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“WE ARE NO PREACHER”:
MARGARET OLIPHANT’S TEXTUAL AUTHORITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine four of Margaret Oliphant's novels, her supernatural fiction, and her literary reviews, revealing how she relies on her knowledge of the cultural sign system, domesticity, and women's value to show how women may successfully navigate middle-class Victorian society. She accomplishes this by identifying the places where women's strengths lie: the boundaries between work and family, between the spiritual and material, amid the everyday details that she herself realizes reveal the workings of society. She sets herself up as a voice of authority within the system itself, not as a distant, all-knowing sage but as someone who shares the tensions that women in the Victorian period experienced while searching for meaningful occupation and serving as the heart of a household, and ultimately reveals that women are able to exert control over themselves in previously unacknowledged ways.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Oliphant is an enigma. A very prolific author who wrote in a variety of genres on a plethora of topics, she is seldom read today. Despite the recent reappearance of several of Oliphant's texts¹, she is not acknowledged as part of the Victorian canon, and in her own day never reached the highest ranks of the literary elite. This perceived failure on her part particularly rankled Oliphant, who judged herself just as worthy of the critical attention that more popular authors received. Laurie Langbauer suggests that context is behind Oliphant's minor reputation: "considered against the supposed certainties of the Victorian world view and the stated requirements for tightly knit endings of the Victorian three-volume novel, her own narrative experiments in inconclusiveness have been overlooked or misunderstood" (62). What also may have kept Oliphant from success was the method she used to establish authority in her texts: her mastery of the middle-class system. In the following chapters, I show Oliphant relying on her knowledge of the rules of middle-class social behavior, domesticity, and women's value in both the public and private spheres in order to redefine women's place in Victorian society. She does this by identifying the places where women's strengths lie: in the relationship between work and family, between the spiritual and material worlds, amid the everyday details that she herself realizes reveal the workings of the middle class. She sets herself up as a voice of authority within the system itself, not as a distant, all-knowing sage but as someone who experiences the tensions that women in the

¹ More specifically, the 2001 appearance the *Kirsteen* e-text on the "Celebration of Women Writers" website, Elizabeth Langland's 2002 edition of *Phoebe Jr.*, and the Oxford UP publication of *Hester* in 2003.

Victorian period felt while searching for meaningful occupation and serving as the heart of a household. In doing so, Oliphant ultimately reveals the ways in which women can control their own lives.

Traditionally, Victorian sages, such as Ruskin, Carlyle, Arnold, Disraeli, and Eliot, have been said to, “express notions about the world, man’s [sic] situation in it, and how he should live” (Holloway 1), something that, in general, Oliphant’s novels, supernatural fiction, and literature reviews do. As Elizabeth Jay notes, however, “Carlyle’s ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’ defined the Victorian ideal of the writer as prophet, priest, or sage as exclusively male” (244). Additionally, Carol T. Christ talks of sage-writing as a locus of masculine heroism, in that the writing itself was gendered masculine. She points to the distinction drawn between “lady novelists” and “men of letters.” Although Carlyle himself praised some of Oliphant’s work² as being a venture into “real literature,” it was not enough to raise Oliphant to the status of the “male heroes of literature” (Jay 245) or to the rank of sage. The sage normally writes from a position outside of society, and he or she is able to see the error of society’s actions because of this distance. The “style, tone, and general presentation of the sage derive from the fact that his voice resides at the periphery” rather than at the center of society (Landow 23). Often, sage writing is critical of current views for having abandoned traditional orthodoxy. As part of their detachment, sages frequently put themselves in direct opposition to the audience, almost in the mode of an outright attack. Though she is frequently critical of society, Oliphant does not distance herself from it or place herself outside of it. Oliphant instead examines middle-class ideology from the inside out.

² Specifically, Oliphant’s biography of Edward Irving

Oliphant establishes her authority in her texts through her identification of the power inherent in women's position in society. Her presentation of women's domestic, spiritual, and professional roles reveals how they cross boundaries normally thought of as strictly defined. Oliphant's writing can help us to see not just how she establishes her influence, but where the authority of Victorian women in general is located in her ideological vision. Oliphant shows women where they are powerful—she does not “create” strengths for women, but she does show them ways that they have control over their own lives, places of power that many women may not realize exist. Oliphant's own experiences color her presentation of women's position in the middle class, and her use of personal examples emphasizes that she, too, is searching for agency in a system that by nature denies women self-actualization. Her intimate knowledge of the system allows her, in a way, to use it against itself: Oliphant frequently finds perceived weaknesses of women and shows how they are in fact strengths. Women's connection to the spiritual, frequently viewed as proof of their inability to be logical, is what allows them to connect the spheres of this world and the next, the material and the invisible world of the spirit. The everyday tasks of the domestic realm become a place of hidden power in plain view, knowledge of which grants women mastery not just over the household but over the entire society. In her position, working both inside and outside the home, Oliphant is given insights into the forces that govern other women's lives.

Oliphant's high degree of class consciousness—an ability to identify the strictures of class, what determines them, and how they affect perceptions of women—controls how she envisions her middle-class reading audience and what kind of material she feels is most appropriate for them to consume. In criticizing the kind of literature preferred by

the “masses” of readers, Oliphant notes that this “lowest” form of literature does not contain many works by women, or “fiction feminine... which fills with mild domestic volumes the middle class of this species of literature. The lowest range, like the highest range, admits no women” (“Byways of Literature” 206). Oliphant also points out how the lower classes who read the lower class of literature do not want to see themselves or the middle class represented—they are only satisfied reading about the upper class, “the wealth of the Rothschilds and the blood of the Howards” (“Byways of Literature” 209), something that does not apply to the middle class of readers, according to Oliphant. She also reveals the potential danger of reading outside one’s class, because when doing so, “we read without fear for our character, finding nothing to alarm our conscience” (“Byways of Literature” 212). She even debates the point of teaching people to read, if only to expose them to “a literature which exaggerates all their worst tendencies and accustoms their minds to nothing but evil” (“New Books” 167). All of these comments show how aware she was of what kind of material was appropriate for middle-class readers and how vocal she could be in describing it. In another review, she states that she is relieved to think that the majority of the audience for the sensation novels, novels that she disapproves of, are “people, happily, too foolish to be really injured by any rubbish they may read” (“Novels” 280). Oliphant appears to believe that the classes should use literature in order to examine themselves critically, and this belief is reflected in her texts. This may be another reason why her works were not as well-received as those of other authors. Oliphant wants her readers to perform a difficult task—to look at themselves and the society in which they live, not with an idealistic lens obscuring their vision, but in a very real, personal way.

Oliphant's grasp of her own influence over society is also clear. She herself notes a change in literature and spells out that this change was "brought into being by society, and it naturally reacts upon society" ("Novels" 258). She especially objects to works that contain "descriptions of society which show the writer's ignorance of society" and claims that these works are "not literature at all" ("Novels" 261). Her texts all seem to contain references to her own personal view of the workings of society. Jay mentions, for example, how in her books on European cultural history (*The Makers of Florence*, *The Makers of Venice*, *The Makers of Modern Rome*) Oliphant "found a way of venturing to comment upon the prevailing Victorian ideologies in her own voice, rather than resorting to the male mouthpiece of her periodical articles" (Jay 255). Jay also claims that Oliphant's command of French language and culture allowed her a "cosmopolitan" view. This ability to adopt a broad outlook and apply it to her specific field of interest—women of the middle class—gives her an authority that she would not have had otherwise. "Although she did not essay the large-scale socio-political comparisons of such Victorian sages as Carlyle or Arnold, she was able to employ this new-found knowledge to open up new areas in her domestic fiction" (255).

Oliphant's grasp of middle-class norms is crucial to her being able to apply these norms in a text and to show the fallacies behind them. Though Oliphant may support the middle-class system as a whole, she questions women's relationship to and position within this system, finding ways to expose women's control over both themselves and others. Oliphant reveals that women's connection to domesticity can be a way to exert power in a system that may seem prohibitive of such power. Something that becomes apparent when we examine a variety of Oliphant's works is how regularly she relies on

her knowledge of domesticity. Part of this command of domestic language is her ability to identify and use cultural signs in her texts, those rules of behavior that govern middle-class social interactions. Elizabeth Langland connects this control over cultural “currency” to the control of representations of the middle-class. According to Langland, women in the domestic sphere were not powerless—they defined the class status of the household, in addition to putting the wealth of the household to its best use. Langland quotes the *Guide to English Etiquette* (1844), explaining how the wife was as important in her sphere as her husband was in his. The woman not only controlled cultural capital, she was in charge of the management of the husband’s material wealth in the operation of the household. According to Langland, the assumption of the separation of public and private spheres conceals the connection that already exists between them on this level of “class management” (71). Oliphant is well aware of this location of power for women. Not only does Oliphant create female characters who display the ability to “manipulate” cultural currency, like Lucilla Marjoribanks and Phoebe Beecham, she herself takes part in the exchange through her writing. Oliphant values women for their connection to the domestic realm, and reveals the ways that this connection empowers them even outside of that sphere. Oliphant herself exercises this kind of power: by using the domestic as the locus of her authority as a writer, she raises its value even further. In her novels, control over the household often equates to control over the community, the nation, even the world of “Unseen” forces that exists separately from this world.

Overall, Oliphant finds women’s position in the connections between spheres previously conceived of as separate. We can see these connections in the figure of Oliphant herself: a wife and mother who must work outside the home to support her

family, but who admits to enjoying aspects of both roles; a woman who is in touch with her own spiritual side but who is also firmly grounded in the everyday of this world; and finally, an author who believes in the value of her own work, even when her artistic production does not receive the praise she thinks it deserves. Though Oliphant has said of herself, “I have never, I am glad to say, been a student of ‘human nature,’ or any such odious thing” (*Autobiography* 98) and that she considered herself to be an “unobservant” kind of person, I don’t believe that this is the case. She is a shrewd observer of the workings of the middle class, especially when it comes to women’s position in it. Despite her feeling that she is “no preacher to call English ladies to account” (“Novels” 275), she provides her readers with her own understanding of what is and is not expected of women in the middle-class value system, and is able to do so based on her own experience in this system.

Although the running of a household is not usually considered a profession in the Victorian period, part of Oliphant’s discussion of domesticity grants it this kind of importance³. If the home is the workplace, then the work itself would be maintaining the class status of the household through acceptable practices. Oliphant’s conception of work for women is more complicated than that, however. In her novels, she presents women doing work outside of the home as well as inside the home, successfully earning a living as she herself did. Oliphant presents the connection between home and profession as a series of conflicts, but ultimately establishes that work, at least for women, is inseparable from home and family, even when women work in the public sphere. In her reviews, she raises the point that unmarried women are able to support themselves in only four

³ See Monica Cohen, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel : Women, Work, and Home*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

occupations, namely teaching, needlework, domestic service, and novel-writing. To add a few “men’s” occupations to this list, like watch-making or bookkeeping, would be “inadequate” and “short-sighted” (“The Condition Of Women” 146), because to do so would be to “give” supposed “men’s” professions to women, while still maintaining the separation between women’s work and men’s work. Oliphant herself does not seem interested in calling for a revolution in Victorian society’s conception of professions or the public and private spheres. She is, however, concerned with pointing out the inequities that are present in the current system.

One of the biases that Oliphant is particularly interested in involves marital expectations. Oliphant supports women’s rights on the basis of marriage being a uniting of the man and wife—the husband becomes the wife as surely as the wife becomes the husband. A wife is “an official person, as much as her husband—one who has voluntarily accepted certain duties and a positive position” (“The Laws Concerning Women” 387). Oliphant talks of marriage in terms of the death of the individual, a relationship in which both husband and wife must share equally. Her defense of her point of view is the domestic scene itself: “a household divided against itself cannot stand” (“The Laws Concerning Women” 381). She points out the division of duties in marriage, putting side by side the man voting for his council member and the woman regulating “a Christian household,” and argues that the laws regulating marriage have nothing to do with the “union of souls” of lovers, but with “the peace of families, the safe foundation of the social world” (“The Laws Concerning Women” 382). As for the argument that the current laws are all in men’s favor, she asks what law protects a man from a wife who spends his fortune, who brings him to ruin. In the end, Oliphant does not base her opinion

on the law, but on the nature of the domestic realm itself. “The law cannot come into the heart of the house.” The law can secure property or wealth, but it “cannot command the return of happiness, love, or a pure heart” (“The Laws Concerning Women” 386), all the things that come from a successful domestic arrangement. In the “respectable working-classes, and of all the grades above the lower strata of the middle class...it is the wife there who is the Chancellor of the Exchequer...the income comes direct and undiminished into the careful keeping of the household manager” (“The Laws Concerning Women” 387). A wife is “a lawmaker, supreme and absolute...most despotic and unconstitutional of monarchs,” someone whose control in the private sphere should be undisputed.

Problems arise, according to Oliphant, when the domestic scene is taken for granted and women’s roles in it are devalued:

So long as the occupations of mother and housekeeper are taken for granted as of no particular importance, and the woman who discharges them is treated simply as one of her husband’s dependents, her work bearing no comparison with that of the ‘bread-winner,’ so long will all hot-headed and high-spirited women resent the situation. (“Two Ladies” 206)

In a *Blackwood’s* article devoted to discussing “The Condition of Women,” Oliphant calls attention to how underappreciated “women’s” work is. She points to a book by Arthur Helps, *Friends in Council*, in which Helps, the “oracle” (meant sarcastically, of course), observes, “it is no wonder to find women inaccessible to reason, considering all the homage and false worship with which they are surrounded in society during the first part of their lives” (148). Oliphant responds by wondering what homage he is referring to, pointing out that all but the richest and highest-class girls are surrounded by “fathers who have bills to meet and clients to satisfy; mothers who are straining income and

expenditure to a needful junction” (149). Instead of being sheltered, young women should be exposed to the realities of domestic life, and instead of being considered property themselves, they should be valued for helping to maintain and uphold the family’s class status in a system constructed on their labor. Critics have referenced this “hidden” labor of women in the Victorian period, work that is critical in establishing the middle-class system.⁴ In Oliphant’s works, however, this invisible labor becomes concrete.

The relationship between women and professionalism and woman and property are tied together, a complicated relationship as Oliphant presents it. I examine how she presents women as moving away from the idea of being property and toward the idea of owning and controlling it in Chapter Two of this work, “‘I’m not just a machine for darning socks!’: Women’s Occupations in Oliphant’s Novels.” In the four texts I analyze in this chapter, *Kirsteen*, *Phoebe Junior*, *Miss Marjoribanks*, and *Hester*, Oliphant explores women’s role in acquiring wealth and protecting middle-class values. Although in Victorian society, the public and private spheres were considered separate, Oliphant presents them as inextricably entwined for women who desired a profession. In these novels, Oliphant shows her female characters both violating and manipulating the social norms that demand they marry and set up a household. In *Kirsteen* and *Hester*, Oliphant creates characters that violate norms by choosing to work outside the home, establishing themselves in careers in the public sphere. In *Phoebe Jr.* and *Miss Marjoribanks*, the main characters seem to uphold societal standards by marrying and setting up households, but in reality they, too, veer from the standard and consider their marriages themselves as careers. Oliphant in fact offers domesticity itself as a kind of profession,

⁴ Tim Dolin’s *Mistress of the House*, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes*, and Jeff Nunokawa’s *The Afterlife of Property*.

and places value on both working outside the home and using what domestic powers women are granted to improve their situation.

Because Oliphant herself was a career woman with a family to support at home, the tensions in the novel between career and family may have been especially important to her. Some of the female characters that Oliphant creates in her novels are professionals outside the home, like Kirsteen Douglas and Catherine Vernon in *Hester*. These women are able to build or control wealth through their work in the public sphere, Kirsteen through her work as a seamstress for the ladies of London, and Catherine as a banker running the family business. Some of the characters are shown as seeking occupation and finding it in the domestic realm, viewing domesticity itself as a profession. Phoebe Beecham, in *Phoebe Junior*, uses herself, the value of her control over cultural capital, to gain an occupation for herself in the form of a husband. She is also able to manipulate actual capital in the text, in the form of the forged check that Mr. May writes. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, Lucilla Marjoribanks also reveals the relationship between domestic mastery and professionalism—she is a “comfort” to her father by being a successful domestic engineer, and with her “evenings” is able to exert influence over the social life of the entire town. The women who do work outside the home and are considered “professionals” still maintain links to the domestic—Kirsteen and Catherine Vernon are both earning money to support their extended families. Oliphant herself was a professional outside the home, but her relationship to wealth is conflicted. She writes to earn money for her family, and because of this pressure the quality of her work suffers, thus decreasing her success as a professional, a self-defeating circle. What all of these women have in common, however, is their desire for occupation and the value of their

labor, whether inside or outside the home. Something else that they have in common is their knowledge of their place within the social structure, their sense of obligation to their family and to the value system in which they must operate.

I present Oliphant's exploration of both this obligation and its connection to the women's place in society in Chapter Three, "Beating Hearts and Walking Dead: Oliphant's Supernatural Fiction." In her works devoted to a discussion of "Seen" and "Unseen" forces, Oliphant explores women's relationship to spirituality in the middle-class value system. She considers how the existing social order affects perception of the "other world," and she aligns the physical and the spiritual to reveal inadequacies or irregularities in Victorian ideology. She is especially interested in the part that women play in constructing how people perceive both materialism and spirituality, locating women's position in society in the connection between the Seen and Unseen. Finally, she uses these texts to place herself in this dialogue, a woman writing about the supernatural. In her tales of the Seen and Unseen, and in her longer works, *A Little Pilgrim in the Seen and Unseen* and *A Beleaguered City*, Oliphant demonstrates how women's spirituality is intertwined with their roles as mothers and nurturers, how even when confronted by spirits of the afterlife (or by becoming such spirits themselves) women's tendency is to revert to their behavioral norms in the everyday world as wives and mothers when unsure about how to act. Additionally, Oliphant reveals how the spirituality of women is also inseparable from the material world because of this tendency. For Oliphant, women are the connection between spirituality and materiality, the Seen and Unseen. She presents women as being uniquely suited for participating in the Unseen, whether it is by being the ones to understand and see the ghostly apparitions, or by becoming a ghost themselves; in

either case, the female characters that Oliphant creates in these works all serve to connect this world and the next. The men in these works, however, are usually firmly grounded in the material world and are unable or unwilling to interact productively with the forces of the Unseen, with few exceptions.

The way Oliphant presents women's spirituality reflects some traditional views on the subject, with a few differences. For Oliphant, women's role in the domestic and their ability to influence both the public and private sphere are related to their connection to spirituality. This connection makes sense when we consider how critics of works of "women of faith" point out that women were in charge of the spiritual life of the household. Author and "woman of faith" Sarah Stickney Ellis demonstrates a traditional Victorian view of women's spirituality, a "discourse of power, where male authority is dethroned and female devotion elevated, fused with a Christian discourse of the passive victim, suffering and serving in order to redeem" (Twycross-Martin 17). Christina Rossetti's devotional works support this view, revealing the tension that exists between the devotional life of single and married women, a tension springing from the notion that a woman's primary duty should be to her family. Oliphant herself connects women firmly to the spiritual, supporting the traditional perspective, but she also shows how women's spirituality is influenced by their "worldly" roles of wife and mother, how women's spiritual nature cannot be separated from their connection to the material world. She places women in between the spirit and material and shows how this connection empowers them. Oliphant also uses the connection to establish her own authority in these works: as a woman, according to Victorian ideology, she herself is eminently suited to conduct such a discourse.

I examine the connections that Oliphant establishes between her private life, the private lives of other authors, and women's position in middle-class society in Chapter Four, "A Prick of Genius or Grist for the Mills?: Oliphant's Literary Criticism." In her reviews and in her history of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, called *Annals of a Publishing House*, Oliphant examines women's position in the social order, how they balance career and family, and their mastery of domesticity and cultural signs/cultural currency. She relies on the standards she establishes in her fiction writings to evaluate the works of other authors and herself in her non-fiction works, considering how these other authors manage their personal lives and how they manipulate cultural signification in their writing. The authors whose personal lives do not demonstrate the kinds of values she herself demonstrates (an attention to home and family in addition to career, a desire for occupation, and ties to the spiritual) or who do not find the value in the everyday workings of people's lives as she does are found wanting. Oliphant also examines the connection between family and her own success as a writer. In her fiction, family and career cannot be separated, and in her reviews and *Annals*, the same holds true. She is able to place herself among the best-known Victorian authors not because she feels her writing has been better received by the public or critics, but because she knows that she herself fulfils the requirements she has established: a close attention to personal detail and an ability to identify and use cultural signification in her writing.

Oliphant's ability to establish authority in her non-fiction writing is based on the same principals that allow her to establish authority in her fiction, with one exception: in these non-fiction writings, it is other people's texts, and lives, over which she is claiming authority. Her primary publishing relationship was with the Blackwoods' publishing

house, and even the Blackwoods themselves were not immune from her critiques, as they become the focus of her attention in the *Annals*. By blurring the distinction between the public and private lives of the authors she examines in both this work and the reviews she wrote for *Blackwood's* magazine, she shows how for her, family and career are never separate. Oliphant's reliance on these personal details, and her decision to prominently place domestic occurrences in these reviews, lets her claim an authority she might otherwise not have had.

One of Oliphant's main concerns demonstrated in her fiction, the position of women in society, is reflected in her non-fiction writings as well. She wrote a number of reviews on this topic, but even in the ones in which this is not the main focus, Oliphant's interest in the subject comes through regardless. Her reviews of sensation novels are especially insightful regarding Oliphant's opinion of the way women present themselves and are represented by others in writing. In general, Oliphant claims a greater value for women than they are usually granted by middle-class society. She finds that professionalism exists not just in the public sphere, but in the kitchens and dining rooms of middle-class family homes. Her treatment of domesticity seems to be based on her belief that all women seek meaningful occupation, much as she presents it in her novels. In her reviews, however, we find real women whom Oliphant sees living the same tensions that she does, balancing having a career and a family. Her own position as a professional woman can be seen in two different lights: one, as a paid, published author; and two, as a woman running a successful household, paying the bills and maintaining its middle-class status.

In her autobiography, Oliphant presents a variety of images of herself, at once comfortable with being a mother but insecure of her success with her children, and blasé about her accomplishments as an author but hinting that she is well aware of her talents. When we consider a variety of her works together, however, a different picture emerges. Although in this text her works are organized by genre, the same themes run through all of Oliphant's works. We can see a woman who is ultimately confident enough in her position as both a "family woman" and a professional writer to closely examine both roles, revealing the difficulties inherent in each. She is also able to find the strength in each, and can see how these affect the position of women in general in the Victorian period. Ultimately, this is why it is so difficult for us to move away from comparing her work to her life, much as she herself does to the authors she reviews—because we can find her in the women she writes about. She could be talking about herself when she describes their professional accomplishments, their dedication to their families, their desire for a meaningful occupation in life. Though we cannot conflate the two, Oliphant's ability to see where women have and exert control in a society that seems prohibitive of such control comes from the fact that she is a woman operating in this system. She uses this knowledge of women's roles to explore the workings of Victorian middle-class culture and ultimately to establish her own authority in her texts.

CHAPTER TWO

“I’M NOT JUST A MACHINE FOR DARNING SOCKS!”: WOMEN’S OCCUPATIONS IN OLIPHANT’S NOVELS

In some of her many *Blackwood’s* essays, Oliphant expounds on her views about novels and their place in society. “Novels are a part of the industrial system of England,” she claims, calling them the “most indispensable of arts” (“New Novels” 379). She notes the relationship of women to novels and ties the responsibilities of women to the telling of stories. “If Eve did not tell stories outside of Eden...to Abel and Cain before they had learned how to quarrel, our first mother was not the woman we take her for” (379). Novels, the “recognised [sic] exponents of social life,” should, however, be held to high standard because of their ability to shape, not just reflect, cultural values. Portrayals of women in novels are of special concern to Oliphant. She critiques E. Lynn Linton, author of “Ourselves: Essays on Women” (Routledge, 1869), for suggesting that women’s position in society is out of their control. Although Oliphant feels that the idea of the position of women is serious, “the mere production of [books like Linton’s] is of itself a kind of insult to women” (“New Books 2” 173). Oliphant may want women to be able to control how they are presented to readers in novels, but she also claims that she would like to limit this control, disapproving of certain kinds of portrayals. For example, the language of physical passion is “curious language...for a girl” (“Novels” 267). Oliphant draws a distinction between talk of “sexless essences” and “shrinking bodies,” and notes that when two people who love each other must marry somebody else that “the true love unextinguished should blaze wildly up”—which is “wrong” but not “disgusting” (267). She draws a distinction, excusing “a woman, driven wild by the discovery of domestic

fraud and great wrong, [who] might propose any sin in her frenzy, and yet might be innocent,” and denouncing that “woman who makes uncleanly suggestions in the realm of her ordinary talk” as “a creature altogether unendurable and beyond the pale” (268). Apparently, Oliphant is well aware of the power of text to regulate society, as Langland discusses in her exploration of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*: “In regulating what is sayable, how it can be articulated, who can speak, where, under what conditions, and within which social relationships, discursive practices constitute knowledge and structure the network of power relations in society” (Langland 3). Although Oliphant may claim to want to limit what is portrayed in novels, even this limitation can be perceived as a realization of her own power as a novelist.

