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**Alternatives to the Married State in the Works of Margaret Oliphant**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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## **Thesis Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the depictions of unmarried women in the works of Margaret Oliphant. One of the most prolific writers of the Victorian era, Oliphant has historically been neglected by scholars, omitted from the British literary canon and largely left out of the discourse surrounding the depiction of female independence in nineteenth-century fiction, in spite of her novels' featuring themes more radically feminist than those of many of her better-known contemporaries. Focusing on those of Oliphant's novels still in print, namely *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Hester* and *Kirsteen*, this thesis explores how the novelist approached the woman's position in Victorian society with regards to her participation in the institution of marriage and the labour market, paying special attention to Oliphant's treatment of the Victorian concept of the separate spheres in her work.

The first chapter explains how Oliphant's own experiences of challenging Victorian gender roles contributed to her creation of subversive fictional heroines while simultaneously restricting her from openly proclaiming support for women's rights movements in her periodical writings. The following chapters take a close look at the three novels under analysis, examining the motivations of each of their protagonists in turn, with the objective of charting a progressive adoption of more radical feminist views on the part of their author. The thesis then concludes that in spite of Margaret Oliphant's reputation as an "antifeminist female novelist," her heroines' increasingly virulent opposition to oppressive Victorian gender roles illustrates the author's gradual shift towards more explicit forms of rebellion against traditional patriarchal structures.

## Abstrakt práce

Bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na zobrazení svobodných žen v dílech Margaret Oliphant, jejíž dílo zůstávalo poměrně dlouho na okraji britského literárního kánonu a kritického zájmu, přestože byla jednou z nejpłodnějších spisovatelek viktoriánské éry. Z literárního diskurzu týkajícího se zobrazování ženské nezávislosti v beletrii devatenáctého století pak byla do značné míry vynechána, a to navzdory tomu, že její romány zpracovávají feministická témata radikálnější způsobem než texty mnoha jejích známějších současníků. Práce se soustředí na tři romány Margaret Oliphant, které se stále vydávají: *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Hester* a *Kirsteen*. Klade si za cíl prozkoumat způsob, jakým autorka přistupuje k postavení ženy ve viktoriánské společnosti s ohledem na její pozici v manželském svazku a na trhu práce. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována tomu, jak Oliphant ve svém díle pracuje s viktoriánským pojetím oddělených sfér.

První kapitola vysvětluje, jak autorčina osobní zkušenost s narušováním viktoriánských genderových rolí přispěla k vytváření subversivních ženských postav; tatáž zkušenost jí však zároveň bránila v tom, aby ve svých textech otevřeně přihlásila k podpoře hnutí za ženská práva. Následující kapitoly se blíže věnují třem analyzovaným románům a postupně zkoumají pohnutky jejich protagonistek; cílem je zmapovat autorčino postupné přijímání radikálnějších feministických názorů. Práce pak dochází k závěru, že pověst Margaret Oliphant jako antifeministické spisovatelky je neoprávněná, poněvadž autorčin posun k explicitnějším formám vzpoury proti patriarchálním strukturám se odráží ve stále zarytější odporu jejích hrdinek proti represivním genderovým rolím, jež jim diktuje viktoriánská společnost.

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## 1. Introduction

Although Margaret Oliphant (1828 – 1897) had produced close to one hundred novels over the course of her lifetime,<sup>1</sup> a feat that makes her easily one of the most prolific writers of the nineteenth century, she still remains routinely omitted from university reading<sup>2</sup> lists in favour of long-established canonical authors.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, her work is more than deserving of the revived critical attention it received towards the end of the last century<sup>4,5,6</sup> for it constitutes a unique exploration of the position of women in Victorian society, especially with regards to its frequent interweaving of the traditionally separate spheres of private and public life. In her fiction, she repeatedly highlighted the disparity between the traditional standards of domestic femininity and the social and career ambitions of her female characters. She also made conscious effort to present her readers with alternatives to the aforementioned standards by featuring unmarried and financially independent heroines at the centre of some of her most popular novels.

In spite of her work regularly depicting complex female characters who defied traditional gender norms of their time, the conservative slant of Oliphant's real-life views on the issue of women's rights<sup>7</sup> has long prevented her from taking her rightful place in the feminist literary canon. The aim of this thesis is to substantiate the feminist value of Oliphant's work by mapping out her gradual shift towards a more radical opposition to traditional patriarchal

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<sup>1</sup> John Stock Clarke, *Margaret Oliphant: 1828-1897: A Bibliography (Victorian Fiction Research Guides)*, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Talia Shaffer, "Non-Canonical Women Novelists, 1850-1900: Recent Studies," *Dickens Studies Annual* 37, no. 1 (2006), 332. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44372166>. Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph O'Mealy, "A Review of The Novels of Mrs. Oliphant: A Subversive View of Traditional Themes by Margarete Rubik: Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive by D. J. Trela and Margaret Oliphant," *Victorian Studies* 39, no. 2 (Winter 1996), 250. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3828685>. Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant. A Fiction to Herself*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Margarete Rubik, *The Novels of Mrs. Oliphant: A Subversive View of Traditional Themes* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> D. J. Trela, *Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Sally Ledger, "The New Woman and Feminist Fictions," *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154-5.



structures. By examining both the objectives of and the obstacles encountered by the eponymous protagonists of three of her most popular novels – *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), *Hester* (1883) and *Kirsteen* (1890) – it will explore how Oliphant’s previously sceptical views on “the Woman Question” progressed over the course of a quarter of a century.

In crafting female characters who went against the ideal of the Angel of the House,<sup>8</sup> Oliphant drew on her own experiences of being a woman who had to work for a living. In contrast to many of the better-known women writers of the Victorian era (the likes of George Eliot or the Brontë sisters come to mind), Oliphant turned to writing only after marrying and starting a family. Widowed at the young age of thirty-one, she had little choice but to step into the role of her family’s sole breadwinner in order pay off her husband’s debts, as well as take care of their three young children.<sup>9</sup> Following the financial ruin of her brother’s family, her writing had to support not only her own children but also four of his.<sup>10</sup> Her numerous dependants and the threat of poverty constantly looming over her head forced Oliphant to write ceaselessly and produce texts at an extraordinary rate.<sup>11</sup> She regularly blamed the at times perilous state of her finances for her lack of distinction, even directly contrasting her situation with that of George Eliot’s in her autobiography, speculating whether she would “have done better if [she] had been kept, like [Eliot], in a mental greenhouse and taken care of,”<sup>12</sup> rather than having had to work for her family’s survival.

Oliphant’s resentment at the necessary commodification of her art, although frequently directed against other women writers,<sup>13</sup> stemmed from her deep-seeded frustration with the

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<sup>8</sup> Katie Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” *Women’s Writing* 28, no. 3 (April 2020), 400, DOI: 10.1080/09699082.2020.1751435. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography*, 91-2.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography*, xi.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Valerie Sanders, *Eve’s Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 41.

men in her life. As noted by Juliet Shields, “an alcoholic brother, an absent father, a loving but thoughtless husband, and two underachieving sons left Oliphant with a poor opinion of male competency.”<sup>14</sup> Having learnt at an early age not to depend on the men in her life for neither emotional nor financial support, her novels accordingly foreground “women who are the primary support of their family, at once caretakers and wage-earners, and who are saddled with ineffectual or downright trouble-some men,”<sup>15</sup> instead of featuring traditional romance narratives. Her heroines persistently subvert the gendered expectations of their society by choosing to focus their energy on pursuing success in the public sphere instead of pursuing men. Much like their creator herself, they reject the idealisation of the institution of marriage, preferring to live independently and rely on their own efforts in the cases when they are given the choice. However, as the endings of Oliphant’s novels regularly reinforce, such choices were anomalous in the nineteenth century, merely exceptions proving the rule rather than signs of coming social change, with most women having to conform to the prescribed feminine role for decades to come.

Of the three protagonists from the novels under examination in this study, one closes her story by consenting to marriage, one by rejecting it and one with the choice left to be made. While their author may be commonly grouped with the “antifeminist” novelists of the era, who, though they might have at times explored alternative options for their female characters, typically settled on either “death or marriage [being] the only realistic possibility for their heroines,”<sup>16</sup> Valerie Sanders argues that Oliphant’s novels not only reject the “Victorian middle-class ideology of marriage,”<sup>17</sup> but actively aid its deconstruction and de-romanticisation. By prominently featuring relationships with “an underlying atmosphere of

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<sup>14</sup> Juliet Shields, *Scottish Women’s Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Sanders, “Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist,” *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

sexual distaste”<sup>18</sup> and “entirely different mental worlds occupied by husband and wife,”<sup>19</sup> Oliphant challenged the construction of marriage as the only appropriate goal towards which a young woman ought to strive.

Though she employs many of the tropes and motives common to traditional love plots in her works, their primary function is to heighten the satirical tone of her novels rather than to capture true emotion, her ironic narrative voice rarely granting her heroines any genuine expressions of love or sexual attraction. They are instead represented as women trapped in a limbo of apathetic courtships and passionless marriages, faced with the choice between conforming to patriarchal gender roles by becoming wives and mothers or attempting to subvert them by carving out an alternative path.

While the author herself challenged the traditional domestic role expected of all women in general – and mothers in particular – by relying on her own income, she nevertheless had to at least partially conform to it in order to avoid being ostracized by society. Consequently, her work focused on exploring the inherent conflict between conventional Victorian domesticity and the realities of working life of the career women who had to exist in both the private and the public sphere simultaneously. Using her own experiences of the sexist double standards of the literary marketplace, she examined the unique hardships faced by those of her female characters who had no choice but to enter the workforce to earn their bread, for much like Oliphant herself, her heroines do not step out of the feminine mould prescribed to them by the conventions of the nineteenth century willingly.

