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RETHINKING GENERATIONAL HISTORY:
QUEER HISTORIES OF SEXUALITY IN NEO-VICTORIAN
FEMINIST FICTION

In *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Jeanette King suggests that historical fiction by women can be placed in the context of a “wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism, of rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded or marginalized” (3–4). Such fiction could be understood, then, as a generational endeavor; the project of “recovering” the past is one which both produces a feminist history and confirms a feminist present as the location from which such a project is possible. However, Judith Roof has questioned the way in which generational thinking “creates a perpetual debt to the past” (71). The past to which such projects of recovery are understood to be indebted can itself be understood as the *effect* of feminist historiography and its narrative forms rather than its cause; indeed, the history discovered by a return to the past will perhaps necessarily be shaped in advance by the imperatives motivating the return. Such a complex and productive (rather than simply restorative) relationship to the past is, however, obscured by what Roof has termed the “reproductive familial narrative” of “generation” which assumes a “linear, chronological time where the elements that come first appear to cause the elements that come later” (71). In this essay I aim to suggest the ways in which a non-generational historiography might allow for an encounter with the past other than as origin or legacy; I will do so by exploring the complex historicizing of non-reproductive sexuality in Sarah Waters’s 1999 neo-Victorian historical fiction *Affinity*.

In her critique of recuperative histories of homosexuality, Jennifer Terry suggests what might be at stake in the retrospective logic of recovered histories: “‘Alternative’ historical narratives claiming to recuperate the truth of homosexuality strive for a kind of respectability, a restoration, a coherence, an identity which is illusory” (58). In place of a quest for a foundational “truth,” Terry proposes a “deviant historiography” that would constitute a “method for mapping the complex discursive and textual operation at play in the historical emergence of subjects who *come to*

be called lesbians and gay men" (55, my italics).¹ The complex temporality of this understanding of the past is useful when considering the uses of retrospective knowledge in *Affinity*. *Affinity* is a suspense narrative which, like its sensational late-nineteenth-century predecessors, has at its core a secret whose revelation provides the dramatic culmination of the novel; moreover, the disclosure of this secret generates a retrospective knowledge which transforms the meaning of preceding events. Such a reading offers to empower the reader as being in possession of a double form of retrospective knowledge: not only the narrative knowledge attained through completion of the novel, but also the historical knowledge of the contemporary reader of a late nineteenth century historical fiction. However, such a reading obscures the radical ambiguity of sexual agency evident in *Affinity*; its representation of late-nineteenth-century spiritualism as a performative space in which the incoherence of normative sexual identities are materialized allows for a rethinking of the "origins" of both sexual desire and of modern sexual identities. Where retrospective narrative knowledge is assumed to have greater authority than the readerly experience of uncertainty, the restoration of a "true" identity is legitimized; I will argue, however, that the "truth" about gendered and sexual identities, which retrospective knowledge seems to disclose, is actually its effect.

WHAT MARGARET KNEW: HISTORICIZING SEXUAL IDENTITY

The contemporary reader's understanding of Margaret, the protagonist of *Affinity*, and her anguished relationship to her own desires for women is perhaps premised on a historical presumption that an identification as a lesbian is unavailable to her. The events depicted in *Affinity* are very precisely located in the period 1872–1874 by the dated entries in Margaret Prior's and Selina Dawes's private journals. Following Foucault, it can then be situated in a period before the advent of sexology and the proliferation of discourses through which homosexuality would be named; that is, as prior to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as the "shift in European thought from viewing same-sex sexuality as a matter of prohibited and isolated genitals *acts* ... to viewing it as a function of stable definitions of *identity*" (82–83). Indeed, the narrative is itself beset by the seeking of terms "out of the ordinary" by which same-sex desire might be described or might describe itself; as Margaret writes of prison warder Miss Haxby's struggle to describe what she terms Selina's "queer ... temper": "Still she seemed to grope for words: she might have been one of her own women, seeking a term out of the prison ordinary and being unable to find it. I knew, however, what she meant" (268). The representation of same-sex

desire in the context of the prison, and the question of what Margaret “knows” about the Millbank “pals,” is indicative of the complex relationship between the discursive construction of sexual identity and the historical experience of sexual desire.