In this chapter, I examine Oliphant’s novel *Kirsteen*, in connection with her novels *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Phoebe Jr.*, and *Hester*, focusing on how Oliphant reveals the conflicts women faced in choosing between career and family. Through the character of Kirsteen Douglas, who, despite the derision of family and society, runs a business that is so successful that she is able to buy back ancestral land for her ungrateful relatives, Oliphant explores her own feelings about the problems connected to the blending of family life and career, the ever-present tension that she herself feels about women’s perceived need to choose between marriage and an occupation in the domestic sphere and a profession outside the home, and their desire to have both. In her essay “Novels,” Oliphant notes how Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* brings about a new sensation in novels, how previously women were taught “their own feelings on this subject [marriage] should be religiously kept to themselves” (“Novels” 259) but that with the publication of this novel, discussions of women’s feelings about marriage and other domestic arrangements

became more commonplace in the novel.⁵ Although Kirsteen may seem on the surface to make this choice decisively, rejecting family life in pursuit of her profession, Oliphant shows how she in fact pursues both, and how the two are actually intertwined. It is through her career that Kirsteen is able to gift her family with more domestic stability than they had experienced before, solidifying the family's position in society and preserving their ancestral home.

By applying Mary Poovey's discussion of the Victorian domestic ideal in her book *Uneven Developments*, we can find an explanation of why Oliphant may have felt such a conflict between choosing a profession and choosing to remain in the domestic realm. The Victorian domestic ideal, as described by Poovey, constructed women as the protectors of virtue. The economic support of the family that the husband traditionally provided (*Uneven Developments* 10) allowed for the protection of virtue by women without inhibiting middle-class economic successes and productivity. Elizabeth Langland also notes this position of women: quoting *Guide to English Etiquette*, 1844, she states that the wife is as important in her sphere as her husband is in his (46). Women not only controlled cultural capital, they were in charge of the management of the husband's material wealth in the operation of the household. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall note in *Family Fortunes*, their investigation into the family's connection to the formation of the middle class, "Men who sought to be 'someone,' to count as individuals because of their wealth, their power to command or their capacity to influence people, were, in fact, embedded in networks of familial and female support which underpinned their rise to public prominence" (13). Oliphant was conscious of women's

⁵ Although Oliphant connects *Shirley* to sensation novels, Brontë also uses the novel to show women's desire for careers and to begin her own exploration into social rather than domestic fiction.

roles as protectors of virtue and the husband's wealth, but her characters vary from that norm at times regardless, challenging the position that professional and family life can be separate for women.

Subtly connecting women's role in the home with their need or desire for outside fulfillment, in *Kirsteen*, Oliphant highlights women's need for occupation, and not just any occupation, but *meaningful* occupation. Oliphant presents the idea that a woman without something to devote time, energy, and thought to is frustrated and mentally unchallenged, and seeks out ways to vent this frustration. Kirsteen Douglas abandons the security of her father's house for the questionable safety of London, driven away by the threat of an unwanted marriage, and drawn by the hope that, if she cannot be a "respectable" member of the family, she can at least support herself and earn the money that her father and brothers have been unable to. However, competing with Oliphant's desire to show that women are able to earn a living outside the home is the idea that domestic occupation is not only a useful but necessary "profession" for women who ought to be given more status in Victorian society. As Oliphant notes in "Two Ladies," an essay that appeared in *Blackwood's*,

So long as the occupations of mother and housekeeper are taken for granted as of no particular importance, and the woman who discharges them is treated simply as one of her husband's dependents, her work bearing no comparison with that of the 'bread-winner,' so long will all hot-headed and high-spirited women resent the situation. (206)

Although domestic duties cannot provide a family with an income, Oliphant still presents "women's work" as indispensable not just to the smooth operation of the household, but to the stability of the middle class in general.

Connected to this conflict between work outside the home and work inside the home is the concept of family obligations. Whether unlooked for or not, obligations to family control Kirsteen and the choices she makes. Kirsteen feels she is betraying these obligations when she becomes a “mantua-maker,” and even when she is able to contribute financially to her family’s well-being, she is never able to regain their respect because of her disobedience in tarnishing the family name by working. Additionally, although Kirsteen does not establish her own domestic household, Oliphant takes pains to show how she is still controlling the cultural norms that are constructed through domesticity. Kirsteen’s dressmaking skill allows her not only to contribute monetarily to her father’s family but also to control the women who are responsible for the cultural norms of the middle class—the women of London. Finally, throughout the novel, Oliphant focuses on Kirsteen’s need to choose between marriage and career. First, Kirsteen flees an unwanted marriage at home to begin her career as a dress-maker. Then, Kirsteen is denied a marriage she wants by the death of the man she loves, and decides to devote all her energies to her profession. In the end, she dedicates herself to supporting her family through her earnings. These choices are revealed as moments of tension in the novels, in which Kirsteen must decide between the path accepted by father, family, and society and a path that will not only grant her the work that she wants, but will allow her to support the family that disapproves of her.

The tensions present in these choices are revealed not just in *Kirsteen*, but in other Oliphant novels as well: *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Phoebe Jr.*, and *Hester*. In these novels, Oliphant develops a view of women’s economic existence, the options that women face when confronted with their own economic status. All three things—the desire for

meaningful occupation, duty to family, and the decision to marry or not—affect women’s place in the male-created, male-dominated economic world. All three, too, determine women’s domestic status, whether as wife and mother, as wage-earner, or both. In the end, Oliphant does not create a decisive picture of women’s place in the economic world or in the home. Instead, her own sometimes conflicted views reveal an existence that was not easily navigable for women, because of all the contradicting demands placed upon them by society. As Oliphant points out, the single woman who must work cannot wait for societal approval or “to consider whether the work she could get to do was feminine, so long as she could...get paid for it, and get bread for her children” (“Two Ladies” 206). Although by the end of the novel Kirsteen has firmly established herself in the economic system, Oliphant’s experiences with family and work allow her to show a multitude of options for women in general, even if in the end they must decide to work or not, to support or obey family or not, and to marry or not.

On the surface, Oliphant’s presentation of a woman working outside the home violated cultural norms. As Langland points out, women themselves controlled representations of the middle-class through their manipulation of cultural currency, which was tied to their domestic role. The idea of women as arbiters of cultural norms seems to conflict with the idea of women as wage earners. “Whereas men earned the money, women had the important task of managing those funds toward the acquisition of social and political status” (Langland 8). As *Kirsteen* further highlights, it was difficult for women to be both wife/mother and wage earner for the family. “The story of the working-class wife for the middle-class man became non-narratable,” because the wife was the one who established the class status of the household through her control of the

middle-class sign system (Langland 9). The place of the wife in the family was to maintain its middle-class status, and a wife that worked as a wage-earner did not fit that value system. Without the woman at the center of the domestic ideal, both the economic and cultural system that created and sustained the middle-class would collapse.

However, Kirsteen is able to navigate both systems, working outside the home but still manipulating cultural signs through her occupation, in ways that were more far-reaching than anything she could have accomplished as a wife in a middle-class household.

In her novel *Miss Marjoribanks*, we can especially see Oliphant's view of women's ability to manipulate cultural signs. Lucilla Marjoribanks' need for occupation drives her to revamp the society of Carlingford, creating her Thursday "evenings" for the town's benefit, rituals of dinner and conversation carefully controlled by Lucilla. Langland points to Lucilla's use of the "signifying realms" of "architectural design, dining rituals, dress and etiquette" (157) to solidify her management of her guests. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, "Household, community, and national management are intertwined agendas as represented by Oliphant" (158). Using a curious blending of military language and the system of cultural signs, Oliphant casts Lucilla in an almost soldierly pose, with Lucilla relying on her superior knowledge of cultural signification to wage her war on Carlingford, "support[ing] a conception of this heroine as a revolutionary or heroic general...[and] suggest[ing] a gender interchangeability within the category of 'real agent of [social] change'" (156). Lucilla's chosen "system of signs" is what allows her to wage this "war" with such success as she pursues her ultimate goal of uniting Carlingford society with a tenacity equal to that of any general.

Oliphant notes that after the successes of her societal “revolution” had gone on for ten years, Lucilla was at a point in her life, “when the ripe female intelligence, not having the natural resource of a nursery and a husband to manage, turns inwards, and begins to ‘make a protest’ against the existing order of society, and to call the world into account for giving it no due occupation” (*Miss Marjoribanks* 395). Oliphant’s focus on women’s work that “stresses the interpenetration of the political and the domestic, the way men’s actions are informed by women’s discursive practices...highlight[s] the way that those discourses allow the heroines to manipulate situations to their advantage” (Langland 152-3). Lucilla widens her control to the political arena when she decides to support Mr. Ashburton as the next Member for Parliament. When she approaches him about the election, he at first takes her recommendations and advice with little seriousness, thinking, “she was only an ignorant woman after all” (*Miss Marjoribanks* 346). But, he “paid her pretty little compliments for a few minutes longer...All which Lucilla listened to with great impatience, feeling that it had nothing to do with the matter in hand” (347). After Ashburton finally sees the meaning behind Lucilla’s intentions about him being the “best man for Carlingford,” he realizes that “it was not womanish ignorance, but an actual suggestion,” surprised at the subtle expertise that Lucilla actually possessed about societal manipulation.

Like Lucilla Marjoribanks, Phoebe Beecham also exhibits her control over cultural signification and social exchanges in the novel, perfecting what Langland calls “image management” (174). Like Lucilla, Phoebe, too, manipulates social signifiers and transforms herself from her more humble roots in “trade” on her mother’s side into a “lady,” the likes of which Carlingford has never seen. Perhaps this is why both Lucilla

and Phoebe have been criticized for being “too self-consciously manipulative and self-interested,” with critics objecting to how Oliphant presents marriage “as a means to an end, never an end itself” (Langland 152),⁶ because both women are in control of their own economic and social status and yet never outwardly challenge societal norms.

Ironically, Oliphant herself professes to being not nearly as adept as these two characters are in social situations. In her autobiography, she explains how at parties she,

...got as quickly as I could into a corner and stood there, rather wistfully wishing to know people, but not venturing to make any approach...which much exasperated my aspiring hostess, who had picked me up as a new novelist, and meant me to help to amuse her guests, which I had not the least idea how to do. (39)

Oliphant, however, has other means at her disposal with which to influence society—the very novels that are part of this chapter.

Phoebe markets her own possession of class status and “trades” her intelligence, strength, and superior grasp of social norms for Clarence Copperhead’s economic status. Oliphant makes it clear that it will be Phoebe’s talents that get Clarence into Parliament, not his own, and in this sense, Phoebe will have an occupation *and* marry, her occupation being to keep her husband in his. When Clarence considers proposing, he, too, thinks of Phoebe’s ability to manipulate and control social status. He knows his father can “afford” for him to marry a woman with no money. He feels Phoebe is the best choice because he will no longer need tutors—not only will her brains get him into Parliament and help him handle his responsibilities there once in, but, “who would look better at the head of a table, or show better at a ball, or get on better in society?” (233) As Langland points out, “Even though [Clarence] early speaks of the ‘social suicide’ in marrying

⁶ Most notably, Merryn Williams. John Blackwood also criticized the novel, noting Oliphant’s overly harsh tone, and requested that she alter her presentation of Lucilla to make the novel more palatable to readers.

someone like Phoebe with so small a fortune and so poor a lineage, in the course of the novel he learns his own lesson in the incalculable value of a woman so fully enabled by genteel society's discursive practices" (175). And Phoebe does not just trade her intellect for economic status, she trades it for an occupation, looking at the marriage not as an opportunity to live out some romantic fantasy but as a job. Clarence "would be a career to Phoebe. She did not think of it humbly like this, but with a big capital—a Career... it was her head that was full of throbbings and pulses, not her heart" (234).

Another character in *Phoebe Jr.* who is valued for her cultural capital is Mrs. Copperhead. Langland notes how she allows Mr. Copperhead to achieve his social status by providing him the other half of the perfect combination of material wealth and cultural capital that allows the perpetuation of middle-class gentility. When Mr. Copperhead, the vulgar millionaire, offers his views on occupation and usefulness, he scorns women in general for their uselessness. He states that women are a "waste of raw material," and calls them, "the surplus we ought to export as we export other surpluses" (254-5). However, Copperhead appears to embrace uselessness in his wife and his son—that his son Clarence merely costs him money to support highlights the fact that Copperhead can afford it. Oliphant describes Clarence Copperhead as "costly and useless" in his father's mind, explaining why his father was so fond of him. "It was sweet to him to possess a perfectly useless specimen of humanity" (12), and he could count son and wife as goods along with the rest of his wealth. Mrs. Copperhead was Mr. Copperhead's second wife, the children's prior governess, "a feeble, pretty, pink-and-white little woman" (10). According to Oliphant, he married her to always have someone to "jeer at." Although Mrs. Copperhead realized that her current position was more economically desirable than

her experience as a governess, she apparently missed the time when she had something to occupy herself with. “Poor little woman! What a change from the governess-chrysalis who was snubbed by her pupil and neglected by everybody! and yet I am not sure that she did not—so inconsistent is human nature—look back to those melancholy days with a sigh” (11). It is Mrs. Copperhead’s native gentility and background that elevate the class of the Copperhead family, a status which Copperhead “prizes above all his merely material possessions” (Langland 180).

Unlike Lucilla Marjoribanks and Phoebe Beecham, the main female characters in *Hester* are not adept at societal manipulation. Neither Catherine Vernon nor Hester attempt to revamp Redborough society or restructure their own social status to secure a good match and occupation through a husband. Catherine Vernon does not need to worry about this kind of position, because she has her own job: running the town’s bank, the family business. Her niece Hester wants to follow in her footsteps, and sees her own future occupation in that of her aunt. Catherine uses her economic status and position as the savior of Vernon’s bank to support the extended Vernon family, condescendingly and amusedly bearing the bitterness and antipathy of her dependents as she remains firm in her obligation to feed, clothe, and house them in a manner that does not disgrace the Vernon name. Although Hester does not share Catherine’s economic position, she shares her responsibility to the Vernon name, unwillingly or not, and eventually after Catherine’s death appears to be in a position to choose to wield the kind of economic power that Catherine did in her life. However, unlike Kirsteen’s involvement in business, the Vernon women’s involvement does not allow them to maintain control of cultural

signifiers, but instead their economic independence (or pursuit of it) and their refusal to marry put them outside this realm of women's control.

As in *Hester*, Oliphant appears to embrace an independent lifestyle for women in *Kirsteen*, making Kirsteen the savior of her family and financial independence seem more desirable in many ways than marrying and having children. The contrasts Oliphant draws between the married and single women in the novel are quite strong. For the most part, it is the unmarried women who seek meaningful occupation, who look for some way to occupy their minds, not just their hands. The first strong, single woman we see is the domestic servant, Marg'ret, whom Oliphant describes as "housekeeper, cook, lady's maid, and general manager of everything" (1). Because of Kirsteen's mother's weak physical and mental state, Marg'ret was the "real substitute of the feminine head of the house" (2). Oliphant paints a highly complementary picture of Marg'ret, showing how doing a good job as a housekeeper, maintaining the domestic sphere, was a highly valuable trait. Oliphant states that Marg'ret was "an able and energetic housekeeper born to organize and administer. Marg'ret did not know what these fine words meant, but she knew 'her work'" (2) and basically took control of things both inside and outside the house.

Oliphant's description of Marg'ret closely resembles her presentation of her own mother in her autobiography. "My mother was all in all. How she kept everything going, and comfortably going, on the small income she had to administer, I can't tell, though of course we lived in the utmost obscurity and simplicity, she herself doing the great part of all that was done in the house" (20). Her mother prepared the meals and served them to her children, and even sewed all their clothes. (20) However, she was also "very quick in

temper notwithstanding this, and was very far from spoiling [the children]" (21), possessing a temperament that is reflected in Marg'ret's. Of all those living in the house, Marg'ret alone had the spirit to speak to Kirsteen's domineering father, Drumcarro, when anyone in the house needed anything, and was not afraid of him, unlike his wife and offspring seem to be. In fact, he stood "in a little awe" of her. It is Marg'ret who speaks to Kirsteen's brother Robbie at his farewell dinner, offering advice when Mrs. Douglas is overwhelmed with crying. (13) Marg'ret also confronts Drumcarro about letting the girls into society by taking them to a ball, arguing with him to get them dresses. He initially refuses to spend the money on them, but in the end relents. Oliphant calls her attempt a "desperate step" (44), recognizing that unfortunately, despite all of Marg'ret's power, the ultimate authority rested with Drumcarro himself. However, it is Marg'ret who inspires Kirsteen to leave the family estate, finding her a job with her sister in the city. Without Marg'ret's connections and the active role she takes in Kirsteen's pursuit of a career, Kirsteen would have been trapped in the unhappy life that she wished to escape.

Oliphant draws a stark contrast between Marg'ret and the character of Mrs. Douglas, Drumcarro's wife, who "went on having child after child for nearly twenty years, without much stamina of either mind or body to support that continual strain" (1). Mrs. Douglas became a "nonentity" with "no spirit, no health, little brains to begin with and none left now" after living with Drumcarro for thirty years in "domestic tyranny" (2). She otherwise has no other function in the household or elsewhere, much like Hester's mother in her "low, white dress" who has no idea about the household's finances, and who therefore is helpless without the management and earning power of her husband. That Oliphant presents this useless state as a natural result of marrying and child-bearing

presents another conflict in her domestic ideology—it is the unmarried, wage-earning housekeeper who is the real authority in the Drumcarro household. The wife has little domestic power: the only real impact she has on the activities and decisions in the house is upon her death. By presenting marriage in this light, Oliphant raises an interesting conflict: most of her novels end in marriage. Although *Kirsteen* does not, both *Phoebe Jr.* and *Miss Marjoribanks* end with the marriages of the main characters.

The view of marriage appears to be different in *Miss Marjoribanks*, where Lucilla looks upon marriage as merely another way for her to exert the kind of social control she has as her father's daughter. When she and Mrs. Chiley discuss the attentions of Cavendish, and how he will possibly be the next Member for Carlingford, Mrs. Chiley tells her that being his wife would be “ ‘just the position that suits you—with your talents!’ ” (114) The more she considered that matter, the more she began to think, “It was a perfectly ideal position for a woman of her views, and seemed to offer the very field that was necessary for her ambition...in short, she looked upon the matter as a superior mind, trained in sound principles of political economy, might be expected” (114). However, although Lucilla may consider marriage in a positive light, throughout the novel she is not married—her social control stems from her position in her father's house, where she is able to exert her influence without a husband interfering with her agenda.

Just as Lucilla's future could be decided by her marriage, so is Cavendish's, though his would be to his own detriment because of his choice of Barbara Lake. Oliphant expresses regretfully, “That was what he came to, poor man! after all his experiences; a man even who, if he had made a right use of his opportunities, might once have had as good a chance as any of marrying Lucilla herself” (464). He chose poorly,

not to sustain his class status but to fulfill his desire. For lower-class encoded Cavendish, “to be seduced by Barbara’s body represents attraction to indulgent pleasure, by Lucilla’s, the capacity for disciplined duty” (Langland 169). Cavendish does not select a wife who will support his middle-class status. Should he give in to his desire for Barbara Lake and marry her, he will sacrifice his good standing in the town, because without a wife who can maintain the middle-class values in his household, he will be unable to keep this position on his own. In the novel, Oliphant’s chosen language conveys a “system of images that describe [this] loss of caste as, what it after all is represented to be, a destruction of identity or a loss of life” (Langland 162). Lucilla herself is presented as being too smart to make the same mistake and lets her mastery of cultural signification guide her choices in marriage, refusing to make a match that does not somehow further her social ambitions.

In the end, the crisis of the novel is the need for Lucilla to make a decision about whom to marry—Ashburton or her cousin Tom. Because Oliphant presents Lucilla as someone who, throughout the novel, is so determined to avoid marriage, it is odd that Oliphant chooses this as the determining factor in Lucilla’s future existence. Mrs. Woodburn acknowledges that “it would be very foolish of Miss Marjoribanks to marry, and forfeit all her advantages, and take somebody else’s anxieties upon her shoulders, and never have any money but what she asked from her husband” (374), insinuating that these are burdens well-known to Mrs. Woodburn, a married woman. Oliphant acknowledges the drawbacks of marriage when discussing the wedding of Queen Victoria, saying, “Her majesty in her girlish days had a special charm and fascination for her people, the charm of youth and maidenhood. We were not eager for any marriage

which more or less brought that unique personality down into the paths of common life” (“Marriage Bells” 157).⁷ In these examples, Oliphant seemingly views marriage as the eventual end, if not ultimate goal, of all single women, an unfortunate, if often unavoidable, part of “common life.”

In *Phoebe Jr.*, Phoebe Beecham appears to embrace the idea of marriage as a means to achieving her own objectives in both private and public life. Phoebe is eternally the good daughter, doing her “duty” by going to Carlingford to care for her ailing grandmother, and eventually does even more when she marries Clarence Copperhead, bringing her family one more step away from its “shopkeeper” roots. Phoebe marries *as* a career, making her husband’s ambitions her own (or, more accurately, making her ambitions her husband’s). Another female character in *Phoebe Jr.* who marries at the end of the novel is Ursula May. It is in the course of performing her domestic duties that she “catches” her future husband, Northcote. Although Ursula ends up successfully marrying, she is not an effective social manipulator like Phoebe or Lucilla. Ursula attempts to create the elegant dinners that Lucilla does, but instead produces a culinary disaster. She admires Phoebe’s self-possession and poise, but is herself made nervous in social situations. When she visits her wealthy cousins in London, and is received as a guest by the Copperheads, she even admires Phoebe from afar, noting her popularity and realizing that she could never be the “belle of the ball,” able to move gracefully through the room making conquests as Phoebe does.

Ursula also has not mastered control over the household, a position she inherited when her mother died. Oliphant shows the disobedient younger children, the mess, the

⁷ This comment of Oliphant’s seems to forecast the sentiment expressed by Tim Dolin in *Mistress of the House*, that marriage is seen as the assumed end for Victorian heroines, whether they resist it or outlive it.

overall lack of control for which Ursula is criticized incessantly by her father. Regardless of these failures, Ursula is able to secure a match that is above her station. Oliphant describes when Northcote realizes that he wants Ursula, saying, “The moment was not romantic, the situation was not sublime. A little motherless housekeeper crying because her father scolded her in public for a piece of bad cookery. There is nothing in this to make an idyll out of; but such as it was, it proved enough for Horace Northcote” (213). It is ironic that Oliphant presents Ursula’s appeal as what should actually make her unattractive to a husband. Her lack of mastery over cultural capital, her inability to run a household, and her failure to “market” herself effectively, should all persuade Northcote to look elsewhere for a wife, but he marries her regardless, moving her out of her father’s house and into his own, although it is unclear whether she is any more successful in her domestic duties there than she was at home.

The life of Catherine Vernon in *Hester* is quite different from that of these other young female characters. Catherine’s life is the frame of the novel, beginning and ending with her single-handedly saving Vernon’s, the family bank, from collapse. Catherine never marries, allowing her to devote time, energy, and money to her distant relatives. Dolin, in *Mistress of the House*, explains the special contradiction inherent in the position of women of property—property allows them to choose not to marry, but makes them eminently marriageable, because they are valuable commodities themselves. Catherine and her young cousin Hester are presented at odds socially throughout the novel, although we see their shared desires—to provide for themselves and their family economically, to refuse marriage for its own sake, and to realize their potentials as women in business.

Hester has a chance to demonstrate her own refusal to be manipulated by societal expectations when she refuses a “good match” with Harry Vernon because even though the economics of the match would be very beneficial, it wasn’t enough to convince her—she realized that Harry wasn’t clever enough for her. Harry considers Hester’s mother’s “connections” to Sir John Westwood and Hester’s overall effect on his household. Oliphant calls to mind echoes of Clarence Copperfield’s concept of Phoebe when revealing Harry’s thoughts on Hester: “He thought her clever, one who would be able to manage his now somewhat too large and unwieldy house and take the trouble off his hands; he thought that handsomely dressed, as of course she would be, she would look very nice at the head of his table” (140). When Hester refuses Harry, Catherine is overwhelmed with confusion tinged with relief. She repeatedly questions why Hester would reject “so excellent a settlement,” noting her disbelief three separate times over the course of six pages, wondering where Hester thinks she will get another such offer, never imagining that Hester is not anticipating any future offers, not wishing to marry.(170-5) Hester insists to Catherine that she will “never marry,” and Catherine replies that if she won’t have Harry, she should marry Roland Ashton. Some of the last words we hear Catherine speak are to renounce the good she had done as an independent, economically powerful woman, saying, “ ‘I would marry,’ she cried, ‘if I were you! I would wipe out every recollection’ ” (492-3). In the end, despite Hester’s insistence, the last few lines of the novel read, “And as for Hester, all that can be said for her is that there are two men whom she may choose between, and marry either if she pleases...What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?” (495). Oliphant leaves us with this image of Hester with two suitors waiting for her to accept them, but the

unvoiced choice is that of assuming Catherine's own position as the head of the family and economic center of town.

In *Kirsteen*, Oliphant frequently links the idea of marriage to economic stability as well, but instead of showing how women may marry to attain economic status, Oliphant shows how a family's lack of status may affect a woman's prospects of marriage. She reveals how in the Drumcarro household, the male and female children are valued differently, the boys revered because of their ability to earn their own way in the world, the girls reviled because of their purely domestic use. Oliphant shows Kirsteen "marking" handkerchiefs with her hair for her brother to take to India while she stays behind to do her needlework. Brother Robbie and suitor Ronald Drummond are on their way to India, "with good blood and plenty of pride and no money" (6), having been "bred for this destination from their cradles," and Robbie was glad "to escape from the dullness of Drumcarro to a larger life" and join his brothers, who were also sent to India. As for Kirsteen and her sisters, "they did not count for much" (6). At Robbie's farewell, Drumcarro says, "Let the lasses' marriages alone...I've enough to think upon with my lads" (13). He tells Mary, the oldest girl at home, "you're just nobody, and never had two ideas in your head" (15). The only activity the girls seem to have is needlework. According to Drumcarro, all his girls have to do to keep fed and housed was sew, darn, and "keep a pleasant tongue in their heads" (43).