Both Kirsteen Douglas and Catherine Vernon are forced to create public personas when unforeseen responsibilities are thrust upon them as a result of the intolerance and incompetence of the men in their lives and find out that their new roles suit them better than they expected.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Sanders, “Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist,” 33.

Through they initially struggle with combining the weight of restrictive gendered expectations with their new-found financial independence, they succeed in finding their footing in a labour market hostile to women, all while maintaining enough of a traditionally feminine domestic presence to escape societal censure.

It was possibly to avoid this precise censure that Oliphant never explicitly opposed the inherently patriarchal political structures that propped up Victorian society outside of her fiction. While her characters subverted the norms of their time, Oliphant herself was frequently praised for seemingly agreeing with the anti-feminist establishment, her political writings appearing at odds with her novels. She was vehemently opposed to the New Women writers' "explicit treatment of 'indelicate' matters and the frequent sexual transgression of their heroines,"<sup>20</sup> which resulted in Oliphant being viewed as "prudish" by her more radical contemporaries, creating a distance between her and the mainstream feminist thinking in the later years of her career. In spite of the outward ambivalence of her periodical writings towards the emancipation of women and universal suffrage, Valerie Sanders argues that Oliphant had no choice but to "[develop] her own idiosyncratic response to the debates about women's independence"<sup>21</sup> in order to appease her middle-class conservative readership, all while simultaneously creating novels which feature "heroines [who] reform marriage from within, rejecting the life of childbearing and submission that their mothers suffered, and subtly adjusting the balance of power"<sup>22</sup> of a fundamentally prejudiced system.

This thesis examines the claims made by Sanders and her fellow literary critics by analysing Oliphant's survey of a woman's position in patriarchal society, treating three of her later novels – *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Hester* and *Kirsteen* – as illustrative of her views on women's rights. Published in a period spanning close to 25 years of the author's career, the works each

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Heilmann, "Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman," *Women's Writing* 6, no. 2 (1999), 234. DOI: 10.1080/09699089900200064. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Sanders, "Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist," 35.

<sup>22</sup> Sanders, "Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist," 34.

approach the intertwined themes of marriage, career and women's independence from a fresh perspective, accomplished by Oliphant's portraying her three protagonists in radically different circumstances.

Her heroines, in spite of their contrasting levels of education and class privilege, all share an ardent desire for acquiring absolute authority over their lives, as well as harbour ambitions of becoming financially independent against the explicit wishes of the dominant groups in charge. The objective of this work is to demonstrate the gradual progression of Oliphant's feminist principles on the characters of Lucilla, Hester and Kirsteen and their varied responses to the inherently oppressive gendered expectations of nineteenth-century England and Scotland, starting with the most ambiguous of the novelist's nonconformists, Lucilla Marjoribanks.

## 2. *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866)

### 2.1 An Atypical Victorian Heroine

Margaret Oliphant's series *The Chronicles of Carlingford*, published in the *Blackwood's Magazine* throughout the early 1860s, can be considered the author's own interpretation of Anthony Trollope's extremely popular Barchester series. The novels follow the inhabitants of a small peaceful town in the English countryside, one not dissimilar from the town to which Oliphant relocated following the sudden death of her daughter Maggie,<sup>23</sup> the provincial mores of the local professional middle class being a frequent target of Oliphant's biting criticism, thinly disguised by her frequent use of an ironic tone. *Miss Marjoribanks*, the sixth book of *The Chronicles of Carlingford* series, is the widest read of Oliphant's novels today, owing largely to the author's provocative commentary on class and gender represented by the behaviour of the novel's titular character.

Lucilla Marjoribanks, a young woman described by Oliphant as "large in all particulars, full and well-developed, with somewhat large features, not at all pretty,"<sup>24</sup> is a far cry from the mould of the typical Victorian heroine. Missing the integral "ladylike fragility and delicate beauty"<sup>25</sup> associated with the women who sought to conform to nineteenth-century standards of domestic femininity, she finds herself at odds with the prescribed ideal of passive womanhood, personified in the figure of the "Angel in the House." Lucilla's invalid mother, who corresponds to this angelic stereotype much closer than her daughter ever could, is unceremoniously killed off by Oliphant before the novel even starts. It is almost as if the author anticipated Woolf's advice on the subject, that "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer,"<sup>26</sup> and took it literally. The killing of Mrs Marjoribanks, which

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<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Jay, "Introduction" *Miss Marjoribanks* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), xii.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), 25.

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," <https://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Woolf.pdf>. Accessed 14th February 2022.

brings about her daughter's homecoming, sets in motion a social revolution, at least within the confines Carlingford scale. It spells the symbolic beginning of the end for their traditional way of life and simultaneously heralds the arrival of "the new reign of youth and energy which was about to commence."<sup>27</sup>

After managing to postpone the then fifteen-year-old Lucilla's plans for the domination of the Marjoribanks household and the Carlingford society in the wake of her mother's death, Dr Marjoribanks has no choice but to welcome his daughter home once she is finally allowed to abandon her studies. Lucilla – well-travelled and finely educated for a girl of nineteen by Carlingford standards – returns to her hometown, deciding to stay with her reluctant father in order to create an entertaining life for herself. While she declares that she intends to selflessly forgo marriage and instead "be a comfort to dear papa,"<sup>28</sup> her true motives are far from self-sacrificing. Rather than setting her sights on obtaining a husband and consequently having to conform to his rule once they are wed, she is determined to become the true mistress of her father's house in an Emma Woodhouse fashion and transform the ways of the inhabitants of Carlingford to her liking.

## **2. 2 Misappropriating the Ideal of Domestic Femininity**

In a move that is at once practical and symbolic, Lucilla commences her foray into the town's society by redesigning the drawing room at her house to better accommodate for larger parties. According to Elizabeth Langland, "spaces [in Victorian houses] were coded as masculine or feminine. Drawing rooms, for example, were regarded as feminine [...] while the dining rooms, [were] considered masculine."<sup>29</sup> Lucilla, who relies on the help of a number of instruction manuals in her reconstruction, transforms the rooms strategically, creating a social event to fit the venue in the process. Her newly instated "Evenings," which feature no "dancing and

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<sup>27</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 7-8.

<sup>28</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Langland, "Nobody's Angels" Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel," *PMLA* 107 no. 2 (March 1992), 295. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/462641>. Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> December 2021.

singing...[or] quantities of young people”<sup>30</sup> quickly usurp the place of her father’s formerly popular Thursday dinners, to which only the male half of the population of the town was ever invited, by simply moving the party upstairs. The Marjoribanks’ drawing room, which functioned as a place of calm and repose during the lifetime of the former ailing lady of the house, is thus transformed into the hub of Carlingford society by her worldly daughter.

Lucilla’s careful consultation of the then popular etiquette manuals which “taught the Victorian middle classes to emulate aristocratic manners”<sup>31</sup> and instructed their young female readers on all there was to know about the tastes and fashions of the day, including the best ways to dress and decorate one’s rooms, is highlighted continuously throughout the novel. By frequently drawing attention to this aspect of her heroine’s education, Oliphant “exposes Lucilla’s refined tastes as arising from her imitation of the correct cultural authorities, not from her moral and aesthetic predispositions,”<sup>32</sup> suggesting that class and good taste are a matter of consensus and compliance with the dominant groups rather than just an inherent privilege of the aristocrats. Aside from helping her cement her place as an undisputed trendsetter over her less sophisticated neighbours, in spite of her being their social equal, Lucilla’s ability to mimic the behaviour and demeanour of upper classes further benefits her in acquiring social capital without ever needing to venture out of her drawing room or raising people’s suspicions about her sudden accumulation of power. Andrea Kaston Tange argues that

once Lucilla Marjoribanks has established the drawing-room as a physical and ideological space that will contain her actions, she uses this space and all it represents to expand the boundaries of her cultural place. By focusing specifically on the work its heroine undertakes within her drawing-room and by asserting that a woman’s power lies in the possibility for feminine taste to accomplish action, Oliphant’s novel, like her heroine, operates within the ‘prejudices of society’ while simultaneously offering a means to exploit those prejudices.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Zlotnick, “Passing for Real: Class and Mimicry in *Miss Marjoribanks*,” *Victorian Review* 38 no. 1 (Spring 2012), 175. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23646860>. Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Kaston Tange, “Redesigning Femininity: “*Miss Marjoribanks*’s” Drawing-Room of Opportunity,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36 no. 1 (2008), 163. DOI: 10.1017/S1060150308080108. Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> November 2021.



While Lucilla's awareness of modern aesthetic trends aids her in amassing undue influence, it is specifically her understanding of social propriety and her masterful performance of the Victorian archetype of womanhood that secures her a position at the head of town society. Although she might lack the means or the drive of Oliphant's subsequent heroines Hester Vernon and Kirsteen Douglas, she shares their ambitions of liberation and independence and, similarly spurred on by a frustration with women's lot in life, she manages to gradually work herself up in her limited world by weaponizing her femininity against the unsuspecting inhabitants of Carlingford and utilising the restrictive gender norms in her favour.

