

Reviewing Autobiography: The Self-Fashioning of Margaret Oliphant in Her Periodical Criticism

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WHEN the Edinburgh printers went on strike in 1872, William Blackwood was forced to postpone publication of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Margaret Oliphant, one of the magazine's most prolific contributors, wryly suggested to him: "It would not be a bad idea to make it a part of literary education to know how to set up our own articles in an emergency—as our grandmothers were taught how to make puddings" (1872). Juxtaposing female domestic lore with artisan skill, Oliphant proposes that the periodical industry could take a lesson from the example of domestic femininity. Only decades earlier, the suggestion would have been unimaginable, and in the 1870s it was still a controversial one. As women novelists flooded the fiction market during the second half of the nineteenth century, reviewers were quick to label them as unskilled interlopers who diminished the prestige of professional authorship. Even George Eliot, in her famous essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856), gave credence to this attitude in a mocking, yet resolute, dictum: "Be not a baker if your head be made of

butter” (322). In light of this “homely proverb,” Oliphant’s words to Blackwood take on a whole new significance (Eliot 1856, 322).

In her most famous work, her *Autobiography* (1899), Oliphant further complicates this approach to women’s labor by closely intertwining two key Victorian narratives of creation—motherhood and professional authorship. Unlike many other women writers, Oliphant enjoyed the support of her family and especially of her mother, whom she credits with initiating her into the literary circles of Edinburgh.¹ Oliphant received the proofs of her serialized novel *Katie Stewart* (1853) on the very morning of her wedding, so that the beginning of her life as a married woman coincided with her professional debut at *Blackwood’s* (Oliphant 1899, 73). Over the years to come, however, a series of domestic tragedies would overshadow Oliphant’s early prosperity as a writer. In the decade following her marriage in 1852, she lost three of her six children in infancy, as well as her eldest daughter, mother, father, and husband. After Oliphant’s oldest brother declared bankruptcy in 1868, she was left to support her two remaining sons and a nephew on her literary earnings. In a final, cruel twist of fate, all three would predecease Oliphant by several years.

For the most part, scholars have cast the *Autobiography* as the romantic portrait of a mother compelled to sacrifice her gift to a life of literary toil, thus forging a close connection between Oliphant’s literary and domestic experience.² The *Autobiography* itself, however, provides evidence to the contrary. While deeply concerned with the financial returns of her labor and at times frustrated with chosen profession’s demands, Oliphant insists that her writing was not merely or even chiefly motivated by maternal duty:

I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children. That, however, was not the first motive, so that when I laugh inquiries off and say that it is my trade, I do it only by way of eluding the question which I have neither time nor wish to enter into. (1899, 48)

Oliphant concedes the economic reality of a Victorian literary market that treated letters as yet another form of breadwinning, a kind of industrial “trade.” By claiming that writing is simply her “natural way of occupying” herself, though, Oliphant renders literary labor neither incompatible with nor driven by the demands of domestic life (1899, 49). If circumstances constantly reminded Oliphant of her work’s remunerative value, she fashions herself primarily as an artist and not as an intellectual toiler.

Though the *Autobiography* gives us a glimpse into Oliphant's sense of herself as a writer, focusing exclusively on this document can be misleading. Indeed, Oliphant did not even consider publishing her journals until several decades after their commencement. In an 1885 journal entry, Oliphant famously compares her own experiences to those related in John Cross's *Life of George Eliot* (1885–86), the reading of which “tempted [her] to begin writing” a private chronicle for her boys (1899, 48). By 1894, after the deaths of her sons, Oliphant was keenly aware that her audience had changed:

How strange it is to me to write all this, with the effort of making light reading of it, and putting in anecdotes that will do to quote in the papers and make the book sell! It is a sober narrative enough, heaven knows! and when I wrote it for my Cecco to read it was all very different, but now that I am doing it consciously for the public [...] I feel [it] to be so vulgar, so common, so unnecessary, as if I were making pennyworths of myself. (1899, 140)

On the one hand, Oliphant's diagnosis of her own autobiographical project calls into question the accuracy of the *Autobiography* as a record of Oliphant's literary career, since it is torn between the demands of private reflection and public representation. On the other hand, it raises new questions about Oliphant's professional self-fashioning within an evolving literary market. While there is much to be learned from accounts that relate Oliphant's “double life” as a Victorian mother and author, such readings overlook Oliphant's attempts to write herself into another, very different professional circle—the exclusive and overwhelmingly male critical tradition.