Oliphant presents Drumcarro himself as a bitter man, a bitterness caused by his lack of money—the "auld slavedriver" barely earned enough money in Jamaica to "buy a little Highland estate and bare little house of Drumcarro" (32). He was the grandson of a Scottish laird who lost his estate through bad political alliances. "He set his whole heart

upon [his] boys,” finding them all appointments elsewhere. Unlike their brothers, the only occupation the girls had to look forward to was as “handmaids who might be useful about the house, but who had no future, no capabilities of advancing the family, creatures altogether of no account” (34). Because of Drumcarro’s pride and poverty, they received no education and even had little prospect of marrying. They did not have enough education or money to associate with the other “high-born” women in the area, and were too proud to associate with the local common people. Oliphant drives this point home, stating, “Nothing accordingly could exceed the dullness, the monotony of their lives, with no future, no occupation except their work as almost servants in their father’s house” (36).

Oliphant highlights the connection between Drumcarro’s economic failure and the failures of his household. Jeff Nunokawa calls this connection “the reach of market forces into the parlors, bedrooms, and closets of a domestic realm,” (4) where the failure of the household reveals the precarious nature of the relationship between the marketplace and the home. Drumcarro’s efforts to control his female children may be linked to his desire to control his own economic condition. Nunokawa claims that the Victorian woman, the “angel of the house,” is a kind of value that transcends the commodity form. Problems arise when women are cast as commodities because then they are linked to the instabilities and uncertainties of the marketplace (Nunokawa 6). According to the rules of the marketplace, “property fit to circulate in the market” must be parted from its owner—these losses are a result of the nature of the marketplace and the marketable goods themselves, not through the faults of individuals. Casting women as goods to be circulated makes their position in both the home and the economic sphere

precarious. Oliphant presents Drumcarro as seeing that his female children are equally valuable to him in his household, performing domestic duties, and as objects of trade, when he attempts to marry first Kirsteen and then Kirsteen's sister to a wealthy man.

We can see two other male characters who have trouble controlling their economic positions in *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phoebe Jr.* Both Dr. Marjoribanks, Lucinda's father, and the Reverend Mr. May, Ursula's father, are economic failures. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, the doctor loses Lucilla's inheritance through a bad investment. The shock of it appears to play a part in his untimely death, causing Lucilla to become almost destitute in comparison to what she had been used to. When Lucilla finds that her income will be 200£ a year, "her heart sank within her; for it was not in Lucilla's nature to live without a sphere...nor to give up entirely the sovereign position she had held for so many years" (415-6). Ultimately, though, Lucilla reclaims her economic power through marriage to her cousin Tom, by convincing him to buy the county residence Marchbank, bringing land back into her family not through her own economic successes, but through those of her husband.

Mr. May's lack of control over money involves a check that he forges to pull his family out of debt. He is forced into this action by his poor spending habits and his inability to hold onto money. This forgery not only highlights his economic failures, but his social failure as well: his desire to secure wealth for his family leads him to behave in a completely unacceptable fashion that could have him socially ostracized should it be discovered. Oliphant uses these inadequacies as a chance to create another character that illustrates the tensions present between woman as economic object and woman as economic actor. In *Phoebe Jr.*, Phoebe is in a place of control in power relations, not an

object of exchange. Inspired perhaps by her own early economic experiences, Oliphant creates a situation in which Phoebe sees wealth exchanged improperly and decides to act. Oliphant reports a similar incident in much the same fashion in her autobiography, when she describes her reaction to her brother's lack of control over his debts:

I was a little dragon watching over him with remorseless anxiety. I discovered, I remember, a trifling bill which had not been included when his debts were paid, and I took my small fierce measures that it should never reach my mother's ears, nor trouble her. I ordained that for two days in the week, we should give up our mid-day meal and make up at the evening one...He agreed to this ordinance without a murmur...and the little bill was paid and never known of at home. (27)

It is Phoebe's control over Mr. May's debt, the forged check, that is the turning point of *Phoebe Jr.* She conducts "business," involving herself in economic exchange even while claiming to have no knowledge of it, telling May's associate Cotsdean, "You may say I am not the sort of person to know about business, and it is quite true. But whoever comes to you remember this—if you don't mention Mr. May, I will see you safely through it" (304). She claims ignorance in order to maintain control—Cotsdean would be uncomfortable dealing with a woman if she appeared too familiar conducting economic exchanges. By having Phoebe discover May's questionable judgment, and by giving her control over who else finds out about his lapse, Oliphant creates a situation in which Phoebe reinforces both her economic and social supremacy. Out of the men who exhibit contempt for women's uselessness (Copperhead, Tozer, and May), none of them have as much leverage in this final exchange as Phoebe. Copperhead ultimately allows Phoebe's marriage to Clarence as a result of this situation, Tozer is the victim of the forgery, and May is himself the forger, forced into it by his own inability to control his money. The

money itself is depicted as an abstract thing by Oliphant, when she explains,

There may have been said to be always a certain amount of quite fictitious and visionary money floating about Mr. May, money which existed only in the shape of symbol, and which, indeed, belonged to nobody—which was borrowed here today, and paid there tomorrow... never really reaching anybody's pocket, or representing anything but that one thing which money is supposed to be able to extinguish—debt. (129)

It is not Phoebe's control over the money itself that is important in establishing her authority, but her control over this exchange.

In addition to focusing on earning potential and control over wealth in *Kirsteen*, Oliphant highlights Kirsteen's desire to control her very existence. She presents Kirsteen as “one of those who make a story for themselves” (36), a woman who refuses to be cast in a role where her only uses were in household duties or as an “object” to be married off at her father's choosing. After her brother Robbie's departure, she begins to become restless, saying, “I cannot settle to my work... and I will not. I'm not just a machine for darning socks! I wish I was Robbie going out into the world” (24). And so Kirsteen slowly begins the process of growing so discontent with her lot at home that she ultimately decides to leave to go her own way.

The first we see of Kirsteen's future career is her doing the fine needlework her father required for his linen shirt ruffles, that no one else could do to please him. Then the dressmaker, Miss Macnab, arrives, who sat “in state” in the best room of the house as she created the girls' ball gowns. Oliphant calls her “an artist in her own way” (54), and dressmakers, “domestic professors of the most primitive yet everlasting art,” reminiscent, perhaps, of Oliphant's own position as an artist. Kirsteen was impressed in more ways than one by the dressmaker, realizing not only the money-making potential of such an occupation, but becoming fascinated by the great amount of work that went into each

garment. She comments to Macnab, ““What trouble you are taking!...And it’s not as if it were silk or velvet, but just a muslin gown”” (55). Macnab corrects her, telling her, “ ‘the maist difficult is the maist particular, as ye would soon learn if ye gave yoursel to ainy art.’” Kirsteen offers Macnab her respect, which Macnab accepts, knowing it “to be her due” (55). Aware of the value of her professional skill, Macnab had “all the confidence of conscious merit and benign condescension” as she explained her methods to Kirsteen. (55)

Kirsteen repeatedly iterates her desire for occupation throughout the beginning of the novel. When she defies her father and leaves home to escape marriage to the wealthy Glendochart, she leaves behind what little prestige is attached to the name of Douglas and must support herself. She realizes the enormity of what her decision means when she has a run-in with a member of the local nobility, Lord John, in which she bristles at being called a governess, and she catches herself, thinking, “Oh, the governess! She will be a far better person than me, and know a great deal more...me to think so much of myself that am nobody! I wish I was a governess or half so good” (126). When she finally reaches Glasgow, she finds herself looking jealously at mill-girls going to work. “Kirsteen’s eyes followed them with a sort of envy. They were going to their work, they were carrying on the common tenor of their life, while she sat there, arrested in everything. ‘I wish,’ she said with a sigh, ‘I had something to do’” (129).

In all of the novels I examine, Oliphant focuses on women’s need for occupation. In *Miss Marjoribanks*, Oliphant shows how Lucilla would like to extend her own desire for occupation to others as well, an improvement in Lucilla’s eyes. When Lucilla joins the Lakes for tea, she becomes irritated at Barbara Lake’s uselessness, when she sees that

the girl cannot even fix her father's tea as he likes it. She compares Barbara to her sister, Rose, thinking that Rose may not be able to serve her father any better, but Rose's usefulness in other matters offsets that. For Lucilla, who "had a respect for use," "a creature who was of no earthly good irritated her well-regulated spirit; for, to be sure, the possession of a fine contralto...is not a matter of sufficient moment in this world to excuse a young woman for not knowing how to give her father a comfortable cup of tea" (269). Rose Lake seems to feel as Lucilla does about having an occupation, and laments Barbara's lack of desire to be helpful to Lucilla, saying, "Barbara ought to have been some rich person's daughter, with nothing to do. She would not mind being of no use in the world" (165). Although she is frustrated by her sister's refusal to be of use at home, Rose realizes that she will have to be the one fulfilling those duties in her absence. When Rose tells Lucilla that Barbara has advertised to become a governess, she tells her "with quiet despair" about the decision, and laments, "I would do anything in the world for Barbara, but one can't help thinking of oneself sometimes, and there is an end of my Career." Lucilla tells Rose that she and her father should forbid Barbara, but Rose differs, "It is her *heart*, you know, Lucilla; and it is only my Career" (336-7). Rose is doubly solemn, not only mourning her career as an artist, but her sister's decision. Barbara's becoming a governess would put her in a different class category than the one Rose sees the family of artists aspiring to. As Langland explains, "What suits Miss Marjoribanks is that which ensures the perpetuation of her own privilege and that of others like her, the gentrified middle class" (162), and her interest in the Lakes shows that Lucilla wishes she could extend her values even to those not of her class.

In *Phoebe Jr.*, Oliphant uses the voice of Mr. May, Carlingford's parson, to express a view contrary to the one she appears to be establishing about women and occupation. Mr. May decries the "uselessness" of girls, calling them, "useless impediments, not even able to scrub the floors, and make the beds, which is all you could ever be good for...they can do nothing better, poor creatures" (127). However, these comments are in direct response to his son's apparent refusal to be economically useful to the family. Reginald May's usefulness, at least from his father's perspective, lies in his recent offer of a position, and Mr. May is frustrated with Reginald's refusal, telling him that he has no excuse for still being a "burden" at home. Reginald eventually takes the position that he feels to be a "sinecure," still lamenting that he could be of much better use doing something more productive than serving as a clergyman to six old men. He only takes the job when he realizes that his lack of obligations will free him for real occupation, and that he will be better able to serve the community if he is not burdened with the responsibilities of career.

The unlikely person who convinces Reginald to make this decision is his sister Ursula, whose occupation, caring for her motherless sisters and brothers, has left her yearning for the opportunity to do something herself. She expresses her own desire for a career to Reginald, when hearing of his reluctance to accept the position,

"Oh, Reginald, think: if *I* had the chance of two hundred and fifty pounds a year! there is nothing I would not do for it. I would scrub floors, as he said, I would do anything, the dirtiest work. You will be independent, able to do what you please, and never have to ask papa for anything... To be independent, able to please yourself." (138)

Ursula even demonstrates her ability to be economically savvy when shopping for rugs and curtains for Reginald's new apartment. "Ursula was quite transformed by the instinct

of business and management into the leader of the party...She was almost grand in superior knowledge and righteous indignation” (138). Still, like Lucilla, and like Phoebe as well, who is forbidden from doing anything resembling housework by her mother for fear it would lower her status, Ursula is bound by her class position, and instead of working independently for money for herself, she is forced to care for her family and put aside her own needs.

In *Hester*, Hester Vernon, too, expresses her desire for useful occupation and clarifies that she does not want to work just for the money, she wants to work so as not to be dependent on Catherine Vernon and for ““something to do”” (68). Ellen Vernon supports her, saying it is the current “fashion” for girls to “do something... everybody is proud to be able to earn money. It is only when they are clever that they can teach, and then they are so proud” (68). Catherine, however, is determined that none of the women in the family should work. When Hester points out that Catherine herself worked, Catherine responds that it was to “save the family,” and that if Hester was in the same situation, she would have Catherine’s permission to do anything she had to (76). Hester, who “felt herself running over with capacity and strength, running to waste” must finally abandon her quest for occupation and resign herself to “eat the bread of dependence,” like the rest of the family, from the hand of Catherine Vernon.

When Hester tries to discuss her father’s involvement in the family business with her mother, Mrs. John replies that her husband “ ‘had too much respect for me to mix me up with business’ ” (405). Hester comes to the realization that she shouldn’t be surprised that men feel women shouldn’t be in business when women themselves believe it. “Everybody thought so, and she alone, an involuntary rebel, would be compelled to

accept the yoke which, to other women, was a simple matter, and their natural law. Why, then, was she made unlike the others, or why was it so?" (405). Oliphant uses Mrs. John, as well as Roland Ashton's sister Emma, to show how different Hester's opinions about women and work really are. She sets up Mrs. John and Emma as representatives of women: Mrs. John "represented all the timid opinions and obstinate prejudices of weakness; all that is gently conventional and stereotyped in that creature" (331), and Emma represented the "vulgarer type," which "considers man as the natural provider of woman's comfort, and, therefore, indispensable, to be secured as any other source of income and ease ought to be secured" (332). Hester was "wounded and ashamed" when she realized that her mother and Emma could possibly be in the same category, though she knew that they both had no aspirations for anything more in life than to live in protective dependence, owing their living to either family or husband.

Like Hester, Kirsteen wants to support herself and to make enough money to help her siblings who she has left behind. Becoming a "mantua-maker" is ultimately profitable enough for Kirsteen to buy back the family land that her ancestors had lost. Regardless, being in business is still shameful, and when she calls her work her "trade," her mentor Jean chastises her, asking what would her parents think if they heard her say so. (161) Kirsteen's skill is laudable, but even that is possibly embarrassing for someone who came from "good blood." Part of what may be influencing Kirsteen's desire to generate income is her father's characterization of the women of his house as good for nothing but utilizing the resources he has provided, much like Mr. May characterizes girls in *Phoebe Jr.* As Poovey, in *Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, says of women in capitalist society, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, if they were not competition

for men in the workplace, they were devourers of men's wealth in the home. Oliphant notes, "It may not be thought a very high quality in a heroine, but Kirsteen soon developed a true genius for her craft" (164), as though Kirsteen's skill and enjoyment of her art almost make it worse that she abandoned her good name to go into "trade." But for Kirsteen, sitting idly by in her father's house, darning for him, was no longer an option after she discovered how much opportunity she could create for herself outside his house. Kirsteen's choice of mantua-making as her profession connects her to the Victorian dress code in an ironic twist—Langland notes the connection of dress to domestic duties and "image management" (35) and how women gave the impression through dress that they did no useful work, but Kirsteen's connection to dress is anything but useless. She demonstrates through her craft an ability to attain a both monetarily and culturally lucrative position.

For Oliphant, however, this balance between economic and social success is difficult for women to achieve. In a telling scene, Roland Ashton, a potential suitor of Hester, tells Hester that she inspires him to be a "hero." Hester replies, "'Do you really think,' she said, 'that the charm of inspiring, as you call it, is what any reasonable creature would prefer doing? To make somebody else a hero rather than be a hero yourself?'" (331) Roland's final opinion on the subject is that the women who do so, who "'step out of their sphere, they may do much to be respected, they may be of great use; but—'" indicating, as Hester, too, points out, that men don't like this kind of woman (331). Their entire exchange highlights how Catherine Vernon's economic power has come at a price, that though she may still wield power in Redborough, she is not considered to be acting as a woman should. It also shows how Hester would eagerly

make the same kind of sacrifice to accomplish the things that Catherine was able to in spite of this loss. At one of Catherine's Christmas parties, Oliphant reveals how much her involvement in the business has cost her, at least in the eyes of other middle-class women. When discussing how Catherine mingled just as easily with the clerks' and cashiers' wives at the party, one of the "great ladies" who were her guests remarked that "after all, when a woman had once been engaged in business, it always left a mark upon her" (313). The other remarked, " 'It does give a sort of an unfeminine turn of the mind, though dear Miss Vernon is so universally respected.' " Oliphant makes it clear that though Catherine herself did not hear this conversation, it would have pleased and amused her to hear, not disturbed or angered her, and that she indeed could tell what the two were discussing "from the conjunction of Lady Freemantle's diamonds with Mrs. Merridew's lace" (313-4). For Oliphant, it seems that it is Catherine's money that allows her to have the social power that she wields (49), and, despite having a career, she has more than maintained her class status. Because Catherine herself did not marry, she is able to escape having immediate family of her own and can serve her family in other ways. Though Oliphant calls Catherine an "old maid," she seems to present favorably the fact that remaining unmarried allowed her to escape "those absorbing affections which bind a married woman within her own circle" (23), unable to think beyond herself or her immediate family.

Oliphant explores this connection between economic power and cultural currency through Catherine Vernon's control in economic exchange throughout the novel, but never more than during the two threats to the family bank. Oliphant contrasts Catherine's willingness to exert this power to the desertion of both John and Edward Vernon, whose

questionable business practices were what put the bank in jeopardy. John is depicted as being merely cowardly, whereas Edward's behavior is shown to be "a transgression of the laws of honour" (377). After losing the money he took from the bank in a bad investment, he thinks of himself as being in "some deep-lying underground where he was [fate's] slave, and could only wait till the iron car of necessity rolled on and crushed him" (377). He feels as if his relationship with Catherine is another kind of bondage, finding even her kindest gestures to be offensive. "And Catherine herself, all unconscious that her presence was disagreeable, might have come to the door to summon them, or perhaps even to bring them, with her own kind hands, the cups of tea which in his heart Edward loathed as one of the signs of his slavery" (197). Edward is obviously not in control of either his economic or social situation, and unlike Hester, is bound not by societal prejudices, but by his own lack of principle. Although both he and Hester share their dislike of being dependent on Catherine, he is unwilling or unable to sever that tie despite having a means to make a living on his own.

Not all of the women in *Hester* control their economic futures, however. Oliphant presents Hester's mother Mrs. John as "helpless, ignorant," basically clueless about the bank going under. Oliphant describes her as wearing her "low white" muslin with "short sleeves," linking her dress to her economic helplessness. At times, Oliphant appears to react negatively to women's increasing encroachment into the business world, claiming, "We have no doubt that the dying-out of chivalry, and the way in which women nowadays insist on doing their own business, and most likely other people's too, is in great part to be put down to high dresses and long sleeves. In these habiliments a lady looks not so very much different from other people" (8). In the end, there is no clear

resolution to *Hester*'s position on women in the economic sphere, because despite Catherine's final triumph in saving the bank, Hester is not promised to succeed her. Hester is never granted her true wish, to work, but remains frustrated in her desires to the end of the novel, and Catherine Vernon herself tells her that if she could do it again, she would choose marriage over business despite her successful career.

This portrayal of family loyalty (and disloyalty) and its connection to economic and social success is also one of the primary tensions at play in *Kirsteen*: the conflict between desire for occupation and duty to family. Kirsteen is both fiercely independent and fiercely dedicated to her family name, her "blood." According to Oliphant, Kirsteen had the "instincts of gentle blood" though she also seems bitter about the restrictions that blood placed on her. For example, Oliphant reveals Kirsteen's indignation in the face of her father's favoritism towards her brothers, pointing out, "The injustice, the humiliation and hard bondage of the iron rule under which she had been brought up, but which she had only now begun to look upon as anything more than the rule of nature" (46).

Kirsteen sees first hand the cost of denying blood connections when her oldest sister Anne leaves home. Anne denies this heritage when she leaves home against her father's will to marry a "commoner," a doctor. Her poor judgment taught the younger girls a lesson, the horror of her banishment from the family. Kirsteen actually berates her other sister, Mary, for belittling the value of the family's "good blood." Even dressmaker Macnab seems to share Kirsteen's prejudices about blood ties and their influence, saying, "It wants good blood in your veins and a leddy's breeding before you'll ever make a gown that will set off a leddy" (56). When Kirsteen decides to leave home, foremost in her mind is "the most terrible though of all"—the shame of opening the Douglas name up

to questions of impropriety, the “scandal” that may cause people to think poorly of her family name.

Oliphant constantly references Kirsteen’s family name and the obligations that name entails throughout the novel. Kirsteen rationalizes and justifies her decision to become a mantua-maker by deciding it would be the best way to support her family economically, that when she “made her fortune” she could “be a help to every one that bore her name” (158). Oliphant notes how when the duo of Kirsteen and Jean, the woman responsible for taking Kirsteen in, becomes more and more successful, Jean, “though she had begun her life as a lady’s maid, was scarcely less than that of Marg’ret’s young mistress who had the blood of all the Douglasses in her veins” (181). And when Jean proposes a partnership to Kirsteen, it is because of Kirsteen’s family background, her “freedom in treating them that I cannot help feeling are my superiors” (183). Ultimately, blood ties have more power than simply to limit acceptable behavior—they also are what allow Kirsteen to act with a freedom that Jean does not possess.

Kirsteen’s pride in this family name that she left behind is what drives her to succeed. She refuses her sister Mary’s dress order; Kirsteen will serve no commoners, even those with money. Her successes elevate her beyond even the class from which she came. She declares to Jean, ““They will come in here and give their orders as if it was a favor to you and me! I would like to learn them a lesson: that though we’re mantua-makers, it’s not for the like of them—a person with no name to speak of—and giving her orders to one of the Douglasses!”” (214) Suddenly, the embarrassment of deserting family and deciding on a trade is reversed, and Kirsteen has manipulated her misfortune into an opportunity for advancement. Her skill, her career, give her power over those

whom she would ordinarily not have control over. As an independent woman, she reaches a position that no Douglas, good name or not, had yet held.

Kirsteen's successes make her scorn her sister Anne for her failure to think beyond herself. When their mother is dying, Kirsteen is determined to return to Drumcarro, but not without Anne. Kirsteen travels to Glasgow to convince Anne to accompany her, and is disgusted to see her sister's unwillingness to leave the comfort of her family for even a short time, thinking, "Was this the effect of marrying and being happy as people say? The little plump mother with her rosy face no longer capable of responding to any call outside of her own little circle of existence...the loosening of all other bonds of older date or wider reach" (254). However, when Kirsteen herself had initially contemplated leaving home, she had thought that Anne was lucky to have a husband to care for her and home. Now, though, Kirsteen's independence allows her to refuse to marry just for her own comfort. As she tells Jean, "I'll not marry a man to deceive him when I care for nothing but his money...I've just come to London to work for my living—and make my fortune if I can" (157). At times Oliphant presents Kirsteen's choice of a profession as replacing family life with her career, even comparing Kirsteen's work to offspring, saying, "She was as well satisfied with all the plannings and alterings as a mother is with things that please and occupy her child" (241). Although younger than Anne, Kirsteen has an independence that gives her not only an increased awareness of the world around her, but an increased awareness of self. Oliphant draws a contrast between Kirsteen and other young, dependent women, noting, "At twenty-six when a young woman has gone through many vicissitudes of actual life, when she has been forced into independence, and stood for herself against the world, she is as mature

as if she were twenty years older” and had stayed in the protective environment of the home. (224)

Kirsteen’s first brush with marriage comes early in the novel, and it is her promise to wait for Ronald Drummond until he returns from India that finally causes her departure from home. Because her father tries to force her into a marriage to another man, Glendochart, Kirsteen feels she must do what she must to honor that promise and leaves before her father can cause her to break it. While pursuing her career in London and waiting for Drummond’s return, Kirsteen worries occasionally that he and his family may look unfavorably on her “mantua-making episode” (225) as Oliphant calls it, one of the few times that Kirsteen questions her decision. After she hears of Drummond’s death, “Kirsteen worked like two women. She had never been so inventive, so full of new combinations. . . . Kirsteen held her place till the last great ball was over, and then she went away” (233), crushed with grief and loss. It is only when she abandons all hopes of marriage that Kirsteen fully dedicates herself to her trade, admitting that, “There was no one to object any more than to praise. She was independent of all the world, and bound to that work forever” (241). She finally reenters her life and begins her work anew, making changes in the shop according to her own ideas.

Because of Drummond’s death, Kirsteen is spared the decision between career and marriage. However, in other novels Oliphant explores this issue in more depth. At the time of her novels’ publication, the notion of separate spheres was still socially accepted—Victorians saw marriage and public life as independent roles. Dolin points out that for women who needed to support themselves outside the home, the focus was on professions that were seen as an “extension” of the “woman’s sphere,” like nursing,

teaching, and writing. There was a reluctance to insist on women's fitness for men's work. We can see these ideas reflected in *Miss Marjoribanks*. Ideally, the kind of work that Lucilla thinks would suit her is out of her grasp if she is to maintain her middle-class status. Lucilla thinks about her maid Betsy and footman Thomas who end up marrying and running an inn together, musing, "It was life the housemaid was about to enter on—active life of her own, with an object and meaning—clogged by Thomas, no doubt, who did not appear to Lucilla as the bright spot in the picture—but still independent life; whereas her mistress knew of nothing particularly interesting in her own uncertain future" (426). Langland holds that by keeping the focus on social standing, the text does not support the notion of gender as the primary determiner of subjectivity, or that gender predetermines women for certain behavior or occupation. Instead, it "subverts that ideological move to sharpen its focus on the way strategies of social management effectively produce political control" (Langland 167). However, Langland admits that Lucilla feels a class-based regret—that occupations open to lower-class women are not open to her.