What is more, she manages to accomplish this feat without offending Victorian sensibilities. As noted by Tange, "Lucilla is not explicitly subversive in a way that would make the 'average' middle-class reader uneasy. Far from rejecting the privileges of her middle-class life, Lucilla is in many respects sincerely conventional,"<sup>34</sup> which allows her to avoid both the opposition and censure experienced the protagonists of Oliphant's later novels. She operates within the bounds of what was permitted to a young woman of her class, creating as independent an existence for herself as was possible without explicitly challenging the oppressive patriarchal structures that restrict her freedom. She would rather stick to her drawing room parties and retain her Carlingford-sized sphere of influence than attempt, and possibly fail at, obtaining true independence, as commented upon by Emily Blair.

In characterizing Lucilla, Oliphant exploits the domestic sphere as a physical space and a social relation to power. She confers symbolic value on Lucilla's ability to decorate interior space and thus to extend her social influence materially, and she extols Lucilla's adept social skills and their means of creating power alliances.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, in her evaluation of the merit of Lucilla's domestic work with regards to the advancement of women, Oliphant's ironic tone fails to disguise her own cynicism. While she

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<sup>34</sup> Tange, "Redesigning Femininity: Miss Marjoribanks's Drawing-Room of Opportunity," 166.

<sup>35</sup> Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth Century Domestic Novel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 139.

refers to her protagonist's "genius" in the art of domesticity at multiple points in the novel, her use of the word only serves to "gently [mock] the elevation of feminine creativity in the domestic realm."<sup>36</sup> Rather than pretend that Lucilla can find fulfilment in the home, Oliphant's derisive portrayal reveals her enterprising heroine as one of the thousands of young women – notwithstanding their marital status – who are stuck in the private sphere and trying to make the best of her circumstances.

In spite of Lucilla's claims that she moved back to her hometown with only the simple wish "to be a comfort to dear papa,"<sup>37</sup> Oliphant repeatedly draws attention to her heroine's revolutionary ambitions by having her presence irreversibly change the workings of the town's society over the course of the ensuing months and years. According to Valerie Sanders, "her apparent devotion to her father is really a cover for an ambitious social campaign in Carlingford."<sup>38</sup> Unlike the more obviously daring protagonists of Oliphant's later works, Lucilla executes her task inconspicuously, without ever being accused of unladylike behaviour or social impropriety. Much like Catherine Vernon or Kirsteen Douglas, she becomes the mistress of her own enterprise due to her skill and cunning, the only difference being that the enterprise in question is neither a bank nor a shop but rather a whole town controlled from the domestic domain typical of a nineteenth-century woman. As pointed out by Elizabeth Langland, Lucilla is a perfect example of the numerous "middle-class women [who] were pursuing a 'career of sociability,'"<sup>39</sup> because it allowed them to obtain social power while still conforming to the feminine ideal.

### **2.3 Lucilla's Political Endeavour**

Although Lucilla outwardly conforms to the gendered expectations of her society, her actions nevertheless challenge Victorian norms. According to Emily Blair, the subversiveness of *Miss*

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<sup>36</sup> Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth Century Domestic Novel*, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Sanders, "Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist," 33.

<sup>39</sup> Langland, "Nobody's Angels" Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel," 294.

*Marjoribanks* arises from Lucilla's "[misappropriation of] the womanly ideal to foster her own ambitions, ambitions that lie outside of self-abnegation and filial duty."<sup>40</sup> These ambitions, chiefly Lucilla's desire to revolutionise "the taste and ideas in Carlingford,"<sup>41</sup> drive her towards engaging in a delicate sort of subterfuge which requires her to conceal her desires of leadership and disguise her striking social intelligence under a girlishly naïve demeanour and pretensions of ignorance. When, in the final part of the novel, Lucilla succeeds in having Mr Ashburton elected as the next MP for Carlingford, despite claiming that she knows nothing of politics, it is her feminine-coded skills of small talk and colour-coordination that she uses to achieve this task. In the words of Andrea Kaston Tange:

Lucilla's foray into governmental politics is impressive: she selects Mr. Ashburton as the candidate who will be the next M.P. for Carlingford, convinces him to run, and manages his campaign so that he wins the election. Yet all the while she limits her involvement in the election to activities that might happen in her drawing-room. She chooses the colors that will become 'his' (used to demonstrate support for his campaign) and makes up endless bunches of ribbons for his supporters to wear from her own stock of green and lavender silks that echo her drawing-room decor. As Langland notes, these 'colors, of course, work through association, allowing him to draw upon her power in Carlingford' – suggesting that in fact Lucilla's political power in the town is far greater than that of the candidate whom she is promoting.<sup>42</sup>

It is also worthwhile to note that the socially conservative Lucilla's choice of "her" colours corresponds with those chosen to represent the suffragette movement.<sup>43</sup> Although she at no point openly proclaims support for women's suffrage, quite the contrary, Oliphant allows her only politically ambitious heroine to at least subtly imply where her true loyalties lie.

In spite of knowing that "she might have gone into Parliament herself had there been no disqualification of sex,"<sup>44</sup> Lucilla is well aware that her only chance at obtaining social power

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<sup>40</sup> Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth Century Domestic Novel*, 139.

<sup>41</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Tange, "Redesigning Femininity: "Miss Marjoribanks's" Drawing-Room of Opportunity," 176-77.

<sup>43</sup> Monica Cohen, "Maximizing Oliphant: Begging the Question and the Politics of Satire," *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 108.

<sup>44</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 389.

and influence over her neighbours is to be the one who chooses the man who will win the office that ought to have been hers. Therefore, she promotes Mr Ashburton's interests by continuing to rely on her constructed persona of the perfect hostess and embodying the fabled figure of the domestic genius. Even Dr Marjoribanks is aware that his now almost thirty-year-old daughter's talents are being wasted on having to still rely solely on her "womanly" skills to partake in the running of the town, as evidenced by the passage below.

But somehow it struck the Doctor more than ever how great a loss it was to society and to herself that Lucilla was not 'the boy.' She could have continued, and perhaps extended, the practice, whereas just now it was quite possible that she might drop down into worsted-work and tea-parties like any other single woman.<sup>45</sup>

The novel's ironic extolment of what is essentially its heroine's relegation to the domestic realm gives Oliphant the opportunity to voice her discontent with the position of women in Victorian society. Unlike the explicit rebellion of the heroines of *Kirsteen* and *Hester*, the empowerment of Lucilla Marjoribanks remains symbolic at best. Although she accumulates an enviable amount of influence for an unmarried woman, "she is ultimately 'only' a woman, whose voice on issues of politics matters not at all to the state."<sup>46</sup> While she might retain her independent spirit, she will never be allowed to assume the leadership role outside her drawing room. She is also the only one of the three heroines under observation in this thesis who ends up having to get married at the end of her story in order to avoid the complete loss of her social power and economic freedom.

## **2. 4 Oliphant's Return to the Marriage Plot**

As noted by Valerie Sanders, while "[Oliphant] had difficulty in rejecting the marriage-plot outright,"<sup>47</sup> she could not "[adopt] it uncritically."<sup>48</sup> Lucilla, much like Hester Vernon, begins her novel explicitly averse towards marriage. When she is first proposed to by her cousin (and

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<sup>45</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 395.

<sup>46</sup> Tange, "Redesigning Femininity: "Miss Marjoribanks's" Drawing-Room of Opportunity," 177.

<sup>47</sup> Sanders, "Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist," 32.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

future husband) Tom Marjoribanks, she promptly refuses him by explaining that “[she has] not the least intention of marrying anybody,”<sup>49</sup> a foreshadowing of Hester’s retort when she is in turn proposed by her own cousin Harry: “I would rather not marry—any one. I don’t see the need for it.”<sup>50</sup> Unlike Hester, Lucilla does see “the need for it”, being aware of the eventual inevitability of herself entering the dreaded institution from the offset, acknowledging it openly in one of the first conversations with her father.

Perhaps I may marry some time,” said Miss Marjoribanks, with composure; “it would be foolish, you know, to make any engagements; but that will depend greatly upon how you behave, and how Carlingford behaves, papa. I give myself ten years here, if you should be very good. By twenty-nine I shall be going off a little, and perhaps it may be tiring, for anything I can tell.”<sup>51</sup>

While Lucilla does contemplate marriage repeatedly over the course of the novel, it is the possibility of an advancement of her position in society that tempts her resolve in every one of these instances, rather than any special affection for the men concerned. Her business-like approach to the sacred institution of marriage betrays some of Oliphant’s own scepticism. As noted by Valerie Sanders “Oliphant should be viewed as a key figure in the de-romanticizing of marriage”<sup>52</sup> seeing as “her blunt cynicism still has the power to shock, as she demonstrates how women were prepared to weigh up all the pros and cons of a marriage-proposal, and act to further their own ambitions, rather than in response to any emotional impulse.”<sup>53</sup> Lucilla’s need to retain the influence and power she has amassed surpasses any stirrings of love or attraction she might have felt had she allowed herself to briefly let go of her constructed persona.

Another notable aspect of Lucilla’s calculating attitude towards her relationships with men is her ability to seemingly immediately recover after being jilted. When her one-time suitor

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<sup>49</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 75.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Hester*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 139.

<sup>51</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 47-48.

<sup>52</sup> Sanders, “Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist,” 35.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

Mr Cavendish switches allegiances and starts paying attention to her protégé Barbara Lake, she goes out of her way to throw the two together, contrary to all their neighbours' expectations. This masterful manoeuvre on Lucilla's part results in the society's damnation of the brazen couple and an increase in sympathy towards Lucilla. According to Emily Blair, "Lucilla's willingness to let her potential suitors court other women for the benefit of her Thursday Evenings and her social reorganization of Carlingford demonstrates how her personal aims lie outside the marriage plot and outside Victorian ideals of womanhood."<sup>54</sup> Given the choice between the possibility of personal happiness and societal success, Lucilla acts in opposition to the typical protagonist of a Victorian three-decker.