The series of female communities depicted within *Affinity* are indicative of the way in which the gender ideology of the period constructs sexually segregated spaces and cultivates, albeit inadvertently, female homosocial bonds: the women’s prison at Millbank, Margaret’s family home at Cheyne Walk, and the residence of Selina’s patron, Mrs. Brink, at Sydenham all present hierarchal female communities of matrons and wards, mistresses and servants, and mothers and daughters. Within these spaces certain kinds of intimacy between women are mobilized and encouraged. As a lady visitor of a higher social class, Margaret is attributed a power of moral influence which requires her to court the confidence and trust of her subjects: “It is a matter of influence, of sympathies, of susceptibilities tamed” (12). Writing in *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England*, Lucia Zedner highlights the normative function which such a role was expected to serve:

If ... the purpose of visiting was as much based on class as on gender, the means by which Lady Visitors were to exert their influence was peculiarly feminine.... [It was] modelled on the devoted, emotionally charged relations common between upper-class Victorian women.... And wherever possible, they elicited close, if deferential, relations similar to those between a servant and her middle class mistress. (123)

Selina’s remark of Sydenham, that “we might just be a lot of nuns in a nunnery” (121), draws a parallel that suggests that a space without men is a space without sexuality; such a parallel is in keeping with Victorian constructions of female sexuality as being the effect of male heterosexual intervention but is confounded by the depiction of Millbank, Cheyne Walk, and Sydenham as spaces in which the homoerotic dimension of the homosocial is given expression. The desires enacted within the domestic spaces of Cheyne Walk and Sydenham remain invisible to the public world; Millbank is the only context to which Margaret has access in which female same-sex desire is given a degree of visibility. Terry Castle has expressed frustration with what she calls “the ‘no lesbians before 1900’ theory” for the way in which it seems to elide the historical reality and diversity of female same-sex desire (9). The representation of the Millbank pals in

Affinity testifies to the existence of same-sex desire prior to the advent of discourses which organize it as an identity. However, the problematic visibility of this desire is symptomatic of the way in which it is held hostage to available discourses of gender and sexuality; attachments between women—whether between inmates, warders, or visitors—become visible only to the extent that they are perceived as potentially subversive not only of the prison’s disciplinary regime but of a broader normative gender regime.² Within this context, desire between women is understood as an effect of criminal confinement: that is, as symptomatic of a deviant femininity and as a compensatory substitute for the heterosexual attachments which the homosocial world of the prison makes impossible. As Miss Craven reports: “This is a place for ‘palling up,’ as the creatures call it” (42). Palling up is assumed to be peculiar to the prison and to the equally peculiar condition of being without men. Borrowing from the language of homosocial companionship, palling up is perceived to improperly imitate heterosexual rituals of courtship: hence, Emma White and Jane Jarvis are “notorious in the gaol as a pair of ‘pals,’ and were ‘worse than any sweethearts’” (67). Palling up confers an identity which is relational and contingent: one can only be a pal if one has a pal. Within the solitary conditions of the prison, palling up as a sexual attachment is defined by the impossibility of its fulfillment; in some way, it acts as a trope for the impossibility of female same-sex desire. Within what Angela Y. Davis has described, in another context, as the “contained, coercive universe of the prison” (46), female same-sex desire is itself contained and coerced into formations which construct it as deviant.

Margaret’s knowledge of the Millbank pals—“I knew, however, what she meant” (268)—complicates any assumption that knowledge of same-sex desire is entirely unavailable to her; however, the nature of her knowledge is itself ambiguous. It seems that Margaret both knows and does not know what meaning the Millbank pals have for each other: “I have heard them talk of ‘pals’ before, and have used the word myself, but it disturbed me to find that the term had that particular meaning and I hadn’t known it” (67). The revelation of “that particular meaning” to Margaret posits her as having not known what it could mean while at the same time being able to recognize the “particular” nature of the meaning once it is disclosed. Margaret distances herself from White and Jarvis: “But the temper she was talking of, it is gross, it is commonplace, it is what Jane Jarvis has, or Emma White—it is not Selina’s, it is not mine” (268). She refuses to unwittingly “play ... the medium ... for Jarvis’ dark passion” by acting as a vehicle for the exchange of tokens of their relationship (67). However,