In *Hester*, too, Oliphant presents the tension women experienced between career and marriage. Hester tells Emma Ashton that perhaps it would be better for Emma to have been a governess than to always have to rely upon her family for a place to stay. Emma replies, "To have a paid salary would be very nice—but it hurts a girl's chance...I was very unwilling to do anything to damage my chance" (254). Hester pretends not to realize what Emma means by "her chance," and asks her, meaning to "crush her companion with lofty indignation: but Emma was not quick enough to perceive the moral disapproval. She was not even conscious that it was possible to

disapprove of such an elemental necessity” (254). When Hester realizes the extent of Emma’s matter-of-fact acceptance of this way of existence, she is horrified, although Oliphant notes that in reality it is “the most calm historic account of a state of affairs which seemed perfectly natural to every one concerned” (255), except, of course, for Hester.

Later in the novel, after repairing the damage at the bank created by Edward, taking a great personal loss, Catherine discusses with Hester the possibility of her working at Vernon’s. “‘It is a great pity,’ she said ‘a girl like you, that instead of teaching or doing needlework, you should not go to Vernon’s, as you have a right to do, and work there’” (492). Hester responds that she wishes she could, but Catherine tells her it is not to be. When Hester asks why not, when Catherine herself did it, Catherine replies, “ ‘I was old. I was past my youth. All that sort of thing was over for me. It could be in one way—if you could make up your mind to marry Harry—’” (493). Despite all of her successes, Catherine cannot envision a life in the economic sphere for Hester, even though she herself professes to desire such a position.

For Kirsteen Douglas, even after her brother finds out she bought the family land with her earnings, he cannot forgive her for her work. “‘Any sort of man, if he had been a chimney-sweep, would have been better’” (341). Though in *Kirsteen* Oliphant has created a young, independent woman who chooses career over marriage, even her economic success does not completely protect her from societal expectations. The choice between home and career do not appear to be completely resolved, as even in the process of exhibiting Kirsteen’s financial success by buying back family land, Oliphant presents the brother’s suggestion that any marriage would have been better. Regardless,

Kirsteen's economic control is unquestionable, and only highlights her father's failure to manage his own economic circumstances. Oliphant even shows us Drumcarro sitting in front of a map of the old Douglas properties, as he wonders if perhaps even a grandson would ever be able to raise the money to buy back the land. (198) When Kirsteen comes to give him the money to buy back the land, he cannot accept from whom it comes, and instead of crediting her success, he questions the solidity of the existing social order, telling her, "It was little likely I should think of a lass like you having siller at her command—everything in this country is turned upside down" (338).

Questioning the social order is, however, part of what Oliphant does in these four texts. *Kirsteen*, *Phoebe Jr.*, *Miss Marjoribanks*, and *Hester* served two purposes for Oliphant—they allowed her to reflect on the society in which she lived, and, conversely, to place her own mark on that society. The novels themselves are a conduit for Oliphant to explore the position of women who want both a career and family. Though this situation may have occasionally caused Oliphant herself some consternation and prevented her from crafting these novels more slowly and carefully, some critics may argue that that is part of the novels' appeal. As J. M. Barrie notes in his forward to Oliphant's "A Widow's Tale,"

...whether they [her novels] would have been greater books had she revised one instead of beginning another is probably to be doubted. Not certainly because the best of them could not have been made better...Condensation, a more careful choice of words, we all learn these arts in the schools nowadays—they are natural to the spirit of the age; but Mrs. Oliphant never learned them, they were contrary to her genius...and they would probably have trammelled [sic] her so much that the books would have lost more than they gained. (vii)

Whether the novels would have improved if Oliphant had been able to devote her complete attention and a limitless amount of time to them, we can never know. What

does seem clear is that in them, she successfully reveals the tension experienced by women as they strove for a balance between career and family, a balance that Oliphant identifies as critical to women establishing their place in both the public and private spheres.

CHAPTER THREE

BEATING HEARTS AND WALKING DEAD: OLIPHANT'S SUPERNATURAL FICTION

Exploring Oliphant's works on the Seen and Unseen is a challenge, in part because Oliphant's views on the differing, and at times even conflicting, world of the "Seen" (the material, living, everyday world) and the "Unseen" (the world of the spirit, the world of the extraordinary) change from story to story. In defining these two worlds, she draws boundaries between them and reveals what happens when those boundaries are crossed. In special circumstances, the inhabitants of the Unseen are able to manipulate the living, and the living are able to see and experience the dead. In fact, Oliphant herself can be seen as crossing these boundaries by writing about the Unseen from her own place in the living world. Her stories, intended to instruct the living about the spirit world, can be said to inhabit that undefined space between the two. As Elizabeth Jay notes, Oliphant is "allowing the imagination to create a liminal world, where past, present, and future can coexist, permit[ing] the unseen to find a point of entry," through the door created by Oliphant, a door that "both is and is not there" (170). In the act of presenting these two worlds as separate spheres, Oliphant reveals an area of overlap, a place where the separation between the two is indistinct. The intermingling of these two spheres is where Oliphant explores the middle-class value system of the Victorian period, examining the relationship of spirituality to this system and the part that both she and other women play in constructing it. In these stories she locates women's authority in their connection to the "other world," the connection between the Seen and Unseen. Oliphant also shows us that the separate spheres of the physical and the material are not, in fact, separate, nor are

they even two sides of the same coin: they are like looking through two transparencies that have been placed on top of each other, whose separate patterns are still distinguishable, but whose overall picture is changed and complicated by the combination, creating possibilities for women's control in this world.

Not many other critics have examined these works, or, in fact, given serious consideration to much of Victorian supernatural fiction. In their introduction to *The Haunted Mind: The Supernatural in Victorian Literature*, Elton Smith and Robert Haas note this scarcity of criticism on Victorian supernatural fiction, and how what criticism there is on the subject is “predictable in its conclusions, and derived from traditionally conservative perspectives” (viii), providing few unique viewpoints on the topic. Glen Cavaliero addresses this same dearth of criticism in *The Supernatural and English Fiction*, claiming that because prose work rose to dominance at a time of increased secularization, when scientific materialism was replacing an absent deity, any mention of supernatural forces in a work of fiction devalued it. Cavaliero voices the opinion that critics may avoid such a subject that is a “source of confusion” and often dismissed as “eccentric or irrelevant” (9). What little serious criticism there is seldom mentions Oliphant, and when it does it is usually only the very briefest of references.⁸

Only works of criticism devoted entirely to Oliphant herself seem to treat her supernatural tales with depth, and even then most seem to focus on only one or two of the works. Of these stories, “The Little Pilgrim in the Seen and Unseen” seems to be most

⁸ Cavaliero treats Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City*, “The Open Door,” “Earthbound,” “Old Lady Mary,” and “The Library Window” in a brief section of his book (two pages' worth of criticism); Smith and Haas don't mention Oliphant at all, nor does Julian Wolfreys; Vanessa Dickerson deals specifically with “Old Lady Mary” but mentions Oliphant in general several times.

underrepresented, with only a brief mention in much of the criticism.⁹ Esther Schor discusses how two other critics of Oliphant's "Seen and Unseen," John R. Reed and Margaret K. Gray, "condescend to Oliphant as a pious domesticator of the supernatural" (Schor 90). Although Schor's critique may not "condescend," it does, however, present a substantial examination of only "Earthbound" and *A Beleaguered City*. One critic, Margarete Rubik, goes so far to state that the "Stories of the Seen and Unseen," while the best-known and the widest read of Oliphant's work at the time of publication, are "of very varied quality...[revealing] a lack of critical instinct and a 'self-indulgence' at odds with her otherwise cool and detached style" (278). Some of the hesitance to analyze these works, and critics' mixed reaction to them, may stem from the fact that these stories are slippery in terms of categorization. Rubik explains how in the "Stories of the Seen and Unseen," Oliphant "transcends the themes and motifs customary in the Victorian domestic novel," (297), which places the works outside of that particular genre. It's possible that Oliphant deliberately crafted these stories to exist in an ill-defined, amorphous category. The very title of the works, "Stories of the Seen and Unseen," avoids being decisive about genre (Jay 158). Not only do the tales themselves not resemble typical writings in the typical genres, they also do not resemble one another. Schor points out that Oliphant's "placement of such diverse writings under a single rubric is easily attributed to her reliable, if not unflinching, instincts for the market" (91), an ability that explains the popularity of the works with the reading audience during the time period. And Rubik places *A Beleaguered City* and "The Library Window" among Oliphant's best works, but criticizes the Pilgrim stories for being "insufferably trashy to

⁹ Although Rubik mentions the "Pilgrim" series (280-2), the chapter in D.J. Trela's anthology by Schor focuses only on *A Beleaguered City*. Jay provides the most detailed treatment of Oliphant's *Seen and Unseen*.

the modern reader” (278). One thing unites all of Oliphant’s supernatural fiction, however. In some of the stories the Unseen forces itself into the world of the Seen, in others the story takes place in the Unseen but is viewed in the perspective of the Seen, but all of these stories demonstrate the connection of the two worlds.

While one might expect Oliphant to use these stories to construct a framework for thinking about what happens to souls after the body dies, she in fact consistently uses them to navigate through her perceptions of the social order of this world and to examine the relationship between the separate spheres. She formulates theories on the position of women in society, the influence of scientific knowledge, and the potential evils of wealth and power. But Oliphant’s positions on these matters are never clear-cut. What Oliphant succeeds in revealing is the overlap between the physical and the spiritual, the public and the private, men’s roles and women’s duties. She puts herself in a position to expose the inherent flaws in cultural precepts about the spiritual world and show how women’s, and her own, relationship to this world cannot be rigidly defined.

We see this kind of overlap in *A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen*. In it, Oliphant presents her view of life after death. She constructs a land of the Unseen, her version of heaven, where souls go when they depart the living world. The pilgrim finds herself in this world, unaware even that she has died, and must learn the rules of this new place. She receives guidance from a number of different characters that she comes across in her travels about the land, and in the end decides to become a guide for the newly-arrived herself. The new world that Oliphant creates is modeled after this world, the world of the living, with only a few key differences. It is as though Oliphant has taken bits and pieces of her world and transposed them into a setting that mimics not just the landscape, but the

physical constructions, the daily chores, and the cultural values of the world of the Seen. The roles of men and women, the family, professions, all still exist in the afterlife that Oliphant creates, but in versions that bear a striking resemblance to those in life.

Rubik points to the perfect blue skies and pastures in the Heaven of the Pilgrim series and how these reflect the art of the time, and notes how the topography is “copied from contemporary London” (281). Rubik claims that Oliphant’s portrayal of this new world, “incorporates Victorian idealism to an absurd degree” (281), but the idealized nature of the surroundings and the people are so transparent that Oliphant doesn’t seem to mean them literally—she is using the idealization as a tool to highlight places where the differences between the two worlds break down. By creating the “perfect” existence, Oliphant is able to show the imperfections in reality. For example, when the Pilgrim first awakes, “all was so still that it could not be the bustling wintry day” like the day she died.

(*A Little Pilgrim* 4) Oliphant expands on her description of perfection:

She thought all at once of a summer morning when she was a child, when she had woke in the deep night which yet was day, early—so early that the birds were scarcely astir—and had risen with a delicious sense of daring...as if she were Eve just entering upon Eden. (5)

This Eden contrasts specifically with a “bustling wintry day” and the Pilgrim’s experience in it. Additionally, the scene is reminiscent of one that Oliphant recounts in her autobiography. After lamenting the death of her daughter, she describes an idealized day from her youth to contrast with the harshness of her current existence. “When I was a girl I remember the feeling I had when the fresh morning light came around. Whatever grief there had been the night before, the new day triumphed over it” (*Autobiography* 6). She goes on to say, “I recollect with the most vivid clearness...a warm still summer day, lying on my back in the grass...looking up into the sky. The depths of it, the blueness of

it...that profound unfathomable blue” (20). These visions from her youth resemble the Heaven of the Pilgrim. Although Oliphant cannot return to the more carefree times of her youth, she uses these idealizations to construct the surroundings of the Pilgrim. Taken from memory, the reality of these blue skies and summer breezes become truly Edenic in Oliphant’s construction of paradise.

The city that the Pilgrim arrives at later in the work bears a similar resemblance to contemporary cities. Though constructed the same, the cities of Oliphant’s time cannot come close to the perfection of the Heavenly cities. As the Pilgrim notes, “It was a great city, but it was not like the great cities which she had seen...those who had been dazzled but by a passing glance had described the walls and the pavement as gold...The buildings were all beautiful, of every style and form that it is possible to think of, yet in great harmony” (74). Oliphant implicitly contrasts this ideal world with the cities of the living world that are not paved with gold, that do not have beautifully harmonized buildings. Even though Oliphant may, as Rubik argues, rely heavily on “clichés otherwise frequently ridiculed” by herself, she seems to be doing so to show that the relationship between this world and the next is not absolute, not necessarily because she supports the philosophies that these clichés represent.

The pilgrim herself is said to be a solitary, older woman who, “had known all the round of sorrows that fill a woman’s life, without knowing any of its warmer blessings. She had nursed the sick, she had entertained the weary, she had consoled the dying. She had gone about the world, which had no prize nor recompense for her, with a smile” (6). In life, she fulfilled all the duties of a woman, focused on private life and family, doing what was expected of her without question. We can see a similarity between the pilgrim

and Oliphant, as she presents herself in her autobiography, someone dedicated to lives of others without time or inclination to think of herself. As Oliphant proclaims, “Curious freedom! I have never know what it was. I have always had to think of other people” (*Autobiography* 16). She talks of “carrying a whole little world with me” everywhere she went, always aware of her duties (16). Oliphant portrays the Pilgrim, however, as being so simple that this type of thinking, desires for more than her lot in life, did not cross her mind. “She was not clever; you might have said she had no mind at all” (6), unlike Oliphant herself.

Oliphant seems to use her discussion of the pilgrim to reflect on how she thought of herself as a writer. When the pilgrim arrives in the Unseen, she finds herself in a flowered meadow, surrounded by other souls who had recently left the earth, who want to know what she knows, want to hear about her experiences and her history in the new land. She becomes upset by their demands, “She who had always been so simple and small, so little used to teach; she was frightened with the sight of all these strangers crowding, hanging upon her lips, looking to her for knowledge” (67-8). She keeps denying having knowledge, even when speaking of what she knows, but finally realizes with a shock that her knowledge and opinions may indeed be valuable. “And so full was she of the great things she had to say, that it was a surprise to her, and left her trembling” (71). These sentiments are similar to Oliphant’s own presentation of herself as a writer; in her autobiography, she consistently questions the value of her writing, and yet has strong opinions that she expresses in the articles and reviews that she writes. For example, she claims at the beginning of her autobiographical attempt that she feels she has nothing to teach anyone, that “I may put the long musing of my agony into words, but

Tennyson has done it already far better than I can” (11). However, she proceeds with the project despite these seeming misgivings. Oliphant occasionally questioned her own worth in her autobiography, asking even in the midst of writing it why she should do so. She talks of how she is in “very little danger of having my life written...for what could be said of me?” (17) She refers to her “poor little unappreciated self” and to being a “fat, little, commonplace woman.” Earlier in the text, though, when discussing another Victorian writer, she shows more confidence in her own abilities:

I was reading of Charlotte Brontë the other day, and could not help comparing myself with the picture more or less as I read. I don't suppose my powers are equal to hers—my work to myself looks perfectly pale and colorless beside hers—but yet I have had far more experience and, I think, a fuller conception of life. (10)

Although some of Oliphant's disparagements may be rhetorical devices, they may still expose Oliphant's desire to prove her value as a writer.

We see a further connection to Oliphant's work as the pilgrim travels through her new world and discovers people working in occupations similar to those on earth. She has a conversation with one of the artists she meets about the contrast between his work in the new world and his work in the old. He tells her that the biggest difference is in comparing one's own work to others'. When you are alive, “Your own work may rejoice you in your heart, but always with a little trembling, because it is never so perfect as you would have it,” he tells her, but goes on to explain that you can see the perfection in others' work because it is beyond your own knowledge or vision. (79) In death, however, the artist no longer begrudges the perfection of others' work, even though he did before. In the Unseen, he is free from the petty resentments that bound him when he was alive. Oliphant describes similar feelings of resentment in her autobiography, when she

compares herself to other writers and finds herself lacking. When Oliphant compares herself to Austen, for example, she compares the atmosphere in which they wrote—Austen had plenty of time to devote to writing, but Oliphant notes of herself, “I don’t think I have ever had two hours undisturbed...during my whole literary life” to devote entirely to writing, because she was constantly distracted by other domestic responsibilities. (*Autobiography* 30) Oliphant even claims to have been motivated to write her autobiography by Eliot’s biography, saying, “I wonder if I am a little envious of her? I always avoid considering formally what my own mind is worth” (14). It seems that Oliphant may be using the Unseen to examine those resentful feelings in herself, to justify them to an extent, and finally to banish them through the mouth of this dead soul.

Although Oliphant may note her dissatisfaction with her own work in her autobiography, and even question her own abilities, in *A Little Pilgrim* she reveals not just the importance of writing in general, but the importance of writing to her. She conjures an image of a writer as a sage, someone who is able to influence how the world views itself, someone who shapes the world as he or she describes it. As part of the pilgrim’s progress through the land, she encounters a writer, and inquires into the nature of his work. He explains that the job of the writer in the Unseen is to look back on life and to explore the meaning of it, to frame it, to define it. The task of the writer is to connect the world of the living and the dead by influencing the living’s perceptions of their lives from beyond. He tells her that the suffering he experienced in life is what makes him suitable for this position, because if you have led a hard life,

You are more accomplished and fit for greater work in the end...when we have to be trained for an office like this...the reason is that we should see everything, and learn all that man is and can be. [In life] These things are too deep for us; we stumble on, and know not till after. (96-7)

Oliphant claims not to see herself in this capacity. In fact, she asserts the complete opposite in a *Blackwood's* article, saying, "We are no preacher to call English ladies to account, and we have no tragical message even had we the pulpit to do it in" ("Novels" 275). Despite this seeming resistance, however, Oliphant is actually serving in *A Little Pilgrim* as a sort of preacher, providing her audience with a spiritual vision of "heaven" on which they can draw for solace, consolation, and peace.

She exerts her authority in the text through the way she discusses the everyday life of the other world. When focusing on these daily tasks that take place in the Unseen, she shows the parts of daily life that are usually "un-seeable" in normal circumstances. As Laurie Langbauer notes in *Novels of Everyday Life*, "One thing about the everyday, Oliphant implies, is that we are loath to see it, especially to recognize it in ourselves, to see ourselves as what we are so willing to condemn and reject as the 'vulgar routine' in others" (63). Oliphant's focus on the everyday both reaffirms the workings of culture and resists it. We can see a vivid example of this in how Oliphant discusses the act of writing in both *A Little Pilgrim* and her autobiography. In *A Little Pilgrim*, she makes the writing seem important, the recording of the meaning of life in the beyond, but she also makes it a joyful occurrence. As the little pilgrim watches all the writers in their recordings, she notices, "it did not seem any trouble to do this work, but only pleasure, and the very pen in his hand was like a winged thing, as if it loved to write" (101). Oliphant exhibits a similar sentiment in her autobiography, when she talks about her own joy in writing, but also seems to contradict some of the ways she talks about it. She says of her own writing, "I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing" (14), things necessary to life that she would do regardless

of necessity. Elsewhere, she compares her writing to domestic tasks, describing the location where she had to write, at the family table, as if she were “making a shirt” (30). The message seems to be the same—the writing, for her, was both critical (in terms of economic survival) and a source of pleasure. Her comparison of writing to domestic tasks does not mean she thinks less of the writing, but reveals the value of her own and others’ domestic labor, regardless of the nature of that labor. In both *A Little Pilgrim* and her autobiography, by focusing on these daily tasks and by showing the work that is done and the rationale behind it, she is exploring how writing and domestic tasks fit in the cultural framework in which she herself and others operate. Her ability to make a comparison between these two dissimilar-seeming acts highlights the ways that societal expectations about women and women’s labor can be misleading, especially when held up against examples of women’s actual work.

The parts of everyday life that most interest Oliphant in the *Little Pilgrim* are those of work and family. When the pilgrim first arrives, she is worried about “doing.” “‘How idle I am!’ she said to herself, in the very words she had often used before she died; but then she was idle from weakness, and now from happiness” (29). The back-and-forth reference does not stop with the experience of the pilgrim herself. The pilgrim meets a man at the gate, a fellow soul, who observes, “I hope though there is something to do. I have always lived a very busy life. Perhaps this is just a pause before we go—to be—to have—to get our—appointed place” (66). Again, Oliphant connects the before and after, illustrating how this “soul” is retaining his beliefs and attitudes from his previous life, beliefs about work and personal industry. She is also showing the possible, transitional nature of these existences. In expressing his desire to move on to an

“appointed place,” this man is reflecting a desire from this world that Oliphant is relying on, the belief or desire to believe that there is “something else” that comes after.

Oliphant shows how work and family are closely related in *A Little Pilgrim*. The pilgrim’s first job, for example, is to rescue a woman entering the gate. “She went forward, and gathered this poor creature into her arms, as if it had been a child” (47), echoing a duty that the pilgrim could have had in life, had she been a mother or caregiver. We can see a connection to Oliphant’s perception of her own family that she reveals in her autobiography. She explains how her mother and brother supported her initial attempts at writing, saying, “I had nobody to praise me except my mother and Frank, and their applause—well, it was delightful, it was everything in the world—it was life” (29). She in turn sustains her family economically with her writing. She also reveals her great love for her children and how their deaths and sickness affected her so greatly, despite her having to sacrifice for them with her work. Oliphant’s goal in life was similar to the one she gives the pilgrim—to care for others, career or not. As she says herself, “The writing ran through everything. But then it was also subordinate to everything, to be pushed aside for any little necessity” (30). In *A Little Pilgrim*, however, the connection between family and work does not require the kinds of sacrifice that Oliphant herself was forced to make. When the pilgrim asks a writer about the homes there, she is told, “‘It is all home here,’” and learns that although they all have their own occupations, the responsibilities were shared.

The pilgrim also meets a couple, a man and a woman, who actually take her to their home. She expresses relief to learn that this family mentality still exists, couples coexisting as a unit, but learns that, “‘It is not as it was...it is no longer needful that one

should sit at home while the other goes forth; for our work is not for our life as of old, or for ourselves,” but for God (128). The blending of the roles of men and women is spelled out—for Oliphant, in her afterworld, in her recreation of *this* world, there is no difference between men’s work and women’s work. This concept, combined with her idea of the overlapping spheres of family and career, reveals her perception of these spheres in life. Jay argues that the roles played by women in Oliphant’s tales of the afterlife “both mirror and offer models for their earthly roles” (171). She notes how “the ‘liberation’ of married women [in Oliphant’s heaven] from domestic servitude enables due value be given to a sense of female community” (172). By affecting this “liberation,” Oliphant calls into question the very nature of “women’s work” on earth. If, in the Unseen, these separate roles do not exist, then the earthly divisions no longer make sense. In any case, all of these idealizations, that of the roles of men and women, the focus on usefulness, even the idealization of the landscape, end up revealing the boundaries Oliphant is crossing in writing this story.

In the aptly-named “The Land of Darkness,” Oliphant shows an afterlife almost completely opposite that of *A Little Pilgrim*. Like the little pilgrim, the narrator in “The Land of Darkness” is newly arrived in the afterlife, but receives a vastly different welcome. The story’s connection to the Little Pilgrim series would be clear, even without the introduction from Oliphant that states, “The following narrative forms a necessary part of the Little Pilgrim’s experiences in the spiritual world, though it is not her personal story” (162). All parts of existence in this land are represented as mirror opposites of the land of the pilgrim. From the start it is easy to see the reversal. This “traveler” begins his trek through the land of the spirits on a busy city street, complete

with non-stop traffic and a sky with a “faint reddish tint diffused upon the vaporous darkness” (162). He is immediately assaulted by the current denizens of the land and decides to wait for someone in authority to complain to, but nobody appeared. “No one was sorry for me—not a look of compassion, not a word of inquiry was wasted upon me” (166). He meets other miserable souls as he goes along, all selfish, angry, and injured. He questions them and learns that all that was good in his previous life, hospitals, law enforcement, order in general, does not exist in this place.

Just as in *A Little Pilgrim*, there is work, but the work occurs in an industrialized waste, and the residents work in mines or become victims of scientific experiments. In one of the areas of darkness visited by the narrator, he becomes such a victim, one of the “mass of bruised and broken creatures...They had served like myself as objects of experiments. They had fallen from heights were they had been placed, in illustration of some theory. They had been tortured or twisted to give satisfaction to some question” (193). Just as Oliphant relies on the world of the living to create her heaven, she relies on it to create her version of hell here. The evils of industrialization, the perils of scientific knowledge, are all connected in this dark land. There is no family, no home. There is no distinction between the work of men and women, just as in the land of the little pilgrim, but it is because everyone is equally likely to become a victim of torment. Oliphant appears to issue a warning in this tale—risk losing your humanity through your pursuits of industry and knowledge.

Oliphant sets up a series of contrasts in this story. She uses the land of the pilgrim to show the contrast between the landscapes, the occupations, the attitudes of the dead. On a more vivid and more global scale is the contrast between the workings of science,

technology, and industry, and those of spirituality. This particular topic is likely the result of her own preoccupation with scientific advances and the effects of industrialization on Victorian England. It is clear from reading these stories of the Unseen that Oliphant was not just unsatisfied with the theories of science, but with the theologies of established religions as well¹⁰, and so set out to affirm her own beliefs, taken from a variety of sources, both spiritual and secular. At the same time, she is responding to the growth in popularity of scientific theories that had caused an increase in works that discussed them. She sets forth an array of scathing commentaries in her review of Darwin's memoirs. She wonders, for example, "how the secret of life could be discovered by the dissection of pigeons and poking into the watery entrails of a medusa" ("The Old Saloon 10" 106).