In order to penetrate Oliphant's complicated relationship to authorship, the literary market, and the gender politics of criticism, we need to turn to the very genre she is rumored to have embraced merely out of necessity—the review. It is here that Oliphant mediates most dexterously between economic necessity and artistic genius, as well as between spheres of masculine and feminine influence. In her work for *Blackwood's Magazine*, Oliphant negotiates between two visions of nineteenth-century letters—an Arcadia alive with burgeoning genius and a literary workhouse where quality consistently yields to profitability. In the end, Oliphant creates a place for herself in the world of letters by shifting the blame for the state of literature from women writers to the reviewers who commonly attacked them; for Oliphant, women's writing serves as a corrective to the pressures

of the literary market and ultimately allows her to reinvent critical community under the aegis of female judgment.

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Over a career of nearly fifty years, Oliphant created a niche for herself at *Blackwood's*, but her public and private commentaries on the major Victorian periodical firms suggest that it was a hard-won victory. Her three-volume *Annals of a Publishing House* (1897) depicts the literary review as an exclusive, genteel, and overwhelmingly masculine tradition. Oliphant describes the founding of the leading periodicals as “one of the most romantic episodes of literary history,” an event which could only have occurred amidst the club life of the early nineteenth century (1897, 96). The *Edinburgh Review* emerged in 1817, literally “out of the merry meeting round [Francis] Jeffrey’s dinner-table” and quickly “set the fashion” for similar enterprises throughout Britain (Oliphant 1897, 96). Contributors to these early publications were gentlemen, for whom “any thought of pecuniary reward was an insulting and degrading suggestion” (Oliphant 1897, 99). This genteel posture presented a stark contrast to Oliphant’s own generation, which in her own words, “weighs out its thousand words across the counter, with the affectation of finding in sale and barter its only motive” (Oliphant 1897, 99). Stressing the difference between the unspoken (and unspeakable) economic motives of the gentlemen reviewers and the elaborate acts of self-fashioning that continued to define the periodical business, Oliphant thus romanticizes the club but also acknowledges its dependence on a rhetoric of exclusion.

The review’s genteel public image was rendered most explicit in *Blackwood's* “Noctes Ambrosianae” (1822–35), a series of fictional conversations among a clan of literary men at their unofficial place of business, Ambrose’s Tavern. Besides being staged in an explicitly masculine space, the “Noctes” was authored collectively by a group of critics whom Oliphant represents as a “gay and reckless, yet powerful band, [...] a sort of literary club” that thrived on the performance of male sociability (1897, 199, 100). With telling sarcasm, Oliphant admitted in a letter to John Blackwood that the “Noctes” was “rather highly flavoured for my feminine taste” (1855a). Oliphant deeply respected her male forebears at *Blackwood's* but also recognized that from an institutional perspective, Ambrose’s Tavern was no place for a lady. Significantly, women writers figure into Oliphant’s *Annals* only as writers of fiction: it was not until the

third volume, which was completed by Mrs. Gerald Porter after Oliphant's death, that Oliphant herself emerged as one of the most prolific male or female reviewers at *Blackwood's*.

While the male writer of the early nineteenth century thrived amid this atmosphere of collaboration and community, domestic duty and the rituals of polite society required a slightly different professional ethos for the woman writer. Discussing the lives of writer Anna Jameson and actress Fanny Kemble in a 1879 review, Oliphant describes the previous generation of women writers as ingenuously devoted to a literary world from which they were largely excluded; at the same time, however, she harbors a certain nostalgia for the archetype featured on the frontispiece of Jameson's *Diary of an Ennuyée*, a "female figure seated dejectedly beneath a tall lily-bush" (213). Sheltered from the surrounding world of literary and economic intrigue, Oliphant argues, a writer like Jameson was able to pursue literature for its own sake. "Mrs. Jameson," she explains, "had learned a lesson which her successors in literature find it more and more difficult to master. She had acquired the art of being content with earnings that were never great, and of life within the strict limits of her capability" (1879, 208). Notwithstanding the fact that Jameson lived to profit from the mid-century publishing boom, Oliphant romanticizes her as part of a world in which women writers could figure themselves as artists, rather than intellectual laborers.