When she eventually consents to marriage – once she is left virtually penniless and is forced to leave her house after Dr Marjoribanks' death – it is her weak-willed cousin Tom she chooses for her partner in life. Rather than ending the novel with her heroine's finding her true match, Oliphant pairs her with a man she will have an easy time dominating. The novel closes with Lucilla's aiming to recommence her campaign for social power as she and Tom relocate to the nearby Marchbank village, which she views as "a broader sphere in which to exercise her genius."<sup>55</sup> Miss Marjoribanks experiences no epiphany and receives no redemption at the end of her story; the novel's final paragraph features her triumphant exclamation: "And yet it is odd to think that, after all, I shall never be anything but Lucilla Marjoribanks!"<sup>56</sup> According to Monica Cohen, Lucilla's keeping of her maiden name "attests to Oliphant's willingness to play both with and within the conventions of traditional patriarchy."<sup>57</sup> Her view is supported by Valerie Sanders who argues that in spite of the author's forcing her heroine to enter the dreaded institution of marriage, "Lucilla gets to keep her own surname, and symbolically her

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<sup>54</sup> Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth Century Domestic Novel*, 145.

<sup>55</sup> Shields, *Scottish Women's Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, 496.

<sup>57</sup> Cohen, "Maximizing Oliphant: Begging the Question and the Politics of Satire," 109.

own identity”<sup>58</sup> at the close of her story. Oliphant thus ends the novel on an ambiguous note, with Lucilla’s fate appearing either as a tragic relegation of an unutilised genius to the managing of household manners or a victorious extension of her heroine’s sphere of influence.

In the novels she wrote roughly quarter of a century later, Oliphant allowed her heroines to acquire and retain more literal forms of independence. Neither Hester Vernon nor Kirsteen Douglas have to get married to avoid financial ruin, although the eventuality of this outcome is left open in Hester’s case. More importantly, they get to openly proclaim their non-standard views on female independence all throughout their respective stories, unlike Lucilla, who had to at least nominally conform to the restrictive norms of the nineteenth century in order to maintain her social standing. As Lucilla never openly criticises the establishment, it is Oliphant’s ironic wit that is left with the task of alerting her readers to all the injustices experienced by women trying to establish their place in Victorian society.

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<sup>58</sup> Sanders, “Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist,” 34.

### 3. *Hester* (1883)

#### 3.1 The Generation Gap

*Hester*, another one of the few Oliphant novels still in print and the primary focus of this chapter, revisits several of the themes Oliphant first introduced in *Miss Marjoribanks*. Published almost two decades later, the novel subverts the expectations of a traditional Victorian romance by featuring a similarly unconventional Victorian heroine, a “not pretty”<sup>59</sup> young woman who is unwilling to marry either one of her numerous suitors. However, unlike her predecessor, Hester Vernon’s ambitions stretch out far beyond the walls of her father’s drawing room. She would much rather break out the confines of Victorian domestic femininity altogether by procuring a job and establishing herself in the public sphere, much to the disapproval of those around her.

Disregarding the novel’s central love plot, *Hester* can be read as Oliphant’s treatise on working women, although it is not its eponymous character on which the author shines the spotlight. The working woman at the heart of the book is Hester’s elderly aunt Catherine, a woman who managed to succeed against all odds in the traditionally masculine field of banking. Notwithstanding her own defiance of established gender norms, Catherine is no great feminist heroine, for being far too content with her own role in society, she refuses to use her position of power for the good by trying to challenge the status quo to help advance the women around her, Hester included.

The novel’s principal theme revolves around the generational conflict between the young Hester, who represents the radicalism of the late nineteenth-century “New Woman” feminist writers, and the older women in her life, her mother and aunt, whose conservative opinions align more closely with those of the patriarchal establishment. This clash between Hester and her relatives can serve as a reflection of Oliphant’s own conflicting views on women’s rights,

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<sup>59</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Hester*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 90.



including her gradual adoption of more progressive political opinions over the course of her life. *Hester* is a work that stands at the midpoint of Oliphant's oeuvre, one that epitomises its author's ambivalent brand of a feminism dubbed by D. J. Trela as a "gentle [subversion]."<sup>60</sup> It represents her shift from the quiet law-abiding feminism of *Miss Marjoribanks* to the outright rebellion of its successor *Kirsteen*. Due to the novel's symbolic role in Oliphant's feminist awakening, this chapter will focus on its at times contradictory views on the emancipation of women personified in its' two main female characters, Hester and Catherine Vernon.

The novel commences when a fourteen-year-old Hester Vernon returns from France along with her mother to settle in Redborough, the same town her parents left under mysterious circumstances many years before she was born. Unbeknownst to Hester, the late John Vernon escaped to the Continent after abandoning his post as the manager of the local bank and leaving his cousin Catherine to deal with the fallout. Determined to provide for herself and "take care of [her mother]"<sup>61</sup> by becoming a governess and teaching French now that her father had died, Hester has her plans for procuring financial independence vehemently criticised by the newly widowed Mrs John, who grew up believing that women, other than those born into working class families, should never seek roles outside of the home. Rather than have her daughter bring shame upon the family name by seeking employment, she swallows her own pride and turns for help to Catherine Vernon.

At the time of the novel's opening, it has been two decades since Catherine saved the Vernon bank by sacrificing her inheritance for the benefit of its creditors. Now in her sixties and at the head of the bank, she invites the indebted Mrs John and Hester to partake in her great charitable project and move into the Vernonry, an old house in which she maintains an ever-expanding number of her poorer relations. Mrs John immediately starts resenting her reliance

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<sup>60</sup> Heilmann, "Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman," 216.

<sup>61</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 43.

on her husband's cousin's charity, with her daughter adopting her antipathy towards Catherine, mistakenly believing her aunt of having been the cause of her father's downfall. From the offset, Hester struggles in her role as a dependent of Catherine's, perceiving her aunt's seemingly generous behaviour towards her as calculated. Indeed, Catherine's treatment of the inhabitants of the Vernonly comes across more as a demonstration of her own social power than true charity, as evidenced by her fury following her first interaction with the novel's titular heroine in which Hester, as yet unaware of her new subordinate position in the Vernon family hierarchy, "refused [Catherine] admission [...] to [her] own house."<sup>62</sup> Though she privately admits to herself that she "felt a little too distinctly that it was her own house, which, seeing she had given it to Mrs. John, was an ungenerosity in the midst of her generosity,"<sup>63</sup> she is incapable of not immediately disliking Hester as a direct result of the young girl's apparent disrespect towards her benefactor.

The enmity between Hester and Catherine quickly becomes the primary focus of the narrative, overshadowing its shallow love plot.<sup>64</sup> Throughout the whole of the novel, the two women are "metaphorically and temperamentally caught in a mother–daughter tug of war, each [detesting] the other."<sup>65</sup> Oliphant shows them alternatively hating and admiring one another, frequently with the intention of highlighting their many similarities. Their mutual antagonism is only resolved towards the end of the book when Hester refuses to follow in her father's footsteps by leaving the bank for ruin and chooses instead to aid Catherine in saving it for the second time. Oliphant emphasises even the physical resemblance between Hester and Catherine in this key scene:

They were both very pale, with eyes that shone with excitement and passion. The likeness between them came out in the strangest way as they stood thus, intent upon each other. They were like mother and daughter standing opposed in civil war.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 36.

<sup>64</sup> Heilmann, "Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman, 225.

<sup>65</sup> Heilmann, "Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman, 225.

<sup>66</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 409.

While Oliphant ends the aforementioned war with a ceasefire and the two women developing a begrudging respect for one another, Hester is still denied the freedom she craves at the end of the story. Her dream of becoming financially independent is quashed by both the older women who are in charge of her life, for it is not only her mother, an embodiment of traditional Victorian standards of femininity, who firmly objects to the idea of Hester working, but also her aunt, a woman who has lived most of her life in open defiance of them.

### 3. 2 The Reluctant Subversiveness of Catherine Vernon

The character of Catherine is repeatedly depicted by Oliphant as that of a woman treading the fine line between the private and the public sphere. In the nineteenth century, these spheres generally remained firmly separated,<sup>67</sup> and in the case of the latter, largely impenetrable to women. According to Nancy Henry, “*Hester* is unique in Oliphant’s body of work particularly, and in Victorian fiction generally, for imagining a woman as the head of a bank, as well as of an extended family.”<sup>68</sup> Catherine indeed defies the norms of the age by taking an active part in family life and business both for, rather than simply condemning the “Angel in the House” ideal of oppressively domestic femininity so skilfully imitated by Lucilla Marjoribanks in Oliphant’s earlier work, she tries to cohere patriarchal gendered expectations with her profession in finance.

In what Patricia E. Johnson refers to as “one of Oliphant’s unexpected reversal’s,”<sup>69</sup> Catherine failure of her attempt at “having it all” comes about not due to a lack of business acumen, but as a result of her insufficiently managing the domestic sphere, that is, failing to perform the traditional feminine role to the standards of the “increasingly powerful domestic

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<sup>67</sup> Laura Marcus, “Woolf’s Feminism and Feminism’s Woolf,” *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154.

<sup>68</sup> Nancy Henry, *Women, Literature and Finance in Victorian Britain: Cultures of Investment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 241.