Oliphant was prompted to cover these topics in her own writing so that she could present the negative effects of these works on the reading audience. Works that relied on the public's new fascination with science and "pseudo-sciences" (like phrenology and mesmerism) were encouraging the wrong sort of trend, according to Oliphant, one where previously illicit material was becoming commonplace. She claims that the way scientific advances have increased the proximity and immediacy of world events is bad for literature. "We can all but hear the echo of the guns, all but reckon the groans of the wounded" ("New Books 3" 608). She also claims she is not "sneering" at science, "but

¹⁰ Her *Blackwood's* essays on scientific advances include "Modern Light Literature—Science." 78 (Jul. 1855) 72-86; her review of John Tyndall's *Fragments of Science for Unscientific People* in "New Books 6," July 1871, 62-80; and her review of the *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* in "The Old Saloon 10." Her religious essays are too numerous to list here, but include "The Fancies of a Believer," February 1895, 237-55; "Religion in Common Life," February 1856, 243-6; "Sermons," December 1858, 728-42; also August 1862, 202-20; "The Life of Jesus," October 1864, 417-31; and "The Conversion of England," December 1867, 702-24.

we are far from being sure that any such influence can be one of unmitigated advantage” (“New Books 3” 609). She expresses her view of the advantages brought by science, advantages “deeply tintured with loss,” through the *Seen and Unseen*, showing how the evils of scientific knowledge can create a veritable hell on earth. She appears fascinated with the ambiguous connection between science, spirituality, and materialism. We can see this connection in a review of Darwin’s works, when she connects the scientist himself to a heavenly figure. Oliphant claims, “Truth compels us to admit that had Mr. Darwin borne the aspect of an angel of light (before such fictions were exploded), instead of being only a very well-to-do, leisurely, excellent, and amiable invalid gentleman,” people would still have initially had trouble believing his discoveries, insinuating that the nature of these discoveries were in part responsible for the “exploding” of elements of faith and spiritualism (“The Old Saloon 10” 106). This ambiguity, the blending of science and religious doctrine, finds its way into the works themselves, adding to their undefined status. Are these works declarations against science? Are they a formulation of religious belief? Are they a stab at the increasing materialism of the Victorian Age? At the same time, they could be all of these, or none.

Oliphant’s focus on the overlap that the *Stories of the Seen and Unseen* exposes between the physical world and what comes after, the material and spiritual, is something that critics allude to but fail to provide a satisfactory explanation for. Margaret K. Gray’s introduction to the collection of stories argues that Oliphant’s supernatural fiction was intended to “serve as a bulwark against the increasing materialism and scepticism [sic] of her age” (*Selected Short Stories of the Supernatural* ix). As Oliphant complains in a *Blackwood’s* essay, “All our minor novelists, almost without exception, are of the school

called sensational,” who deal with “bigamy and seduction.” These novelists are making up for what they lack in talent by exploiting the appeal of sensationalism, according to Oliphant. (“Novels” 258) These novels are full of black arts, mad psychology, horror, Mesmerism, Socialism, or “what creeping honours [sic] might be underground” (“Sensation Novels” 565). After the 1850s, the supernatural story shared space with the sensation novel and its focus on materiality, sensuality and sexuality, although Oliphant herself distinguishes between the two genres (“Sensation Novels” 565). Like her feelings about certain aspects of scientific advances, her opinion on sensation and sensuality varies: it is not so much science itself that she objects to, but the uses to which it is put, and not the sensations themselves that she disapproves of, but the way authors discuss them. Oliphant professes a disgust of works that flaunt “the flesh,” complaining about the women who “describe those sensuous raptures.” Oliphant does not deny that these physical feelings in women exist, but does not like how they are supported and displayed through the literature and by the women who read it. She finds the language of physical passion to be a “curious language...for a girl” (“Novels” 267). She then qualifies her position, claiming that a woman who is “driven wild by the discovery of domestic fraud and great wrong” may acceptably say just about anything, but only if passion provokes it. The relating of “nasty thoughts [and] ugly suggestions...is almost more appalling than the facts of actual depravity, because it has no excuse of sudden passion or temptation, and no visible boundary” (“Novels” 275). For Oliphant, then, authors’ exploration of “nasty thoughts and suggestions” is even more unforgivable than actually having these thoughts.

Despite her disapproval of “sensation” and the focus on the physical, it is the interplay between the physical and spiritual that makes Oliphant’s *Stories of the Seen and Unseen* interesting. In “Earthbound,” for example, she illustrates how a fixation on the physical can hinder spiritual progress, and how even the spirit can occasionally take on physical form. In this story, Edmund Coventry visits the Beresford family country house, Daintrey, at Christmas. He begins walking nightly down a tree-covered lane on the estate, and there catches glimpses of a young woman in a white dress. As the nights progress, the figure becomes more and more substantial, but Edmond is unable to determine who the woman is, and when he questions the family and other locals, he learns that no such young woman should be walking that lane at all at the times he describes. He finally meets the woman face to face, unaware of her ghostly status. In conversation, she mentions her reasons for being there:

“I was always fond of it [the tree-lined lane]. That was what was wrong with me. You know,” she said, with her little soft laugh, “I was so fond of the house and the trees, and everything...I thought there was nothing better, nothing so good. I was all for the earth, and nothing more. That is why I am here so much.” (48)

He decides he is in love with her, and during a subsequent meeting, tries to reach out to touch her, only to find he is unable to. When he is finally made aware that the woman is, in fact, the ghost of a long-dead resident of the estate, he does not want to accept it. Although in the end he recovers from his disappointment, Oliphant makes it clear that he is never quite the same after his encounter with the Unseen.

This story demonstrates what happens when the boundaries between the Seen and Unseen are crossed. This collision manifests itself in physical effects on the living, and seems to occur at moments of overlap in place and time. The first time Edmund sees the

figure of the ghost, he is walking in the late afternoon, at the verge of twilight. He catches a glimpse of her as he crosses from daylight into the shadow of the trees. The sight of her has a physical effect on him, and “his heart began to beat” (36):

He was startled to see something move...something white...he was still more surprised to see in front of him, at the end of the avenue, a woman, a lady, walking along with the most composed and gentle tread...The dress, too, struck him with great surprise. It was a white dress... (36)

In this passage, we can see elements of the first meeting of Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*. Although the meeting in “Earthbound” takes place at dusk and Walter’s and Laura’s meeting after midnight, the setting is the same: the isolated road, the element of surprise, the figure of the unknown woman.

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road—there, as if it had that moment sprung from the earth or dropped from the heaven, stood the figure of solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments. (14)

Collins’ Laura is, however, a real, live woman. As Oliphant herself notes in her review of *The Woman in White*, quoting this same passage, “There is nothing frightful or unnatural about her...She is not a wandering ghost, but a wistful, helpless human creature...It is, in fact, in its perfect simplicity, a sensation-scene of the most delicate and skillful kind” (“Sensation Novels” 571).¹¹ Oliphant’s decision to lift these textual references from *The Woman in White* calls attention to the blending of the real and unreal, and questions the difference between the physical and spiritual. Edmund’s experience of these physical

¹¹ Oliphant’s review of *The Woman in White* puts an ironic twist on the resemblance between the two works. Of Collins’ novel, she says, “Its power arises from no overstraining of nature...he shows no desire to tinge the daylight with any morbid shadows” (“Sensation Novels” 566). Additionally, “A writer who boldly takes in hand the common mechanism of life, and...thrills us into wonder, terror, and breathless interest...has accomplished a far greater success than he who effects the same result through supernatural agencies” (“Sensation Novels” 566). Her own work, however, is supernatural in nature, containing all the things that she praises Collins for omitting.

manifestations only get stronger as he sees the ghost again and again, until, at their final meeting, he actually reaches out to touch her, and the result is almost violent. “Then in Edmund’s head was a roaring of echoes, a clanging of noises, a blast as of great trumpets and music; and he knew no more” (61). This dramatic, “sensational” reaction shows at the same time that the physical and spiritual are not meant to interact, and that the two are inextricably linked, each being influenced by the other. Edmund’s efforts to possess physically this ghost figure force her to abandon him, and his contact with her is enough to prevent Edmund from ever returning to Daintrey after this episode.

Oliphant continues her exploration of what happens when the Seen and Unseen meet in “Old Lady Mary.” Like “Earthbound,” this story takes place in the world of the living, but its subject is a spirit, the spirit of an old woman who has died but returns to earth. Lady Mary seems to wake in heaven, but Oliphant does not describe this place in the same way she does the heaven of the little pilgrim, or even in the way she describes the land of darkness. Her focus is not on the landscape or on the people there, or on the work that they are doing, but on Lady Mary’s desire to return to earth to “right the wrong” that she has done to her ward, the young Mary. This spirit’s preoccupation with helping the living resembles those spirits of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, as Gray notes (xi), who attempt to effect change in the living world for the good of the living.¹²

Lady Mary does come back to earth, but is unable to give the aid that she wants to. She must leave without helping anyone to find her will, which secures her young ward’s fortune, but not before realizing that no one can see her but the children and

¹² Although Oliphant may have used the idea from Dickens, her review of his works makes it seem otherwise. Her focus in her discussion of *A Christmas Carol* is on the material nature of the story. She calls it “the apotheosis of turkey and plum-pudding,” claiming that “Goose and stuffing are its most ethereal influences” (*Blackwood’s*, “Charles Dickens,” June 1871).

women of the house. The child Connie, for whom the younger Mary is a governess, sees the ghost, as does a housemaid, who says that the ghostly woman “told her, in a hollow and terrible voice, that she could not rest, opening a series of communications by which it was evident all the secrets of the unseen world would soon be disclosed” (116). Young Mary herself seems aware of her guardian’s presence, and in the end takes sick because of it; “her senses failed her, her eyes shining as if they would burst from their sockets, her lips dropping apart, her countenance like marble” (122). And because Oliphant writes the story from the perspective the ghost herself, we see that her spirit is just as affected by her sojourn among the living as the living are by the presence of her spirit. Oliphant describes her upon her return to the Unseen, saying, “Her face, which had been so easy, was worn with trouble; her eyes were deep with things unspeakable” (123). Yet, in the end, both she and the younger Mary are triumphant. The old woman’s spirit is finally released, because she learned of her ward’s forgiveness while visiting earth. And the young Mary is “saved” when some children find the will tucked into the desk where Lady Mary had hidden it. Oliphant’s message seems mixed—although both the living and the dead can pay a steep price when they come into contact, both can benefit as well.

Oliphant’s description of Old Lady Mary before her death resembles her descriptions of herself in her autobiography:

She had not forgotten [sic] anything in her life—not the excitements and delights of her beauty, nor love, nor grief, nor the higher levels she had touched in her day...She did not forget the dark day when her firstborn was laid in the grave...All these things were like pictures hung in the secret chambers of her mind, to which she could go back in silent moments...With these pictures to go back upon at her will she was never dull, but saw herself moving through the various scenes of her life with a continual sympathy, feeling for herself in all her troubles...passages so

hard that the wonder was how she could survive them—pangs so terrible that the heart would seem at its last gasp, but yet would revive and go on. (64)

Oliphant also lost her children, and remembered their loss until the end, haunted by their deaths. She even explains her need to believe in an afterlife after Maggie's death, saying, "The more I think of it, the less I am able to feel that those who have left us can start up at once into a heartless beatitude without caring for our sorrow" (*Autobiography* 6).

When she recounts another event from her life in the autobiography, the language she uses is almost identical—she remembers "a little incident [that] remains to me, as so many scenes in my early life do, like a picture suffused with a soft delightful light" (24).

We can even see a little of the younger Mary in Oliphant's autobiography. She wonders what it would have been like had she not been the one to whom her family turned to for help, and had she been able to turn to someone herself, especially for financial assistance. "How I have been handicapped in life! Should I have done better if I had been kept...in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?" (15) She decides, however, that for herself, she most likely would not have turned out the same had she not had to struggle as she did.

Oliphant focuses on the distribution of wealth and on the spirit's interest in it in "The Portrait," much as she does in "Old Lady Mary." Written as a first-person narrative, this story of the Seen and Unseen is an account of a motherless young man, Philip Canning, and his father's obsession with money and material goods. In this story, the Unseen does not merely return to earth as a disembodied, helpless ghost, but physically possesses the body of a living person to ensure that her desires are carried out. Philip's mother's spirit takes possession of him on three separate occasions to prevent his father from denying her young, female cousin, Agnes, the inheritance she wished her to have.

The young woman is presented as having “ ‘no one in the world to look to her’ ” (157), and like young Mary, her relative’s ghost returns to make sure she is taken care of. Oliphant uses the medium of the portrait as the conduit for the possession, and each instance of possession results in a physical reaction similar to those she reports in “Earthbound” and “Old Lady Mary.” Philip reports that, “My heart leapt up and began beating wildly in my throat, in my ears, as if my whole being had received a sudden and intolerable shock...I felt the blood bound in my veins, my mouth became dry, my eyes hot” (145). Philip’s mother is strategic in her acts of possession: the first possession alerts Philip to the presence of Agnes’ father’s letters of appeal in his father’s study, the second occurs after his father receives letters from the family’s nurse, issuing her own appeal, and the third, final possession introduces Philip to Agnes herself. In the end, the two marry, and Agnes is able to erect her own “peaceful domestic throne” in the very same place Philip’s mother had hers years earlier, revealing the link between women’s role in the domestic sphere and their connection to spirituality.

In a final story of the *Seen and Unseen*, “The Library Window,” Oliphant presents a main character, a young woman, who can see the ghost of not just a man, but an entire room, through a non-existent window across the street from her home. The young woman sees the ghost of a man clearly at times, and at other times sees nothing. The scene fades in and out, but appears strongest at twilight. The narrator notes that she watches the figure, not out of normal curiosity, but as a result of some strange compulsion. “It was a sort of breathless watch, an absorption. I did not feel that I had eyes for anything else, or any room in my mind for another thought...[but] He did nothing to keep up the absorption of my thoughts” (225). As she sits staring at him, “my

head grew hot and my hands grew cold” (227). She talks about the “extraordinary blindness” of the others in the room, who are unable to see the room opposite at all, or glimpse the man who is in it, that “for all their wisdom and their knowledge [are] unable to see what a girl like me could see so easily” (226). The girl’s physical reaction to the figure, and the others’ inability to see it at all, closely parallel how Oliphant presents supernatural figures in her other stories of the Seen and Unseen. Like the other living who are confronted with the dead, the girl is unable to control her physical reaction. And as in the other stories, the young woman is able to see the apparition when others cannot. The ghost does not menace the girl in any way, in fact does not recognize her at all, until the end of the story, when he opens the window, sticks his head out, and waves, then disappears once again, never to reappear.

The entire disturbance in this story seems to be the fact that the others in the house are unable to see this figure, and the narrator is unwilling to reveal her visions. However, she is so affected by these glimpses of this figure that her aunt, with whom she lives, and her aunt’s guests realize that something is bothering her. They eventually bring her across the street to show her that no such window exists, and the realization has the effect of a severe trauma, causing her to become ill, and she leaves the house as a result. Her aunt eventually alludes to the fact that at one time, there was a scholar living across the street who let his studies rule his life, to the detriment of his relationship with a woman who lived in the aunt’s house. The only information the aunt provides is that the scholar may have had bitter feelings toward the residents of the house and that they may have in some way contributed to his death.

This story of the *Seen and Unseen* is unlike Oliphant's others in that its spirit seems to have no interest in the material world. He does not actively contact the girl in the opposite window, he barely acknowledges her, and the story ends without a satisfactory explanation for the ghost's existence. In all her other stories of the supernatural, the Unseen take some interest in the material world, whether it be interest in still-living relatives, a desire to correct a wrong done, a desire to inflict their will upon the living, or even in just reflecting upon the life that they led on earth and how the afterlife differs from it. In "The Library Window," however, Oliphant limits her discussion to the effect of the Unseen on the Seen. Oliphant's victim here, a young woman, does not actually become a victim until others interfere. Although this spirit does not appear to take an active role in affecting the living in this tale, the results are the same. The overlap of the Seen and Unseen calls into the question the notion of physicality and materiality in and of themselves, and women are at the heart of this meeting. When viewed separately, all of these texts' approaches to the conflict between spiritual and material may seem vastly different, but when viewed as a whole, they present the full spectrum of Oliphant's philosophy.

The crystallization of this philosophy, the text that seems to incorporate the greatest variety of interactions between the Seen and Unseen, is Oliphant's longer work of the Unseen, *A Beleaguered City*. She sets the story in a town, Semur, taken over by the forces of the Unseen. The inhabitants of the town, the living, are unable to resist the souls of the dead. Like some of her other stories of the Seen and Unseen, *A Beleaguered City* takes place in the Seen, although the inhabitants of the Unseen, the dead, are able to cross the boundaries between the two worlds. Some of the townspeople are also able to hear

and even see the dead that have come to haunt their loved ones. Oliphant again shows that the worlds of the living and the dead are not discrete and that the boundaries between them are crossable.

The main narrator of the story is the mayor of the town, Martin Dupin, and he attempts to tell the story from the point of view of his position of power in the town. Oliphant uses his character to represent the rational, the material, the world of order amid chaos. At the very beginning of his narrative, when Dupin mentions the “place of eminence” his family has held in the district, and notes their “unblemished integrity” that he “will not be vain enough to specify” (1), he reinforces his position in the town as someone of authority and responsibility. His is not the only narrative, however, that describes the chain of supernatural events. Oliphant constructs the text of *A Beleaguered City* as a series of narratives: that of Dupin, the Mayor of Semur; Paul Lecamus, one of the townsmen; M. De Bois-Sombre, another townsman; the Mayor’s wife, Madame Dupin de la Clairière; and his mother, Madame Veuve Dupin. The compilation itself, intended to supply a chronicle of the events from a variety of points of view, is commissioned by Dupin. Regarding his reasons for recording the account, Dupin claims that it is his duty to compile all the various separate accounts and “present one coherent and trustworthy chronicle to the world” (20). Although his wife and mother contribute their own narrative, throughout both the women’s narrative and Dupin’s, the women’s ability to put on paper the course of events is continually questioned, both directly and indirectly. In addition, Dupin’s and the other men’s narratives surround the women’s narrative physically (the women’s narratives are in the middle of the book), as though containing or controlling what the women have to say. However, these multiple

narratives end up undermining Dupin's authority. As Schor notes of Dupin, although he "insists on preserving the normative shape of authority in Semur throughout the crisis...the import of interpretive difference in Dupin's compilation is both to undermine his authorial control of the document, and to question the adequacy of his centrist, tolerant notion of government" (101). This issue of control in the text reflects the problems that Dupin has with control throughout the story. He is unable to control the Unseen that enter the town, or his and the townspeople's reactions to the Unseen, just as he is unable to control how the events are related by his commissioned narrators. This narration scheme is indicative of Oliphant's own presentation of the material—by beginning with narratives that do not mesh, she is able to (or must unavoidably) present this conflict with the Unseen from a variety of perspectives, incorporating different biases and expectations. It is in the areas in which the texts do not agree that we find Oliphant's position on materiality and spirituality, her discussion of the roles of men and women, and her exploration of public and private spaces.

The focus of the story is the supernatural invasion of Semur: the townspeople awake one morning and are herded outside the city gates like cattle, unable to resist the pressure of the Unseen around them. The women of the town believe that the presence of the Unseen forces and the darkness that came over the city are a punishment for Dupin's action against the sisters at the hospital in his capacity as mayor, his decision to have them suspend daily mass for the invalids at the hospital. In fact, "the women, and...many of the poor people" (49) shared this belief, two groups who had no influence on the practical matters of the decision but who felt responsible for the spiritual health of the town. The curate himself, however, blames the sisters of the hospital for the darkness, not

Dupin. After the townspeople are pushed out of the town by the teeming masses of invisible dead, the curate tells Dupin that he believed the sisters of the hospital to be responsible, saying, “ ‘It is never well to offend women, M. le Maire ... Women do not discriminate the lawful from the unlawful: so long as they produce an effect, it does not matter to them’ ” (58). His statement seemingly calls into question the women’s ability to make good decisions, and emphasizes women’s distance from those who control the social order. Oliphant’s use of the sisters in this manner may be her way of acknowledging the power of the newly re-established religious sisterhoods in the mid-nineteenth century by the Church of England, the threat that they posed to male authority (how the “father’s” influence is replaced by the “Father’s” influence, so to speak). According to Frederick S. Roden, religious sisterhoods posed a threat to the Victorian patriarchal family. These same-sex congregations were thought of as “unhealthy” and “unnatural,” “subversive to the ‘naturalness’ of the contemporary socio-political matrix” (64). The belief that the sisters had power connected to “unnatural forces” is never in fact proven false by Oliphant. Regardless, Dupin initially refuses to give in to the women’s demands, and uses his magisterial clout to silence their objections and cloak his decision in the guise of responsibility.

Oliphant provides an alternate possibility for the hostilities from the Unseen than that of the women. *A Beleaguered City* actually begins with an examination of the impious nature of the men in the town and their focus on materiality. The symbol of impiety is money, the valuing of wealth above God. As one of townsmen illustrates, “ ‘I do not care one farthing for your *bon Dieu*. Here is mine; I carry him about with me.’ And he took a piece of a hundred sous out of his pocket... ‘There is no *bon Dieu* but

money” (6). The women in the town are apparently more offended by this impiety than the men, crying out that it was enough to make the dead rise from the grave, a sentiment echoed by Dupin’s mother. Dupin himself notes, “the thirst for money and for pleasure has increased among us to an extent which I cannot but consider alarming” (14), and equates this attitude towards money with the spiritual collapse of the town. That the spirits are responsible for the exodus is clear: when the town is sealed outside the city gates, the Mayor turns and beats on the gates, crying ““Open, open in the name of God”” (72), and then hears an echo replying, ““Closed—in the name of God.”” Oliphant expresses how, “the devotion of the community at large to this pursuit of gain—money without any grandeur, and pleasure without any refinement” (16) can wreak havoc on society in general, placing the town’s excessive pursuit of material gain squarely to blame for this spiritual incursion.

The connection between the Unseen and the material/physical is just as clear in *A Beleaguered City* as it is in Oliphant’s other stories of the supernatural. This connection frequently manifests as forced inaction, or the inability to control one’s self. This lack of control is not just the inability to act physically, but the inability to speak or even think. For example, when Lecamus is reunited with the spirit of his dead wife, he describes how, “Her presence wrapped me round and round,” and how, “It was beyond speech... We said to each other everything without words” (136). The Unseen themselves are shown to have greater control over speech than Dupin does. At the height of the darkness, lighted words appeared on the front of the chapel, the only words of which Dupin could remember were a demand for the living to leave the town to the dead: “‘leave this place to us who know the true signification of life’” (54-5). Oliphant’s irony is

clear—it has taken the dead to teach the living about the meaning of life. Dupin explains in his narrative, “even at this moment it struck me that there was no explanation, nothing but this *vraie signification de la vie*” that could explain what was happening in the town. (55) In fact, when the Mayor first experiences the Unseen, he states, “My heart leaped into my throat again, my blood ran in my veins like a river in flood” (44).¹³ He tried to remind himself that “all sensations of the body must have their origin in the body” and tried to convince himself that what he was experiencing was a failure of his senses, his body, but, accustomed to controlling his physical surroundings through his administrative power, he is unable to.

Oliphant’s exploration of the effects of the Unseen on the material world does not end with its effects on the body. After the Unseen take over, the town abandons its fixation on money and turns to Dupin, who, in his role as mayor, represents the control that men have over themselves and each other, the power of the living. As Dupin notes, when he meets the man who had declared money to be his God, “Instead of his money, in which he had trusted, it was I who had become his god now” (97). However, others pull Dupin in the opposite direction, attempting to reunite him with God and the Unseen. Dupin’s wife, Agnes, asks for him and the others to “submit” and explains that the darkness is there to convince the townsfolk of “the love of God.” Dupin cannot have the same faith as she does and notes, “the words she spoke were but words without

¹³ These physical manifestations are similar to those described by D. A. Miller in his discussion of sensation novels. Miller explains how the sensation novel is the thing that is supposed to cause the effects that Oliphant attributes to the supernatural—“its characteristic adrenaline effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, the pallor resulting from vasoconstriction” (187). Miller points out how the reader can be affected in this way as well: the reader “remains unseen, of course, but not untouched: our bodies are rocked by the same ‘positive personal shocks’ as the characters’ are said to be” (196).

meaning” (110). He asks her what proof she has that this is what is really going on, realizing that she had none. Even the Curate, although he “had proved himself a man, had he been ten times a priest” (111), tells Dupin that the proof is that the Unseen had revealed itself, but he cannot convince Dupin to abandon what he perceives to be the burden of his office. Throughout the text the mayor is presented as being on the side of the material and secular, as he is when a procession goes by of people going to care for the sick. He tells of how “some of the women, always devout, fell on their knees” (4). The Mayor, however, did not, “for I do not pretend, in these days of progress, to have retained the same attitude of mind as that of the more devout sex” (4). Oliphant also seems to be commenting on the dangers of scientific progress that she addresses in some of her other stories of the Unseen. The Mayor, embracing progress and man’s ability to discover new ways to exert his control over his world, has no need for spiritual exploration. Dupin is, for example, not in the habit of attending Mass, “save on Sunday to set an example” (46). His own mother feels that he is “secular in all his thoughts, as, alas! it is so common for men to be” (205). Not only is Oliphant uniting the figure of the mayor with the material, she is uniting his position and his sex with it as well. He celebrates religious services only to “set an example”—he is mayor first, spiritual second. He has abandoned the religious leanings of the “devout sex”—being a man does not allow for spirituality in his frame of reference.

