Useful Soup for Benevolent Purposes: the Politics of Domestic Economy

At first glance, the manuals of domestic economy which began to be published in great numbers from the early nineteenth century onwards do not appear to offer much insight into the political culture of middle-class women in Britain and America. Indeed, the proliferation of these texts on household management had often been utilised by historians to demonstrate the dominance of domesticity in middle-class culture. Recipes from China Chilo to Scotch Rumbletethumps may not at first sight seem promising sources for analysing female political participation. However, such readings often take these manuals out of their political context and by using them largely as descriptive texts give a distorted picture both of the aspirations of the authors, and of their reception by their predominantly female readership. It is possible to provide a more politicised interpretation of these domestic economy books by locating in them as evidence of the emergence of a 'bourgeois' subject. Along with the rise of the 'domestic' novel, these works are evidence of female authority and political power in both the public and private spheres. They demonstrate how far political concerns had penetrated the household, the endorsement of women's education, the promotion of national and class identities, and the treatment of servants and the poor. Mrs Beeton's recipe, 'Useful Soup for Benevolent Purposes' gives a hint to the rich material contained within the pages of the domestic economy books.

The term *economy* originally referred to the practice of household management encompassing its financial, moral and personal aspects. It was only in the eighteenth century that the term was linked with the political, and thus the discipline of political economy was promoted as the science of managing the financial and human resources of a nation. As a consequence, the science of domestic economy was established to distinguish the techniques of household management from strategies to direct the nation's economic wellbeing. Therefore, many of the early nineteenth-century handbooks consciously employed the term 'domestic economy' in their titles, and their content

encompassed the whole range of household activities from medical care to animal husbandry. By locating the texts in this emergent science of domestic or household economy their authors sought to establish a genre specifically for the newly developing households of the industrial age. The rise of domestic advice books accompanied the emergence of the middle-class household as a result of both social and geographical mobility. Such rapid advances often meant that the woman at the centre of the household was estranged from traditional sources of help and advice, and the genre of domestic economy manuals served to provide the information and assistance which once may have been proffered by family or experienced housekeepers. Advice manuals were largely targeted at the middle-class woman, although an important sub-category were instruction books for the working class, and these were supported by an extensive range of weekly and monthly periodicals offering guidance for women on everything from fashion to childcare.

One indication of the connections between domestic economy and the public sphere may be found in an analysis of the lives of the authors themselves. None lived up to the model of the 'domestic woman' which many have assumed their texts were promoting. A closer reading of their work reveals a number of different, often conflicting, views of femininity with more associations to female agency than have hitherto been acknowledged. The writers were thus subverting the ideology of domesticity and furthering the discipline they termed 'domestic economy' as a means of advancing women's contributions to current political debates. Eliza Acton and Frances Parkes both established schools primarily as a means of supporting themselves and their families financially. However, their philosophy of education provided an alternative medium for the promotion of their political and ideological beliefs. Eliza Acton founded her boarding school at Claydon, near Ipswich at the age of seventeen. The school offered 'a course of education combining elegance and utility with economy'. Frances Parkes (née Byerley) opened a school with her sister Maria in Warwick in 1810. Frances and Maria were from a family of thirteen and the school provided the family's main means of support after the

death of their father in 1810. The school which moved to Barford in 1817 quickly established a high reputation and the sisters educated the relatives of a number of leading Unitarians including Julia Leigh Smith and Elizabeth Stevenson (later Gaskell).

Christian Isobel Johnstone, Isabella Beeton and Lydia Child earned their living as journalists and writers. All worked alongside their husbands: Johnstone as co-editor of the *Inverness Courier* and eventually from 1834 to 1846 as sole editor of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*; Isabella Beeton as a journalist and co-editor of the *English Domestic Magazine* almost continually from her marriage in 1856 until her early death in 1865; and Child on the *Massachssetts Journal*. The domestic articles that they wrote and edited formed the basis for their manuals of household economy. Johnstone was the only woman to edit a mainstream Victorian periodical before the 1860s, and her radical politics and literary expertise made *Tait's* an important rival for the Tory *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. She embraced radical politics, using economic arguments to press for the abolition of slavery. Her novel *Clan-Albin* focused on the economic and political justifications for and against the Highland clearances, ultimately arguing that repopulation rather than forced emigration was more beneficial for the British Empire's economic well-being. Johnstone also wrote didactic tales for children emphasising subjects such as rational reading, charity and benevolence, utility, and the philosophy of daily life. Child wrote the *Frugal Housewife* based on her column 'Hints for Persons of Moderate Fortune' in a period when she was living apart from her husband and supporting herself by her writing. She also wrote on anti-slavery and the rights of native people.

