—*Friedrich Engels*

In May 1854, at the age of 25, Arthur Munby stopped a maid-of-all-work in the street [Fig. 3.1]. The encounter was as casual as any of the hundreds that filled Munby's wanderings, yet the woman was destined to become his lifelong companion and wife. Almost immediately, Hannah Cullwick and Arthur Munby embarked on an intense but clandestine love affair that lasted the rest of their lives. After nineteen years, they married

secretly, though they lived in the same house for only four years and then, to all appearances, only as master and housemaid.

Cullwick and Munby both record in their diaries that they instantly felt destined for each other.¹ In a sense, it was no accident that the maid-of-all-work and the barrister met in the street. In the promiscuous crowd—that element permanently on the verge of social confusion—classes mingle, strangers brush each other, women and men rub shoulders and part. As Benjamin writes: “A street, a conflagration, or a traffic accident assemble people who are not defined along class lines.”² Cullwick and Munby took sustenance from the crowd, pitching their strange fantasy life on the borders of social limits—gender and race, paid and unpaid work, domesticity and empire. Their sense of destiny, moreover, bore witness to the social force of the Victorian edicts they so scandalously flouted in private and so decorously affirmed in public. At the same time, the chance encounter, the forbidden meeting across social limits reveals itself as a recurrent theme in the domestic and racial fetishism that structured their lives, indeed, that structured Victorian society at large.

FIGURE 3.1 HANNAH CULLWICK.

FIGURE 3.10 CULLWICK AS AN ANGEL.

FIGURE 3.11 RACE AND GENDER TRANSVESTISM:
CULLWICK AS A MALE SLAVE.

Leonore Davidoff has vividly evoked the games and fetish rituals Cullwick and Munby staged for their mutual pleasure when together and relived in their diaries when apart.³ Munby later excised from his diaries the details of the “training” he claims he gave Cullwick, but we know she chose to address him by the imperial title “Massa” and that she wore a “slave-band” on her wrist and a locked chain around her neck (to which only Munby had the key) as proof of her “bondage” [Figs. 3.2–3.4]. We know that she would kneel, lick his boots and wash his feet to profess her love and servitude.⁴ She posed for numerous photographs: as her working self in “her dirt”; cross-dressed as an upper-class lady; as a rural maiden, a man, an angel, a male slave, and “almost nude” and blackened from head to foot as a male chimneysweep [Figs. 3.5–3.11].

When they married secretly after nineteen years, she cross-dressed as an upper-middle class lady and traveled with Munby around Europe. Back in London, she would arrange to theatrically scrub the front

doorsteps on her knees as Munby sauntered down the street, languidly swinging his cane [Fig. 3.12]. He checked in at a boardinghouse where she worked, to be served by her as if they were strangers, then to meet her on the clifftops nearby, kissing and giggling and savoring in secret the knowledge of their forbidden liaison. When they lived within reach of each other, Cullwick visited Munby frequently “in her dirt” after a grueling day’s work, her clothes dank and filthy, her face deliberately blackened with boot polish, her hands red and raw; only to pose later that same evening freshly dressed as an upper-class lady in clean finery. They spent happy hours mulling over the ordeals of her workload, ritualistically counting and recounting the incredible number of boots she cleaned. On a couple of occasions at her other employer’s house, Cullwick stripped naked except for a blindfold and climbed into the chimney, where she curled in the warm soot “like a dog,” savoring the sensation later in her diary for Munby’s delectation. Her diary reveals (as his does not) that she also lifted him in her huge, brawny arms, cradled him on her ample lap and “nursed” him like a child.

FIGURE 3.12 DANGEROUS THRESHOLD:
THE DIRT FETISH ON DISPLAY.

Over the years, Cullwick wrote a voluminous diary, first at Munby's behest, later for more complex reasons of her own, in which she recounted the daily regimen of her domestic work and her curious life with Munby. Both of their diaries reveal, though differently, a profound and mutual involvement in a variety of fetish rituals: slave/master (S/M), bondage/discipline (B/D), hand, foot and boot fetishisms, washing rituals, infantilism (or babyism), cross-dressing, and a deep and mutual fascination with dirt. Fundamentally, the scripts for their fantasy life involved theatrically transgressing the Victorian iconographies of domesticity and race, and their fetish rituals took shape around the crucial but concealed affinity between women's work and empire. In what follows, I will argue that their fetishism inhabited the borders of a double disavowal by dominant Victorian society: denial of the value of women's domestic work in the industrial metropolis and the devaluing of colonized labor in the cultures coming under violent imperial rule. What is the meaning of Cullwick and Munby's rituals, belonging as they do in the realm of the fetish? What, in particular, is the relation between fetishism, domesticity and empire?

The Freudian definition of the fetish gives privileged normality to male heterosexuality and the scene of castration. Instead, I wish to explore fetishism as a more complex, historically diverse phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single, male, sexual narrative of origins. I wish to challenge the primacy of the phallus in the realm of fetishism and open the Freudian and Lacanian theories of fetishism to a more varied and complex history in which class and race play as formative a role as gender.

The presiding contradiction animating Cullwick and Munby's fetishism is, I suggest, the historical dichotomy between women's paid work and women's unpaid work in the home—overdetermined by the contradictions of imperial racism and negotiated by the fetishistic iconographies of slave and master, dirt and cleanliness, rituals of recognition and cross-dressing. In contrast to the idea of fetishism as a quintessentially male preserve, Cullwick takes her place among the countless women for whom fetishism was an attempt—ambiguous, contradictory and not always successful—to negotiate the boundaries of power in ways that do not yield simple lessons about dominance and submission.

The fetish, which inhabits the border of the social and the psychological, throws into sharp relief the invalidity of separating the realms of psychoanalysis and social history. Both psychoanalysis and Marxism took shape around the idea of fetishism as a primitive regression and the disavowal of the social value of domestic work, so it is only fitting that the fetishistic proclivities of an obscure maid-of-all-work should oblige us to begin, again, to renegotiate the relation between

psychoanalysis and social history, women's agency and male power, domesticity and the market.

What follows is less an attempt to empirically recover the past than it is an attempt to intervene strategically in historical narratives of race and fetishism, domesticity and empire, in such a way as to throw into question not only the historical force of these relations in Victorian Britain but also their continuing implication for our time.

NO PYGMALION AMBIGUOUS AGENT

Munby and his biographer, Derek Hudson, both portray Cullwick as little more than a cloddish, if charming, marionette, a curiosity trained, costumed and controlled by her "Massa," lumbering through her awkward theatrical paces to indulge his pleasures.⁵ In later years, Munby claimed it was he who apprenticed Cullwick to drudgery: "training and teaching" her in the "lowest & most servile kind (of work)," initiating her into subservience and the indecorous degradations of their love.⁶ When Cullwick refused to "enter society" as his wife, Munby lamented that she had heeded his "training" too well and had become permanently wedded to drudgery. Cullwick is likewise seen by Hudson as little more than the "product of (Munby's) training of her in the ways of salvation through drudgery."⁷ Hudson finds, in consequence, that Cullwick's diaries and letters need "be sampled only briefly."⁸ Even Leonore Davidoff, in an otherwise excellent essay, presents a one-sided portrait of their relationship and sees Munby as the master of ceremonies of Cullwick's life, the impresario and choreographer of their rituals, Svengali to her Trilby. Hudson and Davidoff thereby both become complicit with Munby's self-congratulatory vision of himself as Pygmalion, sculpting Cullwick's values as if from stone and instilling in her an "over-commitment to drudgery." "In many ways," Davidoff writes, "Hannah was, in fact, a creature of his fancy."⁹ As Davidoff sees it, their relationship was conducted "on his terms and ultimately at a very high price." "All this happens," she writes, "at the will of the middle class male protagonist who creates the situation and engineers the transformation."¹⁰ Once more, the maidservant vanishes from the middle-class narrative.¹¹

Liz Stanley, however, in an excellent introduction to Cullwick's diaries, protests these patronizing and dismissive portrayals of Cullwick. To accept only Munby's account of matters and to see Cullwick as no more than Munby's creation runs the very real risk of accepting "Victorian sexist and classist thinking as an accurate reflection of the social world as it actually was." Rather, she argues, Munby's writings are "frequently belied

by the reality of experience."¹² Certainly they are belied by Cullwick's frequently contrasting perspectives. There is ample evidence in her diary and in Munby's, if read against the grain, that Cullwick invented as many of the scenarios and scripted as much of the game-playing as Munby did. It is also clear that she received a good deal of pleasure and power from doing so, despite the unremitting disadvantage of her situation. Far from being a passive drudge, she was stubbornly and steadfastly protective of her own interests and fiercely resisted Munby when her needs came into conflict with his. The critical portrayal of Cullwick as hapless jade and abused plaything serves only to annul the self-respect and agency she struggled so long and so stubbornly to achieve, under circumstances of extreme circumscription. Indeed, the erasure of Cullwick's lifelong resistance to limitation presents a sad irony, for one might say that the project that animated her obscure and arduous life was the project of the social recognition of women's domestic work.

Certainly it was not Munby who initiated Cullwick into the ambiguous value of pride in working-class labor, for her beloved mother and working-class community, the church, the charity school, the village and the nearby manor had already shaped the foundations of her identity and her attitudes to work. To see Munby as the only and originary shaper of her identity is to capitulate in a dominant Victorian middle-class fantasy: the fantasy of male, philanthropic surveillance and control over the lives of working-class women. At the same time, Cullwick's relationship with Munby was inevitably informed by the discrepancy between her considerable power within the relationship and her social disempowerment outside it, a discrepancy that Munby was not at all averse to exploiting when he could.

I do not wish, however, to give the impression that Cullwick's relation to Munby was one of libertarian equality and mutual power; such a notion is insupportable. I am interested, rather, in the more difficult question of what kind of *agency* is possible in situations of extreme social *inequality*. Cullwick's life expressed a sustained determination to negotiate power within circumstances of great limitations, in ways that raise questions not about her cross-gender and cross-class relations with Munby, but also about her cross-class and inter-gender relations with her female employers. Within domestic households, the unequal burden of women's work, the mutual recriminations, class harassments and class rebellions took place within a combination of class estrangements and gender intimacies. In short, a major theoretical concern of this chapter is to explore the strategic tension between social constraint and social agency.

In what follows, I wish to question one feminist tendency to see women as unambiguous victims, a tendency that equates agency with context, body with situation, and thus annuls possibilities for strategic refusal. In this

view, Cullwick is reduced to a victimized drudge, exhibited as the embodiment of female degradation and male dominance. If she was not an unambiguous victim, however, she was also not an unambiguous heroine of female revolt. Her circumstances were unremittingly harsh and disadvantageous; yet within their conscription she engaged in a lifelong negotiation of power, throwing continually into question the binary verities of dominance and resistance, victim and oppressor. What, then, of Cullwick's agency and desires in these curious rituals?