Throughout *A Beleaguered City*, Oliphant seems to associate the men with the Seen and the women with the Unseen. This equation extends to what the men appear to represent in these stories: power (both physical and mental), knowledge, and wealth. The women, with their connection to emotion and inner sight, participate on a level with the

Unseen in ways men are unable to. However, the participation of the dead in the world of the living disrupts the boundaries that Oliphant has set out. We see this disruption most clearly by examining the points of divergence in the separate narratives. As Schor points out, the chapters written by Dupin's wife and mother undermine Dupin's view of women as the devout sex. (102) Although his wife's account focuses on spiritual issues, his mother's account focuses on social issues—the administration of the women and children during the crisis and the social boundaries that need to be maintained. Jay seems to see the presentation of the women's texts as marginalizing the women, who are “not allowed a conclusive voice...[and are] empowered only by virtue of their relation to M. le Maire” (163). However, these divergent points of view on the experience are enough to show that no one view of the Unseen is ever the final view.

Oliphant presents the overlap of these areas through her discussion of the roles of the men and women in the town. From the start of *A Beleaguered City*, the women of the town are able to see and hear the spirits while the men are not. When the women begin to see the spirits, the ghosts of their dead, they are the ghosts of family members, people who were dear to them. “Those who were thus transported by a knowledge beyond ours were the weakest among us; most of them were women, the men old or feeble, and some children” (79). Agnes Dupin sees her dead daughter, others see husbands, parents. The one man who is able to see the Unseen, Lecamus, sees his wife. Most of the men, however, are at a loss for what to do, save for a few who “were not persons of importance who could put themselves at the head of affairs” (82). There were also women who were not affected, but those were not “of the best” (83). Only those who are not in a position of

authority are able to have contact with the Unseen, and when they do, these figures are parts of their private lives, remnants of home and family life that have come back.

These personal, familial spirits seem in direct opposition to the government of the town. Dupin, with all his power of his office, cannot control these apparitions. We eventually learn, through the narrative of Lecamus, what the spirits want—a town-wide recognition of the importance of religious observance and obligation, an activity previously carried out by only the women in town. The overlap—the “private” figures of the ghostly family members, the “public” space of town worship, the material figures of the ghosts themselves, the spiritual nature of their message—indicates boundaries that Oliphant is crossing. As Schor notes, “Oliphant broods on the ways in which public and private authority are mutually implicated in the social matrix” (98). This tale is, at least partly, about the ways that public and private spaces coincide, and how authority and social order are a part of that. Class status and societal organization are part of what has caused the Unseen to appear in Semur, and men and men’s power, class status and authority are what brought on the invasion. Oliphant also makes much of the positions held by the various people affected by the “events.”

The importance of class status is solidified throughout the story. For example, even in the absence of Dupin himself, his domestic servant and his mother enforce the class boundaries. When the women have been sent away from the town to Dupin’s country estate, Dupin’s mother describes how upset the housekeeper is when they get to La Clairière, complaining how “ ‘Madame Martin is putting all this *canaille* [scoundrels] into our very chambers’ ” (215), referring to the women who she perceives to be not worthy of the protection Dupin’s estate could provide them. Dupin’s wife, Agnes,

corrects her, telling her that it is the people of Semur needing shelter. Even so, Dupin's mother questions Agnes for putting "the poorest of the poor" in her own chamber. (219)

As Cavaliero says of *A Beleaguered City*, "As with all Oliphant's stories of this kind [stories of the Seen and Unseen], it conveys a genuine sense of a supernatural dimension encompassing everyday affairs" (101). Oliphant seems interested in how the everyday life of town is affected by the Unseen, but also with how the nature of this daily life precipitated the events. From the beginning of his narrative, Dupin notes the connection between his story and his private life. He explains how he, his wife, and his mother live in "the most perfect family union," and that his wife "is everything that is calculated to render a household happy" (2), details of his domestic situation that are necessary for understanding his narrative. He shows the connection between his private and public life, demanding that his family assist the others of the town to support him in the position that he holds. He tells his wife and mother, "recall to yourselves the position you occupy, and show an example. Lead our neighbors" (77). Although the focus of the mayor's version of the story may appear to be on the public side of the events, even he brings his discussion back to the private sphere. Recognizing the importance of women's roles in the home, Dupin explains the return of the women to the town after they are allowed back in, saying, "In such a case, the wives are the best guardians, and can exercise an influence more general and less suspected than that of the magistrates" (245-6). Essentially, the women of the town are more likely to restore public order than the public officials, asserting a greater authority than that of the mayor himself.

When Paul Lecamus begins his own narrative telling of his extraordinary experience of being reunited with his dead wife in the empty town, he notes, "But this is

not of public signification that I should occupy with it the time of M. le Maire” (136). This narrative illustrates how, despite the implicit value of women’s roles in the story, Lecamus still thinks of his experience as beneath Dupin’s notice. Although Dupin had requested his narrative, Lecamus felt he should include only “significant” information, and that did not, apparently, include the personal. However, Lecamus is the only one with whom the Unseen communicate directly, and they provide him with the reason behind their actions. He is able to connect with these spirits through his connection to his dead wife. Had he not been able to do so, the town may never have know why it was overrun or how to save itself.

Even more so than in the narratives of these two men, the stories of the two women highlight the role that the private sphere, and with it the women, played in this conflict, and also show two very different understandings of these issues. Oliphant seems to question women’s place in society in general, but more specifically their role in the spiritual life of the community. Dupin’s wife Agnes is the prime example of the connection drawn between women and faith. When it becomes clear that someone must attempt to enter the town to discover if there were any way to put an end to the Unseen’s presence there, the mayor’s wife offers to enter the city in his stead to ask the dead if there were no way to allow the townspeople back into the city. When he tries to convince her not to go, he notes, “Her face was sublime with faith. It is possible to these dear women; but for me the words she spoke [about the love of God] were but words without meaning.” Then, when M. le Cure comes up to speak to them, the mayor notes, “It was natural that the Church should come to the woman’s aid” (111), and calls his wife a silent angel. When Lecamus is able to enter the city and has his own spiritual experience there,

he hears the Unseen talking, saying that “the women had been instructed, that they had listened, and were safe” (144).

Indeed, Agnes herself reflects on the status of women in the town, revealing how the men of Semur believed women could control their own reactions to events, and how the men attempted to control women’s actions because of the fear that they themselves have no control. Contradicting this opinion at the same time as she states it, Agnes explains how she was ready to go into the city in her husband’s place, but that perhaps it was better that a woman not be sent, because “they might have said it was delusion, an attack of the nerves,” and notes how “We are not trusted in these respects, though I find it hard to tell why” (188). With this contradiction, Oliphant presents an hypocrisy that she sees inherent in the middle-class value system. Dupin sums up this conflict: women must “sit there silent, to wait till we [the men] had spoken, to be bound by what we decided, and to have no voice—[even if] they thought they knew better than we did” (113). Agnes seems to support her husband in this view, when she tells him, ““There are many things I hear you talk of, Martin, which are strange to me...of myself I cannot believe in them; but I do not oppose, since it is possible you may have reason to know better than I”” (256).

Madame Veuve Dupin, on the other hand, expresses verbally her desire to support her son and do her “duty,” but her actions indicate a woman whose energies are directed in the manner that she chooses. She begins her narrative by telling of her difficulty with the story, saying, “I have not the aptitude of expressing myself in writing” (204). She says that her main concern in recounting her tale is the possibility that she may not agree with her son and that her story may reflect that lack of total support. However, she does

not hide the disapproval that she feels as she tells of her experiences. Dupin's mother formulates her own discussion of the place of women, one that both accommodates Agnes' view and contradicts it. Part of what Oliphant does with this narrative is to call into question women's ability to assert authority over events; Dupin's mother doubts her capacity to turn her experiences into text and regularly conveys this doubt throughout the text. However, Madame Veuve Dupin is also not connected to the spiritual in the way that Agnes Dupin is. Inevitably, Dupin's mother reestablishes her authority through her control of social and material "goods." She appears to be linked to her son and his authority, but in the end shows that her own powers lay elsewhere.

At the beginning of the Unseen occurrences, when Madame Veuve Dupin realizes that Agnes is allowed to see the dead and she is not, she becomes upset. She attempts to comfort herself by connecting her position in society to her son's, stating, "If I receive no privileges, yet have I the privilege which is best...that of doing my duty. In this I thank the good Lord our Seigneur that my Martin has never needed to be ashamed of his mother" (209). Oliphant allies Dupin's mother with him, making it seem as though she is an extension of him, the keeper of his status and power. He sends her to the family's country house with the fleeing women and children of the town, to "do her duty" and take care of them. Dupin notes that the women in his family are not ones to "abandon their duties" (247), and praises his mother. When Agnes, Dupin's wife, provides her own narrative of events, she too describes how it was with the women and children at La Clairière, how, "The children were all sheltered and cared for; but as for the rest of us we did as we could" (189). Oliphant herself shared this responsibility in her own life, as we can see in her autobiography. Especially after her daughter Maggie died, her remaining

two sons were doubly precious to her, and she was determined to make whatever sacrifices she had to for their sake. As she explains, she wanted, “to bring up the boys for the service of God,” claiming this pursuit was “better than to write a fine novel” (*Autobiography* 16). She gives the task equal importance in *A Beleaguered City*, as most of Agnes’ and Dupin’s mother’s narratives are devoted to how they fulfill this duty. Many of the other women, though, do not help and act as the children do, expecting to be waited upon. Dupin’s mother wants to send them away, telling Agnes, “ ‘I have no patience with the idle, with those who impose upon thee’ ” (190). But Agnes cannot, because of the “mission” she had been given, to “ ‘preserve the children and the sick’ ” (191). That the preservation of the town’s children and women is linked both to the wishes of God and the Unseen and to the wishes of Dupin and the maintenance of the status quo proves Oliphant’s point: the women are the connection between the Seen and Unseen.

Madame Veuve Dupin distances herself from the spiritual nature of what is going on in the town, focusing instead on the domestic duties brought on by the fleeing women and children. When the ladies arrive at La Clairière, Dupin’s mother worries about the proper domestic arrangements, saying that she would even allow the poor to stay in the chamber in which her husband had died. She does, however, occasionally come back to the idea of faith, as when she is trying to figure out where to fit everyone, dealing with the wailing of the children and the mothers, saying it was a task “beyond our powers— but the Holy Mother of heaven and the good angels helped us” (216). For most of her narrative, though, Madame Dupin talks of the routine at La Clairière:

When we had done each piece of work we would look out with a kind of hope, then go back to find something else to do...some of the other

women would work, and those the most anxious, would work, never resting, going on from one thing to another, as if they were hungry for more and more!” obsessed with domestic duties, using them as an escape from the anxiety about the town. (221)

When the women and children return to Semur, Dupin’s mother announces “ ‘My son...I have discharged the trust that was given me. I bring thee back the blessing of God.’” (247), that blessing taking the form of the men’s families returned, the heart of the town.

Oliphant’s reference to women as undependable narrators and, in fact, women as independent thinkers, is revealed to be a backhanded one, made to question societal expectations about women in these roles. Even Dupin’s mother, seemingly firmly allied with her son, is finally able to voice her own opinion on Dupin’s decision to oppose the sisters at the hospital, expressing her firm belief that the recent events befalling the town are linked to Dupin’s decision and the “outrage done upon the good Sisters of St. Jean by the administration” (*A Beleaguered City*, 205). Oliphant seems to be making the point that although the men in the story, Dupin especially, consistently link the women to Unseen, the women themselves are able to penetrate the power structures of the living world, and if not exert their influence, at least perceive the mistakes made there. Dupin himself, even when connecting the women to the Unseen, tries to limit their power there. According to him, women’s prayers do not carry the weight of the men’s. In the end, when the entire town unites in the cathedral, Dupin notes how because the men joined the women, it actually meant something. “The women, they are always praying; but when we thus presented ourselves to give thanks, it meant something, a real homage” (*A Beleaguered City*, 253). In fact, it was the one man who saw the Unseen who was able to carry their message to the townspeople. Dupin makes it seem like all along, what the spirits wanted was the entire town united at mass, not just the women as usual. Although

Dupin acknowledges the return of the women and children to the town as almost miraculous, valuing their presence, when the town as a whole gathers in the cathedral. Dupin appears to believe that the previously missing male voices were making up the difference to the Unseen, that the men being present the Mass actually meant something.

One of Oliphant's primary goals in her tales of the Unseen is to explore men's transgressions and show what can result from them. In *A Beleaguered City* especially, she shows what can happen when men stray from their spirituality. Women, the roles of women, seem to be at the heart of this. Even the language she uses connects women to the spiritual health of the community: when the mayor is outside the city, he says when hearing the bells of the cathedral, "We seemed to see them [the dead] trooping into our beautiful Cathedral. Ah! only to see it again, to be within its shelter, cool and calm as in our mother's arms!" (103) Ultimately, though, there is no one answer for Oliphant on the nature of the relationship between the Seen and Unseen. As Dupin concludes his narrative about the events that happened in Semur, he notes that all the narratives that appear in the text were from "different eye-witnesses" and naturally had "discrepancies, owing to their different points of view and different ways of regarding the subject" (241). Oliphant's supernatural fiction may seem to be like this itself at first glance, with each story presenting a different picture of the nature of the Seen and Unseen. What all of these works have in common, though, is the idea that the spiritual and material are inseparable, and that for Oliphant, women are the connection between the two.

CHAPTER FOUR

A PRICK OF GENIUS OR GRIST FOR THE MILLS? OLIPHANT'S LITERARY CRITICISM

Margaret Oliphant published any number of novels, explored spirituality in supernatural fiction, and is remembered today for her autobiography. Throughout most of her career, however, she was primarily a critic. Her non-fiction, editorial work makes up the majority of her publications¹⁴. She wrote biographies, histories, and literature reviews, but an undercurrent runs beneath all of these—instead of just reviewing novels or the lives of individuals, she analyzes the workings of culture and the society in which she lived by examining the “literary battlefield,” questioning why some works succeed while other more valuable texts (in her opinion) don’t, why some authors rise through the ranks while others do not. Oliphant uses her critiques of other writers to show what she feels should determine the value of a text, the limitations in her chosen profession, and how literature helps define the society in which it is produced. She adopts a stance that incorporates the ideology she establishes in her fiction to evaluate the works of other authors and herself. In her opinion, the personal lives of authors, their ability to balance work and family, are just as important to determining their success as the critical acclaim or audience support that they receive. Though in her fiction Oliphant limits her analysis to women, in her reviews she applies these evaluative approaches to both male and female authors. Additionally, Oliphant identifies flaws in their ability to manipulate social signs, find meaning in everyday details, and prove themselves capable of sustained

¹⁴ See John Stock Clark’s bibliography of her works: *Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897): A Bibliography*. Queensland, Australia: U of Queensland, 1986.

occupation. Using these criteria, Oliphant is able to establish herself among the best-known Victorian authors not because she feels her writing has been better received by the public or critics, but because she knows that she fulfils her requirements: a close attention to personal detail, an ability to identify and use cultural signification, and success in combining caring for a family while maintaining a degree of professional success.

Although Oliphant published her reviews in many of the journals of her time, I am primarily going to consider her most important publishing relationship—that with the Blackwoods. Not only did the Blackwoods’ publishing house put out many of her novels, she was also a major contributor and editor for the journal, supplying much “grist for the mills of ‘Maga’” (*Annals II* 454). Her relationship with the Blackwoods was so significant that John Blackwood requested that Oliphant write *Annals of a Publishing House*, the history of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the second volume of which she finished nine days before her death. She begins the *Annals* with her view of the place played by literature in general. When discussing the early career of William Blackwood, she mentions how it was “the fashion of the time...to consider literature something too fine and sacred to be produced for money” (*Annals I* 6). Oliphant seemingly laments the current trend to treat literature as any other “product,” saying later in the *Annals*, “there was more real respect for Literature in this [Blackwood’s] manner of treating it...than is implied in the present mode of bargaining for it as a mere commercial produce to be sold across the counter in little half-ounce packets of a thousand words each.” She goes on to say that in “those days,” “the price ‘per thou.’ of words was not quotable in any price list, though we don’t doubt it shortly will be now” (*Annals I* 439). She reflects on the subsequent change in the field, “the moment of a wonderful new flood of genius,”

when “there was a certain spirit of daring and romance in ‘the Trade’ . . . a sort of manufactory out of nothing, to which there seemed no limit” (*Annals I* 24-5). Oliphant contrasts this to her own time, when the “publishers are the most grasping of middlemen, eager only to have the lion’s share of the profits” (*Annals I* 25). Of William Blackwood’s early career, Oliphant is quick to observe, “We hear of no special difficulty, however, or struggle in the career of one who established himself so early in all the responsibilities of life, and who seems to have been so completely independent without the aid of patronage or connection” (*Annals I* 24). Her praise of him seems to be based on his willingness to accept these responsibilities and the fact that he built his publishing house through hard work, not because he was supported by others.

Not only does Oliphant connect Blackwood’s professional success and his family life repeatedly throughout the *Annals*, she also talks about his professional relationships in familial terms. One instance of this kind of conflation is when she defines Blackwood’s relationship with London publisher John Murray, saying, “The relations of the publishers of that period, taking share in each other’s enterprises, and setting their hopes of fortune of the same touch of good or evil chance, were very close ones, and perhaps, like blood-relationship” (*Annals I* 32). The way the magazine itself got started was through the publication of family-related incidents, blurring the lines between “literature” and reports of everyday family occurrences. Oliphant approves of this early version of the magazine. She discusses how under the direction of two early editors, Pringle and Cleghorn, the magazine was “the most curious jumble of the high-flown and the commonplace,” containing “chronicles of border fairs and markets . . . and even the minutiae of the Register, births, deaths, and marriages” (*Annals I* 111), a characteristic of

the magazine that she finds admirable. Eventually, the magazine was taken over by Wilson, Hogg, and Lockhart, and in her descriptions, Oliphant alters the focus of her discussion. She compares this rebirth of the magazine to war, “The decks were now cleared, the men were at their posts: the real battle was about to begin” (*Annals I* 114). In describing details of the relationships between Wilson, Lockhart, and Blackwood, Oliphant goes on to say that Lockhart “was not a swashbuckler like Wilson, making his sword whistle around his head, and cutting men down on every side...Wilson hacked about him, distributing blows right and left” (*Annals I* 194-5). Lockhart, on the other hand, “put in his sting in a moment...with the effect of a barbed dart” (*Annals I* 195). These overwhelmingly male metaphors for the atmosphere at *Maga* reveal how Oliphant herself considered the magazine during her own tenure there—she considered *Blackwood’s* to be a decidedly masculine magazine.¹⁵

Oliphant is careful to point out how few women were allowed to contribute to the magazine. Despite the decidedly male slant, or perhaps because of it, Oliphant discusses how the magazine was “extremely chivalrous to women, confining that sentiment to those who knew their own place and held the proper helpless and dependent attitude which was the ideal of the time” (*Annals I* 492). She claims to have found “few women’s names among this large and changing group” that regularly contributed to and was reimbursed by the magazine (*Annals I* 493), although she herself was, of course, among this list. Oliphant’s presentation of *Maga’s* attitude towards women is

¹⁵ Jay Haythornthwaite goes so far to suggest that Oliphant took great pains to conceal her sex because of this belief. “It appears that in the early years Margaret Oliphant attempted to convey the impression that she was male. She perceived *Maga* as a masculine magazine and was careful to conceal her femininity.” (Haythornthwaite, 80)

unsurprisingly tongue-in-cheek—she presents the “kindness” of the editors so that it could not be mistaken for anything but the opposite:

I may add, to show the view then taken of feminine contributors, a cheering note in a letter to a lady who had been unkindly treated by a publisher less courteous and friendly than Mr. Blackwood. ‘Your MS.,’ our kind editor says consolingly, ‘did not contain more than the usual grammatical slips which ought to be expected from a female pen’!
(*Annals I* 495)

Oliphant herself reflects this condescending attitude when she discusses the way the Blackwoods thought of the journal, referencing how William Blackwood considered *Maga*, “something like a princess committed to his care” (*Annals II* 118).

Oliphant began working on the *Annals* at the request of William Blackwood, who had some specific visions for what this history should entail. According to David Finkelstein, Blackwood wanted the *Annals* to be “a record of his firm’s achievements in fostering literary genius, done in the manner of past publishing memoirs” (119), focusing more on the “cultural significance” of the firm’s showcase magazine and less on the actual family. In a letter to Mary Porter, Blackwood states his desire for Oliphant’s history to become ““a very important landmark in the literary history of this century”” (Finkelstein 120, quoting William Blackwood III to Mary Porter, December 31, 1894 MS 30381 290), a desire that some critics feel was actually fulfilled.¹⁶ Finkelstein notes that Oliphant had her own vision of the project, however. She “view[ed] it more as her artistic swansong, a concluding statement on literary life” (121), and she decided, without consulting him, to present perhaps more domestic detail than what Blackwood intended. She had a personal interest in the piece, having contributed not just time and submissions,

¹⁶ Oliphant’s bibliographer, John Stock Clarke, calls the *Annals* Oliphant’s “in many ways most enduring work of non-fiction” (Clarke, 11)

but most of her professional life to the magazine. She reveals how her personal life was impacted by *Maga* as well. As she notes in a letter to William Blackwood II, “I can think of nothing better, if I must go on with this weary life so long, as to conclude everything with this book...I began my married life by my first story in ‘Maga’—the proofs of which (*Katie Stewart*) I received on my wedding day: I should like to wind up the long laborious record (which seems to me now to have been so vain, so vain, my life all coming to nothing) with this” (November 3, 1894, Coghill’s *Autobiography* 414). Oliphant uses events from her life (her marriage, her eventual death) to illustrate her connection to the magazine, emphasizing how much her personal life determined her professional relationship with the magazine.

From her discussions in her autobiography and her more public editorials in *Maga* itself, Oliphant seemed to view the magazine as top-notch, echoing Blackwood’s opinion and revealing how she felt lucky to be included in such a collection of talent. She makes few references to doing work for the Blackwoods in her autobiography, but in one of these few instances she states how they had rejected some of her submissions, which prompted her to go to them about a novel for serial publication. She said of the two, John Blackwood and Major Blackwood, that they were “so jealous of the Magazine, and inclined to think nothing was good enough for it, and I just then so little successful” (*Autobiography* 90). Oliphant was definitely aware of her own vested interest in *Blackwood’s*. When complimenting the work of a former *Maga* contributor in his obituary, she equates herself outright with the magazine, asking, “To say of these articles all that we should wish to say, would be something like applauding ourselves, for do they not form part of *Maga*?” (“William Smith” 435) It is not only her professional

connections that keep her close to the magazine, however. As Mary Porter, John Blackwood's daughter, notes in the third volume of the *Annals*, "Mrs. Oliphant's name had been for some years flitting constantly through the letters—at first only in connection with literary matters, and then again in frequent and familiar allusions to home and family, as the ever-increasing friendship of years drew her more closely into our home circle and interests" (*Annals III* 73). Elizabeth Jay observes how Oliphant's connections to the Blackwoods may have done her as much harm as good. She was a regular contributor to what she judged to be a first-rate journal, but unfortunately with no hope of rising in the ranks of the magazine. Oliphant's non-fiction contributions to *Maga* are as diverse as those of her male counterparts, encompassing almost every possible area of interest, and Oliphant consistently compares herself to the highest-paid male writers of the time: Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope (Jay 249-50). Oliphant wanted nothing less than the editorship of a major journal, and her connections to *Blackwood's* would almost guarantee that she would receive no offers from competitors. Her deep ties to the magazine and her strong opinions about it influenced the distinct personae that she adopted for her different contributions.

Looking at Oliphant's contributions to *Blackwood's*, we find that many, if not most of them, are anonymous. As she herself notes, "We believe that the preservation of this anonymity is of great service to all serial, and especially to all critical, composition—giving freedom to the writer, and taking away one almost irresistible temptation towards undue warmth either of praise or censure." It also has the unfortunate effect, however, of distancing the writer from the reader, depriving the writer of "personal appreciation which is one of the most agreeable recompenses the world can give" ("William Smith"

429). Oliphant at times seems to argue that being a woman should not affect an author's decision to remain anonymous or adopt a pseudonym as it did in previous years.

Discussing an early *Blackwood's* contributor, Susan Ferrier, Oliphant comments, "Up to this time, it is evident, Miss Ferrier, like her contemporary, Miss Austen, shrank with a horrified femininity, which it is amusing to see nowadays, from any betrayal of identity. Her packets of proof are directed on one occasion under cover to a friend, as if they had been clandestine love-letters" (*Annals I* 43). When discussing William Blackwood's communication with Ferrier, Oliphant notes that although Ferrier moved in the same circle with Scott and other literary personalities, "No one had thought of attributing authorship to a lady in society, considered them in those days to be protected, and superior to any wish of entering the arena of letter—or, indeed, any other" (*Annals I* 37-8).

Despite the insinuation that times had changed, Oliphant still published most of her editorial pieces anonymously, in many cases with a distinctly male persona. Jay claims that Oliphant adopted male personae as "an acknowledgement that she had decided to place her talent in direct competition with men" (75). She suggests that Oliphant did so to undermine the male influence in the literary marketplace. (78-9) A dramatic example of a male persona appears in an essay, "New Books," in which she uses the pronoun "us" to refer ostensibly to herself and "other men." "Men, too, have their sins, let us admit. Some of us drink, and smoke, and swear, and make ourselves hugely disagreeable not only to our wives but to everybody concerned" ("New Books 2" 175). When Oliphant voices how anonymity "confounds in one big voice of the Magazine or the Review the utterances of many individual voices" ("William Smith"

429), it is not clear whether she views this as a benefit or a drawback, and yet her own choice to use a male voice at times had the same effect of presenting a uniform face to the public—a man’s voice for a man’s magazine.