Esther Copley also made a living from her writing. She was a productive author publishing over forty books on a wide range of subjects during her lifetime. These ranged from practical manuals such as *Cottage Comforts* and its middle-class equivalent *The Housekeeper's Guide,* to works on health, tales for children, religious tracts, magazine articles, history books, and biographies. The vast majority of these were

aimed at imparting a sound knowledge of household economy to the working class. However, Copley's prolific output encompassed a number of other texts which contained pointed remarks on issues of political or social importance. One example is a tract she wrote in 1817 entitled 'The Radical Reformists'. She offered it to one publisher, but 'it was rejected with scorn and laid aside as useless.' Following the Peterloo Massacre, Esther shrewdly re-packaged the text to make it fit with the issues surrounding the Manchester disturbances and offered it to her main publisher, Simpkin and Marshall, 'at their risk, but to give me half the profits'. Copley was an astute businesswoman with a clear understanding of her market as well as an accomplished author. She negotiated directly with her publishers and would take her writing elsewhere if she did not think she was getting a good deal. For example, in 1820 she sold the entire copyright of her tract *The Contrast,* to the publisher, Nisbet, for £7 7s but noted, 'I had offered Nisbet 'The Races and Persecution' and had some books on the strength of it - but when we came to settle Nisbet would only offer 10 pounds for the two – which I thought too little – I therefore took them to S[impkin] & M[arshall] and got £16 16s.' Copley's most important work aimed at children was the 634 page *History of Slavery and its Abolition*, published by the Sunday School Union in 1836. The account gave a comprehensive and meticulous account of the history of slavery in the world from biblical times to the early nineteenth century and provided a detailed record of the British anti-slavery movement.

The female writers of domestic economy texts often came from difficult home or family backgrounds: Christian Isobel Johnstone had divorced and then remarried; Maria Rundell was widowed; Esther Copley was widowed, remarried and then separated, as well as being a dissenter married to Anglican churchman; Lydia Child had a period of separation from her husband and lived in poverty; Frances Parkes was married to a bankrupt. They used their experiences not merely to promote best practice in household management but also to disseminate ideas of domestic economy, utility, science, a rational approach to the control of the household, and an engagement with the important contemporary social, economic and political debates.

The relationship between the writers of these manuals on domestic economy and their readers was close and complex. The recipes, hints and tips were often not the original work of the authors but compiled from earlier books and periodicals or collected from a range of correspondents. Many were drawn from and formed part of the community they served. The contribution of the authors was to experiment with the recipes contained in their manuals and to attest to their efficacy. This tradition of the sharing and exchange of recipes and domestic advice has been noted by literary scholars who comment that the recipe needs to be seen as embedded within a particular milieu. It is apparent that the authors of these early manuals were drawing upon the long tradition of cookery writing both from within Britain and abroad. But they were re-inventing the recipes and domestic advice for a new audience and it was important that this new genre of domestic economy was acknowledged as written by and for women. In particular they reached out to a new generation of women, especially young wives lacking the instruction and advice they would have once received from their close kin. Frances Parkes drew on her own experience and in the preface to *Domestic Duties* addressed readers who were once in the same position as herself:

> A young housekeeper, inexperienced and uninformed. The queries are such as she would have put, at the period, could she have met with one willing to have listened to them, and capable and inclined to solve her difficulties.