Hannah Cullwick's childhood was the commonplace story of a girl destined for a lifetime of service in Britain's ruling households. Daughter of a lady's maid and a saddler, she was born on May 26, 1833, in the Shropshire village of Shifnal. Her mother, Martha Cullwick, worked for the lady of the Hall and her father worked as a stableman. Her parents thus served the vanishing world of the ancient gentry, where power was invested in land, and the landless classes related to the manorial class through ancestral codes of duty, fealty and paternalism. Although Cullwick died in the village of her birth on July 9, 1909, she spent her life as a lower servant moving between the rural manorial estates and the urban houses of the manufacturing elite in London and Margate.¹³ In the imperial dockyards, merchant banks, factories and mills, power was invested in capital and the far-flung lootings of empire, and the working class related to the new masters through the unreliable dynamics of the cash nexus. Cullwick's life thus straddled the dwindling world of the gentry and the ascendant world of industrial manufacture and, if her childhood was in almost every respect ordinary, her life would criss-cross some of the deepest faultlines of the Victorian age.

Born in a rustic cottage in Shropshire, Cullwick spent most of her life in the belching cities, working as a pot girl in an inn, as a nurserymaid, a kitchen maid, a scullion and drudge and a rural stranger in the huge, begrimed houses of the Victorian urban elite. In the heyday of the "idle woman," she grew muscular with manual labor. Destined by class to wed a laboring man, she married instead a member of the upper-middle-class bureaucracy. As a barrister's wife, Cullwick could have "entered society," but chose instead to live as a maidservant among her own class, spending very little time under the same roof as her beloved husband. In an age when wifely services were void of economic value, she insisted that her husband pay her monthly wages. At a time when most women devoted two-thirds of their lives to raising children, she remained childless. When most women of the age were illiterate, she could read and write and left behind seventeen diaries, which render in intimate detail the Herculean feats of her domestic toil. Her life was nondescript and her death caused no stir, but in retrospect her diaries offer a rare and important testimony to the

life of a Victorian servant. Cullwick's diaries bear invaluable witness to "the last generation of women that did heavy manual labor in large numbers."¹⁴

In 1851 Cullwick traveled with her employers to London, the rhythms of her life following the class logic of their seasonal migrations.¹⁵ In London a prescient vision in the fire showed her Munby's face. In 1854, she returned to London, where Munby approached her in the street. When she returned again the following year, she found lodgings in a cold, tiny room: "There Massa came to see me again, & there was where I first black'd my face with *oil o' lead*."¹⁶ At Cullwick's instigation, the couple began their lifelong career in domestic and racial fetishism and soon after, Cullwick began to write the first of her seventeen diaries.

NOTHING TO USE BUT YOUR CHAINS

S/M AND DOMESTIC POWER

Cullwick and Munby filled their lives with the theatrical paraphernalia of S/M: boots, chains, padlocks, leather, blindfolds, straps, costumes, scripts and photographs—some of them semi-pornographic. Their games included a variety of fetish rituals: transvestism, bondage, foot and leather fetishism, hand fetishism, washing rituals, infantilism, animalism and voyeurism. The primary transformations about which their fantasy games revolved were the central transformations of industrial imperialism: class (servant to mistress), race (white woman to black slave), gender (woman to man), economy (land to city) and age (adult to baby), transformations that were drawn simultaneously from the cult of domesticity and the cult of empire.

As Liz Stanley notes: "Chains, boot-licking and blacking up the better to show the abasement of a slave to a master aren't just images of servitude in a conventional and often religious sense; they are also images replete with sado-masochistic and sexual overtones."¹⁷ Yet Stanley quickly rejects "the usefulness or appropriateness of labeling (their relationship) as sado-masochistic."¹⁸ For, she argues, while people in S/M scenarios may change roles, we see "at any one time whoever is the 'master' has power and whoever is the 'slave' has not." Since Cullwick was neither powerless nor slavish in this "conventional" sense, but was rather "strong, stubborn, independent, assured and competent," the term *sadomasochism*, Stanley contends, has no usefulness for understanding Cullwick and Munby's power games.¹⁹

Stanley also rejects S/M as no more than the retrospective imposition on the past of images and terminology from the present. Yet it is no accident that the historical subculture of S/M emerged in Europe toward the end of the eighteenth century with the emergence of imperialism in its modern industrial form. As Foucault points out, S/M (which is not simply

synonymous with cruelty or brutality) is a highly organized, ritual subculture that "appeared precisely at the end of the eighteenth century"—a few decades before Cullwick and Munby were born.²⁰

Late Victorian racial scientists demonized S/M as the psychopathology of the atavistic individual, a blood flaw and stigma of the flesh.²¹ The "sciences" of man—philosophy, Marxism, anthropology, psychoanalysis—sought to contain the irruptive implication of fetishism by projecting it onto the invented zone of "degeneration," figuring it as a regression in historical time to the prehistory of racial degradation, the degeneration of the race writ in the pathology of the soul. S/M, however, is less a biological flaw, or a pathological expression of natural male aggression and natural female passivity, than it is an organized subculture shaped around the ritual exercise of social risk and social transformation. As a theater of conversion, S/M reverses and transforms the social meanings it borrows.

To argue that in S/M "whoever is the 'master' has power and whoever is the slave has not," is to read theater for reality; it is to play the world forward. The economy of S/M, however, is the economy of conversion: master to slave, adult to baby, power to submission, man to woman, pain to pleasure, human to animal and back again. S/M, as Foucault puts it, "constitutes one of the greatest conversions of Western imagination: unreason transformed into delirium of the heart."²² S/M is a theater of transformation; it "plays the world backward."²³

Consensual S/M (the collective organization of fetishism) insists on exhibiting the "primitive" (slave, baby, woman) as a *character* in the historical time of modernity. S/M performs the "primitive irrational" as a dramatic script; a theatrical, communal performance in the heart of Western reason. The paraphernalia of S/M (boots, whips, chains, uniforms) is the paraphernalia of state power, public punishment converted to private pleasure. S/M plays social power backward, visibly and outrageously staging hierarchy, difference and power, the irrational, ecstasy, or alienation of the body, placing these ideas at the center of Western reason. S/M thus reveals the imperial logic of individualism and refuses it as fate, even though it does not finally step outside the enchantment of its own magic circle.

Hence the paradox of S/M. On one hand, S/M parades a slavish obedience to conventions of power. In its reverence to formal ritual, it is the most ceremonial and decorous of practices. S/M is high theater: "beautifully suited to symbolism."²⁴ As theater, S/M borrows its decor, props and costumery (bonds, chains, ropes, blindfolds) and its scenes (bedrooms, kitchens, dungeons, convents, prisons, empire) from the everyday cultures of power. At the same time, with its exaggerated emphasis on costumery, script and scene, S/M reveals that social order is unnatural, scripted and invented.

For Victorian science, nature was the overlord and guarantor of power. Thus for Krafft-Ebing, S/M enacts the male's "natural" sexual aggression and the female's "natural" sexual passivity: "This sadistic force is developed by the natural shyness and modesty of women toward the aggressive manner of the male . . . the final victory of man affords her intense and refined gratification."²⁵ The outrage of S/M, however, is precisely its hostility to the idea of nature as the custodian of social power. With the utmost artifice and levity, S/M refuses to read power as fate or nature and outrageously reverses the sacramental edicts of power and abandonment. Since S/M is the theatrical exercise of social contradiction, it is self-consciously *antinature*, not in the sense that it violates natural law, but in the sense that it denies the existence of natural law in the first place. S/M presents social power as sanctioned, neither by nature, fate nor God, but by artifice and convention and thus as radically open to historical change. S/M flouts social order with its provocative confession that the edicts of power are reversible. As such, it is a radically *historical* phenomenon.

S/M AND THE CULT OF DOMESTICITY

Cullwick's lifelong power over Munby lay in her theatrical talent for conversion and her power to play the world backward: to switch from maid to mistress, wife to slave, nurse to mother, white woman to black man. She was the dreamed-of combination, the "Blessed Anomalie" that allowed Munby to stage in his own private theater of transformation the fateful early contrasts of gender and class that both perplexed and enthralled him. Munby records his first sighting of her in his diary:

A country girl, she was, a scullion. . . . A tall erect creature, with light firm step and noble bearing: her face had the features and expression of a high born lady, though the complexion was rosy and rustic, & the blue eyes innocent and childlike: her bare arms and hands were large and strong and ruddy from the shoulder to the finger-tips; but they were beautifully formed. . . . A robust hard-working peasant lass, with the marks of labour and servitude upon her everywhere: yet endowed with a grace and beauty, an obvious intelligence, that would have become a lady of the highest. Such a combination I had dreamt of and sought for; but I have never seen it, save in her.²⁶

For Munby, Cullwick was a paragon of ambiguity: a country girl who trod the urban streets, a scullion formed like a high-born lady. She bore the marks of labor, but with aristocratic grace. She was both innocent and worldly-wise. She was a child, but as strong as a man. By playing both

drudge and lady, woman and man, Cullwick offered Munby the delirious promise of embodying in one person the contrast of mother and nurse, woman and man, that so excited him: "Let me," he wrote, "at least work out some of my theories upon this tender servant: let me be refreshed and comforted by a mother's love and by that of one so different."²⁷ Cullwick's abiding attraction for Munby was her talent to play "either part so well." He recalls her sitting after a day's drudgery "dainty in black silk and drawingroom cap . . . for is she not a servant during the day and a lady in the evening? and fulfills either part so well, that for some time she seems incapable of the other?"²⁸ "One moment she is the very pattern of a kitchen drudge, awkward and strong, hard at work in sweat and dirt." In the next instant, she transforms herself "into the perfect image of the still and stately queen [Fig. 3.13, 3.14]."²⁹

Cullwick offered Munby the illusion of control over the contradictions that shaped his identity. He relished her muscular brawn and her "manliness," that allowed him to feel, by contrast, deliciously "female," yet in such a way as not to endanger his precarious, compulsory

FIGURE 3.13 CULLWICK AS A DRUDGE.

FIGURE 3.14 CULLWICK PASSING AS A LADY.

manhood.³⁰ And by indulging the fantasy that he was master of their ceremonies, Munby indulged in what John Berger has called the "Pygmalion Promise"—the (infantile) desire to shape another being's life according to the dictates of one's own desires. But since Munby's "mastery" over Cullwick was no more than her theatrical gift to him, which she had the power to withdraw at any time (and did), and since the contradictions that vexed him were social contradictions that could not be resolved at a personal level, the fetish scene was destined to recur again and again.

S/M is a theater of signs. Munby was helplessly fascinated by the visible and written *signs* of Cullwick's domesticity. The representation of domesticity as social and imperial allegory held him in its thrall. Obsessed with writing, Munby demanded that when Cullwick could not appear physically in the "sign" of her dirt, she send him verbal signs instead in the form of her diary. And Cullwick, in turn, learned quickly to use her diary

and her theatrical performances to manipulate Munby's desires and maintain control over him.

Indeed, it was not so much the actuality of female labor that captivated Munby but the *representation* of labor: labor as spectacle, as photograph, as language, as diary, as sketch, as script, as theatrical scene. He and Cullwick played their fetish games around the theatrical paraphernalia of domesticity: brooms, pails, water, soap, dirt—fetishes that cannot, in my opinion, be usefully reduced to a single-minded phallic logic. In their theater of conversion, mundane household objects became invested with profound fetish power, as ambivalent signs of domestic subordination and domestic power. Why the stress on signs?