the subterfuges necessitated by covert invisibility are the very strategies which characterize Margaret's relationships with both Helen and Selina. Margaret receives tokens of affection from Helen, in the form of a lock of her hair which she wears in a locket given to her by her father, and from Selina, in the form of supernatural *apports*, which she reads as evidence of a preternaturally unmediated desire.³ Margaret finds Jane Jarvis "sly" and then "sullen" in her dissimulations but is herself cunning and secretive, feigning illness in order to view Selina's private effects and concealing her continuing visits to Millbank from her mother (65, 66). Margaret's conflictual relationship to her own knowledge—both of the desires of other women and of her own desires—is perhaps an effect of the contained and coercive context in which this knowledge is produced. Unwilling to recognize her own desires in those of the Millbank pals, Margaret also refuses the criminalizing connotations which are inescapably implicated in this formation of identity.

KISSES THAT DON'T COUNT: SPIRITUALISM AND SEXUALITY

"I am not willing this to happen, I am surrendering!" (316)

If Millbank is a coercive space within which desires between women are policed and punished, the "dark circles" of spiritualism depicted in *Affinity* can be seen as performative spaces within which the transgression of normative identities is both licensed and privileged. Materialized within these dark circles are the "spectres of discontinuity and incoherence" which Judith Butler suggests are both "prohibited and produced" by discourses that attempt to establish causal and expressive relations between "sex, gender, sexual practice and desire" (23). These "spectres" embody discontinuities *within* heterosexuality as much as departures from it: "heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody" and which produce a "persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence" (155). I will explore how the enactment of desires between women within the "dark circles" can be seen as expressive of same-sex desires but also as revealing the "spectres of discontinuity" to which Butler refers.

The complex and ambivalent relationship between Victorian spiritualism and gender norms is the subject of Alex Owen's classic study *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* in which she writes:

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Spiritualists may not have set out to challenge the dominant view of womanhood, but séance behaviour itself signified a transgression and transposition of normative femininity. For, whilst speaking directly to the feminine ideal, mediumship succeeded in effectively undermining it. What was implied in the structure of the séance was permission to infringe cultural imposed limits. (11)

Focusing on the role of the female spirit medium, Owen suggests that the passivity prescribed by late Victorian gender norms made her the perfect vehicle for communication with the spirit world. However, by virtue of her possession the female spirit medium's voice was paradoxically granted a powerful authority. Mediumship, Owen argues, allowed women the exercise of voice, empowered by authority and in public contexts, in ways otherwise unavailable to them: "Passivity, a vital element in the construction of femininity, became, in spiritualist hands, an invitation to power and subversion" (209). Writing of the way in which the séance not only licensed the transgression of gendered norms but also of sexual norms, Owen implies an imitative relationship between spirit possession and phallic heterosexuality:

Mediums surrendered and were then entered, seized, possessed by another. In this sense female mediumship was a re-enactment of prescriptive notions of the female sexual role. At the same time, however, the diverse sexualities expressed through the vehicle of possession countermanded all that was signified by the closed definition of orthodox femininity. (218)⁴

I wish to explore in more detail the ambiguities of sexual agency at work in the "dark circles" of spiritualism as represented in *Affinity*: that is, to explore how the supernatural imperatives of spiritualism at once perpetuate Victorian constructions of female sexuality and license their transgression.

The "dark circles" during which Selina's spirit control, Peter Quick, is materialized would seem on the surface to reiterate conventional gendered roles in their enactment of heterosexual rituals of desire. Selina's feminine integrity and spiritual credibility as a spirit medium is assured for her clients by her perceived lack of interest in the attentions of male members of her audience; as Mrs. Brink comments approvingly of Selina: "She had seen other young lady media who would have let men like that turn them into coquettes" (347). By contrast, the roguish masculinity of Peter