Maria Rundell professed similar sentiments, claiming modestly in the advertisement, 'This little work would have been a treasure to herself [the author] when she first set out in life, and she therefore hopes it may prove useful to others.' The readers themselves also treated the domestic advice books differently from other texts. They are primarily practical manuals, often heavily annotated by generations of owners with the addition of both printed and manuscript recipes and pieces of advice interleaved with the pages or stuck into the front or end of the book. The extant library copies frequently bear

evidence of these annotations and revisions. These early nineteenth-century domestic economy books in their writing and in their reading may be seen as contributing to the construction of middle-class women's identity at a particular significant cultural moment: the emergence of the middle-class housewife and her interconnections with the political and industrial world in which she was located. They should not be seen as static entities; they were constantly changing and being adapted by and for the needs of their readers. As such the texts represent a bridge between the private homes of their middle-class female readers and the public world projected by the authors.

The tension between the private and public spheres is a constant thread running through many of these works. Isabella Beeton's opening address to the mistress of the household immediately demonstrates this conflict. She used a particularly dramatic opening comparison, equating the female householder with the commander of an army. It would be difficult to imagine a more masculine public office that could be employed. However, she instantly countered this image by quoting from Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, 'The modest virgin, the prudent wife, and the careful matron, are much more serviceable in life than petticoated philosophers, blustering heroines, or virago queens.' A more overtly feminist approach was taken by Frances Parkes in *Domestic Duties.* In her preface, Parkes outlined her view of partnership in marriage:

> It is not the desire, nor the intention of the author, to maintain unmodified the doctrine of passive obedience in the married female to the will of her husband. Such a doctrine may be regarded as incompatible with that spirit which woman assumes as her right…

Domestic Duties maintained its strong emphasis on women's rights throughout its four parts. Parkes presents her advice on domestic management using the technique of a conversation between a newly married woman, Mrs. L., and an older mentor, Mrs. B. The topics discussed are wide-ranging, incorporating comments on social relationships (with

subsections on gossip, scandal and flattery); household concerns; the regulation of time; and moral and religious duties. Parkes accepted the central role of women in the household but she also stressed the importance of women's influence in the wider society. She carefully negotiated the boundaries between women's public and private role. Each was given an equivalent status and Parkes gently, but steadfastly, challenged and subverted existing discourses on the domestic ideal.

Concerns with class, as well as with gender, ethnicity, and nationhood, were threaded through the pages of the domestic economy manuals. This was apparent in their preoccupation with providing guidance on the welfare and management of the poor. According to Child 'True economy is a careful treasurer in the service of benevolence'. Most supplemented practical advice with 'appropriate' recipes that were nutritious yet cheap. Usually the chapters on the poor were combined with other topics, in particular the treatment of servants and the care of the sick. The advice and recipes for these categories were kept separate from the general guidelines on supervising the household. The poor and the sick were viewed as specialist topics. On the whole the attitude to the poor presented in these texts hovered between pity for their poverty-stricken state and fear of their immorality, disease, and squalor. A quote from *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* provides an apt summary of these two attitudes:

> We turn to the foetor and darkness that, in some obscure court, attend the robust brood who, coated in dirt, and with mud and refuse for playthings, live and thrive, and grow into manhood, and, in contrast to the pale face and flabby flesh of the aristocratic child exhibit strength, vigour, and well-developed frames…

Beeton expressed surprise at the apparent health and vitality of the child brought up in the filth and dirt of the urban slums in comparison with the pallor of the aristocratic infant raised in luxury. As we have seen with other aspects of these texts, the authors were keen to demonstrate that their stance on the poor was based on sound intellectual

principles rather than using anecdotes or emotions to govern their viewpoints. In particular, they employed the science of political economy to inform their approach. There was an awareness that indiscriminate charity could not be justified in a climate where an ideology of self help and non-intervention were dominant. The clearest explanation of the conflict between the benevolent activities of many middle-class voluntary activists and the ideology of political economy was expressed by Frances Parkes in the dialogue between Mrs L. and Mrs B.:

> Mrs L.: Political economists censure the charity of English women, as having tended, with many other circumstances, to destroy a laudable spirit of independence among the lower orders of the community, who now claim relief and assistance from the benevolent, rather as a right than as a gratuity.
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> Mrs B.: Much may be said on that subject, but you and I are not reformists, but can only seek to direct our own conduct skilfully, and to adapt it to existing circumstances. Women may have erred and may still err as political economists: but who would wish them to subdue, with the cold arguments of the statesman some of the best feelings with which their hearts can be animated?...
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> To the arguments of political economists however, some attention should be paid by the female world… Benevolence, therefore, and charity misapplied, may cause the downfall of a state as readily as luxury or any other vice.