As a theater of signs, S/M grants temporary control over social risk. By scripting and controlling the *frame* of representation, in other words, the control frame—the diary, the camera, the theatrical scene—the player stages the delirious loss of control within a situation of extreme control. For Munby, loss of control and confusion of social boundary were mediated by an excessive preoccupation with control. He depended deeply on control frames, by which he managed the staging of social risk. Managing the control frame—the photograph, the sketch, the diary, the script, the circus and, in particular, the exchange of money—was indispensable to his sense of mastery over what were otherwise terrifying ambiguities.

S/M is haunted by memory. By reinventing the memory of trauma and staging loss of control in what is really a situation of excessive control, the player gains symbolic power over perilous memory. S/M affords a delirious triumph over memory and, from this triumph, an orgasmic excess of pleasure. But since the triumph over memory is theatrical and symbolic, however intensely felt in the flesh, resolution is perpetually deferred. For this reason, the memory (the scene) will recur for perpetual reenactment, and compulsive repetition emerges as a fundamental structuring principle of S/M.

One tendency within feminism has been to demonize heterosexual S/M as the sanctioned exercise of male dominance over women. "Sadomasochism is self-debasement on all levels that renders wimmin unable to execute truly feminist goals."³¹ But, more often than not, S/M culture often reveals the opposite: "In the world of the sadomasochist, there is nothing 'abnormal' about a male being passive and submissive. Indeed, male passivity is by far the most common phenomenon."³² It is therefore not surprising that Munby was what is, in current parlance, called a "babyist," or "infantilist," relishing, as he did, to be bathed by Cullwick, lifted in her massive arms and rocked and "nursed" on her ample lap like a baby.³³ Perhaps in these encounters Munby could surrender deliriously to the memory of his helplessness in his first nurse's arms, to voyeuristic pleasure at the spectacle of a working woman tending

his passive body and to forbidden recognition of the social power of working-class women.

The contradiction that Munby faced was his dependence on working-class women whom society stigmatized as subservient. By ritually recognizing Cullwick (like his nurse) as socially powerful, he could acknowledge his forbidden childhood identification with powerful femininity, particularly working-class femininity. His foot-washing fetish was an expiation ritual that symbolically absolved him from guilt and "dirt" while simultaneously letting him indulge in the forbidden, voyeuristic spectacle of women's work and women's power. Nonetheless, the recognition of domestic work as valuable was socially taboo and had to be mediated and controlled through carefully prearranged scripts.

On one occasion, for example, Cullwick asked Munby to visit her at her workplace. Once there, he was plunged into agitation and extreme distress. "But to see her stand in a drawing room in her servant's dress and know that she is a servant and that the piano, the books, the pictures belonged to her mistress . . . this I could not endure."³⁴ Seeing Cullwick in her workplace forced Munby into the agonized recognition that he did not really control, or own, her life. On another occasion he was appalled to visit her workplace and see how truly filthy and exhausted she was. What bothered him to distraction on both occasions was the collapse of his control frame and thus loss of his illusion of mastery over the scene. Seeing Cullwick at work was a forcible reminder that another woman paid her wages, another woman gave her orders. Just as he was thrown into outrage at the sight of another journalist photographing "his" pit-brow-women, the sight of Cullwick at work robbed Munby of his illusion that he controlled the dangerous scenario, and he was flung violently into crisis.

Role switching is a common feature of S/M and in their secret society of the spectacle Cullwick and Munby often switched roles. Most S/M is less "the desire to inflict pain," as Freud argued, than it is the theatrical organization of *social risk*.³⁵ Contrary to popular perceptions, a great deal of S/M involves no pain at all. Its ritual violations are less violations to the flesh than symbolic reenactments of the memory of violations to selfhood, violations that can take myriad forms. As Weinberg and Kamel argue, "S&M scenarios are *willingly and co-operatively* produced; more often than not it is the masochist's fantasies that are acted out."³⁶ Many S/M fetishists claim that in fact it is the "bottom" who is in control.

Havelock Ellis points out that much S/M is motivated by love. Far from being the tyrannical exercise of one will upon a helpless other, S/M is more typically collaborative, involving careful initiation rituals, a scrupulous definition of limits and a constant confirmation of reciprocity

that can bind the players in an ecstasy of interdependence: abandonment at the very moment of dependence. But because S/M involves the negotiation of perilous boundaries, any violation of the script is fraught with risk, whereas mutual fidelity to the pledge of trust creates an intimacy of a very intense kind. If at any point control is lost, or the rules of the game transgressed, either of the players can be plunged into panic. Hence the importance and prevalence of scripting in consensual S/M.

THE SLAVE-BAND REFUSING ABJECTION

For years Cullwick wore a filthy leather "slave-band" on her wrist and a chain and locked padlock around her neck. Her original reason for wearing a strap, she tells us, was to support her wrist after a bad sprain.³⁷ Later she wore it as a "sign" of her love for and servitude to Munby. When she insisted on wearing the strap while serving dinner, letting it show on her wrist before the invited company, her employer ordered her to remove it. Cullwick declined to obey and was furiously dismissed, preferring, as she proudly records in her diary, to lose her employment rather than take off "the sign that i'm a drudge & belong to Massa."³⁸ What are we to make of Cullwick's slave-band, belonging as it does in the zone of the fetish?

The fetish embodies a crisis in social meaning. In Cullwick's slave-band, three of the formative contradictions of the Victorian era converge: between slave labor and wage labor; between the private realm of domesticity and the public realm of the market; and between metropolis and empire. In the fetish of the slave-band, race, class and gender overlap and contradict each other; the slave-band, like most fetishes, is overdetermined.

Cullwick's transgression was to wear at dinner (the theater of middle-class consumption and female leisure) the forbidden sign of women's work. Cullwick brought scandalously into crisis the incommensurable relation between the Victorian doctrine that women should not work for profit and the visible sign of female domestic labor: the faint, illicit odor of the kitchen, the stain of dirty water, the mark of labor in imperial leather. Cullwick outraged convention by exhibiting, of her own stubborn volition, the public evidence of women's domestic dirt, banished by Victorian decree to kitchen and back-corridor, cellar and garret—the architecture of the unseen. In refusing to take off her band, Cullwick was refusing the social abjection of her labor and domestic dirt [Fig. 3.15].

For Cullwick, the fetish of the slave-band was specific to the recognition of social value. The idea of concealed labor is fundamental to the Marxist analysis of the commodity fetish. The idea of traumatic fixation upon an intense experience is fundamental to the psychoanalytic notion of the sexual

FIGURE 3.15 DEFIANT DISPLAY.

fetish. Both ideas fuse in the slave-band. In an important observation, William Pietz notes that fetishism often arises from a crisis that “brings together and fixes into a singularly resonant, unified intensity an unrepeatable event (permanent in memory), a particular object and a localized space.” Paradoxically, this crisis moment, because of its “degradation from any recognizable value code,” becomes “a moment of infinite value.”³⁹ The death of Cullwick’s mother was just such an unrepeatable moment; the localized space was the architectural space of upper-class domesticity; and the particular object was the imperial fetish of the slave-band. Here the crisis does involve the mother’s body, but not in the way that Freud envisaged.

As a child of fourteen, working away from home as a nursemaid, Cullwick was called without warning from the family schoolroom and was summarily told that both her parents had died of illness a few weeks before. Abandoned to cry alone on the floor where she had fallen and refused leave to return home to help her orphaned brothers and sisters, Cullwick felt that

the death of her beloved mother stripped her life of all value: “It seemed as if my care for life or work was all gone.” The crisis took on fetish form, for the violence of the chance encounter with death and her employers’ refusal to let her mourn marked a radical break with history and community, costing her not only her family but also the symbolic value of her work and her sense of control over her own life. The death of her mother flung her into intense collision with the power of the upper-class family to subjugate her value to their needs: “I don’t think I ever shall [get over it]. I shall never play again or bowl hoops around the garden.”⁴⁰ Henceforth, her mother would be represented by the striving of a memory: “trying to dream of her ghost.”

With the slave-band, Cullwick turned memory into a repeatable object. In photograph after photograph, she posed in such a way as to display her slave-band to maximum effect. Like all fetishes, the slave-band was contradictory, embodying the power of the upper class to enslave her, while at the same time exhibiting her determination to reclaim the value of her work and the memory of her mother. At the “marked site” of her wrist, damaged by the trauma of labor, she transformed bondage into the secret sign of self-assertion. By deliberately letting the filthy band show at dinner, she reclaimed her independence and her right to contract her labor as she pleased. By flouncing out of her employment, she claimed her right to control her own body and her own work. By contracting herself to Munby as his symbolic “slave,” she took control, in the symbolic realm, of lack of control in the social realm. Her adamant and entirely unsubservient refusal to take off the band revealed, moreover, that she valued it only as a *symbol* of power over which she had ultimate control. Most importantly, by displaying her wrist filthy with labor, she rejected the stigma of shame attached to domestic work.⁴¹ If the Victorian cult of domesticity voided her work of social recognition, she stubbornly displayed her hands in public to exhibit their *economic* value: “my hands & arms are tho’ chief to *me*, to get my living with.”⁴²

Cullwick’s fetishistic attachment to her slave-band expressed, I suggest, a lifelong attempt to reinvent the memory of her mother’s domestic value in the eyes of the upper class. The upper-class *undervaluation* of her work found its antithesis in her *overvaluation* of her work. Her slave-band and her profound commitment to domestic labor embodied a compulsive determination to maintain control, at whatever physical cost, of the realm of labor in which she was subordinated.

The cross-cultural experiences marked by the fetish fuse in the slave-band: in the triangular relations among slavery as the basis of mercantile capitalism; wage labor as the basis of industrial capitalism; and domestic labor as the basis of patriarchy. By flagrantly wearing on her body the fetish leather of bonded labor Cullwick threw into question the liberal separation of private and public, insisting on exhibiting her work, her dirt,

FIGURE 3.16 THE PARAPHERNALIA OF DOMESTIC FETISHISM.

FIGURE 3.17 THE DIRT FETISH.

her *value* in the home: that space putatively beyond both slave labor and wage labor. Exhibiting her filth as value, she gave the lie to the disavowal of women's work and the rational, middle-class control of dirt and disorder.

THE DIRT FETISH

Cullwick's employers' principle objection to her band was its dirt. Cullwick and Munby's rituals—the foot and boot cleaning, the washing rituals, Munby's voyeuristic desire to see Cullwick “in her dirt,” Cullwick's deliberate “blackening,” the photographs, the slave band—were organized in complex but repetitive ways around the Victorian dirt fetish [Figs. 3.16–3.18]. Why did dirt exert such a compulsive fascination over their imaginations, as it did over the Victorian era at large?

Nothing is inherently dirty; dirt expresses a relation to social value and social disorder. Dirt, as Mary Douglas suggests, is that which

transgresses social boundary.⁴⁸ A broom in a kitchen closet is not dirty, whereas lying on a bed it is. Sex with one's spouse is not dirty, whereas conventionally the same act with a prostitute is. In Victorian culture, the iconography of dirt became deeply integrated in the policing and transgression of social boundaries.

