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## LOVE, WAGES, SLAVERY: THE LITERATURE OF SERVITUDE IN THE UNITED STATES

Barbara Ryan. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Pp. 256..

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In *Love, Wages, Slavery*, Barbara Ryan brings together two literatures which have traditionally been analyzed separately—literature about free labour and literature about enslaved labour—considering how nineteenth-century conceptions of slavery impacted ideologies concerning free labour, and how notions of freedom shaped discourses about slavery. Ryan draws upon a wide variety of sources, including prescriptive literature, novels, and memoirs from both enslaved and free labourers. The result is a fresh and insightful consideration of how notions about race, class, gender, and ethnicity influenced nineteenth-century Americans' perceptions of what it meant to be, and to hire, non-kin household labour.

Studying the rhetorics surrounding free and enslaved labour separately can be misleading, Ryan argues, because notions of slavery were profoundly impacted by ideas about free labour, and, equally, “service did not exist in a sphere unaffected by slavery.”<sup>1</sup> While scholars have long recognized the ways in which ideas about the family permeated discourse about Southern patriarchal society, few have considered how Northern employers deployed such rhetoric in their discussions of household labourers. It was not just white Southern slaveholders who professed to regard those who laboured for them as members of their “family,” for whom they felt a deep and abiding sense of personal responsibility. Ryan demonstrates that Northern employers, likewise, used language which defined non-kin household labourers either as integral parts of—or as insidious threats to—the middle-class Northern family.

*Love, Wages, Slavery* follows a roughly chronological organization, beginning during the 1820s, when the hiring of non-kin household labour was becoming increasingly common for middle-class families, and concluding in the early twentieth century, when scientific notions of housekeeping, and the discipline of home economics, were in the ascendant. Over the course of this time period, Ryan locates three distinct phases of popular attitudes towards non-kin household labourers: the sentimental, the postsentimental, and the antisentimental. The sentimental phase, which lasted from the 1820s until the mid-nineteenth century, was characterized by faith that bonds between employers and servants should be warm, loving, and familial. After the Civil War, Ryan maintains, notions of the servant-employer relationship emerged that were what she terms “postsentimental.” Postsentimental writers, while convinced that relations between employers and servants could never achieve the closeness or warmth of family ties, nonetheless continued to express regret that such bonds were impossible. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many writers expressed antisentimental attitudes, declaring that it had been an error to think that relationships between employers and servants could have ever been anything other than business connections, and affirmed that it was necessary to purge domestic service of any lingering

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Ryan, *Love, Wages, Slavery: The Literature of Servitude in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 186.

emotional associations.

In the first few chapters of her monograph, Ryan offers intriguing reconsiderations of the work of such canonical literary figures as Catherine Maria Sedgwick and Ralph Waldo Emerson, considering how, in both of their lives and writing, these authors sought to create radically new labour relations during the early republic and antebellum eras. Although Sedgwick's literary work has received a significant amount of attention from scholars, few have recognized just how central a figure Sedgwick was, in shaping national discussions about the mistress-servant relationship during the early and mid-nineteenth century. So influential and popular were Sedgwick's writings about household management and labour, Ryan persuasively argues, that all other writers seeking to define domestic labour relations during this era needed to grapple with Sedgwick's ideas. It was imperative that masters and mistresses—particularly mistresses, as this was the era in which middle-class women were assuming new responsibility for their households—built loving, quasi-familial bonds of warmth and trust between themselves and their servants. Forging such connections was vital, Sedgwick insisted, as white middle-class mistresses played a significant role in instructing female non-kin household labourers in proper morality and respectability. According to Sedgwick, the best way to secure servants' all-important trust and affection was by paying their wages regularly. Of course, as Ryan notes, Sedgwick's insistence on the regular payment of servants was decidedly racialized, as the African-American woman who worked in the Sedgwick household for most of her life, Elizabeth Freeman, did not receive similarly consistent financial remuneration for her domestic labour.