Quick—“always one for kissing ladies” (152)—is indulged and his competitive attitude to his masculine rivals tolerated even when it becomes combative: “The gentlemen he never cared for. She had known him pinch a gentleman, or pull his nose. She once saw him strike a gentleman upon the nose—so hard, the nose was bloodied” (152). Young female sitters are invited to a private audience with Peter Quick in a context where the practice of spirit possession licenses an abdication of agency on the part both of the medium and of the sitter. The bodily encounters which follow are then placed within the continuum of spiritualist practice rather than beyond the pale of sexual propriety: “now we had her between us and she began to shake” (262). It would seem that because these experiences are contained within the doctrine of spiritualism and its normalizing of non-normative experiences, these encounters are not experienced as sexual. To the extent that female sexual desire was thought to exist only in the context of reproductive sexuality and as an effect of masculine heterosexuality, these encounters perhaps *could* not be experienced by their subjects as sexual. The very discourses which construct female sexuality as passive and receptive, and in one sense deny women a language through which to articulate their desires, here permit women to experience transgressive encounters. In a sense, these encounters are not experienced *as* sexual to the extent that they are not experienced as compromising *by* the sitter. The dark circles stage a sexual encounter in which the female sitter’s gendered identity remains intact so long as it remains unknowing and passive: “Peter prefers the ladies.... They think that kisses from Peter Quick don’t count” (219). The contradictions inherent in the discursive construction of female heterosexuality allow for norms to be subverted even as they are perpetuated.

For the female sitters these scenes may be understood in a number of ways. I have suggested the ways in which these scenes can be understood as an expression of prohibited female sexuality, so long as that sexuality is assumed to have no agency and hence no object. As Janet Oppenheim has written: “without exaggerating the extent of sexual repression in Victorian society, one can surmise that the holding of hands and the caressing of spirit forms might have been stimulating not only to the sitters, but also to the young women whose emerging sexuality was denied natural means of expression” (21). However, these encounters can be understood as a licensed form of female *heterosexual* expression so long as the materialization is taken to be “real”; once Peter Quick’s “true” sex is known, the possibility emerges that these encounters may express a coded form of same-sex desire. The reader’s knowledge, whether incipient or retrospective, of

the identities of the participants may give rise to an understanding of these scenes not available to its actors but it also raises a further question as to the extent to which a knowledge of sex and gender produces a knowledge about desire and identity. The reader's deduction that Peter Quick is Ruth, Selina's maid, in masculine disguise, following from the revelation that Ruth and Vigers, Margaret's maid, are one and the same person and that Ruth and Selina are accomplices, is the most logical explanation by which to account for an otherwise supernatural phenomena: hence the reader becomes party to the realization that all of the participants in the private dark circles are female. However, to translate the sex of the actors in these scenes into a "truth" about their desires or identity would be to obscure the significant ambiguity of agency and object which these scenes enact. The disguise adopted by Ruth may be interpreted as a means through which she can gain access to other women's bodies; such a reading would posit her transgendered imposture as simultaneously concealing her identity and as expressing her hidden desires. However, such a reading risks perpetuating a construction of female same-sex desire as imitative of masculine heterosexuality. Ruth is placed in a position determined by the heterosexual matrix in which her desire is constructed as masculine because it is for a woman: that is, "a matrix that accounts for all desire for women by subjects of whatever sex or gender as originating in a masculine, heterosexual position" (Butler 68). Ruth is retrospectively constructed as the only knowing agent in these scenes; however, the extent to which her desires can be identified unproblematically with the sex of their objects any more than any nominally heterosexual character's desires is open to question. The masquerade of heterosexuality staged by the dark circles is not a mask beneath which is concealed a "true" sexuality, whether same-sex or heterosexual; rather it foregrounds the performative nature of sexual identity, the mobility of desire, and the instability of its objects.