Dirt is what is left over after exchange value has been extracted. In Victorian culture, the bodily relation to dirt expressed a social relation to labor. The male middle class—seeking to dismantle the aristocratic body and the aristocratic regime of legitimacy—came to distinguish itself as a class in two ways: it earned its living (unlike the aristocracy) and it owned property (unlike the working class). Unlike the working class, however, its members, especially its female members, could not bear on their bodies the visible evidence of manual labor. Dirt was a Victorian scandal because it was the surplus evidence of manual work, the visible residue that stubbornly remained after the process of industrial rationality had done its work. Dirt is the counterpart of the commodity; something is dirty precisely *because* it is void of commercial value, or because it transgresses

FIGURE 3.18 DOMESTICITY AS EXHIBITION.

the “normal” commercial market. Dirt is by definition useless, because it is that which belongs outside the commodity market.

If, as Marx noted, commodity fetishism flamboyantly exhibits the *overvaluation* of commercial *exchange* as the fundamental principle of social community, then the Victorian obsession with dirt marks a dialectic: the fetishized *undervaluation* of human *labor*. Smearred on trousers, faces, hands and aprons, dirt was the memory trace of working class and female labor, unseemly evidence that the fundamental production of industrial and imperial wealth lay in the hands and bodies of the working class, women and the colonized. Dirt, like all fetishes, thus expresses a crisis in value, for it contradicts the liberal dictum that social wealth is created by the abstract, rational principles of the market and not by labor. For this reason, Victorian dirt entered the symbolic realm of fetishism with great force.

As the nineteenth century drew on, the iconography of dirt became a poetics of surveillance, deployed increasingly to police the boundaries between “normal” sexuality and “dirty” sexuality, “normal” work and “dirty” work and “normal” money and “dirty” money. Dirty sex—masturbation, prostitution, lesbian and gay sexuality, the host of Victorian “perversions”—transgressed the libidinal economy of male-controlled, heterosexual reproduction within monogamous marital relations (clean sex that has *value*). Likewise, “dirty” money—associated with prostitutes, Jews, gamblers, thieves—transgressed the fiscal economy of the male-dominated, market exchange (clean money that has *value*). Like prostitutes and female miners, servants stood on the dangerous threshold of normal work, normal money and normal sexuality, and came to be figured increasingly in the iconography of “pollution,” “disorder,” “plagues,” “moral contagion” and racial “degeneration.”

Here a crucial aspect of Victorian imperialism emerges. The relation between the “normal” economy of heterosexual marriage and the “normal” economy of capital exchange was legitimized and made natural by reference to a third term: the invention of the “abnormal” zone of the primitive and the irrational. Money, work and sexuality were seen to relate to each other by negative analogy to the realm of racial difference and empire. Thus, historical contradictions internal to imperial liberalism (the distinctions between private and public; paid work and unpaid work; the formation of the male, propertied individual and the denial that slaves, women and the colonized were “possessive individuals”; between the rational and the irrational) were contained by displacement onto a third term: the term of race. Class and gender distinctions were displaced and represented as natural racial differences across time and space: the difference between the “enlightened” present and the “primitive” past.

Cullwick’s slave-band embodies the traces of both personal and historical memory: her own subjugated labor and the slave labor on which

industrial capital was built. By the second half of the seventeenth century, black people brought to Britain by slavers, merchants and plantation owners lived scattered all over England, though they clustered mostly in London. By the turn of the eighteenth century, London and Bristol were thriving slave ports, continuing for another hundred years to garner huge profits from the murderous transport and sale of human beings. In Britain, the possession of a black slave became an emblem of new imperial wealth and advertisements raising a hue and cry after escaped slaves show that they were “customarily obliged to wear metal collars riveted round their necks. Made of brass, copper, or silver, the collar was generally inscribed with the owner’s name, initials, coat of arms, or other symbol.”⁴⁴ At the Lord Mayor’s pageant, the annual festival of London’s merchant capitalists, black people were obliged to perform in opulent costumes and these fetish collars, exhibiting in public displays of sumptuary excess the wealth of the imperial metropolis and the forced labor on which mercantile capitalism was built.

The slave-collar here embodies a contradiction between the extravagant display of black slaves for their exhibition value and the total denial of the value of their lives and work. Cullwick’s slave-collar, as a fetish, thus embodied a double disavowal: the historical erasure both of slave labor and of working-class women’s labor as the foundation of modern industrial power. The slave-band and chain-collar brought into the bourgeois home the memory of empire—chains, straps and bondage—at the precise moment when the industrial economy was being transformed from a slave market to a wage market. The fetish slave-band thus stages the history of industrial capital as haunted by the traumatic and ineradicable memory of imperial slavery.

S/M AND RITUALS OF RECOGNITION

S/M performs the failure of the Enlightenment idea of individual autonomy, theatrically staging the dynamics of interdependency for personal pleasure. But S/M is not merely an existential, timeless Hegelian drama of Self and Other, Being and Nothingness. Rather, it is a historical subculture that draws its symbolic logic from changing social contradictions. What is the social logic of Cullwick’s pleasure in domestic S/M? “The desire for submission,” writes Kamel, “represents a peculiar transposition of the desire for recognition.”⁴⁵ If Cullwick gave Munby license to negotiate the contradictions of class and gender, Munby gave Cullwick the longed-for ritual recognition of the value of her labor.

When Cullwick was a girl, her identity came into being through paradox. Through an obscure economy of social affirmation by self-

negation and the edicts of class abasement, she learned very early that she would be rewarded only if she denied herself.⁴⁶ Performing sanctioned and scripted rituals of obeisance, curtsying and bowing before the gentry, she won affirmation only through negation of self. The need for recognition by the upper class entered her identity with the force of an ineradicable contradiction.⁴⁷

Cullwick inherited a perilous paradox. Her primary source of self-esteem was recognition as a worker. This meant being obedient, sturdy, independent and economically resourceful—but, according to Victorian decree, only if she remained invisible. Domestic work shaped the deepest formation of her self-esteem and the boundaries between herself and others—particularly women.⁴⁸ Yet her extraordinary feats of domestic labor were publicly and ritually despised—as filthy work, work without social value. Her beloved, laboring mother—the first to bestow recognition and limits to selfhood—was socially despised as menial and inferior, a vassal to shame. Cullwick knew only too well how dependent the women of the upper class were on her labor: “Miss M . . . was fussy and *whining* like, & yet so small and feeble. It seem’d hard to be provoked so by her, & for me to be patient & meek to one as I could crush with one hand almost & I so much taller nor her . . . & I pitied her too.”⁴⁹ Yet these helpless women constantly denied her the magical ingredient of social recognition.

Cullwick spent much of her energy performing what can be called rituals of recognition for the upper classes. Bobbing and curtsying, demurely taking a man’s hat, theatrically lowering her eyes and voice, leaving a room backward, kneeling to remove the master’s shoes, being stepped over by upper-class women—these were ritual performances in which Cullwick ceremonially recognized those who paid her to do so. Her ritualized presence was thus a necessary element in her employers’ class identity; yet, by contrast, social recognition of her strength was perpetually deferred. “I somehow never got much praise in service,” she remarks sadly.⁵⁰ One can call the project that animated her life the project of recognition, at the very moment when female manual labor was being erased from view.

Cullwick repeatedly insists that she *likes* work and likes being working class: “for freedom and true lowliness, there’s nothing like being a maid of all work.”⁵¹ Her diary contains frequent entries such as the following: “The summer went on and I worked away and enjoyed it.”⁵² “I like the life I lead—working here & just going to M. when I can of a Sunday.”⁵³ She also prefers physical work, which taxes her immense strength and gives her a sense of accomplishment: “So I often clean’d the steps for her & shook the doormats in the square & I really liked it better than making the rolls.” Work, especially visible work, was an exhibition of

strength and her capacity to pull off astonishing feats of labor affords her much pleasure. She is inordinately proud of her muscular prowess and enjoys lifting Munby and other men to show off her strength: “I can heave my Master easy & carry him as if he was a child nearly.”⁵⁴ “I lifted him easily & carried him, & then he lifted me & said I was *heavy*—I am 11 stone.”⁵⁵ She habitually measured her body to prove her value—an ironic mimicry of the Victorian discourse of degeneration and the fetish for measurement. “My arm is 13 3/4 inches round the muscle,” she writes proudly, “& my hand 4 1/2 inches across the inside.”⁵⁶ On more than one occasion, however, the murderous workload became too much even for her: “Got up & come down to the wretched looking-kitchen & I felt so sick & bad from so much dirt & hard work.”⁵⁷

Cullwick was stung to miserable indignation when her employers refused to recognize her Amazonian feats: “I did all I could to show that I liked dirty, hard work, but Mrs Bishop never seemed satisfied, & I wasn’t either.”⁵⁸ “When Miss Margaret come down to give orders she began about the work & said she was surprised that everything wasn’t more thoroughly done. I said, ‘Well, ma’am, whether you know it or no, I’ve worked *very* hard . . . a fortnight’s nothing to clean a big house like this in. . . . I’d worked harder in the time nor ever I would again for anybody’. . . . She said no more, but left me feeling quite sick with disappointment.”⁵⁹

For Cullwick, class recognition seemed to matter more than gender recognition, throwing into question some feminist theories that men alone are privileged owners of the gaze. Apart from Munby, she seldom mentions her male employers. On the rare occasions when upper-class women acknowledge her prowess, she radiates special pride: “She said, ‘What *arms* you’ve got!’ I said, ‘Why yes, ma’am, I’m pretty strong, & it does me good to fetch the beer in the bracing wind. . . . I came away with my beer feeling quite pleased at being noticed . . . and my arms *did* look big and red & I reckon I weigh’d 11 stone 7 & a 1/2.”⁶⁰

Power through being the spectacle of another’s gaze is an ambiguous power. It allows one to internalize the gaze of the voyeur and participate in the vicarious enjoyment of their power. Yet it also breeds a corresponding dependency on the one endowed with the social privilege of approval. Feminists have offered sophisticated analyses of the male prerogative of gazing, yet here there is much evidence that upper-class women held that privilege in Cullwick’s life. She recalls cleaning the grates, while the Misses Knights watch voyeuristically. “The one in bed call’d me, & she pour’d water onto my black hand to wet the grate with it, & so she wasn’t disgusted.” The pouring of water effected a baptismal cleansing and exoneration of class debasement (“she wasn’t disgusted”), granting Cullwick one of her treasured moments of recognition: “Miss Julia used to

like to see me clean & after sweep. She said she thought it very interesting to see me clean the paint so thoroughly."⁶¹ Her longing for class recognition is assuaged. At the same time, recording such moments in her diary renews her power over Munby.

In the private theater of domestic S/M, Munby bestowed on Cullwick, repeatedly and ritualistically, the rare, dreamed-of recognition of her work: "for he *was* & always *is* interested in my work."⁶² Munby figured as the official witness of her concealed domestic value: "I wrote and told him about it all."⁶³ At such moments, however, a curious metamorphosis transpires. Reading the diary later, Munby is put in an oddly female role, occupying the same position of voyeur of the forbidden spectacle of Cullwick's work as her female employers, precisely that female association which so enflamed and enchanted him. In her fetish rituals with Munby, Cullwick reinvented the *scene* but converted the *terms*, playing the drudge for value. Ostentatiously blacking her face, rubbing grating polish deeply into her hands, taking herself to be photographed, as she did, "in her dirt," Cullwick converted the scene of disavowal into the scene of theatrical display.