Equally useful is Ryan's consideration of how some of the nineteenth century's most radical thinkers and reformers sought to renegotiate labour relations in their own households and communities. She devotes one chapter to considering the household of Ralph Waldo and Lidian Emerson, who constantly experimented with new ways of integrating non-kin household labourers into their family, by (unsuccessfully) seeking to blur the lines between friends and servants; between labourers and guests. While the overwhelming majority of the Emersons' experiments proved to be failures, these failures were perhaps not so great, or quite so crushingly disappointing, as those experienced by members of the utopian communities of Brook Farm and Fruitlands. Founded on egalitarian principles, these communities insisted that the master/mistress-servant relationship was an inherently and inescapably oppressive one, and vowed to hire no non-kin household labourers. The sheer volume of work soon caused this vow to be broken, however, much to the chagrin of community members. Brook Farm and Fruitlands, as Ryan ably demonstrates, also generated numerous controversies surrounding gender and work, as male community members left the majority of domestic labour to female members, who in turn came to resent having this work consistently devalued, and serving as domestic workers to those not members of their immediate families.

In one of her monograph's most valuable and intriguing chapters, Ryan considers the growing market for, and increasing controversy surrounding, "kitchen narratives" in the mid-nineteenth century United States. While the antebellum American public's fascination with the written accounts of enslaved labourers has been well-documented by historians, Americans' appetite for (and ambivalence about) memoirs written by free domestic labourers has not received as much scholarly attention. Ryan considers the "kitchen narratives" of non-kin household labourers and slave narratives side-by-side, fruitfully analyzing the ways in which these accounts shaped notions of labour during this era. Although several former domestic labourers experienced some popular success with their volumes, "kitchen narratives," like slave narratives, were nonetheless profoundly controversial texts. These narratives began to appear in signifi-

cant quantities in the American literary marketplace, Ryan demonstrates, at precisely the same time that notions of the home as a sacred, private space became widely accepted in American society. The very act of publishing an account of one's life as a servant was thus perceived by many as an unforgivable violation of the sanctity of the private sphere. Alongside kitchen narratives, therefore, were published many works which endorsed "day service" workers, who could assist in the performance of household tasks, but who would not intrude too much into the private households—and the private affairs—of their employers.

In the wake of the Civil War, Ryan details, white middle-class authors writing about non-kin household labour experienced a sort of crisis. The influx of freed African American women into the Northern domestic labour force created, much as the influx of Irish women had decades earlier, a distinct sense of nostalgia for a mythical time in which white, native-born domestic labourers had been both willing and abundant. Authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who experienced significant success with her series of *Atlantic Monthly* articles about her domestic trials and tribulations, lamented that white middle-class mistresses no longer shared close, emotional bonds with their often difficult and "alien" servants. The problem, writers such as Stowe affirmed, was not with mistresses, who would willingly serve as loving, quasi-maternal figures to their domestic labourers, but with workers themselves, who scornfully rejected this affectionate guidance. Postsentimental pieces such as Stowe's, Ryan demonstrates, were thus confused and contradictory works, which lamented the passing of loving relationships between mistresses and servants, but offered no productive solutions to the "servant problem."

In her epilogue, Ryan considers what she terms the "antisentimental" period, in which those writing about labour relations turned resolutely away from the (in their view) "soft" medium of fiction, and its sentimental rhetoric about service, towards non-fiction works which purported to consider the "labour question" from a strictly objective and scientific perspective. While authors such as Sedgwick and Stowe claimed authority to instruct their readers about domestic labour relations because of their personal, subjective experiences, late nineteenth-century female writers drew upon their academic credentials to support their ideas about how to reform America households. Sentiment had no place, these authors insisted, on what was essentially and inescapably a business relationship.

*Love, Wages, Slavery* is a skilfully-written, wide-ranging and thought-provoking monograph that contributes a great deal to existing studies of women and work, the evolution of class distinctions, and changing ideologies about gender, race, ethnicity, and labour over the course of the nineteenth century. It offers fresh and intriguing insights into much-studied subjects, such as changing notions about labour in the wake of emancipation, and also puts a welcome spotlight on such significant but still relatively unexamined figures as Brook Farm's Sophia Ripley. Historians, literary scholars, and American Studies scholars will find much of interest in this provocative and insightful study about the ways in which Americans thought about, and worked to reshape, household labour during the nineteenth century.