

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.