AMBIGUITIES OF DEPENDENCE

One cannot exaggerate the influence of Christianity on Cullwick's fetish life. Christianity offered Cullwick the promise of deferred recognition: *God* saw her work, *God* recognized her value. By lowering herself in drudgery, she exalted herself in the eyes of the Master. By working, she accrued spiritual capital, storing up a surplus stock of value in heaven. The economy of Christianity is the economy of conversion: the low exalted, the high made low.⁶⁴ Like Christianity, S/M performs the paradox of redemptive suffering and like Christianity, it takes shape around the masochistic logic of transcendence through the mortification of the flesh. Through self-abasement, the spirit finds release in an ecstasy of abandonment. S/M shares with Christianity a theatrical iconography of punishment and expiation: washing rituals, bondage, flagellation, body-piercing and symbolic torture. In both S/M and Christianity, earthly desire exacts strict payment in an economy of penance and pleasure.

The couple's washing rituals, I suggest, allowed Munby to indulge his hand fetishism—watching Cullwick's blackened "male" hands stroke, rub and massage his male extremities. These were purification rituals, an exoneration of guilt and transgression. For Cullwick, these washing rituals were a staged appropriation of Christian pageantry, offering her a delirious advance on her spiritual credit—a stolen taste of what should properly be her exaltation in the hereafter. For both, these fetish rituals express a

negotiation of power for pleasure far more complex than can be captured in easy binaries of victims and oppressors.

For Cullwick, her theatrical displays of submission were a way of negotiating power over Munby as well as a means of gaining ritual control over her own very real social disempowerment. She clearly saw her "enslavement" as ceremonial rather than real—a symbolic gift to Munby that she could retract at any moment. Her diaries show her determined to be mistress of her theater of submission, and she reacted with unmitigated fury when Munby had the temerity to intimate that she really *was* his slave or presumed to treat her as if she really was a drudge. Indeed, Cullwick fiercely defended her right to be mistress of all her theatrical displays of humility, even with other employers. She brooked no injustice from employers, showing great temper when anyone dared suggest that they, rather than she, managed the scenes: "Miss M. said that she was the best judge of that, & I said, 'No, ma'am, you canna tell me about my work so well as I can.' I suppose she saw a little temper in me, the same as I saw in her, for she said, '*Hannah*, you forget your place.' I said, 'No, ma'am, I don't.'"⁶⁵ Munby, too, earned her wrath if he presumed to "play" with her patience: "Then resentment like rises up inside me & pride, & will not let me speak nor be pleasant and nice as I want to be."⁶⁶

Munby, nonetheless, liked to indulge the fantasy that he alone was master of their games, an unwarranted arrogance that became a lifelong source of conflict between them. He often tried to insist on complete control over Cullwick; as often, she resisted him. One such misunderstanding nearly brought their relationship to an end. Cullwick was in Munby's chambers working as his housekeeper and did not know a boy was on the stairs. So when Munby insisted on her calling him "Sir," and went upstairs to ring the bell for her, she exploded with rage at his violation of the rules and his unilateral changing of the script. "I thought, Well that is showing off certainly, & I went upstairs with my temper up to its highest, & Munby began to question me about not saying 'sir' to him, as the lad was on the stairs. . . . So I was really in a passion." Munby had desecrated their secret rites, callously violating the boundaries between theater and reality and confusing Cullwick's ceremonial submission with real submission. The magic spell was broken and Cullwick furiously threatened him with an ultimatum: "I declar'd that if M. tantalized me in that way again I would leave him whether we was married or not, for I didn't care a straw for that."

The tragic paradox of Cullwick's life, however, was that Munby gave her the longed-for recognition of working-class value, but only in private. Choosing public recognition as his wife (as he wanted) meant denying her labor power, losing her social mobility and bartering her

independence of spirit. Cullwick never escaped this social paradox; it could be negotiated but not individually resolved. In this way, S/M brings to its limit the liberal promise of social resolution through individual agency alone.

In order to understand more fully the meaning of Cullwick's fetishism, it is necessary to explore the social context in which it found its meaning and against which it set itself as stubborn refusal. This context was the historical invention of the middle class labor of leisure and the invisible servant.

THE LABOR OF LEISURE

Women have always worked—they have not
always worked for wages.

—Sophonisiba Beckenriidge

In a century obsessed with women's work, the idea of the idle woman was born. A commonplace story depicts the middle-class Victorian woman's life as a debauch of idleness. At some point during the eighteenth century, the story goes, the spindle and loom were pried from her fingers and all the "bustling labor" of the previous century—the candle and soap-making, the tailoring, millinery, straw-weaving, lace-making, carding and wool-sorting, flax-beating, dairy and poultry work—were removed piecemeal to the manufactories.⁶⁷ By the end of the eighteenth century, Wanda Neff writes, "the triumph of the useless woman was complete."⁶⁸ Robbed of her productive labor, the middle-class woman became fitted, we are told, only for an ornamental place in society.⁶⁹ There, drooping prettily in the faded perfume of watercolors and light embroidery, she lived only to adorn the worldly ambition of her husband, the manufacturer, the city banker, the shipowner.⁷⁰ Enconced after marriage in a bower of ease, she simply exchanged temporary for permanent uselessness.⁷¹ Closeted in her "cold sepulcher of shame," the virgin in the drawing room blushed at tablelegs and shrank from the pleasures of the body. Her dreamy torpor was ruffled only by hysterical ailments, swooning spells and a plague of obstructive servants.⁷² Frigid, neurasthenic and ornamental; wilting in the airless hothouse of Victorian domesticity; fretfully preoccupied by trifles; given to irrationality and hysteria; languishing in ennui; incapable of constancy, decision or stature, the middle-class woman was, until recently, consistently disparaged and her life, as Patricia Branca notes, was dismissed as a "mass of trifles."

At this time, what Nancy Armstrong calls "economic man" and "domestic woman" were born.⁷³ Secluded in the ethic of purity, Coventry Patmore's "angel in the house" was seen to float in a separate sphere.⁷⁴ In the tumult of the commercial marketplace, economic man was seen to live out his destiny as the public actor and maker of history: "eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender." Domestic woman was shaped to her destiny as sweet preserver and comforter, the vessel and safeguard of tradition. Until the 1970s, most critics simply repeated verbatim this fictional portrayal of the crushed flower of middle-class womanhood, taking Victorian writers at face value and accepting fictional portraits quite literally as documentary portrayals.⁷⁵

For decades, therefore, it was widely assumed that the visible sign of the Victorian middle-class housewife was the sign of leisure.⁷⁶ It was as widely assumed that the "typical" middle-class woman was freed for her conspicuous leisure by employing at least three domestic servants in her home.⁷⁷ By common assumption, a typical middle class home was not complete without at least three paid domestics.⁷⁸ Yet Patricia Branca, totting up the average yearly wages of a cook, parlormaid, housemaid or nurse, calculates that the family income required to employ this "necessary trinity" was found only in the tiny, elite-upper and upper-middle classes. Most women of the middle class (itself a broad and shifting category, still under formation) would have to have been content harrying, at best, a single callow girl whose life would, most likely, have been a chronicle of interminable labor and pitiful wages.⁷⁹ Wives of the small tradesmen, clerks, grocers and plumbers would probably have made do with the services of only one such maid-of-all work. Perhaps wives of professional men could afford two paid servants, while doctors, clergymen, bank managers and successful businessmen might, by the late Victorian period, have employed three.⁸⁰ Arguably, then, neither the typical bourgeois lady nor the typical domestic servant really existed. Little regard has been given to the representational discrepancy between Victorian (largely upper middle class) portrayals of women and the myriad, middling domestic situations that took contradictory shape across the span of the century.⁸¹

While contemporary historians have noted the *symbolic value* of the serving class in the formation of middle-class identity, few have acknowledged the *economic value* of the domestic serving class as labor.⁸² What I suggest is that—apart from the tiny, truly leisured elite—idleness was less a regime of inertia imposed on wilting middle-class wives and daughters than a laborious and time-consuming *character role* performed by women who wanted membership in the "respectable" class. For most women whose husbands or fathers could not afford enough servants for genuine idleness, domestic work had to be accompanied by the historically unprecedented

labor of rendering invisible every sign of that work. For most middling women, the cleaning and management of their large, inefficiently constructed houses took immense amounts of labor and energy. Yet a housewife's vocation was precisely the concealment of this work.

Housewifery became a career in vanishing acts. A wife's vocation was not only to create a clean and productive family but also to ensure the skilled erasure of every *sign* of her work. Her life took shape around the contradictory imperative of laboring while rendering her labor invisible. Her success as a wife depended on her skill in the art of both working and appearing not to work. Her parlor game—the ritualized moment of appearing fresh, calm and idle before the scrutiny of husbands, fathers and visitors—was a theatrical performance of leisure, the ceremonial negation of her work. For most women from the still-disorganized middling classes, I suggest, idleness was less the absence of work than a conspicuous labor of leisure.

The architecture of middle-class homes took shape around this paradox. The parlor marked the threshold of private and public, serving as the domestic space for the spectacular (public) metamorphosis of female work into female leisure. The morning call fulfilled the requirement of being *seen*—idle and scrubbed clean of the telltale signs of labor. As a threshold zone, the parlor also became the domestic space for the display of commodity fetishism. The parlor served to conspicuously display the family's "best" household commodities: use value was converted to exhibition value. In lower-middle-class houses, the anxious exhibition of "good" silver, "good" china and "clean" furniture (commodities with exhibition value rather than use value) barely cloaked the shabbiness, overwork and anxiety that lay concealed behind the commodity spectacle of female leisure and male buying power. A fresh and pretty housewife presiding at table disavowed the anxious and sweaty hours of labor, cooking, cleaning and polishing, even with the help of an overworked maid. The dilemma for these women was that the more convincingly they performed the labor of leisure, the more prestige they won. But the prestige was gained not through idleness itself but through a laborious mimicry of idleness.

Certainly it was not the spectacle of leisure that mattered in itself, but the undervaluing of women's work that the spectacle achieved.⁸⁵ Hence the Victorian fetish with hands, for hands could betray the traces of female work more visibly than a washable apron or disposable gloves. Housewives were advised to rub their hands at night with bacon fat and wear gloves in bed to prevent smearing the oil on the sheets, an imperative that revealed so fundamental an embarrassment at female work that it had to continue even in sleep.

THE INVISIBLE SERVANT

Clearly the most damaging burden of the erasure of domestic labor fell on servants. The housewife's labor of *leisure* found its counterpart in the servant's labor of *invisibility*. Servants were ordered to remain unseen, completing the filthiest work before dawn or late at night, dodging their employers, keeping to the labyrinthine back passages, remaining, at all costs, out of sight. If they had to appear before their "betters" to answer the master's bell or open the front door to receive a visitor, they were obliged to change instantly from dirty work clothes into fresh, clean white ones—a ritual metamorphosis that rehearsed the century's long transformation of domestic work from the realm of the seen to the unseen.⁸⁴ The fetish for clean clothes was eloquent of a systematic attempt to erase from view any visible trace of domestic work. The governesses' white gloves, the maid's white apron, the nanny's white sleeves were fetish emblems of the contradiction between women's paid work and women's unpaid work [Figs. 3.19–3.21]. At the same time, the myriad tools and technologies of work—buckets, brooms, brushes, scuttles, irons, cooking utensils,

FIGURE 3.19 THE DISAPPEARING ACT OF LABOR.

marketplace, the odor of cash. Domestic workers thus embodied a double crisis in historic value: between men's paid labor and women's unpaid labor and between a feudal homestead economy and an industrial wage economy.