From what the records indicate, Oliphant’s choice of a male persona allowed her to get the positive attention of the Blackwoods. They apparently valued her contributions, even indicating that they did not understand why she was not more popular. Porter notes her father’s opinion of Oliphant’s works, saying, “He wished he could do something towards making her works more widely known, as he thought they were in those days...suffering, as Thackeray’s did, from a tardy recognition of their merits.” He wanted “to make the ‘sluggish world do her justice’” (*Annals III* 114). John Blackwood says as much in his own words in a letter to a Miss Mozley, in which he is referring to her essay on the “position of women.” He writes, “George Eliot and Mrs. Oliphant are able to hold their own against all male competitors. There is a paper...in the forthcoming No. of the Magazine...by Mrs. Oliphant, which for excellence...it would be hard to beat” (*Annals III* 164, from a letter dated January 23, 1868). That Blackwood would not just compare Oliphant to Eliot but insinuate that their literary skills were similar indicates that others might eventually think so as well. Despite the Blackwoods’ confidence in her abilities, however, Oliphant, though she rose through the ranks at *Blackwood’s*, never could secure a top position at another journal.

Oliphant realized that her popularity was not what it could be, and her reviews are full of direct and implicit comparisons between herself and other writers, as when she observes how her fortune “has never been very much, never anything like what many of my contemporaries attained” (*Autobiography* 91) and explains that she doesn’t know

whether this is because she was a “friendless woman” or because she was truly inferior to other writers. (*Autobiography*, 91) As in much of her autobiography, it is not clear how much of this self-criticism is heart-felt. As she notes when discussing a young woman’s comments on *Beleaguered City*, for example, “it may perhaps be suspected that I don’t always think such small beer of myself as I say, but this is a pure matter of comparison” (*Autobiography* 137).

Oliphant reviewed hundreds of her contemporaries throughout her career with *Blackwood’s*, many of whom she knew personally, which perhaps led to her tendency to comment extensively on the lives of the authors in addition to their works. She seems to value the work based on the mind behind it in addition to the work itself. When reviewing Jane Austen’s accomplishments, Oliphant, for example, criticizes how Austen’s domestic experience sheltered her from the outside world, and points to Austen’s talent as the only thing that spurred her from her seclusion. She describes Austen as being “fenced from the outer world by troops of friends, called only by names of love—sister, daughter, aunt...with no inducement to come down from her pedestal and go out into the bitter arena where the strong triumph and the needy struggle, except that prick of genius...[that] must find utterance somehow” (“Miss Austen and Miss Mitford” 291). In this statement about Austen’s personal experiences, Oliphant makes it seem as though Austen had little ambition or desire for work, and that were it not for the “prick of genius” she would remain sheltered among her family and friends. That Austen had no identifiable professional aspirations, and that she did not have to get down from her pedestal and struggle as Oliphant had, appears to make her work less admirable, somehow. It is so important for Oliphant to be able to connect the professional and

private life of authors as she critiques their work that when she cannot, she finds it disturbing. A vivid example of this appears in a review of Darwin's works:

When we turn to Charles Darwin, who perhaps is the most influential of all the scientific writers of our epoch, we associate no personality with his work, and feel no temptation to inquire what manner of man he was. This is one drawback which attached to wealth, comfort, and a quiet life, that there is little attraction for human sympathy in them. ("The Old Saloon 6" 752)

Not only does this remark confirm Oliphant's underlying feelings about the value of work, it shows how accustomed she is to equating the author with the text.

Oliphant also judges works by the effect they have on society. In her review of *Jane Eyre*, she describes Jane as, "pale, small, by no means beautiful—something of a genius, something of a vixen—a dangerous little person, inimical to the peace of society" ("Modern Novelists Great and Small" 557). She mentions the "impetuous little spirit which dashed into our well-ordered world, broke its boundaries, and defied its principles—and the most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*" ("Modern Novelists Great and Small" 557). Oliphant blames all of this on an attempt to prove the Rights of Woman, and talks of man and woman in mortal combat over it, no longer lovers but at-arms against each other. The revolutionary ideas that this text contains challenge some of the roles of women that Oliphant herself questions, and though the inflammatory language she uses to discuss the work makes it seem as if Oliphant opposes broken boundaries and disorder, a concluding comment she makes indicates otherwise. "We feel no art in these remarkable books. What we feel is a force which makes everything real—a motion which is irresistible" ("Modern Novelists Great and Small" 558).

In Oliphant's reviews of fellow novelists' work, we see reflections of her own failures, successes, and desires. Even in her early reviews she appears confident about her opinions, presenting her analysis with a certain haughtiness. In one of these early reviews, "Novels," she confesses to having felt "a sense of injury in our national pride" when she saw the names of two sensation novelists being held up as representative novelists of England. (261) She goes on to compare these novelists to Thackeray, who, according to Oliphant, had wicked characters but not merely for the sake of wickedness. "Thackeray did not dwell upon Becky solely because she was wicked. She was infinitely clever, amusing, and full of variety. The fun in her surmounted the depravity" (271). Oliphant glibly identifies the wickedness that Thackeray uses in his character as acceptable, apparently never doubting her ability to distinguish the difference between "too much wickedness" and an acceptable amount. Occasionally, Oliphant uses sarcasm for effect, although the humor is never outright. For example, in this same piece, she criticizes Ouida for her focus on "luscious" details, like women's hair, commenting, "Hair, indeed, in general, has become one of the leading properties in fiction. The facility with which it flows over the shoulders and bosoms in its owner's vicinity is quite extraordinary" (269). This kind of tongue-in-cheek commentary does not disguise the criticisms that Oliphant is putting forth—if anything, it solidifies them, proving that Oliphant cannot take these authors seriously. This strategy, which is so effective at undermining the works she does not approve of, also serves to confirm the value of the ones she does. Trollope, according to Oliphant, is a vast improvement over the sensation novelists, because, "there are no women who throw their glorious hair over the breast of any chance companion" (277).

Despite her levity in places, Oliphant, perhaps unknowingly, also exposes a few personal sore points. Her one complaint about Trollope's novel is the character Lily Dale, whom Trollope labels an "old maid." Oliphant argues, "Lily will not like it when she has tried it a little longer. She will find the small house dull, and will miss her natural career" ("Novels" 277), a possible allusion to matters on which she herself had no choice.

Oliphant remarks earlier in the review about Trollope's own career, a comment similar to ones she voices about herself in her autobiography (and something that the Blackwoods noted about her), saying, "Mr. Trollope writes too much to be always at his best" (275-6). We see a similar reflection of Oliphant in her review of Thackeray's work, when she calls him a, "semi-successful writer" who got his "full meed of approbation only after his great work had carried him at a leap to the summit of popularity." She claims that he finally attained "all that the ambition of an author could desire...the plaudits of all whose applause was worth caring for" ("Mr. Thackeray's Sketches" 232), although it is unclear whether she means the critics or his readership (the comment can be seen as putting Oliphant in a positive light in two ways—she can be casting herself as one of those "whose applause was worth caring for," or she can be expressing the possibility that her own leap to fame is still to come). As in her discussion on Trollope, she brings her own personal experiences to this review. She only touches on "the heaviest of domestic clouds" but is sure to mention how "he was withdrawn from the world in the strength of life, in the fullness of fame and genius...what could be more happy?...The man who dies in middle age has all that is best in life without its saddest drawbacks and burdens" (232). She presents Thackeray's sudden death as "a special privilege of heaven to those who have stood bravely at their post, and borne the heat of the day and the sore labours of life

without fear or flinching” (233). Her brother Frank is clearly pictured in these ideas—he had just left his family in financial ruin the year before Oliphant wrote this review, dying in his prime, but without the “fullness of fame and genius” that Thackeray had, to her regret. For Oliphant, Thackeray’s literary achievements were a result of his successfully navigating out from under his “domestic clouds,” something that she herself was striving to do at the time.

In these articles, Oliphant evaluates other authors of the period, and, by association, herself in relation to them. She consistently compares authors in her reviews. In her rave review of *Woman in White*, she compares Collins’ novel to *Great Expectations*. She exclaims how Collins “deprived his readers of their lawful rest” with his wonderful story of suspense, and inserts an underlying critique on her own work in the process, noting, “Domestic histories, however virtuous and charming, do not often attain that result” (“Sensation Novels”565). In the same review, she expresses her disappointment in Dickens’ work, saying, “The book reminds us of a painter’s rapid memoranda of some picture...After he has dashed in the outline and composition, he scribbles a hasty ‘carmine’ or ‘ultramarine’ where those colors go. So the reds and blues of Mr. Dickens’ picture are only written in...it is feeble, fatigued, and colourless” (575). Oliphant claims to not be evaluating either author, presenting her supposed neutrality with yet another comparison, stating, “We will not attempt to decide whether the distance between the two novelists is less than that which separates the skirts of Shakespeare’s regal mantle from the loftiest stretch of Mr. Bourcicault” (565). Despite these claims, she goes on to present her opinion of both authors and is a harsh judge in the process,

pronouncing Dickens' work to be inferior to that of Collins. She explains her reasoning:

In every way, Mr. Dickens's performance must yield to the companion work of his disciple and assistant. The elder writer, rich in genius and natural power, has, from indolence or caprice, or the confidence of established popularity, produced, with all this unquestionable advantages...a very ineffective and colourless work; the younger, with no such gifts, has employed the common action of life so as to call forth the most original and startling impressions upon the mind of the reader. (580)

Oliphant is well aware of the political ramifications of her remarks—Dickens, the established author with hordes of admiring readers, served as Collins' mentor and confidante. To present Dickens' work as sub-par, especially in direct comparison to Collins', was a daring statement to make. His "indolence" and "caprice" are to blame for his failures, however—these personal attributes are inseparable from Dickens' literary disappointment. She acknowledges how risky her comments could be, saying, "It is a bold proceeding to place the name of a comparatively recent writer, who has scarcely yet won his spurs, beside that of one of the masters of fiction" (580).

Oliphant critiques Dickens and a number of other prominent authors in a series of essays, "The Old Saloon." There are almost thirty of these articles, in which she explores a huge range of topics, but the more interesting ones are the comments on novelists. Two in particular show Oliphant in her finest reviewing form. In the first of these, "The Old Saloon 6," she discusses most of the major novelists of the Victorian period. She lists Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot as the "three novelists of the highest rank" (754). She narrows her focus to Dickens and Thackeray, noting how, "it is almost impossible not to place them more or less in competition with each other" because "they were so exactly contemporary in age, in production, and ultimately in fame" (754). Dickens she places with the *bourgeoisie*, the "simple-minded readers," and claims Thackeray's was "a much

more highly cultivated mind, and free from those associations and deprivations which make Dickens always at his least best...in the society of ladies and gentlemen” (755-6).¹⁷ She claims that Dickens’ later works are “on a lower lever” but notes that they are still enough to make the fortune of a dozen other writers (755). When Oliphant comments on Eliot, she places Eliot among the greatest, but with a caveat: “The great female writer of the Victorian period is equally remarkable, perhaps even more so, as being the only woman who has yet attained the highest place in literature” (756). However, she faults Eliot for using “too much philosophy” in her later works, and for being overly conscious of being a “public instructor” (757).

Oliphant mentions Charlotte Brontë in one of her “Old Saloon” pieces, but claims that any comparison between her and Eliot “would be a mistake” (757). Oliphant reveals her perception of the power of the critic (her own power, in this case), explaining how the other Brontës became well-read and well-known because of Gaskell’s biography of Charlotte Brontë. This work “brought this remarkable family under the observation of the world, and heightened the effect of all their literary performances, raising the two secondary figures to something of the same level as Charlotte” (758). In a possible forecast of her own fate, she talks of how Gaskell “has fallen into that respectful oblivion which is the fate of a writer who reaches a sort of secondary classical rank, and survives, but not effectually, as the greater classics do” (758).

¹⁷ She made similar comments on Hawthorne in another review: “Mr. Hawthorne, we are afraid, is one of those writers who aim at an intellectual audience, and address themselves mainly to such. We are greatly of opinion that this is a mistake and a delusion, and that nothing good comes of it. The novelist’s true audience is the common people—the people of ordinary comprehension and everyday sympathies, whatever their rank may be” (“Modern Novelists Great and Small” 565).

Oliphant begins her 25th “Old Saloon” essay with a preamble on *Jane Eyre*. She talks about how when Dickens’ and Thackeray’s major works were well-received, “neither of them, though infinitely greater, produced exactly the same kind of effect. ‘Jane Eyre’ struck the imagination of the reader with one clear sharp blow, ringing upon the shield like an individual defiance” (“Old Saloon 25” 455). Of the novel, she says it was not fashionable, “exceedingly ignorant in that respect, and making out fine ladies to be the most vulgar and detestable of living creatures; but with what a flash and fire of passion and reality in its veins!” (456) Again, we can see how Oliphant appears torn in respect to this novel—the passion and reality seem to make up for Brontë’s treatment of fine ladies. She goes on to talk of the genius of Eliot, again referring to the critic’s power and responsibility. “Her light was not always at the height of that pure flame or genius and simplicity, yet not even her least favourable critic has ever attempted to question her right to the highest place” (456).

She eventually critiques Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* at the end of this review, saying, “We acknowledge that Mr. Hardy is not one of our first favourites in fiction, and that his new book is not greatly to our taste. Taste, as everybody knows, is the one thing upon which there is no discussion” (464), although Oliphant goes on to explain her “distaste” for the text. Part of the problem with the book, Oliphant surmises, is the fact that Hardy is “too is didactic, and has a meaning, an *arrière pensée*, a text from which he preaches” (465). She conjectures that he has confused Dante’s work with the Holy Scripture, as she has seen happen before with the works of Milton. Both of these complaints target the fact that Hardy is overly “preachy,” sermonizing without the substance to support it, something that Oliphant protests about frequently in her reviews.

In general, she frowns upon those who try to speak on subjects with which they are unfamiliar, acting as though they are an authority when in fact they have no right to such claims. What Oliphant accomplishes by critiquing Hardy in this fashion is to establish her own authority in his place—her knowledge of scripture surpasses his, and her ability to identify his “preaching,” his didacticism, so readily as something that diminishes the quality of the work undermines any “preaching” that Hardy may do.

Writing on topics without authority is something that Oliphant touches on again and again in her reviews. When writing an obituary for a former Blackwood’s contributor, Oliphant praises him, William Smith, because he “was not one of those who dash off a breathless criticism on the spur of the moment, or arrogantly pretend to judge of subjects upon which they have the merest smattering of knowledge” (“William Smith” 429). Knowledge of their subject matter is important for critics according to Oliphant, because they, “Must have the power of close observation...must combine much positive knowledge, and confidence in [their] own power and judicial authority, with so much intellectual modesty as will make [them] ready to perceive excellence” (“New Books 5” 440). A diatribe about the battle over female education becomes a complaint about the “strange inaccuracies and blunders” that its critics are guilty of. Although she uses some standard tropes common to Victorian reviewers, there are fewer of these than one would think, and after each she asserts her points with conviction. For example, she says of herself in this article, “We do not profess to be very learned in the question...” but then proceeds to describe in precise language the ways the critics are wrong (“The Condition Of Women” 149). Jay notes how in her preface to Irving’s biography, Oliphant’s first venture into this field, she apologizes, calling herself a “person without authority” and

questions her decision to “pronounce judgment” on Irving. (253) However, Jay eventually notes Oliphant’s acquired authority later, saying that Oliphant’s *Annals* does not “pretend to encyclopaedic coverage but confront[s] us with the personal view of a ‘woman of letters’ confident of her right to assess her peers” (256). Clarke, like Jay, notes Oliphant’s ability to offer critiques on a wide range of topics, about which “at times she is able to speak with a seeming authority, which can often carry conviction” (12).

Oliphant’s confidence in asserting her opinions in her reviews is mirrored by the confidence she has in her writing ability. She often questions the value of the works of other authors in comparison to her own, realizing the value of her own work at times when others may not. This line of questioning leads her at times to examine what determines the worth of an author and her work, as she does when troubled by the whimsical nature of the publishing industry, wondering, “why a book in every way inferior to mine should receive double or triple, nay, sometimes as much as ten times the recompense and applause which I have ever been able to secure” (*Annals II* 325). This train of thought exists throughout the *Annals* and her reviews, although Oliphant fluctuates between embracing her own value and calling it into question, consistently referencing its relation to her personal life in the process.

Oliphant provides a sustained critique of her own work in the *Annals*, introducing her own contributions to the magazine in the midst of discussing the correspondences of “Major” Blackwood. She writes, “It was through the Major that I sent with trembling in the spring of 1852 my little story called ‘Katie Stewart’ for the consideration of the editors” (*Annals II* 415). Oliphant goes on to discuss how she was, “at twenty-four the author, in youthful presumption, of three or four novels” and yet was still nervous about

the editors' reception. She goes on to mention that she had earlier "attempted that flight" with her first work, *Margaret Maitland*, claiming that although Blackwood rejected the work, "he had nearly accepted my lucubrations out of pity" (*Annals II* 415). She indicates that her novel *Katie Stewart* would have suffered the same fate, being unable to withstand their scrutiny on its own merits, but the Major accepted it regardless, as Oliphant says, "the first proofs of which, 'for the Magazine'! I received on the morning of my wedding day – not exactly a moment when the glory and excitement of such a second event could have the appreciation which was its due" (*Annals II* 415-6).

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Oliphant's importance to the magazine only grew over time. Even after her relationship to the Blackwood's was firmly established, though, the circumstances under which she worked were not always ideal. She connects the demands of working for *Blackwood's* to her domestic experiences:

I suppose I must have become by this time a sort of general utility woman in the Magazine, as I remember being called upon to write a short article ...at a moment's notice, which I did in the midst of a removal, with a flying pen, in a room unoccupied as yet by anything but dust and rolled-up carpets, where a table and an inkpot had been hurriedly set out for me. Never was a trumpet blown under more disadvantageous circumstances. (*Annals II* 475)

She goes on to say how she feared her "literary gift, such as it was," was failing her, and how out of desperation she proposed an idea for a serial story to the Blackwoods, and they refused her. The anecdote has a happy ending, though, again linked by Oliphant to her personal life.

I went home to find my little ones all gay and sweet; and was occupied by them for the rest of the day in a sort of cheerful despair...[the] next day (I think) I had finished and sent up to the dread tribunal in George Street a short story, which was the beginning of a series of stories called the 'Chronicles of Carlingford,' which set me up at once and established my footing in the world. (*Annals II* 476)

Although Oliphant laments that the books may no longer be “very well remembered by anyone,” for her they formed the “greatest triumph, at least in a pecuniary point of view, of my life” (*Annals II* 476). She also points out that she owes her entire success to the “two kind and sympathetic brothers” who accepted her story. In the *Annals*, these ties between Oliphant’s personal and professional life hold true throughout. The entire section that Oliphant dedicates to Major Blackwood’s correspondence is framed by a discussion of her work and her personal experiences at the time. She begins and ends the segment with personal information about herself, as well as with her literary place in the magazine’s history. Maintaining such a focus on her role in this history shows that she realized how important her work was, validating its worth. Her inclusion of details about her family and home life connects her professional successes to her personal experiences.

The Blackwoods themselves lauded Oliphant’s efforts and accomplishments for *Maga*. John Blackwood demonstrated his confidence in her work through decisive actions. As he grew older, reading all the proofs for the upcoming issue strained his eyes, so “in the case of any one like Mrs. Oliphant,, he had it printed before trying to read it” (*Annals III* 95), indicating his trust that her work would be acceptable to the magazine’s high standards. Porter dedicates an entire chapter in the third volume of the *Annals* to a discussion of Oliphant, saying, “Mrs. Oliphant’s place in a work of this kind is difficult to determine, for the reason that there is not a year, hardly a month, from the date of her earliest contribution down to her last, in which she is not represented in the archives of the Magazine” (*Annals III* 336)—and she worked for Blackwood’s for twenty-seven years. Porter claims that because Oliphant’s skill as a reviewer was so broad, it was difficult to sift through the “embarrass de richesses” and find examples to point to as

representative of her work. (*Annals III* 341) Despite the fact that little critical attention has been given to Oliphant's reviews, even modern critics note the breadth of her contributions to *Blackwood's*. "Her value to the firm therefore resided in her ability to participate simultaneously on different planes of textual production: from fiction, to prose and magazine contributions, to biographies and editorial work" (Finkelstein 33). In fact, the sheer number of articles published by Oliphant (Clarke numbers them in the hundreds, predicting that there are many that were published anonymously left to be discovered) seems almost impossible for one person to accomplish, especially given that Oliphant was constantly reading the works she reviewed and constructing her own novels. In the course of her research, Porter examined all the letters that John Blackwood sent to Oliphant, a correspondence that prompts her to ask, "When did she find time to get through the mass of work they [the reviews] represent?" She surmises that Oliphant apparently "worked early and she worked late, and yet there was no time in the day when she could not be seen. She may be said to have been always working, yet her work was never obtruded" (*Annals III* 350).

Oliphant presents herself as being unfazed by her workload, and unimpressed with the stamina and patience that her writing took. In her autobiography, she notes, "my friends will scarcely believe how little possessed I am with any thought of it all, how little credit I feel due to me, how accidental most things have been, and how entirely a matter of daily labour, congenial work...this has been" (11). One of her reviews tells a different story, however, when it comes to her judgments about the effort required by authors. In a discussion of Darwin's writings, she comments,

Mr. Darwin's two hours' work in the day was most creditable to him...but the praise to be awarded to him in these circumstances is very different

from that pathetic sympathy with which we follow the failing days of the unfortunate author who toils along to the very brink of the grave under the burden of a daily conflict. It must be allowed that from this point of view the prosperous and well-off philosopher of our days stands at a disadvantage when his life comes to be written. ("The Old Saloon 10" 107)

Apparently, Darwin's lack of effort reflected a mind that was not worthy of attention, a life that had not been lived to the fullest extent. In another example, when Oliphant compares the life of Blackwood's contributor Smith to the life of a typical writer, she describes the latter as, "toiling perhaps into fame or for fortune, going against the tide, and buffeted by busy men and ill winds, straining every faculty to keep every step he gains" ("William Smith" 429-30). Her own experiences in the profession color the way she discusses the conditions under which authors normally work, and the expectations that they are unable to live up to. She is especially sympathetic of those whose efforts do not bring them the successes they have strived for. When she discusses the Brontë family, for example, her empathy for the less-successful sibling is apparent.

Poor Branwell Brontë! it is evident that he found no favour with 'Maga'; and we may allow that it was indeed something of a hard fate for the rejected aspirant...to be placed by nature with his halting verse in the midst of three clever sisters whose verses did not halt...though it is they, and not he, with whom the world has sympathized most. (*Annals II* 185)

It was not so much that Branwell was not successful in and of itself that appears to bother Oliphant the most—it is the fact that he is surrounded by those whose success remind him daily of his own lack. As she notes a few pages later, "Alas for the poor authors whose conscientious labour tells for so little sixty years after! How few of those able writers who put forth all their strength with such strenuous hope of permanence are ever thought of now!" (*Annals II* 188-89) For Oliphant, the lack of sympathy and the ease

with which the public can forget works that may take an author a lifetime to complete seem more difficult to bear than the work itself.

Oliphant is also able to praise authors whom she feels are worthy of it, authors who earned their success through their industry. In her review of *Woman in White*, she indicates that Collins' early works were building blocks for his later triumph. Oliphant claims that *Woman in White* is not "a chance success or caprice of genius, but that the author has been long engaged in preparatory studies, and that the work in question is really the elaborate result of years of labour" ("Sensation Novels" 568-9). Comparing Collins' previous works to sketches in preparation for a master painting, she feels that he shouldn't have "disclosed" these imperfect works to the public before the masterpiece itself was ready, but she also does not want to, "throw his earlier imperfections in his face" (569). She apparently wants to teach a lesson to other authors, giving them encouragement that not all works lead to success. Oliphant issues this warning as well: "The most popular of writers would do well to pause before he yawns and flings his careless essay at the public, and to consider that the reputation which makes everything he produces externally successful is itself mortal" (580). She deliberately targets those of her peers who may least heed her comments but whom she feels are the ones most in danger from making the mistake of taking their fame for granted.

Oliphant's goal in these reviews is not just to critique authors; she offers her opinions on a variety of subjects, from travel experiences to popular hobbies. One subject upon which she speaks regularly, however, is the place that women have in the public sphere, and more specifically, what roles are acceptable for them there. In her review "The Lives of Two Ladies," Oliphant talks about the domestic arrangements of Mary

Granville Delaney and Hester Thrale, discussing in negative tones how many women felt that marriage was their only option, and so devoted themselves to pursuing it, “the sole profession of marriage as a means of making [their] fortune,” as a career (403). Oliphant sets up a distinct contrast between women who pursue marriage and women who “work,” questioning the importance society gives to women like Delaney and Thrale. She calls Delaney a “spotless princess of English domestic life,” (423), telling how the newly married Delaney decorated her husband’s chapel and their house with needlework and shellwork, seemingly questioning the value of these domestic tasks (410). Oliphant specifically mentions how she does not understand the popularity of these two women, because they “were not women of genius; they were not ‘working’ women; they neither wrote books nor organized public movements.” They did not even have an “association with distinguished men” to account for their fame (402). These comments seem to conflict with Oliphant’s presentation of herself in her autobiography, where she frequently mentions her own enjoyment of similar domestic tasks and even questions the value of associations with “distinguished men.” After describing her two inauspicious meetings with Tennyson, for example, she explains, “It is rather a fictitious sort of thing recalling those semi-professional recollections” (*Autobiography* 144), implying that either the meetings themselves had little meaning to her despite Tennyson’s fame, or that being acquainted with distinguished men doesn’t necessarily guarantee anything about the person who has made their acquaintance. Her presentation of marriage, however, aligns with the one she presents in her novels: marriage for its own sake is something Oliphant does not approve of.