In an 1870 review, "Miss Austen and Miss Mitford," Oliphant suggests that even a writer she genuinely admired, Jane Austen, benefited from being "fenced from the outer world by troops of friends [...] with no inducement to come down from her pedestal and go out into the bitter arena" of literary drudgery (291). According to this idealized account—one that resists Virginia Woolf's more cynical account years later in "A Room of One's Own" (1929)—Austen's fiction thrived in a state of seclusion, which made possible "the constant [...] observation in which a young woman, with no active pursuit to occupy her, spends" her youth (Oliphant 1879, 294). If women writers inhabited only a remote cloister within the field of nineteenth-century letters, Oliphant observes, at least that cloister conferred on them a monastic solemnity, a pastoral charm that could not be overwritten by the virulent critics of later days.

Admittedly, Oliphant's own successes at *Blackwood's* appear somewhat incongruous with her fantasies of a literary past in which women's opportunities were comparatively limited. But her reviews also reveal an acute sensitivity to recent developments in print culture, and this historical sensibility ultimately would lead her away from the idyllic model of the

secluded lady writer. The literary world changed dramatically between 1826, the year Jameson published *Diary of an Ennuyée*, and the middle of the century when, as Oliphant puts it, literature began to evolve into “a profession like any other” (1879, 209). The growing availability of printed material, the expansion of a literate middle class, and rising literacy rates at all levels of society had fostered a greater demand for things to read. Technological developments made it possible to produce books more cheaply and effectively, and the expansion of rail travel brought these books to a larger and more diffuse readership. This, combined with the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1836 and the Paper Duty in 1861, resulted in an unprecedented rise in the publication of books and periodicals in the 1860s.³ As R. C. Terry (1983) explains, booksellers were “adapting methods of the factory system, raising capital, advertising, marketing, vying with one another, streamlining with new machinery to meet a potential market of colossal dimensions” (23).

For Oliphant, most significant outcome of these developments was the increasingly mechanistic quality of literature itself. Rather than becoming a “profession like any other,” authorship was gradually absorbed into an expanding network of literary labor. With the influx of authors in the market, literature became not only more affordable, but also qualitatively cheaper. For Oliphant, the very conditions that had cultivated the Victorian publishing industry now threatened to diminish the value of literature as a whole. The “foolish canonisation” of technologies like the steam engine and the telegraph, as she observes in an 1860 review, pointed to a more deep-seated problem: the community of readers and writers who once came together in the pages of the literary reviews was quickly passing out of existence (38).

In “Byways of Literature” (1858), Oliphant illustrates the disruptive consequences of this mass market by recounting an afternoon spent reading a sixpenny novel in a small cathedral town. This rural paradise, itself so tranquil, rouses in the speaker a deep anxiety regarding the disjunction between England’s unique beauty and the second-rate literature it produces:

Grave literature and learning, decorum and dignity, the authorities of society, stood represented in those grave old houses, from which no careless human eye looked out; and scattered over the daisies, with the wind among their leaves, lay the unauthoritative, undignified, unlearned broadsheets, which represent literature to a great portion of our country people, despite of all the better provision made for their pleasure. There could not possibly

be a more marked or total contrast than between the object of our immediate attention and the scene. (Oliphant 1858, 201)

The contrast between the intellectual dignity of the speaker's physical environment and the popular novel she peruses is unmistakable. The novel is not only intellectually barren but actually threatens to overwhelm or erase the world around it, so that the cheap leaves of broadsheet rustling along the landscape are the "object of our immediate attention," rather than the daisies which they literally smother (Oliphant 1858, 201). While this proliferation of novels has had "fertilising results, so far as the manufacture itself is concerned," the case is far more serious when it comes to the cultural value of Victorian fiction (Oliphant 1863, 168). Because literature was increasingly tailored to market demand, Oliphant contends, the nineteenth century had become an age of imitation, in which authors had neither time nor inclination to produce original work, generating instead "a series of endless repetitions in the social economy of human nature" (1855c, 554). The novel, "which proclaims itself an ephemeron in its very name," was in danger of losing its distinctiveness as a genre (Oliphant 1855c, 556).