Small wonder that female servants in Victorian households came to be figured by images of disorder, contagion, disease, conflict, rage and guilt. For this reason, I suggest, domestic space became racialized as the rhetoric of degeneration was drawn upon to discipline and contain the unseemly spectacle of paid women's work.

THE PRIVATE, THE PUBLIC AND THE BOOT FETISH

If Munby had a fetish for hands, Cullwick had a fetish for boots [Fig. 3.22]. It is not clear when she began to count boots with Munby, but an entry on Tuesday July 31, 1860 reads: "This is the last day of July. I have cleaned 83 pairs of boots." Other entries abound: "We had a very nice evening & we added the boots up." Over the years, Cullwick cleaned an astonishing

FIGURE 3.20 THE WHITENESS FETISH.

FIGURE 3.21 THE CULT OF CLEANLINESS.

saucepans, and so on—were laboriously hidden from view. Though a tailor's workroom or a smithy's workshop could be visibly eloquent of labor, the domestic labor of women suffered one of the most successful vanishing acts of modern history.⁸⁵

The wife's labor of leisure and the servant's labor of invisibility served to disavow and conceal within the middle-class formation the economic value of women's work. Female servants thus became the embodiment of a central contradiction within the modern industrial formation. The separation of the private from the public was achieved only by paying working-class women for domestic work that wives were supposed to perform for free. Servants' labor was indispensable to the process of transforming wives' *labor* power into their husbands' *political* power. But the figure of the paid female servant constantly imperiled the "natural" separation of private home and public market. Quietly crossing the thresholds of private and public, home and market, working and middle class, servants brought into the middle-class home the whiff of the

FIGURE 3.22 THE BOOT FETISH.

number of boots. "I clean'd 63 pairs of boots last month." Another entry reads: "I've clean'd 66 pairs o' boots this month & 937 pairs in this year." And another: "I have cleaned 95 pairs of boots this month." And another: "That's the least for 3 or 4 years, else I've clean'd a thousand & more every year."⁸⁶ Yet Cullwick performed these labors unseen, before the family woke. When she was with Munby she converted the labor of invisibility into a theater of display, turning what Barthes calls the "enumerative obsession," and the fetish for cleaning, into delirium of the heart.⁸⁷

It is commonplace to observe the historic emergence in the nineteenth century of the distinction between the private and the public. However, the separation, if decisive, did not happen overnight and it did not happen naturally. By the end of the seventeenth century, new forms of money drawn from imperial mines and plantations had begun to infuse feudal agriculture and industry and, over the next century, shipowners, manufacturers, bankers and professional men, emboldened by imperial profit, began to define new forms of legitimate rule outside the familial, landowning elite.⁸⁸ The ancestral feudal system based on kinship ties, fraternal guilds and patrilineal descent—that is, on the landed patriarchal family—was displaced by a commercial system based on nonfamilial, yet still firmly patriarchal, relations.

There were no laws to prevent the new men of commerce from elbowing their way into the upper echelons of social power, which they gradually did. There were no laws to prevent women from this fledgling class from likewise elbowing their way into power. Yet women didn't. As Catherine Hall notes: "At one level the exclusion of middle class women from the public world of politics is hardly surprising."⁸⁹ Traditional barriers against women participating in politics were extensive, so women had never been allowed very active roles in the political sphere in the first place. But, as Hall points out, neither had middle-class men. Why did men from the middling class and not women inveigle their way into public power?

The process of defining the public, political market as male and not female, did not "simply happen by default."⁹⁰ As the new commercial and professional men muscled their way into power, they decisively and deliberately excluded middling women from the clubs and taverns, from the Masonic lodges and financial organizations, from the commercial rooms of the pubs, from political rallies and Town Hall meetings, from the Chamber of Manufacturers, from parliamentary and council elections and from the universities; in short, from all institutions of public, commercial power, which were henceforth defined as exclusively male spaces.⁹¹ From the outset, the distinction between private and public (figured as a *fait accompli* of natural progress) was the result of a systematic regime of displacement and dispossession, not just of women, but also of all non-propertied, European men.

By the nineteenth century, a major transformation was under way as middle-class men laboriously refashioned architectural and urban space to separate, as if by nature, domesticity from industry, market from family. Manufacturers slowly but steadily moved their houses away from the factories, shopkeepers stopped living above their shops, bankers set up separate banking houses and the suburbs were born. The passing of the Company Acts of 1856–1862 finally freed commerce from kinship and the historic distinction between the public realm of business and the private realm of domesticity came into its own. For the first time, political relations (for men) were fully severed from kinship restraints, creating, as if obedient to natural law, the separate spheres of economic man and domestic woman. In ideology at least, the homes of the Victorian middling class became vaunted as a distinct sphere lying naturally secluded from public commerce and thus beyond the abstract principles of the liberal market economy and the regime of rationality.

Insufficient attention, however, has been given to the transformation of households during this period and to the powerful role that the cult of domesticity played in the boundary formation of the incipient middle class. Yet there is considerable evidence that women were centrally, if contradictorily, implicated in the emergence of liberal rationality. Davidoff has argued brilliantly that the nineteenth century witnessed not only the increasing rationalization of factory labor but also the increasing rationalization of the domestic regime.⁹² If women, as the first factory workers, were the first to be brought under the rule of rationality in the marketplace, women were also the first to participate in the rationalizing of the home. Nonetheless, excluded from public power by male classical liberal theory, as well as by legal and economic decree, women bore an uneasy and contradictory relation to the rationalizing of domesticity.

THE RATIONALIZING OF DOMESTICITY

Nancy Armstrong has argued powerfully that eighteenth-century conduct books and domestic manuals reveal a contradiction of historic proportions. The books were written as if they addressed a fairly wide readership with consistent social objectives—a middle class that was not yet there. The new genre of the female conduct book, she argues, implied "the presence of a unified middle class at a time when other representations of the social world suggest that no such class existed."⁹³ What this suggests is that women played a far greater role in the formation of middle-class identity than has been acknowledged. The cult of domesticity was crucial in helping to fashion the identity of a large class of people (hitherto disunited) with clear affiliations, distinct boundaries and separate values—organized

around the presiding domestic values of monogamy, thrift, order, accumulation, classification, quantification and regulation—the values of liberal rationality through which the disunited middling classes fashioned the appearance of a unified class identity.

What was specific to rationality in its nineteenth-century form was its single-minded dedication to the principles of capital accumulation for commercial expansion.⁹⁴ The full expansion of imperial commerce was not possible without elaborate systems of rational accounting—surveying, map-making, measurement and quantification—organized around the abstract medium of money into the global science of the surface. By the mid-nineteenth century, the domestic realm, far from being abstracted from the rational market, became an indispensable arena for the creation, nurturance and embodiment of these values. The cult of industrial rationality and the cult of domesticity formed a crucial but concealed alliance.

The middle-class determination to identify happiness with rational order and the clear demarcation of boundaries manifested itself in precise rules not only for assembling the public sphere but also for assembling domestic space.⁹⁵ Household arrangements gradually took shape around a geometry of extreme separation and specialization that came to discipline every aspect of daily life. Domestic space was mapped as a hierarchy of specialized and distinct boundaries that needed constant and scrupulous policing.

Spatial boundaries were reordered as the large, communal medieval hall was replaced by arrangements of smaller, highly specialized rooms. By the mid-nineteenth century, what Barthes calls the “sensual pleasure in classification” ruled domestic space—in the labeling of bottles, the careful marking of sheets and clothes, the scrupulous keeping of visitors’ books, the regular accounting of stocks, the meticulous measuring of food, the strict keeping of account books.⁹⁶ Specialized utensils, technologies and timetables were developed for different stages of cooking and eating. The fetish for rational measurement led to an increase in the use of weights and measures. Food was served in obedience to rigid timetables, announced by the ringing of bells. Unlike the medley of sweet and savory, hot and cold courses served all at once in earlier times, meals now followed strict sequential rules, one course following the other with the proper decorum of rational, linear progress.

Domestic space was increasingly disciplined by the obsessive tidying and ordering of ornaments and furniture. Time was rationalized: servants’ workloads and children’s daily schedules followed strict routines and timetables. Cleaning schedules were divided into increasingly rationalized and rigid calendars: washing on Monday, ironing on Tuesday, polishing on Wednesday and so on. The domestic day itself was measured into mechanical units, marked by the chiming of clocks and the meticulous ringing of bells. The

clock presided magisterially over the life of the household, perfectly encapsulating the Victorian fetish for measurement, order and boundary.⁹⁷ In short, the cult of domesticity became a crucial arena for rationalizing emergent middle-class identity and its presiding values.

Very little is known about the role of women’s labor, attitudes, agency and dilemmas in this process. Even less is known about how working-class women negotiated, opposed or appropriated the cult of domesticity and the rationalizing of the household. Cullwick’s diaries, I suggest, offer a rare and important insight into these dynamics, all the more valuable for expressing a working-class perspective. If, as I suggest, a central function of liberal rationality and the cult of domesticity was to disavow the social and economic value of women’s manual and domestic work, Cullwick’s diaries present the remarkable record of a working-class woman’s unflagging attempt to negotiate and accommodate to the rationalizing of housework while at the same time doing precisely what liberal rationalism forbade: stubbornly insisting on the visible economic and social value of her labor power. Cullwick’s writings and her fetishistic rituals reveal in glimpses and intimations some of the critical contradictions that bring the discourse of rationality and the cult of domesticity to its conceptual limit. Indeed, her diaries reveal that fetishism, far from being the antithesis of rationalism and progress, as was tirelessly claimed, instead came to inform the domestic cult of rationality as its central logic. How, then, does one account for Cullwick’s counting rituals?

DOMESTICITY AND THE BOOT-COUNTING FETISH

It is fitting that Cullwick recorded her life and work in a diary, which is the literary genre most appropriate to the logic of linear, rational individualism and the idea of progress. In the diary, progress is seen as the measured, linear development of the private individual.⁹⁸ Yet it also bears witness to a contradiction, for the diary, putatively the most private of literary forms, gave formative shape in the eighteenth century to the novel, the most public of literary forms. Cullwick’s diary is no exception, for it was written as a private document but intended for Munby’s perusal. Indeed, Cullwick’s diary as a whole is fully expressive of the fetishistic irrationality that shaped the middle-class cult of domesticity.