Moreover, the revelation of Ruth's role in the plot is also a revelation of the complex implication of narratives of class in narratives of sexuality. The novel concludes with an entry in Selina's journal, dated to the evening prior to the fateful sitting at Sydenham, which delivers a dramatic revelation: "Ruth is lying on my bed with her shoes kicked off. She is smoking one of Peter's cigarettes" (351).⁵ This entry confirms a complicity between Ruth and Selina; the impropriety suggested by Ruth's behavior has as much to do with class (a maid's appropriation of the lady's mode of leisure) as with gender (a woman's appropriation of masculine prerogatives). These transgressions are compounded in Ruth's power over Selina: "'Remember,' Ruth is saying, 'whose girl you are'" (351). The possession implied in this

claim is both gendered *and economic* as far as its feminized object, Selina, is concerned; the extent to which this possession is sexual remains, like much else in the novel, ambiguous. Margaret's middle-class narrative of anguished subjectivity is then revealed to have unwittingly contained a narrative of working class agency. In a novel in which motifs of the ghostly and of haunting are prominent, the domestic servant is exposed as the true ghost in the house, her class invisibility making possible the exercise of transgressive power; as Selina remarks of Ruth: "she come[s] quietly ... like a real lady's maid, like a ghost" (119).⁶ Ruth's stated motivation is economic; as such, there is perhaps no more reason to assume that her sexual practices are necessarily expressive of her desires than with any other woman engaged in a form of sex work. The sexed identity of the object of Ruth's desires may coincide with that of her female sitters, but to assume henceforth that her actions are entirely motivated by sexual desire might be to posit sexuality as an originating cause in such a way as to obscure other axes of power and agency.

THE "QUEER CAREER" OF THE PAST IN NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION

As a neo-Victorian historical fiction, *Affinity* demonstrates a fidelity to the past which nevertheless foregrounds the mediated relationship to history which all historical fiction must have. On the one hand, *Affinity* is a historically grounded and plausible reconstruction of marginalized women's histories: the spinster, the spirit medium, the working-class servant. On the other hand, it is characterized by a fidelity to the sensibilities of late-nineteenth-century literary conventions, specifically those of the sensation novel. The past is then experienced both through the framework of revisionary feminist historiography and through the past's own conventions of representation; the novel's attempt to reconstruct a "lost" past is qualified by a consciousness of the ways in which the meanings of the past change with every attempt to "return" to it. I want to conclude by suggesting that these complex temporalities of knowledge are exemplified in the use of the term "queer" throughout *Affinity*.

The term queer is employed extensively and in keeping with late-nineteenth-century usage to denote the odd, the peculiar, and the strange, ranging from the quaint to the devilish. It is used both of Millbank prison and of spiritualism to evoke a sense of unfamiliar and unaccountable impressions. Hence, the "queerly segmented" walls and "queer geometry" of Millbank (19, 235), the "queer and impressive sight" of prisoners, the "queer sounds" heard from Selina's cell (13, 43), and the "queer reminders" and "queer verses" which linger in Margaret's mind (70, 71). The subjects

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of the books held in the British National Association of Spiritualists reading room are “queer” as are the “fact[s] or article[s] of knowledge” relating to Selina which Margaret gathers (126, 150); the wax molds of materialized spirits are “a little queer” as is the “perfume” which Ruth claims to smell after the materialization of Mrs. Brink’s dead mother (131, 173). Peter Quick’s materialization is declared “the queerest, quaintest sight you ever saw” (151). Selina’s “queer career” takes her through the spectrum of queer’s meanings, from the peculiarity of spiritualism to the criminality of Millbank (162).

In one particularly striking usage, queer is used as a noun to denote the counterfeit coins which constitute an alternative currency within the thieves economy: as Agnes Nash exclaims to Margaret: “did you think all our queer [sic] goes into *your* purse?” (107). Quite apart from the sexual connotations of the purse, the notion of a queer currency captures the way in which the meaning of the word has changed according to the context of its exchange and the channels of its circulation. While the modern usage of queer is not anachronistically evoked in *Affinity*, the reader cannot help but be aware of its “queer career”: that is, its emergence as a form of homophobic insinuation or abuse and its late-twentieth-century appropriation as affirmative and subversive. In the late-nineteenth-century setting of *Affinity*, queer resides within a continuum of normality; it denotes experiences, impressions, or perceptions which strike a note of incongruity or troubled comprehension, but which implicitly retain the potential to be recouped. However, given the reader’s knowledge both of the discursive history of queer and of the discursive construction of homosexuality of which it is a symptom, it is perhaps inevitable that in certain conjunctions the term will seem to speak in an untimely fashion to the contemporary reader. When Mrs. Brink exclaims of the events which lead to Selina’s prosecution, “Queer? I should say it is criminal!” (3), the relation between the queer and the criminal is in danger of becoming one of equivalence rather than distinction. Mark Llewellyn’s 2004 article takes this quote as its title and as the basis for asserting that Margaret’s “attachment” to Selina “go[es] far beyond the usual” (203). He argues that Waters “deliberately uses spiritualism throughout the novel as a metaphorical cover for the underworld of lesbian sexuality, punning on the more modern meaning of the word ‘queer’” (210), referring to “the lovers Selina and Ruth . . . enact[ing] their fantasies” and to Margaret using her role as prison visitor as “an outlet for her lesbian desire” (210). Integral to contemporary appropriations of the word queer is a critique of fixed categories of sexual identity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, as a means of policing and containing iden-