For Oliphant, the most formidable consequence of the expanding literary market was an increase in the number of mediocre reviewers, who only contributed to the overall decline of literary standards. According to Oliphant, Jane Austen's novels owed their success largely to the power of the critics, who persuaded Victorian readers to acclaim her work with a "half-real half-fictitious universality of applause" (1870, 304). But by mid-century, reviewing had become a business enterprise like novel writing: the market overflowed with ambitious critics who did not always attend to the responsibilities of their trade and were losing their once tenacious hold on public opinion. In this "fantastic lottery of nominal criticism," as Oliphant calls it in 1869, true authors "never receive at the hands of any qualified workman the examination which is their due, or the praise which can be fitly bestowed only by a mind accustomed to trace the progress of literary excellence, and acquainted with its essential elements" (488). The critic no longer effectively policed a literary hierarchy of his own invention. Like the novelist, the critic had become a kind of intellectual laborer, and the genteel critics of the 1820s an outdated fiction. What is more, although the verdicts of unpracticed and unskilled laborers had contributed to the decline of critical standards, it was the *élite* critics whom Oliphant held most responsible for it. If this decline persists, she declares, "the silence of genuine criticism, the murmurs of false commendation, the curious nepotism of the Press, will be the most to blame" (1869, 489).

By mid-century the legendary critics of the first reviews—John Wilson, John Gibson Lockhart, Francis Jeffrey, and others—had bowed out of the literary scene only to be replaced by throngs of unskilled literary hacks. In the absence of authoritative specialists, Oliphant suggests, the literary world experienced a discursive rupture—what Bradley Deane (2003) has recently described as “a juncture during which the fantasy of a utopian, universal community of readers was ripped asunder” (59). The expansion of the literary professions made it increasingly difficult to sustain the illusion of a cohesive and élite club that could standardize literary judgment. The foreseeable alternative to a world dominated by negligent critics is, she suggests, a world in which individual readers proclaim themselves the supreme arbiters of taste, thus fracturing the British “Republic of Letters” into a horde of “individual despotisms” (1858, 203).

For Oliphant, these changes in the print industry constituted, quite literally, a cultural revolution. In an 1863 review, she reprimands the public for approving literature that emphasizes “the brutalities rather than the subtleties of crime” (169). “Even when we try to be Arcadian,” she reflects, “it is Arcadia ‘*plus* a street-constable,’ as Carlyle says” (1863, 169). In his *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (1850), Carlyle had described the 1848 revolutions as a break with the past, a time when deposed kings were suddenly revealed to be mere “Playactors” in an elaborate political fiction (6). The result, according to Carlyle, was that individuals embraced self-government, which qualified at best as a kind of “anarchy *plus* a street constable” (1850, 6). In Oliphant’s rendering, the decline of the reviewers is aligned with the fall of kings; as with Carlyle, however, the result is not a flourishing democracy of prose, but rather an uninhibited popular literature where “Murder, conspiracy, robbery, fraud” all abound (Oliphant 1863, 169). For Oliphant, the abdication of the critic had facilitated the rise of sensational literature. But where someone or something inevitably intervened to restore order to the fictional world of the novel, the reviewer could no longer contain the lawlessness of popular taste.

Ironically, Oliphant would seek a solution to this cultural crisis by turning to the very figure who had been charged with fanning its flames—namely, the woman writer. While Oliphant’s position on women’s issues was markedly ambivalent, she invested a great deal of faith in the intellectual capacity of women and felt that women had something unique to offer the world of literature.⁴ In an 1855 review, she even describes the rise

of women writers as a supernatural phenomenon which, far from corrupting the literary tradition, had actually begun to repair it. Oliphant's rendering of this empowered woman writer poses a direct contrast to the secluded authoress, a literary model that the market placed increasingly out of reach. Like so many of her contemporaries, Oliphant was perplexed by Charlotte Brontë's groundbreaking novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), but she appreciated the "magic world she has created—a world which no one can enter without yielding to the irresistible fascination of her personal influence" (Oliphant 1855c, 568). In 1869, she would present an even more powerful rendering of the woman writer, describing her as

a being full of power, and brilliancy, and daring, and intuitive perception—full, indeed, of what we can describe only as genius, in distinction from the more manageable and practical talents of ordinary life—ready to mump at the truth, however concealed; but, at the same time, not above the deceptions of society, or those benevolent tricks which a fertile imagination suggests for the management and wellbeing of others [...]. (1869, 490)

Although Oliphant describes the woman writer as a "being full of power," in the same breath she reminds us that such power was deeply transgressive. Overseeing her "magic world," the woman writer is commanding and creative but also stigmatized by virtue of these qualities. In this respect, Oliphant is complicit in what Nina Auerbach (1982) describes as the construction of "an explosively mobile, magic woman, who breaks the boundaries of family within which her society restricts her" (1). In other words, while the image of the witch invokes a cultural stigma against aberrant femininity—specifically against independent, single, or sexually empowered women—Oliphant recasts the witch as a figure for creative, intellectual women. The ambivalent image of the woman writer as "good witch" thus distinguishes her as a visionary outside authoritative cultural discourses, yet also discreet.