<sup>69</sup> Patricia E. Johnson, “Unlimited Liability: Women and Capital in Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester*,” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 1, <https://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue61/johnson.html>. Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

ideology.”<sup>70</sup> Oliphant subverts the preconceived notions about the intrinsic strengths and weaknesses of women by “unsettling the concept that Victorian women could reign in the private sphere and yet would be attacked and undercut if they entered the public”<sup>71</sup> by having “*Hester* [show] that Catherine Vernon carries all before her in the public arena but is brought to ruin by her private family relations.”<sup>72</sup> Catherine’s inability to incorporate her well-regarded public persona into her family life leads Katie Barker to consider *Hester* “an example of a problematic domestic environment, fraught with difficulties as family members reveal their petty jealousies, resulting in stifled growth and impeded development for the novel’s central female characters, Catherine and Hester.”<sup>73</sup>

Hester is painfully lacking in any support from Catherine in her quest for financial independence. Instead of becoming her mentor, her economically autonomous aunt sides with Mrs John, maintaining that it would be improper for Hester to seek employment and declaring that “women have never worked for their living in our family, and, so far as I can help it, they never shall.”<sup>74</sup> When challenged by Hester about herself being, by definition, a working woman, Catherine, who believes herself to be a sole exception to the rules she expects other women to abide by, highlights the difference between their respective situations:

I did not stoop down to paltry work. I took a place which—others had abandoned. I was wanted to save the family, and thank Heaven I could do it. For that, if you were up to it, and occasion required, you should have my permission to do anything.<sup>75</sup>

She then continues forcing Hester to mindlessly accept her charity, repressing rather than assisting her personal growth and further feeding the bitter resentment towards herself already brewing in her ward. Instead of providing Hester with guidance, Catherine repeatedly

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” 400.

<sup>74</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 72.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

discourages her niece from attempting to advance her own position in life by any way save marriage, playing the part of the “masculine patriarch who hinders Hester's way to economic independence,”<sup>76</sup> determined to preserve the social structures in place rather than aid Hester in dismantling them.

### 3. 3 Oliphant’s Second Return to the Marriage Plot

Even after Hester is finally given the opportunity to gain Catherine’s respect by “[saving] the family;”<sup>77</sup> and the two women are allowed to make peace with one another, she is still not allowed to follow her aunt’s example and remain unmarried. Unlike women like Catherine and Kirsteen, who were more or less successful at escaping the clutches of patriarchal familial structures, Oliphant finishes Hester’s story with a rather disappointing, albeit more realistic, ending – her character is “left with marriage as the only realistic prospect for her future,”<sup>78</sup> in what Valerie Sanders dubs “one of Oliphant’s flattest and most unenthusiastic ringing of marriage bells, all the real emotion of the novel having been expended on the night when Catherine’s prompt actions saved Vernon’s bank.”<sup>79</sup> In spite of Hester proving herself capable of assuming a role in the family enterprise on that day, she still finds herself expected to marry one of the “two mediocre men that she does not love”<sup>80</sup> in order to appease her mother’s ambitions at the end of the book.

Hester’s situation is made all the more tragic by her obvious hostility towards the institution of marriage. When she is first proposed to by Harry, one of Catherine’s cousins who, unlike Hester, has the ability to eventually succeed her as the head of the bank, she immediately

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<sup>76</sup> Seda Cosar Celik, “Pro or anti-feminist? Margaret Oliphant’s Hester,” *Interactions* 25, no. 1-2 (March 2016), <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Pro+or+anti-feminist%3f+Margaret+Oliphant%27s+Hester.-a0443888701>. Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

<sup>77</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 72.

<sup>78</sup> Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” 403.

<sup>79</sup> Valerie Sanders, “Mrs Oliphant and Emotion,” *Women’s Writing* 6, no. 2 (1999), 185. DOI:10.1080/09699089900200072. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

lets him know that “[she] would rather not marry – any one”<sup>81</sup> because she does not “see the need for it.”<sup>82</sup> From the offset, Hester is fundamentally opposed to marrying a man whom she does not love; regardless of this, Harry still ends up being one of the men she will have to choose between in order to help secure her position in Redborough society, the other being the stockbroker Roland Ashton, who almost brought about the second ruination of the bank. The narrator’s heavily ironic assessment of Hester’s situation forms the closing paragraph of the novel: “there are two men whom she may choose between, and marry either if she pleases—good men both, who will never wring her heart [...] What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?”<sup>83</sup>

Considering all Hester desired ever since moving to Redborough was to work for her own money and become independent, “the conventional marriage ending is disrupted,”<sup>84</sup> as noted by Ben Moore, who also proposes that “the novel therefore concludes by registering that a sufficient, comfortable domestic life [...] is not in itself satisfactory.”<sup>85</sup> Unlike Lucilla Marjoribanks, Hester does not easily comply with having to conform to the oppressive Victorian norms of feminine behaviour. She rages at the “dullness” of the lives of women, the condition of “not living at all, but only going on because one cannot help it”<sup>86</sup> and yet, she has no choice but to eventually conform to the expectations of patriarchal familial structures, primarily for the sake of her mother, who cannot accept her daughter’s seemingly irrational wish to not have to give up her autonomy by entering the marital state.

Unlike the expected reluctance on the part of the conventional Mrs John, Catherine’s opposition to her niece’s abstention from marriage reflects the hypocrisy of “her inability to

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<sup>81</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 139.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 456.

<sup>84</sup> Ben Moore, “‘Of Pride and Joy No Common Rate’: From the Surplus Women Problem to Surplus Jouissance in Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester*,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 26, no. 1 (2021), 131. DOI: 10.1093/jvcult/vcaa018. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 306.

regard her own departure from conventional femininity other than as an exception.”<sup>87</sup> In order to accept her own role as a working woman, Catherine has to “[rip] herself from her female identity.”<sup>88</sup> She presents herself “as a woman so much superior to her sex [with] her masculine understanding,”<sup>89</sup> mostly because she feels threatened by the possibility of other women gaining the same privileges she has long enjoyed. In spite of acknowledging that Hester is more than able to take over the bank after her passing, Catherine still chooses Harry as her heir, preferring to maintain the patriarchal system of inheritance rather than try establishing a new feminine line of succession.

Even at the end a life that continuously challenged established gender norms, she still upholds the values she was raised with and consequently, does not believe in women’s ability to take on roles deemed traditionally masculine, even though her personal experiences left her without much faith in the abilities of men either. As noted by Ann Heilmann, “despite her experience of male betrayal, which sparks off the first crisis, Catherine chooses another man as her heir, failing to recognise in Hester her spiritual equal and born successor.”<sup>90</sup> Rather than allow for her rival to take her place, rendering her irrelevant, she would prefer for Hester to follow the traditional path assigned to women by marrying and remaining firmly confined to the prison of the domestic sphere she herself escaped.

### **3. 4 New Woman Versus the Old Tradition**

However, Catherine’s refusal to allow Hester to follow in her footsteps can be read as a protective gesture as well. Assuming a role inherently associated with men has after all brought Catherine a lot more besides financial independence; her existence is lonely, having been rejected by her cousin in her youth and her surrogate son in her old age. Although she is respected for her wealth by the majority of the inhabitants of Redborough, “[her] power in the

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<sup>87</sup> Heilmann, “Mrs Grundy’s Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman,” 226.

<sup>88</sup> Celik, “Pro or anti-feminist? Margaret Oliphant’s Hester.”

<sup>89</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 424.

<sup>90</sup> Heilmann, “Mrs Grundy’s Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman,” 225.

public sphere does not translate at all into the domestic realm”<sup>91</sup> as she is scorned and envied by her relatives because of it. The resentment of her dependants “reinforces old conventions, suggesting that women who step out of expected domestic norms are subversive and to be distrusted.”<sup>92</sup> Having personally experienced the hostility towards women in power harboured by the Victorian society, Catherine’s distrust in Hester’s ability to succeed her as the manager of the bank can be read as more considerate than petty, especially considering their last exchange:

You would soon learn. A few years' work, and you would be an excellent man of business; but it can't be.  
Why cannot it be? You did it. I should not be afraid——  
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——  
I could not—I could not! I will never marry.  
[...]  
I would marry," she cried, "if I were you! I would wipe out every recollection.<sup>93</sup>

Even at the very end of her life, Catherine is still mourning the loss of the life she might have had, had she followed the path traditionally prescribed to women in the early nineteenth century.

Placed in direct opposition to her aunt’s views on the abilities of women, those of Hester’s are a direct reflection of the period in which she grew up. Unlike her aunt brought up in the shadow of the ever-present feminine ideal of the “Angel in the House,” the late Victorian Hester represents a new generation of women, one that wants to work and earn their own money rather than be forever relegated to the private sphere. Rather than rely on men for financial support, these “New Women” sought to establish a mutually supportive community of liberated working women, with their offer of support extending even to those of their foremothers who directly oppose their radical vision of womanhood. Oliphant demonstrates this tenet of the

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<sup>91</sup> Johnson, “Unlimited Liability: Women and Capital in Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester*.”

<sup>92</sup> Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” 405.

<sup>93</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 454.



“New Woman” ideology by having Hester, in spite of explicitly admitting to her dislike of Catherine, still defend her to her suitor Roland in their discussion about working women.

Besides, she said, it was not a hero I was thinking of. If anybody, it was Catherine Vernon.

Whom you don't like. These women, who step out of their sphere, they may do much to be respected, they may be of great use; but——

You mean that men don't like them, said Hester, with a smile; but then women do; and, after all, we are the half of creation—or more.<sup>94</sup>

Unlike her older female relatives, Hester “recognises the importance of sisterhood, despairing of traditional women’s tendency to endorse misogynist ideas about women rather than stand up for their sex.”<sup>95</sup> In this respect, she surpasses not only Lucilla Marjoribanks, but also the seemingly more radical Kirsteen Douglas, who continued to hold disparaging views about the women whose ideas differed from her own.