If the diary as a genre is dedicated to the idea of the individual, the syntax of Cullwick’s early diaries bears witness to an erasure: the sovereign “I” of individual subjectivity is missing. Her truncated and mutilated sentences are driven forward by the relentless repetition of verbs of cleaning and labor, her subjectivity engulfed by the regime of objects. A typical day’s entry from her early diary for Saturday July 14, 1860, reads as follows:

Opened the shutters & lighted the kitchen fire. Shook my sooty things in the dusthole & emptied the soot there. Swept & dusted the rooms & the hall. Laid the hearth & got breakfast up. Clean'd 2 pairs of boots. Made the beds and emptied the slops. Clean'd & washed the breakfast things up. Clean'd the plate; cleaned the knives & got dinner up. Clean'd away. Clean'd the kitchen up; unpack'd a hamper. Took two chickens to Mrs Brewer's & brought the message back. Made a tart & pickled and gutted two ducks and roasted them. Clean'd the steps & flags on my knees. Blackleaded the scraper in front of the house; cleaned the street flags too on my knees. Wash'd up in the scullery. Clean'd the pantry on my knees & scour'd the tables. Scrubbed the flags around the house & clean'd the window sills. Got tea at 9 for the master & Mrs Warwick in my dirt, but Ann carried it up. Clean'd the privy & passage & scullery floor on my knees. Wash'd the dog & cleaned the sinks down. Put the supper ready for Ann to take up, for I was too dirty and tired to go upstairs. Wash'd in a bath & went to bed without feeling any the worse for yesterday.⁹⁹

In Cullwick's diaries, the inescapable imperative to clean and order objects—shoes, windowsills, knives, flagstones, closets, plates, saucepans, table tops, windows, floors, glasses—consumes her life's energies in an infinity of repetition without progress or perfection. This is what Marx called commodity fetishism: the central social form of the industrial economy whereby the social relation between people metamorphoses into a relation between things. The domestic realm, far from being the antithesis of industrial rationality, is revealed to be entirely structured by commodity fetishism.

Housework is a semiotics of boundary maintenance. Cleaning is not inherently meaningful; it creates meaning through the demarcation of boundaries. Domestic labor *creates* social value, segregating dirt from hygiene, order from disorder, meaning from confusion. The middle class was preoccupied with the clear demarcation of limit and anxiety about boundary confusion—in particular, between private and public—gave rise to an intense fetish for cleaning and a fetishistic preoccupation with what the anthropologist, Victor Turner, calls liminal, or boundary, objects. Servants spent much of their time cleaning boundary objects—doorknobs, windowsills, steps, pathways, flagstones, curtains and banisters, not because these objects were especially dirty, but because scrubbing and polishing them ritually maintained the boundaries between private and public and gave these objects exhibition value as class markers. Glistening doorknobs, freshly washed curtains, spotless windowsills and scrubbed paths—the uncertain objects on the threshold of private and public, upstairs and

downstairs—vividly expressed the boundary between the middle-class home and the public market.¹⁰⁰

The middle-class fetish for boundary purity surfaced in a peculiarly intense fixation with the cleaning of boots [Figs. 3.23, 3.24]. Boots are threshold objects, carrying traces of streets, fields and markets into polished interiors, confusing public with private, work with leisure, cleanliness with dirtiness and thereby accruing a special fetishistic power. For this reason, maids were especially tasked with keeping their employers' shoes scrupulously clean. At the same time, they had to complete the purification rituals unseen, before the household awoke.

Cullwick and Munby seem to have spent many evenings counting and recounting the extraordinary number of boots she cleaned, in a recurrent ritualistic fetish that continued for years. In these conversion rituals, Cullwick's labor of invisibility is converted into recognition, her exhaustion into leisure, disavowal into agency. Most importantly, Munby acts as official witness to her enormous, disavowed labors. At such moments of delicious recognition, the "I" of agency reappears and her identity takes shape around the ritual of recognition.¹⁰¹ By licking his boots,

FIGURE 3.23 THE COMMODITY BOOT FETISH.

FIGURE 3.24 THE CULT OF BOUNDARY PURITY.

moreover, as she did a couple of times, she turned the secret labor of boot cleaning into outrageous display.

On the other hand, a damaging paradox makes itself felt. The striking difference between the rationalizing of the market and the rationalizing of housework is that the latter is rationalized so as to render women's work invisible and to thereby disavow its economic value. The rationalizing of domestic labor in the nineteenth century involved massive expenditures of effort that went *unquantified* and *uncalculated*, since such work had to be excluded, as far as possible, from the rational market.

Each month, each year, Cullwick's boot counting begins again—at number one. There is no progress in domestic labor, only repetition. Thus on one hand, the boot fetish demands recognition of labor value; on the other hand, it dramatically stages the failure of domestic progress. The boot fetish reveals a slavish obedience to rational form, while at the same time it flagrantly exhibits the fetishistic logic of rationalism itself. Victorian

domesticity simultaneously embodied and belied the enlightenment myth of rational progress. Small wonder that servants and the boundary objects of domestic servitude—boots, aprons, brooms, soap—became infused with intense fetishistic power.

CROSS-DRESSING AND FEMALE FETISHISM

A person without clothes is a person without language.

—West African Proverb

Cullwick's abiding power over Munby was her theatrical talent for conversion. Over the years, she revealed a remarkable capacity for adopting different social identities and costumes at will. As a servant, it was her profession and her pride to stage as natural the theatrical rites and pageantries of middle- and upper-middle class status. One minute she was on her knees scrubbing the grimy floors and closets, her huge arms filthy with fat and water; the next minute she appeared in fresh, dry white, to demurely open the door to a stranger or answer the mistress' bell. One minute she was lifting and carrying menservants around the kitchen table in gales of hilarity, or heaving heavy luggage, buckets of hot water and loaded coal scuttles up three flights of stairs at a time. Next minute she was bobbing and curtsying to her "betters," mimicking servility and performing the exaggerated rites of humility required of her station.

In her relationship with Munby, she transformed her servant's skills at mimicry into high theater and a source of considerable power. She cross-dressed as an upper-class mistress, a rural farm worker and a male valet. She costumed herself as a male slave, a chimney sweep, an angel and a fieldhand, and took herself to the photographers to be photographed in her costumery. She cut her hair and dressed as a man and traveled round Europe with Munby as his valet. After they were married, she cross-dressed as an upper-class lady and again toured Europe with Munby, this time as his wife. Munby was helplessly enthralled by "her talent to play each part so well."

With her exceptional talent for the ambiguities of identity, Cullwick joins the countless concealed and clandestine female cross-dressers who—according to the edicts of psychoanalytic tradition—do not exist. Robert Stoller proclaims firmly that there is no such thing as the "transvestite woman": "fetishistic cross-dressing" in women is "so rare it is almost nonexistent." Unlike Freud, Stoller argues that women "have no clothing fetish," they simply want to *be* men; a perfectly natural desire.¹⁰² Female cross-dressers cannot be admitted into the house of perversion, for they

throw radically into question the centrality of the phallus as the fetishized object around which transvestism is supposed to be organized. However, not only was Cullwick a lifelong cross-dresser, but her fetishism was organized not around the traumas of phallic identity and erotic displacement (I critique this Freudian theory in Chapter 4) but around the historic contradictions of women's work and the iconography of empire — chains, blacking, dirt, clothes, boots, buckets, water and brushes. While Cullwick may well have received deferred erotic pleasure from her fetishism, understanding her cross-dressing and fetish rituals as an erotics of the castration scene serves only to reduce her life to a masculinist narrative of sexual interest. Instead, I suggest that her fetishism amounted to a sustained attempt to negotiate the perils attending the Victorian erasure of women's work.

Cross-dressing is not only a personal fetish, it is also a historical phenomenon. What one can call sumptuary panic (boundary panic over clothing) erupts most intensely during periods of social turbulence. In the early modern period, sumptuary laws in Europe and Britain took shape around the upheavals in money and social status engendered by imperialism.¹⁰³ As spices from the slave plantations and silver and other precious metals from the slave mines engendered new possibilities for mercantile consumption and surplus, new forms of money and consumption — no longer dependent on land and aristocratic power — began to interfere in old forms of political distinction. These changes led to the promulgation of sumptuary laws all over Europe, restricting "the wearing of certain furs, fabrics and styles to members of particular social and economic classes, ranks or 'states'."¹⁰⁴ Clothing became central to the policing of social boundaries, marking out "visible and above all legible distinctions of wealth and rank within a society undergoing changes that threatened to even obliterate social distinctions."¹⁰⁵ Dismantling the aristocratic regime involved, in part, dismantling the aristocratic body as a theater of sumptuary and sexual display.

Sumptuary laws sought to regulate social boundaries by regulating the social legibility of dress.¹⁰⁶ Yet sumptuary laws contain an internal paradox, for the fact that class and rank are made legible by the wearing, or not wearing, of "cloth of gold, silk or purple" reveals the invented nature of social distinction, throwing into visibility the question of both the origins and the legitimacy of rank and power. The bits and pieces of colored cloth that are the legible insignia of degree are also permanently subject to disarrangement and symbolic theft. For this reason, the historical figure of the cross-dresser becomes invested with a potent and subversive power. As Marjorie Garber puts it in her groundbreaking book, the transvestite is "the figure that disrupts."¹⁰⁷

Garber brilliantly chronicles how "the specter of transvestism, the uncanny intervention of the transvestite, came to mark and indeed to

overdetermine this space of anxiety about fixed and changing identities, commutable or absent selves."¹⁰⁸ Garber refuses to accept the traditional account of transvestism as a medical pathology or biological anomaly — the crisis of the transvestite, she argues, represents the "crisis of category itself."¹⁰⁹ In this way, Garber invites us to take transvestites on their own terms, not as one sex or one gender but as the enactment of ambiguity itself; not even so much a "blurred sex" as the embodiment and performance of social contradiction. The transvestite inhabits the threshold of category distinction, challenging "easy notions of binarity and throwing into question the categories of 'female' and 'male.'"¹¹⁰ Thus Garber sets herself against the progress narrative theory of cross-dressing, that attempts to uncover a "real" desired identity, either "male" or "female" beneath the transvestite mask. For Garber, by contrast, the transvestite is not equivalent to one sex or another but is rather the figure that inhabits that borderland where oppositions are perpetually disarranged, untied and subverted.

Nonetheless, Garber herself, by universalizing all cross-dressers as the "figure that disrupts" and by universalizing all fetishes as the phallus ("the phallus is the fetish, the fetish is the phallus"), cannot, in the final analysis, theoretically explain the wealth of diversity that her own anecdotes reveal. Within the single, cramped Lacanian frame into which she consigns all cross-dressers, diversity, ambiguity and difference are paradoxically lost and each cross-dresser becomes, at the theoretical level, a clone of all the others. Her obedient genuflection to a single genesis narrative of phallic ambiguity reduces the rich diversity she marvelously recounts to an abstract economy of one. Garber is therefore unable to account theoretically for distinctions among subversive, conservative or radical transvestite practices and fetishes. Diversity disappears in the perpetual recurrence of the single "primal scene."

In the twilight world of transvestite ambiguity, Cullwick situated her power and her pleasure in that threshold zone where boundaries blur. Her talent for costume, disguise and improvisation was no simple theatrical masquerade; rather, it was a profound engagement with the social edicts that brutally circumscribed her life.