The women Oliphant identifies as the leaders of this new and potentially redemptive school of fiction were, in a manner of speaking, conjurers who created worlds utterly distinct from the world of literary toil in which they existed. In her 1854 review "Mary Russell Mitford," Oliphant represents Mitford's fiction not merely as an escape from reality but as a return to a sort of literary Eden. With the recent popularity of realist fictions, Oliphant explains, "Poets and story-tellers no longer think it necessary to dive into an unknown time, or see a half-discovered country, before they venture to give their imagination sing" (1854, 659). Appealing to the popular demand for

sensational plots is, for such authors, much more important than fidelity to the craft of novel writing. With tongue in cheek, Oliphant thus accuses her colleagues of reducing literary trends to seasonal fashions, so that “Utopia and Arcadia are scarcely more out of date than the visionary Spain or romantic Italy, the mysterious German forests or the Rhenish castles, which were wont to be the proper seat of romance” (1854, 659). According to this view, the novel no longer retains a connection to the legends and motifs that once gave it life. In yet another Carlylean gesture, Oliphant here suggests that popular novelists have inherited relics and rituals from the romance tradition that they are unable to put to good use and whose meaning can only be restored by excavating the literary past.⁵

Oliphant perceives Mitford’s work as one such attempt to recuperate the past. Mitford’s England is a modern Arcadia whose rustic landscapes and overwhelming fecundity abolish the need for any “monsters, either of vileness or perfection” to captivate the reader’s interest (Oliphant 1854, 658). It is accessible and familiar, yet ideal and distinctive—a world capable of “making reality out of fancy, and truth from dreams” (Oliphant 1854, 661). For the reader, this borderline fiction enables both an escape from “dusty towns, and streets full of never-ceasing bustle” and a renewed belief in the possibility of resurrecting bygone traditions in the present (Oliphant 1854, 659). Awakening from a momentary escape into Mitford’s fiction, the reader has “no perception of a book at all,” but a keen sense that “it is not all a delusion” (Oliphant 1854, 659). This reading experience is very different from the one Oliphant describes in “Byways of Literature.” Mitford’s fiction, according to Oliphant, does not merely portray a charming and pastoral scene, but actually creates this world within the minds and “homely hearts” of her readers (1854, 659). Ironically, Mitford fulfills for Oliphant the role of “magic woman,” even though Mitford’s writing is strikingly unconcerned with bizarre or uncanny plot devices; her supernatural power stems instead from the overwhelming power of her fictions to transform and rejuvenate the reader.

By charting the close relationship between Mitford’s fiction and the real world, Oliphant also draws attention to the real power of women’s writing and the artificial barriers between the world of fiction and the world of everyday prose: that is, between the female novel and the gentleman’s review. At the same time, Oliphant’s biographical sketch of Mitford reminds us that she lived in a time and place that differed greatly from the idyllic world of her fiction. Given the best educational opportunities and destined for a comfortable future, Mitford was ultimately ruined by the financial

imprudence of her father, who twice reduced the family to straightened circumstances. What is most remarkable about Oliphant's sketch is the connection she draws between the burdens of Mitford's professional life and her creation of this idealized fictional world. Addressing the conclusion of Mitford's memoirs, Oliphant describes the writer as a

genial, tender old woman [...] undisturbed, as it was meet she should be, by any care or trouble, taking the full enjoyment of the country so dear to her, and of the summer skies and summer air, and all the greenness that she loved; with her favourite poets by her side, and the pen which she had no longer any need to ply as a drudge, and which she loved too, dearly, when she ceased to be its vassal. (1870, 312–13)

Oliphant revels in Mitford's return at the end of her life to a world of pastoral ease—a world that both resembles the paradise she had given to her readers and allows her to produce and consume literature for its own sake. Of course, Mitford's happy ending is also colored with grave irony in Oliphant's account: as a woman, Mitford could only enjoy Arcadia in a state of retirement from professional writing.