With its focus on the obstacles faced by working women in Victorian society, *Hester* lies at the turning point of Oliphant’s work, proving that the author was reconsidering some of her long-held opinions on the condition of women. Even though she would offer a more thorough exploration of the themes seven years later with *Kirsteen*, Oliphant’s treatment of “the Woman Question” in *Hester* conversely suggests that Oliphant “was moving closer to the position of the younger generation”<sup>96</sup> concerning her views of women’s rights. The steadfast “gentle subversive”<sup>97</sup> of Margaret Oliphant was seemingly abandoning the last shreds of her conformist attitudes just as her life was entering its last decade.

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<sup>94</sup> Oliphant, *Hester*, 307.

<sup>95</sup> Heilmann, “Mrs Grundy’s Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant between orthodoxy and the New Woman,” 226.

<sup>96</sup> Heilmann, “Mrs Grundy’s Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant between orthodoxy and the New Woman,” 227.

<sup>97</sup> Heilmann, “Mrs Grundy’s Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant between orthodoxy and the New Woman,” 216.

## 4. *Kirsteen* (1890)

### 4.1 The Rigid Gender Roles of the Regency Era

After Oliphant's more tentative explorations of the "enterprising young woman narrative" examined in the previous chapters of this work, it was *Kirsteen*, her 1890 historical novel, that finally allowed the author to shed the vestiges of her allegiance to Victorian gender roles and at last construct a story that actively opposed patriarchal familial structures. The novel depicts a young woman complete the transition from a private domestic role to one in the public sphere by capturing its protagonist's escape from her tyrannical father's home in the Scottish Highlands and her subsequent establishment as a financially independent dressmaker in London.

Aside from being a seminal treatise on the experiences of working women in the nineteenth century, *Kirsteen* also heavily criticised traditional gender roles and the sexist double standards inherently associated with them. It allowed Oliphant to re-examine the themes of her preceding works in a more revolutionary light, tacitly signalling a shift in her previously conservative stance regarding women's rights. Written towards the end of the author's career and published at the beginning of the "New Woman" decade of Victorian literature, the novel represents a culmination of Oliphant's piecemeal adoption of more progressive feminist views.

Despite its plot taking place during the Regency era, *Kirsteen* is a historical novel in name only, seeing as "in focusing on women's experience, Oliphant cuts out the major political events of the period."<sup>98</sup> Although the book features oblique references to its male characters taking part in the Atlantic slave trade and East Indian imperialism, rather than concentrate her attention on their exploits, Oliphant puts Kirsteen Douglas at the centre of her narrative and, utilising the benefit of seven decades of hindsight, criticises the oppression of women under

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<sup>98</sup> Pam Perkins, "'We who have been bred upon Sir Walter': Margaret Oliphant, Sir Walter Scott, and Women's Literary History" *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 30, no. 2 (2004), 98. DOI: 10.1353/esc.2004.0018. Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

the patriarchy from a contemporary late Victorian perspective, as commented upon by Patricia Zakreski:

As a woman and a dressmaker, Kirsteen is firmly located in the 1880s. The story, however, is set in the 1820s, and through this temporal discrepancy, Oliphant demonstrates the change over the Victorian era in ideas of proper womanly behaviour and in the propriety of work for the middle-class woman.<sup>99</sup>

By effectively erasing all the strides towards gender equality made over the course of the nineteenth century, Oliphant is able to present a picture of patriarchal absolutism at its most oppressive, thereby justifying to her unsuspecting readers her protagonist's at times radical deviations from the accepted standards of feminine behaviour.

The novel allows Oliphant to finally take advantage of the opportunity to condemn essentialist gender roles by conducting a throughout investigation of the effects they have not only on the women, but also the men living in a world dominated by them. In the seat of the novel's literal patriarch Drumcarro Douglas, women are neglected and regularly verbally abused, with Kirsteen and her sisters having to work "as almost servants in their father's house,"<sup>100</sup> while their brothers are sent off to war, one by one, in an attempt to win back some of the Douglas family long-lost glory. Forcing his daughters to cook and clean while being denied anything but the most basic of educations for the benefit of his sons, Drumcarro all but severs the sisters' links with the world outside of their home. While the men of the family get to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the family estate by joining regiments stationed all across the Empire, the women are kept isolated in the Highlands and confined to the endless drudgery of thankless household chores. As stated by Juliet Shields, "Kirsteen and her sisters cannot expect to escape from the cyclical repetitions of domestic time into the linear time of

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<sup>99</sup> Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman* (London: Routledge, 2006), 55.

<sup>100</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2010), 58.

history, as their brothers do,”<sup>101</sup> because they are stuck in the perpetual servitude of the traditional female role.

#### 4. 2 Escaping the Patriarchal Familial Structure

Even though Oliphant analysed the numerous drawbacks of being confined to the Victorian domestic sphere in both *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Hester*, neither of her antecedent heroines was subjected to the treatment experienced by Kirsteen and her sisters at the hands of their father. Unlike the majority of Oliphant’s male characters, whom she typically portrayed as incompetent but effectively harmless, Drumcarro Douglas functions as a representation of the damage caused by unchecked toxic masculinity. Plagued by the numerous disappointments in his personal history that rendered him unable to express himself emotionally, he takes out his frustration on the members of his family, mainly by terrorising the female half of his household. Being a former “slave-driver,”<sup>102</sup> who returned home from the West Indies with a high temper and a sadistic twist, “he proceeds to treat his ‘feeble’ wife and his ‘useless’ daughters as if they too were slaves [as] he looks to his sons to redeem the rest of the family’s former estate.”<sup>103</sup>

As noted by Beth Harris, it is his desire to recover the former grandeur of the Douglas name that induces him to “[insist] on living according to the highland customs of a generation earlier and accordingly [believe] that his daughters’ only mission in life is to serve and obey him.”<sup>104</sup> His failure to regain his ancestral home, along with the accompanying feelings of emasculation, drives him to exploit the power structures that permitted fathers to practise absolute dominance over their daughters, who are left with no choice but to submit to him in everything, including the choice of their future husbands.

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<sup>101</sup> Shields, *Scottish Women’s Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 62.

<sup>102</sup> Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, 54.

<sup>103</sup> Shields, *Scottish Women’s Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 61.

<sup>104</sup> Arlene Young, “Workers’ Compensation: (Needle)Work and Ideals of Femininity in Margaret Oliphant’s *Kirsteen*,” *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Beth Harris (London: Routledge, 2005), 43.

Having been already defied once by his eldest daughter Anne, who ran away from home to marry a commoner against her father's will, Drumcarro refuses to consult any of her sisters with regards to their intended spouses. Therefore, when he arranges a marriage between Kirsteen and a wealthy man of his own age named Glendochart, he does it without asking his daughter's opinion on the matter. However, unbeknownst to him, Kirsteen has already promised herself to Ronald Drummond, a young man from a neighbouring family whom she loves. Drumcarro's determination to enhance the family's fortune in exchange for his daughter's freedom leaves Kirsteen with the painful choice between "marrying Glendochart, which would entail betraying her word and her love for Ronald, or defying her father, which would bring shame to her family, since he is prepared to turn her out."<sup>105</sup> In the end, much like any other heroine of a traditional Victorian love plot, Kirsteen decides to flee her father's house rather than marry against her will, as explained by Patricia Zakreski.

As progressive as her characterisation of Kirsteen is, Oliphant relies on images of domesticity and feminine propriety to balance Kirsteen's work with conventional markers of social respectability. Kirsteen may disobey her father, but Oliphant mitigates her rebelliousness by attributing it to a very womanly cause...In Kirsteen's decision to leave, Oliphant demonstrates the power of romantic love over filial duty. Kirsteen's actions may be ungrateful and unwise, but they are not unwomanly.<sup>106</sup>

Although not outwardly quite as cynical on the subject of marriage as *Hester* or *Miss Marjoribanks*, *Kirsteen* nevertheless features Oliphant's pointed criticism of the conditions under which young women in the Victorian period usually entered the institution. While its protagonist is not principally opposed to marrying at the start of the novel, as evidenced by her acceptance of Ronald's proposal, she shares her predecessors' distaste at the thought of doing so solely due to societal pressure or economic necessity, instead of genuine affection. In addition to her rejection of loveless marriages, Oliphant, after avoiding implications of

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<sup>105</sup> Young, "Workers' Compensation: (Needle)Work and Ideals of Femininity in Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen*," 45.

<sup>106</sup> Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman*, 56.

sexuality for the whole of her career, also addresses the “unsuitability of [the] union”<sup>107</sup> between Kirsteen and Glendochart, as commented upon by Arlene Young. By underscoring “how repugnant sexual relations would be for Kirsteen under these circumstances [with] her constant trembling and her repeated references to her misery and her broken heart [suggesting] the level of emotional and physical repulsion,”<sup>108</sup> Oliphant leaves Kirsteen with virtually no choice but to refuse the older man. Once she turns down Glendochart’s offer of marriage, the response from her family is swift and brutal as “rather than sympathizing with Kirsteen, [they] censure her for not willingly sacrificing herself. The economic considerations that dominate all responses to the union except Kirsteen’s make the appalling similarities between this kind of marriage and prostitution unmistakable.”<sup>109</sup> It is therefore primarily the thought of sinking in respectability and losing her integrity, rather than her unwillingness to continue to conform to the inherent oppression of the prescribed feminine role, that induce an Oliphant heroine to defy patriarchal familial structures.