There was thus an awareness that philanthropic activities needed to be directed by sound economic principles. However, these women practitioners assumed an authority informed by their experience of managing poverty at the grass roots level. Parkes also directly connected female benevolence with the affairs of the state. The authors of these texts almost invariably approached the subject of the poor with an air of superiority. Mrs Beeton, unashamedly plagiarising Frances Parkes, asserted:

> Visiting the houses of the poor is the only practical way really to understand the actual state of each family… Great advantages may result from visits paid to the poor, for there being, unfortunately, much ignorance, generally, amongst them with respect to all household knowledge, there will be opportunities for advising and instructing them, in a pleasant and unobtrusive manner, in cleanliness, industry, cookery, and good management.

Visiting the poor, then, was considered an opportunity for the middle-class advisor as much as a source of succour for the working-class housekeeper. It was also an occasion to inculcate principles of domestic economy and best practice in household management more widely in the community. In line with the dominant ideology of these texts, great attention was paid to assisting the poor using economical methods. The authors advocated devoting part of the household income for charitable purposes. This should not be paid directly to the poor but used to provide food or clothing for those in need. Maria Rundell, for example, in her chapter entitled 'Recipes for the Sick, and for the Poor' proffered 'a few hints to enable every family to assist the poor of their neighbourhood at a very trivial expence.' Invariably, the recipes for the poor centred on cheap soups, broths, or gruel including Rundell's 'Baked Soup', Johnstone's 'Scotch Nettle-Kail' and 'Welsh Leek-Porridge', and Mrs Beeton's 'Useful Soup for Benevolent Purposes'. Beeton estimated the cost of her 'Useful Soup', which was based on an ox-cheek, a few cheap trimmings of beef, some bones, and vegetables, to be around 1½d per quart. She related that in the winter of 1858 she regularly made eight or nine gallons of soup for distribution to the poor, claiming that 'she has reason to believe that it was very much liked'. Maria Rundell also emphasised the economical nature of her recipe for 'Baked Soup': 'I found in time of scarcity ten or fifteen gallons of soup could be dealt out weekly, at an expence not worth mentioning.' She also advised that 'the fat should not be taken off the broth or soup, as the poor like it and are nourished by it.' In fact there is little evidence that the poor welcomed either the soup or the inference that

they were ignorant in the 'cooking art.' It was left to the lone voice of Christian Isobel Johnstone to poke fun at this self-righteous approach via the character of Dr. Redgill who 'made a long oration on the value of pork liquor for soup to the poor; charitable soup, *economical* soup, dealt out in copious libations to old women as often as very salt, and very fat pork was boiled in the Doctor's kitchen.'

Relatively few women had access to, or engaged directly with, the major works of political economy. Yet the popular domestic economy manuals discussed in this chapter graced the shelves of most middle-class kitchens and parlours as the circulation figures and frequent re-editions demonstrate. Many were found in the cottages and dwellings of the working class, and numerous girls encountered them in their schoolrooms as part of the compulsory curriculum. Interwoven with the recipes, advice, and tips on household management were discussions and debates on key public policy matters of the day: the role of the state; the treatment of the poor; the care of the sick and elderly. Much of the discussion was fully referenced, drawing on classic political and economic texts, and alluded to issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and nationhood.

Thus, an assessment of the apparently unpromising territory of domestic economy books, in fact reveals the home to be a formative site of middle-class female political action. There were direct connections between the home and pressure groups such as the anti-slavery movement or the anti-Corn Law campaign which encouraged politically-inspired consumption patterns. However, it is in the variety of indirect links where the rich texture of nineteenth-century political culture may be fully explored.