This treatment of Mitford reflects Oliphant's resistance to a new literary market where authorship could not guarantee financial security and the rise of sensation novels increasingly precluded the sort of imaginary escape that she felt had been possible in Austen's day. Oliphant found some solace in reflecting on "a period in which people still looked with some wonder on a female writer" but was ultimately forced to acknowledge that circumstances had changed since she was a child: the world of Austen being irrecoverable and that of Mitford inadequate, the field of Victorian letters now demanded a new kind of writer (1887b, 438).

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Oliphant felt that she was, at least potentially, the woman for the job. Oliphant's own life experience had, by her own account, been more complete than that of George Eliot, Austen, or Mitford. She had married, given birth to several children, and experienced a more traditional domestic life than many of the female authors she reviewed. As Oliphant moved from novel writing to reviewing, however, her relationship with *Blackwood's* would expose her increasingly to the world of public business. "I have learned," she speculates, "to take perhaps more a man's view of mortal affairs, —to feel that the love between men and women, the marrying and

giving in marriage, occupy in fact so small a portion of either existence or thought" (1899, 43–44). Oliphant may have experienced some of the same literary hardships as Mitford but also knew that, as a reviewer, she ran with a very different crowd. Transforming herself from a writer of fiction into an authoritative critic required that Oliphant become a part of the literary club life at *Blackwood's* and at times, as her language in this passage suggests, assume a masculine persona in her professional dealings with the firm.

In her early years with the magazine, Oliphant was known behind closed doors as "Katie," after the title character of her first story for *Blackwood's*. Oliphant, who did not learn of the epithet until 1896, seems to have taken it in good humor, but she also interpreted it as a sign that the firm had singled her out as "so young and simple [...] that the girl's name was appropriate" (1899, 73). Of course, Oliphant was anything but timid in her dealings with *Blackwood's* and was determined to rank alongside her male colleagues. In her correspondence with the magazine, Oliphant regularly discloses her sensitivity to the gender politics of review culture. When she proposed doing an article on Pepys and Evelyn, a topic she felt Blackwood would be reluctant to assign a woman reviewer, she writes: "I am afraid a feminine critic must find but a limited orbit possible to her—but I should greatly like this piece of work if it would answer you" (1855b). In 1861, when Blackwood rejected one of her articles, Oliphant again teased with no small degree of sincerity that "the stronger fare to which you are accustomed has given you a distaste for my womanish style" (1861).

Oliphant fought a number of battles during her fifty years with *Blackwood's*: in the final two decades of the century, she would repeatedly inquire after editorial opportunities—serving as an editor was the professional goal she most desired and never achieved. She did, however, begin a regular review series, which was intended to evaluate works from all literary genres without digressing onto broader social and political topics, a practice which Oliphant felt had discouraged popular audiences from consulting the reviews in recent years. She called the series "The Old Saloon," after the firm's real library, located at *Blackwood's* office on George Street in Edinburgh. In this way, Oliphant invoked the clubbish ethos of *Blackwood's* most vividly represented by the exclusively male gatherings featured in the "Noctes Ambrosianae" series.

While Oliphant idealizes the preceding generation of male reviewers, she nevertheless critiques and transforms it in light of the mounting crisis within the critical community. That it is an "old" saloon reminds us of the aged state of the firm, a dramatic contrast with the younger critics. In this

new series, Oliphant proposes a significant renovation of the venerable old gentleman's club of Maga, as *Blackwood's* was affectionately known. When Oliphant first invites readers into "The Old Saloon" in 1887, she takes them behind the scenes at *Blackwood's* to witness a true novelty—the woman reviewer at her desk. She describes herself seated alone in "Maga's Library," gazing at the bust of John Wilson ("Christopher North"):

His image stands there upon the wall, in the half shadow, half glow of the dancing firelight, with his head like Jove—one of the most splendid types of man that ever illustrated humanity, Christopher North, John Wilson, the first standard-bearer in old Maga's band; and look! behind him, fine and keen, with sarcasm trembling on his thin-cut lips, the beautiful head of Lockhart; and further on, with a twinkle of kindly simplicity, with his plaid round him and his dog at his knees, that badly used but finely transformed Shepherd [James Hogg] [...] How does one dare to lift the small pipe of a lesser voice in presence of these shades? (1887a, 126)