Cullwick celebrated the peculiar freedoms of ambiguity rather than the fixity of one identity. Cross-dressers seldom seek the security of a perfect imitation; rather, they desire that delicious impersonation that belies complete disguise: "something readable, a foot that is too big, a subtle gesture or the peculiar grain of the voice."¹¹¹ Thus when Cullwick cross-dresses and is photographed as a "lady," her filthy, callused hand with its dirty strap rests visibly and improbably on her fresh, flounced skirt. Cullwick's insistent display of her hands and strap refuses the historical erasure of women's work. Displaying, in public, the taboo sign of women's private work, she throws into question the naturalness of the categories of

dirty work or clean work, dirty women or clean women, insisting that she "could play either part so well" because both were invention.

It is extremely important to emphasize that Cullwick performed transformations of race and class as well as gender (I explore this theoretically in Chapter 4). Cross-dressed as a "male slave," she posed naked from the waist up, visibly displaying her "masculine" arms and huge shoulders. Yet if she appears quite male, on closer examination the gentle curve of her breasts, half-hidden in the shadows, suggests other possibilities. Again, in the "Rosetti" portrait (hand-tinted for Munby by Rosetti himself, who declared he was sure it was of a "lady") the slave chain lies visibly and incongruously on her gentle bosom.

Cross-dressing became so habitual for Cullwick that she declared in her diary: "I have got into the way of *forgetting* like, whether I am dressed up as a lady or drest in my apron & cotton frock in the street."¹¹² Gautier captures beautifully the threshold state that transvestism inhabits in a description that could well have been written by Cullwick: "I hardly remembered, at long intervals that I was a woman; . . . in truth, neither sex is really mine. . . . I belong to a third sex, a sex apart, that has as yet no name."¹¹³ Similarly, Cullwick writes of her gender in upper-class houses: "I was the man in the house."

On their trip to Europe as man and wife, she started out from the Temple, where she lived as Munby's housemaid, in her old black bonnet and working clothes, performing a complete change of costume at Folkstone. There at the port, where the boundaries of national custom permitted the safe transgression of class convention, Cullwick donned her "felt hat & plume of cocks feathers and a veil." The ornamental hat and brooch were the necessary, visible signs of class leisure and wealth, while the veil was the insignia both of male property ownership of female sexuality and protection from the elements (and thus the racial and class disgrace of a sun-darkened skin). Returning from Europe, she put her old plaid shawl over her skirt: "I've doffed all my best clothes & put my own on again—very dirty cotton frock & apron and my cap." Her transformations were entirely convincing: "I wasn't noticed coming into the Temple or going out."¹¹⁴

"SO MUFFLED UP"

MARRIAGE AND RESISTANCE

There remain no legal slaves except
the mistress of every house.

—J. S. Mill

Cross-dressing signaled Cullwick's refusal of the niggardly social roles allotted her. Cross-dressed as a man, she could travel unquestioned around

Europe with Munby. Dressed as a working-class woman, she freely entered bars and music halls, enjoying forms of working-class leisure forbidden "proper" women. She could walk about after dark without fear of ruination or reprisal. On the other hand, cross-dressed as a lady, she could enjoy the luxury and adventure of the hotels, holiday resorts and sightseeing trips barred to working-class women.

For this reason, Cullwick dreaded the prospect of marriage to Munby and, for some time, steadfastly refused his insistence that she appear in public as his wife. If for most women, as Christine Delphy argues: "marriage is a contract into unpaid labor," Cullwick's dogged will to independence expressed itself in a powerful, principled resistance to marriage.¹¹⁶ Because the "outward bond" of the legal license threatened to turn her into Munby's real slave, Cullwick found the prospect of marriage unbearably galling. If, on one hand, she called Munby "Massa" and seemed to genuflect symbolically to Rousseau's dictum that the husband should be a "master for the whole of life"; on the other hand, there is every evidence that she saw Munby's "mastery" as purely theatrical.¹¹⁶ For this reason, she showed nothing but repugnance at the thought of marrying Munby and entering "proper" society as his wife. When Munby decided that it was high time they married, Cullwick made no bones about her distaste for the idea and relented only when circumstances made it well nigh unavoidable.¹¹⁷ She was deeply reluctant to move in with Munby and after four unhappy and lonely years under his roof, she moved out again, against his wishes, to continue their relationship more on her terms than his. Marriage, with its apparently permanent settling of heterosexual identity, struck her as unbearably constrictive: "It is too much like being a *woman*," she lamented.

Cullwick's slave-band brings into visibility the triangulated, historic convergence of wife, servant and slave. A long and sorry relation holds between wives and slaves. As Engels points out, the term "family" derives from "famulus," which means slave.¹¹⁸ The status of women as individuals entered classical liberal theory as a central dilemma. If women, like slaves and children, were to be denied the rights to liberty and property ownership, ideological work had to be done. The solution lay in the distinction between the private and the public. Classical liberal theorists constructed as a *political* right the right to contract within the public sphere, but defined conjugal relations as belonging within the sphere of *nature* and thus beyond contract. The domestic sovereignty of the husband over the wife and thus the exclusion of women from possessive individualism, was justified as deriving from natural, not political, law.¹¹⁹

Thus when Munby exults that Cullwick was brought to him by "him who brought Eve to Adam," he speaks in the language, as was only fitting, of the classical liberal contract theorists. For Locke, Adam's sovereignty

over Eve has “a Foundation in Nature for it.”¹²⁰ In his “First Treatise,” Locke argues that Eve’s natural subjugation is such that “every Husband hath to order the things of private Concernment in his Family as Proprietor of the Goods and Lands there and to have his Will take place before that of his wife in all things of their common concernment.”¹²¹ For Pufendorf, however, conjugal right, while squaring with “the condition of human nature” has to be secured “by her consent, or by a just war.” Yet because, for Pufendorf, it is “the most natural thing” for marriages to come about through good will, man’s conjugal rights originate in the wife’s “voluntary subjection” to the “unequal league” of marriage.¹²²

Carol Pateman points out that in these redefinitions of contract law a paradox emerges: women are by nature rendered incapable of equal contract with men under political law (since women are naturally subordinate), yet women can and must make marriage contracts (since marriage was to be seen as a matter of consent, not coercion). Through these debates, liberal theory formed an ideological distinction between individual freedom and the right to contract of the political sphere, and the refusal of the right to such political status within the domestic, conjugal sphere. Thus, as Pateman puts it, marriage remained a legal anomaly in that it “retains a natural status even in civil society.”¹²³

The invented distinction between the “natural” sphere of the family and the “political” sphere of civic society was indispensable to the formation of middle-class male identity because it was employed to restrict the liberal notion of sovereign individuality to European men of propertied descent. With the alibi of imperial nature, women, slaves, servants and the colonized could be excluded from liberal individuality. The emergence of the rational liberal individual thereby took shape around the reinvention of the domestic sphere as the realm of natural subjugation, just as the realm of the “primitive” was the realm of natural racial subjugation. Domesticity and empire merge as a necessary element in the formation of the liberal imagination.

Cullwick’s slave-band was the visible embodiment of these contradictions. The wife’s voluntary, verbal submission (“I do”) represents a ceremonial display of hegemony as the woman “voluntarily” enters a social relation of inequality with her husband, which grants him henceforth the legal right of coercion over her. In short, the wife’s contract is a contract *out* of hegemony *into* coercion.¹²⁴ Cullwick’s slave-band exposes a fundamental contradiction within classical liberal theory: women are *naturally* like slaves and thus *cannot* make contracts, but women *must* enter into contracts in order to become wives and thereby waive their right to contract-making.

Cullwick tartly brushed aside Munby’s patronizing suggestion that she should be grateful to him for marrying her: “Before the visitors came, Munby show’d me a license he had bought—a marriage license—for him

and me, & he said, ‘Doesn’t this show how much I love you, & what do you say to it?’ I told him I had nothing to say about it, but I hoped he would never be sorry for it, nor I. Tho’ I seem’d so cool & said so little I really meant what I said. I car’d very very little for the license or being married either.”¹²⁵ She would not brook Munby’s condescending notion of their marriage “as a reward to me for I want no reward,” and deeply resented the social reality of the marriage license as an “outward bond”: “I seem to hate the word marriage in that sense.”¹²⁶

Cullwick’s marriage to Munby was in virtually every respect an accumulation of transgressions. By insisting on wages from Munby for her services, by contracting herself out to work as she pleased, by keeping her own money (though she asked Munby to manage it for her), Cullwick set herself against the fundamental edicts of Victorian marital law. Indeed, she put quietly and stubbornly into practice what feminists fought for for the rest of the century: the right to control her body, her labor, her money and her reproductive freedom, all the more remarkable and empowering for the fact that it took place within the context of enormous social disempowerment [Fig. 3.25].

FIGURE 3.25 CULLWICK IN HER LAST YEARS.

By living as Munby's "symbolic slave," while in effect coming & going as she pleased, Cullwick negotiated a degree of power that would otherwise have been well-nigh impossible. By living independently of a marital household, she avoided contracting herself in marriage as a working-class man's legal possession. "I made my mind up that it was best & safest to be a slave to a gentleman, nor wife & equal to any vulgar man."¹²⁷ Her marriage to Munby remained a purely titular affair, and she never surrendered her birth name. Most importantly, by refusing to live openly as a wife, Cullwick avoided having children; quite clearly, she had no desire to be a mother. On the contrary, she commented commiseratingly on a cousin of hers: "I was glad I wasn't a mother of a little family like her . . . for after all however natural it's very troublesome & after they grow up generally a great anxiety."¹²⁸

Cullwick would not countenance the ennui and dependence of being a wife nor the sacrifices attendant upon having children: "Ah Ellen—the music's nice, & the easy chair is nice, but for being among the grand folks or drest up like 'em & all that I'd fifty times rather be all black among the grate cleaning. And which is the most lasting of the two, & which is the solidest & real pleasure?" She much preferred the freedom of "downstairs" and frequently relished the freedom of public mobility her low status gave her: "I can work at ease. I can go out & come in when I please. . . . all the years I've walked about London nobody has ever spoke to me wrongly, & I don't think they will if you're drest plain & walk on about your own business."¹²⁹

In these complex ways, the realm of fetishism was for Cullwick an arena of contestation and negotiation. She claimed the right to manipulate the theatrical *signs* of lowliness in order to refuse the legitimacy of their value as *nature*. Far from seeing marriage as the gift of progress, she refused the "grand idea of the nineteenth century" by choosing the value of her work over the muffled ennui and bondage of marriage. Refusing to barter her unruly working-class strength for the halter of respectability, she decked herself in her own symbolic chains and threw dramatically into question the Victorian narrative of progress and the heterosexual Family of Man.

PSYCHOANALYSIS, RACE AND FEMALE FETISHISM

4

It is an awful thing still to dread the magic that you contemptuously investigate—to collect folklore for the Royal Society with a lively belief in all Powers of Darkness.

—Rudyard Kipling

Could we emancipate ourselves from the bedimmed influences of custom . . . we should see as numerous tribes of fetish-worshippers in the streets of London and Paris, as we hear of on the coasts of Africa.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

In 1760, a French philosophe, Charles de Brosses, coined the term *fetichisme* as the term for "primitive religion."¹ In 1867, Marx took the term *commodity fetishism* and the idea of primitive magic to express the central social form of the modern industrial economy.² In 1905, Freud transferred the term *fetish* to the realm of sexuality and the domain of the erotic "perversions."³ The "sciences of man"—philosophy, Marxism and