tity and desire. While Waters is no more unknowing about the “modern usages” of the word queer than her readers, to read queer as simply denoting lesbian would be to evacuate it of its most radical meanings. More interestingly, the recurrence of queer moments in *Affinity* have the effect of evoking meanings prior to and subversive of its derogatory meaning; it is placed simultaneously within the late-nineteenth-century continuum of the peculiar and within a late-twentieth-century continuum of desire, both pre- and postdating its abusive appropriation. Rather than reiterating the well-documented historical criminalizing of homosexuality, I have focused on the ways in which the “queer” desires enacted in the “dark circles” of spiritualism reveal the incoherence of normative (hetero)sexuality.

The “perpetual debt to the past” created by generational thinking, according to Judith Roof, constructs the present as the inevitable outcome of the past (71). However, I would suggest that a non-generational historiography confounds an understanding of the past as reproducing the conditions of the present. A reading of *Affinity* informed by the linear, causal logic of retrospective knowledge would be compelled to discover an origin as the cause of its narrative intrigue; indeed, the dramatic revelation of Ruth’s “true” identity at the climax of the narrative seems to offer the narrative key to the plot of *Affinity*. However, the “truth” about Ruth disclosed in the final scenes conflates and confounds different kinds of knowledge about identity: sexual, gendered, class, and economic. The novel withholds a singular “truth” about identity just as its narrative conventions promise to disclose it; more specifically, the possibility of a single and determining *sexual* origin capable of resolving the question of identity is denied. It is tempting for the reader of *Affinity* to assume that she is in possession of a knowledge about its protagonists which they themselves, as historical subjects, are unable to access; that is, a knowledge of the sexual identity by which their desires will, as Terry puts it, “come to be called” (55). Resisting the temptations of retrospective knowledge, I have attempted instead to foreground the “complex discursive and textual operation at play” in the novel which vividly suggests the contradictions and incoherences out of which modern sexual identities have been called (55). If the “reproductive familial narrative” of generation serves to legitimize prescribed histories of gender and sexuality, *Affinity* testifies to the diverse histories, identities, and sexualities which are the *illegitimate* legacies of the generative powers of the past (Roof 71).

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NOTES

¹ Terry draws on Foucault's "effective history" which is characterized by a "strategic awareness of points of emergence or "possibilities" existing at particular historical moments in the formation of particular discourses. It traces the conditions whereby the marginal subjects apprehend possibilities for expression and self-representation in a field of contest.... It is *not* an alternative narrative with its own glorious tumescence peopled by previously elided but now recuperated Others. Effective history exposes both the events and actors elided by traditional history, but instead lays bare the *processes* and *operations* by which these elisions occurred" (56).

² For a discussion of the relationship between femininity, criminality and the homosocial in the late-nineteenth-century sensation novel, see Hart.

³ An apport is defined as "an object materialised from the invisible part of reality." See SurvivalAfterDeath.org, <http://www.survivalafterdeath.org/glossary.htm>. (Accessed August 5, 2006.)

⁴ See also Tromp and McGarry.

⁵ The name of Ruth's spirit world alter ego is an uncanny echo of Peter Quint, who's ghostly and hatless manifestations in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) signify sexual and class transgression.

⁶ Eve M. Lynch discusses the parallels between the figure of the ghost and the servant: "Like the ghost, the servant was in the home but not of it, occupying a position tied to the workings of the house itself" (67).

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