Oliphant is surrounded by an ultramasculine coterie—the glorified bust of John Wilson appears godlike and, despite Oliphant's reverent depiction of her predecessors, they are all members of a daunting and combative critical canon. Their awesome presence causes her to pause, "with a certain shamefacedness and recollection of all we are not in the presence of our fathers. We are not formed like Jove or Christopher. Our dart is not one made out of the lightning-shaft, as was Lockhart's in his youth" (Oliphant 1887a, 127). On the face of it, Oliphant speaks as a member of the new generation of reviewers that has been overwhelmed by the Victorian cult of fiction and no longer wields the authority once possessed by its forebears.

The gendered subtext is, however, undeniable. Oliphant compares Lockhart's intellect to Jove's lightning shafts, thus attributing to her critical fathers a godly, phallic, and militant disposition. Her own method differs. Thus, while *Blackwood's* has always embraced contributions "from many a manly pen [...] with a sound and wholesome partiality for her soldiers and sailors," female contributors have been correspondingly overlooked: Maga "has her ladies too," Oliphant continues, "but, shall we own it? perhaps loves them less" (1887a, 127). By 1887, the figureheads of criticism had departed, and the lone figure seated in Maga's library was a woman reviewer seeking to reconstitute the critical community once composed of *Blackwood's* tavern sages, this time with a woman reviewer at its center.

Over the coming years, Oliphant's manner of conducting business at the saloon became a source of tension between herself and the newest editor of

Maga, William Blackwood. In the first year of the series, Blackwood accused Oliphant both of giving favorable reviews to friends and of publicizing her participation in the series, which was supposed to have been collaborative and anonymous. If Oliphant were known to be the chief contributor to the column, the “Old Saloon” could no longer be considered a legitimate successor to Ambrose’s Tavern: it would not be collective, militant, and masculine, but rather secluded, forbearing, and feminine. In a manner of speaking, Oliphant had reinvented the secluded lady writer as a public author by placing herself squarely within a space of masculine sociability. The “Old Saloon” threatened to become the old *salon*, an intellectual circle headed by a progressive bluestocking. Certainly the pun is borne out by the fact that Oliphant’s establishment is not a tavern, but rather a private library—a domestic space where Oliphant herself presides over a gathering of great men.

As a consequence of this dispute, Blackwood announced in a letter to Oliphant his intention to cede the editorship of “The Old Saloon” to Alexander Allardyce, a move that Oliphant and her editor would debate at length in their correspondence. In 1892, Oliphant wrote a letter of protest to Blackwood, attempting to forestall his decision. While she would have “with great pleasure given up the Old Saloon at any time,” Oliphant defends herself against Blackwood’s accusations and emphatically rejects the notion that he has any proprietary right to the series (1892a). She speaks of “The Old Saloon,” in fact, as if it were a real establishment, rather than a fictional one. It has never, Oliphant observes, “been one of the rights of an Editor to berate a contributor as he might do a shopman. The Saloon in George Street is unquestionably yours, but the Old Saloon as a seat of criticism was not invested or thought of by you, but by me. You did not make and cannot own it, nor is it any necessary part of Maga, any more than Ambrose’s Tavern was” (1892a). In the “Old Saloon” series, Oliphant sought to appeal to a more general audience than had “Noctes Ambrosianae,” and her treatment of gender in the opening installment is instrumental to this act of inclusion. In her correspondence with Blackwood, however, Oliphant is as concerned with reviewing the critical practices of *Blackwood’s* as with creating a broader community of readers. To this end, she distinguishes between the “Saloon in George St.” and the fictional saloon, a critical space of her own devising. While the institution of *Blackwood’s* retained the social atmosphere of a gentleman’s club, Oliphant insists that criticism could no longer both adjudicate literary taste and remain the province of a privileged, masculine elite.