Oliphant's commentary on the roles played by women does, of course, appear in many of her discussions of literature and how literature has affected or displayed these roles. Her review of sensation novels in particular reveals a highly developed prejudice in terms of women's portrayal in the popular genre. Though a "purer atmosphere" still exists on a higher level, Oliphant claims, "all our minor novelists, almost without exception, are of the school called sensational," who deal with "bigamy and seduction" ("Novels" 258). According to Oliphant, these novelists are abusing the market for this kind of literature, ignoring the cultural implications of what they publish, because they are making up for a lack in talent. She begins her review with a mention of the novel *Shirley*, noting that it has brought about a new development in marital discourse, that previously women were taught "their own feelings on this subject [marriage] should be religiously kept to themselves" (259), but that because of this novel, this is no longer the case. Whether Oliphant disapproves of this change is unclear, but she spells out her opinion on the changes brought about by the content of sensation novels in general and its effect on literature and society. Oliphant laments that the reading public has become accustomed to the sensationalized view of women presented in these works. "What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings is a very fleshly and unlovely record" (259). For Oliphant, the relating of, "nasty thoughts [and] ugly suggestions...is almost more appalling than the facts of actual depravity, because it has no excuse of sudden passion or temptation, and no visible boundary" (275). These authors are using this device only to capture their audience's attention, not to describe the natural progression of human emotion, and Oliphant feels that this is merely a failure on their part, indicating their inability to win

over their audience in a “legitimate” fashion, through talented writing. In one of her rare instances of criticizing *Maga*, she expresses bitterness at having to review books that, in her opinion, did not deserve space in the magazine. She grumbles, “The fact is all the more humbling when we consider the very small amount of literary skill employed in the construction of these books” (261), especially considering that she must now devote her own skill to critiquing them. The things she points to as especially offensive in these novels are “descriptions of society which show the writer’s ignorance of society” (261). Oliphant does not argue that women don’t experience the feelings discussed in these works, the “sensuous raptures” that the authors describe. What troubles her is that they are supported and displayed through the literature and by the women who read it.

Oliphant praises what she calls “domestic histories,” explaining, “the last wave but one of female novelists was very feminine. Their stories were all family stories, their troubles domestic, their women womanly to the last degree, and their men not much less so” (265). The most recent wave though, that of sensation novelists, has “moulded its women on the model of men,” by painting this passionate picture of women’s internal life. Oliphant also points to the “flippancy” of the female character in her sample sensation novel (*Cometh up as a Flower* by Rhoda Broughton), and objects to the tendency in recent novels to portray the motherless girl—“it is odd, to say the least of it, that this phase of youthful life should commend itself so universally to the female novelist” (265). Although Oliphant is strenuous in her denouncement of these trends, both complaints could actually be applied to her own novels.¹⁸ Her main grievance, however, is not so much the works themselves, but that women have come to accept this

¹⁸ *Miss Marjoribanks* contains several “motherless girls,” and contemporary critics objected to her “flippant” female characters in both this work and *Phoebe Jr.* See my discussion of her novels in Chapter One.

presentation of themselves without questioning it: what troubles her the most is that woman have not rebelled against being portrayed in this manner. “The perplexing fact is, that the subjects of this slander make not objection to it” (260). In another review of sensation novels, Oliphant’s objection to the genre lies in its tendency to mislead the reading public, especially regarding the consequences of the illicit actions described in the works. For Oliphant, “Nothing can be more wrong and fatal than to represent the flames of vice as a purifying fiery ordeal, through which the penitent is to come elevated and sublimed” (“Sensation Novels” 566). Oliphant does not condemn sensation novels completely, however. In fact, she praises Collins’ *Woman in White* for its superb (and appropriate, to Oliphant) use of sensation, saying, “there is almost as little that is objectionable in this highly-wrought sensation-novel, as if it had been a domestic history of the most gentle and unexciting kind” (566). In these reviews, she does not just critique one or two novels—she condemns a profession-wide trend away from what she perceives to be middle-class ideals.

Oliphant explores her social views in more detail in her articles, “The Laws Concerning Women” and “The Condition of Women.” In both of these articles, she discusses women’s place in the social order, revealing, perhaps, why she critiques sensation novelists as she does. In the first essay, she focuses on the laws that regulate marriage, explaining that they have nothing to do with the “union of souls” of lovers, but with, “the peace of families, the safe foundation of the social world” (“The Laws Concerning Women” 382). Oliphant bases her claims on her opinions about women’s and men’s earning potential, but mostly on the fact that family unit is what makes society what it is. She argues that the division of earnings or property should not be the heart of

the question of justice in terms of the solidity of marriage, but that the division of the children should, and in her opinion this matter of justice is impossible to decide. A divided family cannot function as it ought to, damaging the lives of everyone involved: husband, wife, and children. She discusses the value of both the husband and wife to the household in the second essay. She explains that, for men, who are the “natural labourers and bread-winners,” to be without a certain type of occupation is worse than for a woman, who must support herself however she can. However, she frowns upon the idea of opening the doors to men’s occupations and governance to women, calling it “the vulgarest of chimeras” (“The Condition Of Women” 145). She claims that there is, “one sphere and kind of work for a man and another for a woman” (145), but undermines this position by revealing the true nature of the work that women do in the private sphere. “Among all those classes with whom economy is a needful virtue, every one who knows family life, knows very well that it is the girls who are in reality the helpful portion of the household” (150), the girls who frequently assist their fathers in all sorts of business matters in addition to fulfilling the traditional domestic duties. Because Oliphant herself was a woman in a man’s world, working at *Maga*, she struggles with pronouncements on what is acceptable for women in terms of professional life. However, she personally did not let her own domestic duties slide because of her writing. As Mary Porter notes in the third volume of *Annals*, “In her own home the kindest and most attentive of hostesses, she always had time to take part in anything that was going on...Her hands occupied with some needlework, she would seem one of the most leisured of women, no hurry in her speech nor in her movements” (*Annals III* 350).

Oliphant's appraisals of others derive from the standards to which she held herself. Her greatest critique of her personal choices appears in a semi-autobiographical work, *The Wizard's Son*. Although the story itself concludes as a supernatural tale, its first few chapters could come directly from Oliphant's own family experiences, and provide insight into her life's expectations and disappointments. In this work, the domestic arrangements are similar to Oliphant's. One of the main characters (Mrs. Methven) is, like Oliphant, a widow raising a son, who also financially supports a distant family member (Miss Merivale). Oliphant herself was responsible for not just her children but her brother's children as well. The widow's son bears an overt resemblance to Oliphant's son, and their relationship is similar. In the work, Oliphant describes the son as having, "a somewhat volatile and indolent disposition, and no ambition at all as to his future, nor anxiety as to what was going to happen to him in life" (1). Additionally, by the time he reached adulthood, "it was apparent that he was not going to take the world by storm, or set the Thames on fire; and, thought she had been too sensible to brag, Mrs. Methven had thought both these things possible" (3). Oliphant echoes these sentiments in her autobiography, when she discusses her son Tiddy, whose successes were lacking. "All his childhood was delightful and there never was any boy more bright. At Eton he had the happiest and brightest career... And then Oxford with its clouds—when I awoke again to that anxiety which has been the burden of my life" (*Autobiography* 45). The widow in *The Wizard's Son* was "stricken with shame to think of all the fine things that had been predicted of Walter in his boyish days, and that not one of them had come true" (4), reflecting Oliphant's own knowledge that Tiddy, despite being given many advantages, failed to live up to his potential.

The story also reflects Oliphant's self-blame, and her feelings that others blamed her as well for her son's shortcomings. "It was Mrs. Methven whom everybody blamed. It was her ridiculous pride, or her foolish indulgence, or her sinful backing-up of his natural indolence; even some people thought it was her want of comprehension of her son which had done it" (5). Oliphant notes of herself and her relationship with Tiddy, "Perhaps my constant coming in to him, avid to make up and preserve him from any evil consequences did harm, God knows" (*Autobiography* 45). We can also hear some of Oliphant's bitterness regarding the sacrifices she made for her son. The widow in *The Wizard's Son* had "sacrificed everything" to give her son a good education and make sure he wanted for nothing, although she herself "would probably have been at a loss to name what were the special sacrifices she had made for Walter" (2). This protest rings hollow in terms of Oliphant's commentary in her autobiography regarding what her sacrifices cost her.

The comparisons do not stop with her relationship with her son; several other resemblances appear in the narrative. For example, Oliphant mentions how the family was distantly connected to a great Scotch family, "which took no notice whatever of them," but from which the widow could "derive a little, much-diluted, far-off drop of blood, more blue and more rich than the common" (6), just as she mentions her own mother's preoccupation with their own family connections in her autobiography. Oliphant also talks of the son's "self-dissatisfaction which is the severest of all criticisms" (11), perhaps thinking of her own dissatisfaction with her success in her career. The following passage, although it does not resemble any particular passage in Oliphant's autobiography, seems to reflect the fears she had of what her life could

become, what she could have had if she had not been able to write to earn money, what other women had to experience every day.

It was the sort of morning to make you think of the tediousness to which most people get up every day, supposing it to be life, and accepting it as such with the dull content which knows no better; a life made up of scrubbing out of kitchens and sweeping out of parlours, of taking down shutters and putting them up again; all sordid, petty, unbroken by any exhilarating event. (45)

The strongest message that Oliphant sends in this work, however, is that of the place of the home and family. As in her reviews of sensation novels and the position of women, her focus is on the domestic unit. There is a moment in the story when the son denies his mother's influence on him, and heads with a great deal of relief away from the house in which she waits for him. Oliphant describes the moment that he turns away, "In spite of all our boastings of home and home influence, how many experience this change the moment they turn their face in the direction of that centre where it is conventional to suppose all comfort and shelter is!" (27), suggesting that although she believes in the importance of the home life, she realizes that at times there is more to life than that. This tension appears in her autobiography at an odd moment, when she is discussing her behavior after Tiddy's death. Oliphant writes how after her other son Cecco and niece, Denny, go to bed, she would "write letters and cry (unless I have proofs to do or some other work) cry often till I exhaust myself" (*Autobiography* 56). Even in the midst of her grief over her closest family member, her work intrudes, both literally in her actions, and on the page, in the text itself. Calling the autobiography a "pitiful little record of my life" (60), she notes, "How strange it is to me to write all this, with the effort of making light reading of it, and putting anecdotes that will do to quote in the papers and make the book sell!...I feel all this to be so vulgar, so common, so unnecessary, as if I were making

pennysworth of myself” (95). The connections between her private life and her profession run deep, but these comments indicate that she wanted to be able to separate them, that she recognized how intertwined the two were but was not entirely happy with this reality. Her resistance to selling herself through her work, of using her personal experience for her professional gain, are overt in her autobiography, but this tension exists in most of her texts, especially when she examines the relationships between career and family.

Oliphant is drawn to discussions of balancing career and family because of these feelings. We see few references to her professional successes in her autobiography, and Oliphant apologizes for this, explaining, “I should like if I could to write what people like about my books, being just then...at my high tide, and instead of that all I have to say is a couple of baby stories” (103). She gives as her reason for this, “perhaps my life has been too full of personal interests to leave me at leisure to talk of the creatures of my imagination” (118). Ironically, among those “personal interests” was her need to earn money to support her family, the thing that caused her to enter her profession in the first place. Oliphant had to take on extra work to finance her brother’s family in addition to her own. In the autobiography, she states that although earlier she had recorded this fact, “with a little half-sincere attempt at a heroic attitude,” she really did not mind doing the work. “There is not doubt that it was much more congenial to me to drive on and keep everything going...than it ever would have been to labour with an artist’s fervor and concentration to produce a masterpiece. One can’t be two things or serve two masters. Which was God and which was mammon in that individual case it would be hard to say” (132). Her inability to decide which was more important to her comes across clearly here.

Eventually, in spite of her apology for the “baby stories,” Oliphant reveals that she knows including the details of her personal life is not necessarily a bad thing. She indicates that these everyday details are what makes for an interesting read.¹⁹ When discussing the future of the text, for example, Oliphant notes how if Denny publishes the autobiography, she can cut out the details of Oliphant’s brother Frank’s financial failure and his children subsequently coming into her care, saying, “It is not likely that such family details would be of interest to the public. And yet, as a matter of fact, it is exactly those family details that are interesting,—the human story in all its chapters” (130).

Oliphant’s preoccupation with the blending of family and career reveals that she is aware of the difficulty inherent in having to balance both. For her, this was not a choice, but she is aware that some women are able to choose, and do decide to have both a profession and a family. She reflects on how this decision impacts these women’s lives, not just through having to take on the extra work that a profession entails, but in dealing with societal disapproval as well. In the first volume of the *Annals*, she includes comments reputedly made by George Eliot, directed at another female novelist who was in this position:

One cannot but think of the reported speech of George Eliot to a young married lady with a number of children, who had ventured into the paths of fiction with a very charming first work in the shape of a novel. The great novelist fixed a serious gaze upon the neophyte and asked, ‘Did you not then find enough to interest you in your family?’ We are disposed to say, Was not the work of planting towns and organizing a new empire, or at least a new province, enough to emancipate even a confirmed storyteller from hankering after that vocation? But indeed it does not seem to have been enough. (*Annals I* 463)

¹⁹ See my discussion of Laurie Langbauer’s *Novels of Everyday Life* in the previous chapter.

Oliphant's response to Eliot's harsh words indicates her understanding of the desire behind the decision to write. It is not just about finding time or juggling responsibilities: someone with something worthwhile to tell should not be discouraged from doing so.

Her relationship with the Blackwood's hinges on this attitude of hers, that it is possible to write in spite of having a family if you are a woman. Their acceptance was not just on a professional level; they thought of her as part of their extended family in a way. Perhaps because of her family obligations, Major Blackwood accepted Oliphant's original offering to the magazine, but her talent kept her there. Oliphant provides a glimpse into the full nature of the association, even as she claims that no one would find it interesting:

I am myself specially moved by glimpses through these kind eyes of a period long swept away into the gulf of time,—a little house full of youth and hope, in which a young woman bearing my name, and faintly recognizable by my own memory, received the gentle soldier-publisher, and talked of cheerful undertakings and many pieces of work long forgotten; but these interviews are not sufficiently interesting for the public ear. (*Annals II* 462)

Like the contradictions in her autobiography, about what is interesting to the audience, Oliphant censors herself in her discussions of her history with the Blackwood family, a relationship that she appears to distinguish from that she had with *Maga* itself. She talks of how, “Amid the records of Major Blackwood's dinings-out, I found with the greatest relief his account of a little party of mine, the remembrance of which has haunted me for forty years! This ought to be a note *for ladies only*” (*Annals II* 477). Oliphant goes on to discuss the “domestic calamities” that took place before the referenced party, stating, “To this day I remember with a shudder a certain dish of chicken cutlets intended to be particularly delicate and dainty. Let us not dwell on such horrors” (*Annals II* 477). She even interrupts her literary history to spend a page or two on her husband's continued

career as a glass painter, complaining about a Mr. W. B. Scott who “represented my husband as abandoning his work in consequence of my own sudden (and undeserved) success in literature” (*Annals II* 471-72), an accusation that Oliphant strenuously denies, explaining that her husband worked until the day he died. After spending another page on her husband, Oliphant notes, “I am afraid all this is too personal; but the reader will excuse a momentary aberration” (*Annals II* 472).

In addition to dwelling on details of her own personal experiences, Oliphant seems to enjoy including commentary on the private lives of her subjects. In the *Annals*, most of these comments involve the Blackwood family, and many involve the same tensions she experiences between career and family. She notes, for example, “Mrs. Blackwood, we fear, did not much like anything which took her husband away from the domestic circle, and still less those civic enterprises which led him into expense” (*Annals II* 105). When telling of how the young men of the magazine printed an unflattering poem about Leigh Hunt and how William Blackwood must bear the “blast of the storm,” Oliphant assumes, “he had probably some trouble too at home, and that the wife of his bosom would not hesitate to point out to him roundly the vexation into which his fine new Magazine, over which he had been so elated, had brought him, and what broken reeds were those writers, for whom all her life Mrs. Blackwood retained an aggrieved contempt” (*Annals I* 139). Though she does not hesitate to include them, Oliphant is meticulous about calculating which ones to include and which to leave, as we can see from her discussions about her autobiography earlier in this chapter. She handles these discussions carefully, evaluating their impact and choosing their placement carefully. While discussing the death of William Blackwood, for instance, Oliphant uses personal

letters from family members, and says about them, “These family communications are almost too sacred to be mingled with the murmur of outside voices” (*Annals II* 131). Throughout this remainder of the segment she does not include any letters from outsiders to distract from the family communications, placing them in a position of importance, but also distinguishing them dramatically from professional correspondence.

Oliphant’s tendency to examine the details of personal lives was part of what made her such a successful critic of biographies and autobiographies. In her reviews, she sometimes approaches these with distaste, despite her own ventures into both genres. When discussing one of Thackeray’s posthumous publications, for example, she condemns the practice of writing memoirs and biographies. “No memoir of him has been given to the world; and, indeed, the memoirs of his contemporaries which have come into being give little encouragement for that vulgarizing and undesirable process” (“Mr. Thackeray’s Sketches” 234). She proclaims her wish that “the art of biography” were “less largely and less volubly exercised” (234). Oliphant is also critical of autobiography as a genre in her review of Harriet Martineau’s memoirs. She begins her review by critiquing the art of biography, saying, “It is a dangerous thing to have your life written when you are dead and helpless, and can do nothing to protest the judgment” (“Harriet Martineau” 472). She claims that “neither pity nor justice interferes to prevent the habitual desecration of the homes and secrets of the dead” (472), but there is something “more murderous” than biography: autobiography. According to Oliphant, “No kind interpreter, no gentle critic, no effacing tear from any angel...can diminish its damning power” (472). These damning phrases seem ironic considering that Oliphant herself wrote several biographies and, of course, her own autobiography at the end of her life.

She seems to contradict this stance in her “Autobiographies” series in *Blackwood’s* with a quote from the first autobiography that she reviews, that of Benvenuto Cellini (1571). ““All men of every class, who have done something creditable, ought, being trustworthy and honest men, to write their lives with their own hand”” (“Autobiographies: Benvenuto Cellini” 1). She goes on to say, “No words more fitting could be found with which to begin” her discussion of autobiographies. (1) Her objection to biographies and autobiographies is similar to her objection to sensation novels. The inclusion of “objectionable” material, information that is not, to Oliphant, relevant to the life of the individual is an unforgivable transgression. When an autobiographer attacks someone posthumously, for instance, it’s made even more unpardonable when the person attacked is “picked out from the gentle obscurity of private life, and have neither public record nor well-known history to be brought forth in their favor” (“Harriet Martineau” 472). Oliphant applauds the brief biography of Martineau that ran in the *Daily News* for being concise, “entirely historical and descriptive,” and praises its lack of “undue detail of characterization, and all that disadvantageous contrast of others with herself” (473). She calls Martineau an “ungenerous churl” for complaining about her home life, calling it a “cruel and persistent indictment” (478). In the end, Martineau’s autobiography is an “offense against good taste, as well as against all family loyalty and the needful and graceful restraints of private life” (478), because of Martineau’s unacceptable content.

What Oliphant finds acceptable material for this kind of work is apparently similar to what she includes in the biographies that she herself writes. As an anonymous reviewer notes about her *Life of Edward Irving*, “It is a relief to turn from the dazzle of

his public ministry to the quiet scenes of domestic interest which show the heart of the man; and which are touched by the writer with all the delicacy of a woman's hand, and the power of an accomplished artist" (*Blackwood's*, June 1862, 745). She does not, however, follow her own advice in her own autobiography—although she does not attack anyone, as did Martineau, she does admit to a great deal of unhappiness and grief in her private life. Her mourning for her daughter is especially painful:

My heart feels dead...Now I have to go limping and anxious through the world all the days of my life...I still have my two dear boys, and I cry out to Him like a savage creature to spare them, to spare them, to let me die first and to leave them alive. Oh God forgive me and help me. (5)

Possibly Oliphant feels free to share this grief because she claims that no one will ever be interested in reading about her life. She talks of how she is in "very little danger of having my life written...for what could be said of me?" (17). This example is perhaps one more illustration of the tensions that she dealt with daily, between home and profession: the writer in her felt that these kinds of personal comments were inappropriate, but the woman devoted to family had to express her grief. In her literature reviews as well Oliphant includes the kinds of material that she appears to find so objectionable in others: ubiquitous personal references, discussions of problems in her home life, comparisons of herself to other authors.

Because of Oliphant's at times candid musings, because her criticism covers such a huge variety of topics, and because the reviews she wrote represent over thirty years of literature, these works are an excellent mechanism for understanding the part she played in the Victorian period. In one of her "Old Saloon" pieces, she reviews the literature of the last fifty years in honor of Victoria's golden jubilee, an appropriate topic for Oliphant if there ever was one. She discusses great anniversaries, and comments that the individual

who is privileged to witness one becomes a “living chronicle,” having seen the “great shuttle moving through the loom of time” (“The Old Saloon 6” 737). We can read Oliphant’s reviews as one of her “living chronicles,” a demonstration of her perception of the writers of the Victorian period, a way for her to leave behind not just criticism, but statements about an era.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

As I noted in my introduction, Margaret Oliphant was never able to reach the critical success that she wished for and felt her writing deserved. Today, still, Oliphant is not widely read. According to Elizabeth Langland, Philip Davis, and Brian Nellist, Oliphant has never achieved popularity because of the way she presents herself and her writing. Their point is valid—although Oliphant conveys a general confidence in her ability, she rarely applauds specific works of her own. In her autobiography and reviews, she does not articulate which of her works she feels are especially deserving of praise, nor does she even indicate which are her own personal favorites. Many of Oliphant's texts have reappeared in recent years²⁰, and this resurgence may indicate a shift in how her works are being received; however, her continued exclusion from the canon is undeniable. Regardless, what many readers may find attractive about Oliphant's writing—in fact, what initially drew me to her works—is her unfailing ability to take the events from her own life and use them in her writing, and in so doing give her audience a more complete picture of the Victorian period. These details from her own life enable Oliphant to structure herself as a writer and ultimately establish herself as an authority, not just on the private sphere, but middle-class society in general. What they also do is provide a window into the private and public life of the writer herself.

Upon reflection, it seems only natural that Oliphant would use her mastery of the domestic to establish authority in her texts. She began her professional career surrounded

²⁰ Specifically, the republication of *Phoebe Junior* with an introduction by Langland in 2002, the Oxford edition of *Hester* in 2003, and the e-text of *Kirsteen* in 2001.

by her family, something that she refers to often in her writing, and spent the rest of her life serving two masters, so to speak—her career and her home-life. Part of Oliphant's domestic ideology seems to be that the challenges of the private sphere prepared women for all the trials that life presents, including those of choosing a profession. The female characters in her novels, for example, do not all work in the public sphere, but all demonstrate their value against the backdrop of the domestic. Oliphant was especially concerned with looking for the contexts in which women were powerful, finding opportunities for agency and industry. She did not necessarily create situations in which women were powerful—she found the places where women had strength already, in the system that existed as it was, but that women perhaps were not aware of. She was able to take qualities previously seen as weaknesses (women's connection to the spiritual, for instance) and show how they could actually be advantages, both to women and the world in general. This interest of hers may account for the wide variety of works that she produced, and her interest in such an array of topics, from science to religion to industrial development to historical events.

My decision to focus on Oliphant's presentation of women's place in society came naturally from reading her texts. When we look at Oliphant's works as a whole, we can see her development as a writer and the struggles she faced, from the naked grief and self-conscious self-deprecation of the autobiography and the spiritual explorations of her supernatural fiction, to the frank monetary and industry commentary in her reviews, and even the results of her experiences as they take shape in the form of the characters of her novels. However, even amid all of this variety, Oliphant always seems to come back to the topic of women, not always overtly but the messages are there. Her texts explore the

value of women's labor that is otherwise unnoticed and looks at the options available to women. Initially, when I began this project, I thought of Oliphant as a conservative voice when it came to women's issues. She seemed to have a conventionally Victorian approach to marriage and appeared to hold to the society-imposed views of appropriate behavior for women. After reading more of her texts and thinking more about them, I changed my opinion. Although Oliphant is rarely directly revolutionary, she frequently exposes the places where gender roles overlap and become confused even when giving the impression of upholding stereotypes, establishing boundaries only to show how they can be crossed. I also thought of Oliphant as slightly impassive, unaffected especially in her non-fiction works. I now see her passion, especially involving the things—occupation, family, literacy, wealth, and religion—that directly influenced her and impacted her own life.

In the end, Oliphant's works show how women in Victorian society need not be limited by the strictures placed upon them. The fact that she was able to publish at all, balancing a career and family, was a form of success, regardless of the critical acclaim she did or did not receive. Although she may at times vacillate between diffidence in her autobiography and snobbery in her reviews, I think the confidence in herself and her abilities that she exhibits in all of her works is ultimately what makes her texts worth studying. Oliphant has effectively shattered any preconceptions I may have had coming into this project about the limitations that Victorian women had placed upon them, and that they placed upon themselves. Her actions, her life, show that though the rules of class behavior may have appeared constrictive, women could in fact turn them to their advantage. Oliphant's ability to focus on women's strengths, using her own life as an

example, ensures that even if she is never included in the canon, her works will always serve as a record of both her individual achievements and the success that all women of the period could strive for.

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