After taking the nevertheless radical step of escaping her family’s estate, Kirsteen is allowed to engage with the world outside of her home for the very first time in life, experiencing what her life can be like without her father’s overarching influence. Assisted in every step of the way by her faithful servant Marg’ret, who secures her a position at her sister Jean’s dressmaking establishment, Kirsteen leaves Drumcarro, first for Edinburgh and later travelling all the way to London in order to take up gainful employment. Upon overcoming her initial embarrassment at having to earn her bread, she starts relishing the freedoms she gains in her new environment, an unconventional domestic space surrounded by a network of like-minded women who support her quest for independence. Finally allowed to make her own choices, she immediately discards her father’s name and forges a new public identity for herself as “Miss

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

Kirsteen.” Oliphant thus rewards her rebellious heroine with a moniker which “extricates [her] from her father’s values and even her role trapped within his uninspiring and confining version of domesticity.”<sup>110</sup> Rather than assume the last name of her intended husband to symbolically emphasise her love and devotion, Kirsteen chooses a title that emancipates her from all forms of patriarchal ownership. Additionally, by highlighting its bearer’s unmarried state, the name can serve as a foreshadowing of Oliphant’s imminent divergence from the novel’s adherence to the traditional love plot.

### **4. 3 Oliphant’s Rejection of the Marriage Plot**

Although Kirsteen gradually establishes a life for herself as a working woman, one that she could not have imagined when she first left her father’s house, she is still nominally awaiting the return of her intended. Upon finding out of Ronald’s dying in the field of battle, her previously clung onto expectations for her future shatter. Having been “left without a narrative pattern through which to interpret her life experiences,”<sup>111</sup> Kirsteen becomes the first of Oliphant’s protagonists to be allowed to forge a completely new path for herself and finally reject to conform to the ideal of Victorian domestic femininity. Ronald’s death is thus presented as a blessing in disguise, for it results in Kirsteen’s complete denouncement of the prescribed feminine role to which she would be forced to return after marrying; for she herself knows that every husband would want her to give up work and devote all of her time to their children.

With Ronald out of the way and no man coming to replace him, Oliphant at last gives in to the temptation “to reward her [heroine] with an independent working life rather than with marriage.”<sup>112</sup> Ann Heilmann corroborates this interpretation by arguing that “although her unmarried state is not a deliberate choice, but the result of tragic circumstances, Oliphant implies that it is only as a single woman that Kirsteen has been able to achieve what she wants

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<sup>110</sup> Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” 408.

<sup>111</sup> Shields, “Scottish Women’s Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century,” 63.

<sup>112</sup> Sanders, “Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist,” 32.

from life.”<sup>113</sup> Once allowed to devote herself fully to her work as a seamstress, Kirsteen finds the fulfilment she was supposed to achieve from domestic work in her trade.

#### 4. 4 Women’s Work

With marriage finally out of the question, Oliphant ensures that her heroine will never again need to submit to any man in order to avoid destitution by establishing Kirsteen as a successful businesswoman with a large income. The author’s choice to have her protagonist enter the field of “mantua-making” specifically is at once strategic and symbolic, as noted by Arlene Young.

She [constructed] the story using the most traditional and apparently unassertive area of women's work – needlework – to forge a sense of female community that simultaneously supports and subverts male dominance and that enables female independence while endorsing femininity.<sup>114</sup>

By choosing the profession of needlewoman, Oliphant also took advantage of “the cultural assumptions about the unfortunate position of the seamstress [which] provided novelists of the mid-Victorian period with a convenient vehicle for representing a sympathetic working-class heroine.”<sup>115</sup> Considering “the work setting was quasi-domestic and the work itself acceptably feminine,”<sup>116</sup> Oliphant only had to replace the oppressive domesticity of Drumcarro with its more attractive counterpart rather than have to dismantle it altogether. In spite of Kirsteen’s original reluctance at having to degrade herself by entering the workforce, she and her sisters had already effectively worked for their room and board in their father’s house, having been mending their brothers’ shirts and embroidering their handkerchiefs all their lives. Notwithstanding the Douglas sisters’ upper-class status, needlework was the one skill universal to all women in the nineteenth century, ubiquitous enough to incite Young to

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<sup>113</sup> Heilmann, “Mrs Grundy’s Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman,” 229.

<sup>114</sup> Young, “Workers’ Compensation: (Needle)Work and Ideals of Femininity in Margaret Oliphant’s *Kirsteen*,” 42.

<sup>115</sup> Young, “Workers’ Compensation: (Needle)Work and Ideals of Femininity in Margaret Oliphant’s *Kirsteen*,” 41.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*



refer to the needle as a “class-leveller.”<sup>117</sup> By “[creating] a narrative of female empowerment in which the value of needlework develops from the obscurity of its dutiful domestic function into the public world of the modern career,”<sup>118</sup> Oliphant tentatively draws attention to the possibility of financial reimbursement for years of unpaid domestic work for women of all classes.

By allowing Kirsteen to flourish in a community of needlewomen who support her quest for independence and financial gain, Oliphant also “draws a strong link between a nurturing, congenial domestic space and women’s development in terms of personal growth.”<sup>119</sup> More so than *Hester*, Oliphant’s previous attempt at examining the many paradoxes and obstacles that arise when women try to take part in both the public and the private sphere simultaneously, *Kirsteen* provides its readers with an account closer reminiscent of their own experiences by focusing its attention on a profession more prevalent in the women of the middle classes than that of bank manager. In spite of the novel’s frequent romanticisation of the gruesome living conditions of the majority of Victorian needlewomen, *Kirsteen* nevertheless provides valuable insight into the lives of working women in the nineteenth century by foregrounding its heroine’s pride in her economic independence. Unlike Catherine Vernon, “Miss Kirsteen” does not feel the need to mourn the life of domesticity she lost by abandoning the prescribed feminine role; she justifiably celebrates her escape from the trap of essentialist gendered expectations.

Katie Barker highlights this instructional value of Oliphant’s work by focusing on the “reciprocal relationships between older and younger women in her novels,”<sup>120</sup> in order to “[make] clear the importance of enterprising and experienced women passing on their

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<sup>117</sup> Young, “Workers’ Compensation: (Needle)Work and Ideals of Femininity in Margaret Oliphant’s *Kirsteen*,” 45.

<sup>118</sup> Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman*, 58.

<sup>119</sup> Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” 400.

<sup>120</sup> Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” 408.

knowledge to the younger generation.”<sup>121</sup> While Miss Jean may be sceptical about Kirsteen’s chances of making her fortune at first, warning her that “that’s all very well in a lad ... but not women, my dear, let alone young lassies like you,”<sup>122</sup> she quickly notices that Kirsteen’s undeniable talent and artistic vision, as well as her business acumen, mark her out as a singularly gifted dressmaker who can eventually take over her shop. Oliphant goes out of her way not to portray Kirsteen’s determination to make her fortune as unseemly or unladylike; instead, she treats her character’s ambition as an inspirational, if not aspirational, personality trait, one that ought to be adopted by the novel’s target audience of middle-class female readers.

These young women, who were entering the workforce in large numbers towards the end of the nineteenth century, did not have many role models, fictional or otherwise, of successful and fulfilled working women, and female novelists – who were working in one of the few fields from which women were not shunned<sup>123</sup> – were tasked with the responsibility of providing them. In *Kirsteen*, published almost four decades before Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Oliphant created a heroine whose experiences demonstrate that what women need in order to escape the shackles of patriarchal oppression is, first and foremost, their own income.

Kirsteen’s unrelenting determination to earn her fortune allows her to retire to “one of the most imposing houses, in one of the princeliest squares of Edinburgh”<sup>124</sup> and ultimately, even purchase a piece of ancestral Douglas land, which leads to a truce of sorts between herself and Drumcarro on his deathbed. However, in spite of Kirsteen being the only one of the Douglas children to contribute to the regaining of her family’s former seat, the act does not redeem her in the eyes of her relatives, with her brother Alexander resenting having to live on the land paid for by her “disreputable” work, as explained by Patricia Zakreski. “As the

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, 188.

<sup>123</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 48.

<sup>124</sup> Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, 385.

representative of the traditional patriarchal order, Sir Alexander articulates conventional notions of domestic propriety and female support”<sup>125</sup> meaning that “from [his] perspective, Kirsteen, having degraded herself and the family name by working, is little better than a fallen woman.”<sup>126</sup> The novel closes with the revelation that “Kirsteen was a rare and not very welcome visitor in the house she had redeemed”<sup>127</sup> with all of her family “[deploring] the miserable way of life she had chosen, and that she had no man.”<sup>128</sup>

Regardless of Kirsteen’s achieving arguably more success than any of her male relatives, she does not get to enjoy the respect of her peers that she would be entitled to had she not been born a woman. Although Oliphant allowed her most rebellious heroine to both achieve financial independence and find emotional fulfilment in her work, her life is still negatively impacted by her relatives’ unwillingness to abandon established gender roles and accept her in her rightful place at the head of the family, her experiences mirroring those of Catherine Vernon and Lucilla Marjoribanks, both of whom also had to compromise their respective positions of power to appease a society unprepared for their subversiveness. Even though Kirsteen reaches greater heights of independence than either of her literary foremothers, she too fails to liberate herself from the restrictions the nineteenth century imposed on the women who refused to conform to the ideal of domestic femininity, for in rendering Kirsteen a pariah in her family, Oliphant demonstrates that regardless of the reasons behind a woman’s choice of celibacy, Victorian society will always find a way to punish a woman who managed to eschew the institution of marriage.