For Oliphant, the recuperation of literature meant returning to a time when writing was not merely big business, but she now felt unable to recreate the golden age of the review without making herself an integral part of it. “We do not regret those days,” she admits in an 1887 review, “but they have already an old-fashioned flavour, and there is a scent as of *pot-pourri* and fresh lavender in the story [...]” (1887b, 438). Her own experience had no such romantic features, and in the final years of her life, Oliphant would repeatedly imagine a woman writer who was freed from economic constraints and yet competitive in the literary market. In a later installment of the “Old Saloon,” she writes,

we are not sure that it would not please us more now to hear that our pet authoress was a little out of the common way, that there was a touch of frenzy in her poetic eye, and that she did not think of feather-beds, but let her money drop through her fingers, and knew nothing of business. Corinne and her lyre are coming back to displace the excellent wife and mother: and literary biography will perhaps become a little more interesting—till the whirligig of time turns round again. (1890, 409–10)

The new woman writer, Oliphant explains, would wield the artistic resources she had once attributed to Jameson, Austen, and other “lady” writers, while withstanding the pressures of a literary market that threatened to eclipse all art. By invoking Madame de Stael’s *Corinne* (1807) Oliphant figures this writer as foreign, erotic, unmarried, and political—above all, a woman who succeeds on the basis of her public oracular power, rather than her performance in a separate, limited, and strictly gendered sphere. The new *Corinne*, Oliphant explains, “has some license in such matters,” but for the time being “it is difficult to be at once the simple house-mother working for her family and the literary leader conscious of superlative power and fame” (1890, 409).

The irony is that Oliphant herself has come to be associated with the very tradition she disparaged toward the end of her career—the sentimental myth of the literary wife and mother. By turning to Oliphant’s reviews, we uncover a record of self-fashioning that her *Autobiography* omits, one that reveals the specific challenges lifewriting posed for women writers of nonfiction prose. Because the review genre was so dependent on the performance of a collective male identity, Oliphant’s attempts to join it suggest that professional lifewriting must sometimes transpire on the borderlines of fiction, where the rigors of nonfiction writing and the power of the imagination create a space for new, previously overlooked identities.

Oliphant recognizes as much in her own consideration of nineteenth-century biographies: “those delicate compensations of poetry and sentiment which we are apt to shake our heads at as imaginary,” she writes, “do actually come in to counterbalance [...] the hard sentences of fact” (1877, 175).

Notes

1. Isabel C. Clarke (1935) briefly describes the part Oliphant’s mother played in her professional development in “Margaret Oliphant,” *Six Portraits* (London: Hutchinson and Co.): 193–230.

2. Stephen Gwynn (1929) directly invokes this approach in the title of his early study, “A Mother: Margaret Oliphant,” in *Saints and Scholars*, (London: Thornton Butterworth) 221–56. This critical tendency also surfaces in some of the most comprehensive studies of Oliphant to date, including Vineta and Robert A. Colby, 1966, *The Equivocal Virtue: Mrs. Oliphant and the Literary Marketplace* (New York: Archon Books) and Elisabeth Jay, 1995, *Margaret Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself, A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press). Linda Peterson (1999) has recently proposed that the combination of professional and domestic narrative in the *Autobiography* reflects Oliphant’s resistance to “a conception of the woman writer [...] that achieves its professionalism by breaking with domesticity” (267). See Linda Peterson, 1999, “Margaret Oliphant’s *Autobiography* as Professional Artist’s Life,” *Women’s Writing* 6 (2): 261–78.

3. For a more complete account of the mid-century publishing boom, see Allan C. Dooley, 1992, *Author and Printer in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia) and John Sutherland, 1995, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Hampshire: Macmillan).

4. Oliphant did not wholeheartedly support universal enfranchisement for women, but she insisted on it in the case of single women and those serving as their family’s primary breadwinners. She attacked Barbara Bodichon’s “A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Laws Concerning Women,” which promoted property rights for married and single women, yet repeatedly argued on behalf of female employment in her periodical articles. See Merryn Williams, 1995, “Feminist or Antifeminist? Oliphant and the Woman Question,” *Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive*, ed. D. J. Trela (London: Associated Univ. Presses): 165–80, and Monica Cohen, 1999, “Maximizing Oliphant: Begging the Question and the Politics of Satire,” *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. Nicola Diane Thompson (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press): 99–115.

5. In *Sartor Resartus* (1833) and *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle famously claims that rituals of modern life retain only a superficial connection to history and that a true connection with one’s present requires a diligent interrogation of the past.

For a rich discussion of Carlyle's approach to historical inquiry, see John D. Rosenberg, 1986, *Carlyle and the Burden of History* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press).

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