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<sup>125</sup> Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman*, 55.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Oliphant, *Kirsteen*, 385.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

## 5. Conclusion

Although she is frequently considered “insufficiently subversive”<sup>129</sup> by today’s standards, Margaret Oliphant questioned the inherent injustices of a woman’s role in Victorian society continuously throughout her body of work. Her lifelong association with the conservative publishers of *Blackwood’s Magazine* did not permit for the novelist to champion the causes of nineteenth-century women’s rights movements in her periodical writings; however, she took every opportunity to criticise traditional gender roles in her fiction, namely through her female characters’ experiences with Victorian patriarchal structures.

In spite of being “excluded until relatively recently from what is understood as a women’s tradition of letters”<sup>130</sup> due to her seemingly antifeminist answers to the Woman Question, her work nevertheless radically challenged what Elizabeth Langland refers to as the “Victorian sacred cows—romance, angels, feminine duty, innocence, passivity, and the separation of home and state.”<sup>131</sup> Her novels frequently spotlight heroines who explicitly reject the institution of marriage in favour of a more meaningful employment, subverting societal preconceptions about women who worked for a living in the process.

Drawing on her personal experiences of the discrimination she encountered as a woman working in a traditionally male profession, as well as a single mother and the sole breadwinner of a large family, Oliphant exposed the double standards faced by the women who refused to conform to the angelic ideal of wifhood and motherhood. The three protagonists of the novels analysed in this thesis – Lucilla Marjoribanks, Hester Vernon and Kirsteen Douglas – attempted to carve out a tolerable existence for themselves within the limits of nineteenth-century standards of femininity, a goal they accomplished with varying degrees of success; for

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<sup>129</sup> Nicola Diane Thompson, “Responding to the Woman Questions,” *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>130</sup> Cohen, “Maximizing Oliphant: Begging the Question and the Politics of Satire,” 105.

<sup>131</sup> Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody’s Angels: Middle Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 153.

all three encountered resistance from a society unwilling to accommodate the women who seek to liberate themselves from the prison of the traditional domestic role. While she was unable to openly support the feminist campaigns cropping up around Britain during her lifetime without risking ruinous financial consequences, Margaret Oliphant let her work and, most notably, her heroines speak for her on the issue of the emancipation of women.

Starting with the eponymous Lucilla of *Miss Marjoribanks* fame who, while outwardly far more of a conformist than either of her fictional successors, represents Oliphant's most cutting critique of the Victorian cult of domesticity. The novel, in which the author had to rely solely on satire and an ironic narrative voice to convey her discontent with the limitations Victorian society placed on England's unmarried "surplus"<sup>132</sup> women, earned Oliphant a letter from her publisher John Blackwood, warning her of its "hardness of tone."<sup>133</sup>

Lucilla's misappropriation<sup>134</sup> of the "Angel in the House" ideal and her apparent self-abnegation to a life of filial duty<sup>135</sup> are undermined by her calculating nature, her adherence to the standards of domestic femininity serving as only the means of acquiring a position of power without inciting the "prejudices of society."<sup>136</sup> Albeit primarily disparaging of Lucilla's ambitions in the first two volumes of the novel; in its last third, "a markedly feminist note subtly shifts the bias of [Oliphant's] characterization of Lucilla – she is seen to be the victim of the frustrations endured by a woman of talent in Victorian society."<sup>137</sup> The novel ends with Oliphant ultimately taking pity on her anti-heroine, rewarding her with a successful "career" and marrying her to her submissive cousin, thus expanding her sphere of influence beyond that attainable to her in her unmarried state.

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<sup>132</sup> Cohen, "Maximizing Oliphant: Begging the Question and the Politics of Satire," 105.

<sup>133</sup> Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth Century Domestic Novel*, 140.

<sup>134</sup> Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth Century Domestic Novel*, 139.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth Century Domestic Novel*, 163.

<sup>137</sup> Clarke, *Margaret Oliphant: 1828-1897: A Bibliography (Victorian Fiction Research Guides)*, 5.

Unlike Lucilla Marjoribanks, the protagonists of Oliphant's later works do not have to resort to irony to express their dissent. They are allowed to accuse the world of grievous gender bias as explicitly as they dare to, although not without paying a price for their outspokenness. Hester Vernon's radical opinions, characteristic of the changing attitudes towards women's liberation in the late nineteenth century, regularly cause friction between her and her mother and aunt who, believing in traditional gender roles, expect Hester to marry and rely on her future husband for all her financial needs.

The novel's principal theme of conflict between its protagonist's generation and that of her elder relatives is indicative of a crossroads in Oliphant's oeuvre, her conflicting opinions on women's liberation represented in dialogic form between Hester and Catherine. Unlike her niece, who argues for the necessity of a drastic change in the circumstances of women, Catherine Vernon is opposed to the idea of a social revolution. Her opinions align much closer with those of Oliphant and her fellow "antifeminist women novelists,"<sup>138</sup> for she shares what Valerie Sanders dubs "their unfashionable commitment to women's domestic role."<sup>139</sup>

Conversely, it is due to her inability to relinquish the archetypal feminine role that Catherine fails to find fulfilment in her work. Her stubborn determination to embody the Victorian ideal of womanhood prevents her from finding common ground with her spiritual successor Hester<sup>140</sup> until it is too late. As a consequence, Hester is left vulnerable after Catherine's passing and, lacking her mentor's wisdom and experiences, likely to either fall prey to an inopportune marriage or face the condemnation of the rest of her family if she refused to conform.

Kirsteen Douglas, who has gone further than any other Oliphant character in her quest for independence, is expelled from her family almost entirely; cut off financially and

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<sup>138</sup> Sanders, "Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist," 24.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Heilmann, "Mrs Grundy's Rebellion: Margaret Oliphant Between Orthodoxy and the New Woman," 225.

emotionally, she moves across the whole of Britain, renounces her last name and has no contact with any of her kin for the majority of the novel. She is also the only one of the three heroines under observation in this thesis to completely renounce the possibility of ever marrying, opting instead to concentrate all her energy on the success of her dressmaking venture.

Juliet Shields points out that as “a female bildungsroman in which work rather than marriage gives meaning to the protagonist’s experiences,”<sup>141</sup> the narrative of *Kirsteen* is unique in the realm of Victorian novel-writing. Its exploration of the culture of female workers in the nineteenth century, though frequently painting an incomplete and idealised picture of the living conditions of seamstresses, foregrounds the potential of a mutually supportive community of unmarried women to form an alternative domestic space, thus bypassing the need to engage with patriarchal familial structures altogether.

The three novels all chronicle their protagonists’ numerous encounters with a society unwilling to let go of traditional gender roles; it is in her heroines’ ways of coping with their respective situations that Oliphant presents her readers with the possible modes of resistance to the limits it imposes on women. Lucilla’s attempts to obtain power without trying to change the status quo result in her having to outwardly conform to it in the end; Hester voices her opposition, but her independence is hampered by her family’s influence; and Kirsteen, who is the only one who manages to break with tradition completely, has to face a lifetime of disdain from those closest to her. In her representations of female independence, Oliphant alerts her readers not only to the possibilities but also the dangers associated with seeking an alternative path to the prescribed feminine role. Rather than advise her audience to abstain from it outright, Oliphant’s work attempts to accordingly reconstruct the domestic space to her heroines’ advantage.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Shields, *Scottish Women’s Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 63.

<sup>142</sup> Barker, “The Radical Voice of Margaret Oliphant: Extending Domesticity in *Hester* and *Kirsteen*,” 401.

Keeping her focus on women and the domestic sphere, Oliphant argues for the expansion of the traditional domestic space “beyond its conventional boundaries so that it belonged to all women [...] offering room for [them] to educate themselves and find personal fulfilment and growth”<sup>143</sup> without having to resort to the drudgery of wifedom and motherhood. Her novels present marriage as severely disadvantageous to capable young women, who would be required to sacrifice the meagre dregs of their freedom to assume the part in return for a lifetime of unpaid domestic work for an unappreciative husband. As noted by Valerie Sanders, Oliphant’s “image of marriage becomes progressively more caricatured at the husband’s expense, revealing a surprisingly strong undercurrent of contempt for men.”<sup>144</sup>

Unlike the hardworking ambitious women of Oliphant’s fiction, her male characters are frequently depicted as relying on the inherent privileges associated with being born a man in Victorian society, wholly incompetent and most likely detrimental to the protagonist’s future happiness. In keeping with the instructional value of her works, Oliphant cautions her young readers against marrying, the actual message of her works at odds with their author’s frequent perception as a relentless champion of domestic femininity.<sup>145</sup>

Margaret Oliphant’s writing career spanned nearly fifty years and resulted in close to one hundred novels. Considering it would be impossible to review all of them in the space designated by this thesis, it concentrates on three that encapsulate their author’s characteristically inconsistent brand of feminism, as well as capture her gradual shift towards a more radical opposition to traditional patriarchal structures. In focusing on the differences and similarities between their three protagonists, it outlines Oliphant’s progressive adoption of feminist political opinions by examining the development of her representations of the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres over the course of its last quarter, specifically

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Sanders, “Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist,” 25.

<sup>145</sup> Sanders, “Marriage and the Antifeminist Female Novelist,” 24.



concentrating on her characters' attitudes towards the intersection of marriage and career in the life of a middle-class Victorian woman. By demonstrating that themes of female independence and anti-marriage sentiments permeate her fiction, it attempted to contribute to the work of the literary critics whose aim to contradict Oliphant's all too frequent categorisation as an "antifeminist female novelist" is the driving force behind the renewed interest in her literary achievements.

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