

Margaret Oliphant Becomes a Heroine: Tracing a Literary Tradition

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*I*n her 1882 *Literary History of England*, Margaret Oliphant identifies the early nineteenth century as a period that saw the simultaneous rise of the novel and rise of female literary artists: “But the opening of an entirely feminine strain of the highest character and importance – a branch of art worthy and noble, and in no way inferior, yet quite characteristically feminine, must, we think, be dated here in the works of these three ladies” (206-7). The novels of Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, and Susan Ferrier provide the evidence for her claim, and Oliphant devotes an entire chapter to their works, arguing for the importance of a new, feminine approach to fiction in which women are depicted as round and complex characters. The emergence of a female literary tradition is one that interested Oliphant, and her writings betray a complicated attitude toward this tradition as she tried to both articulate it broadly for the readers of her critical works and negotiate her own place within it as a prolific woman novelist. Oliphant appears to have used her writing, specifically her critical essays, as a way to think through her ideas, and she had ample space for this in the more than 400 pieces she published in periodicals including *Blackwood’s*, *St. James’s Gazette*, and *The Spectator*, among many others. Thus, a comprehensive account of her views on fiction and the development of the novel is beyond the scope of a single essay. However, looking at her criticism of several women novelists reveals a specific, sustained interest in the

evolution of the heroine and the rights and responsibilities of women's fiction.

Over the course of her career, Oliphant charted the distinct progression of women's fiction – particularly with regard to the development of women characters – and chafed against what she saw as negative influences on the genre. Oliphant's critical essays on nineteenth-century novels suggested that women's fiction was on a forward-moving and progressive path that needed to be carefully guarded against certain kinds of incursions. Specifically, she demonstrated how the heroine evolved from Jane Austen's novel of domesticity to Charlotte Brontë's passionate *Jane Eyre* to George Eliot's female philosophers. In contrast, the fleshly and lustful sexuality of much sensation fiction as well as, most notoriously, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, threatened the positive evolution of female characters and could have negative implications for readers. The sanctity of readership and the ability of fiction to influence culture was a common theme for Oliphant and lent additional *gravitas* to her arguments about the characterization of women. As a novelist herself, who was often very self-conscious about her status, Oliphant brought multiple perspectives to bear upon this tradition in which she hoped to find a place.

Oliphant's interest in a tradition of women's writing is apparent from her critical attention to women writers of a generation preceding her own. She devotes an entire chapter of her *Literary History of England* (Vol. III) to Austen, Edgeworth, and Ferrier because she believed their work marked a turning point in the history of literature, particularly for women writers. Oliphant's biographers Vineta and Robert Colby point out her interest in tradition and inheritance, terming the *Literary History* "an inquiry into the *durability* of fame" (195). Devoted entirely to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Oliphant's *Literary History* draws heavily on biographical material and frequently places the authors in the context of their Victorian successors. For instance, in closing the chapter on Austen, Edgeworth, and Ferrier, she writes,

There have been more brilliant novelists, more potent writers, than these three ladies. None of them come up to the level of George Sand or George Eliot, in sentiment or philosophy; but they were of more importance in their generation than either George Eliot or George Sand, and laid open the workings of the common life as no one else had done in the three countries which they represent so well. (247)

As this passage suggests, Oliphant valued writers' ability to contribute to the literary tradition equally with the writing itself. Eliot and Sand may have been more "brilliant" as novelists but their contributions, in terms of forging a tradition, were surpassed by Austen, Edgeworth, and Ferrier. These writers marked an important stage in the development of the novel by creating a space for domestic fiction – a genre Oliphant herself frequently worked in. In focusing on everyday domestic life, these early women writers also brought attention to the heroine, which was spurred, in part, by an increase in female readership. Thus, for Oliphant, the early nineteenth century marked the beginning of an age of serious women's writing, as these three writers "opened up for women after them a new and characteristic path in literature" (207).

Jane Austen, in particular, was a favorite of Oliphant's, and she frequently appears as a touchstone in the latter's critical essays. For Oliphant, Austen represents an historical nostalgia – a period in which gender relations, the novel genre, and other vexing questions of the mid-nineteenth century were simpler and more straightforward. She finds that Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse stand out among Austen's heroines, yet Oliphant notes an important distinction between them. Elizabeth is modeled on an eighteenth-century version of the heroine in which she is "superior" to those around her (a criticism Oliphant would later levy at George Eliot's *Romola* as well). For instance, Oliphant dislikes Elizabeth's readiness to concede the vulgarity and inferiority of her mother and younger sisters, noting "A

heroine must be superior, it is true, but not so superior as this” (“Miss Austen” 301). In contrast, as Austen matured, she was able to create a more nuanced and therefore more realistic heroine in Emma Woodhouse. Oliphant points out the contrast between the two characters: “Miss Austen no longer believes in her, or gives her all the honours of heroine, as she did to her Elizabeth, but laughs tenderly at her *protégée*, and takes pleasure in teasing her, and pointing out her innocent mistakes” (303). These comments on Elizabeth and Emma appear in Oliphant’s review of James Edward Austen-Leigh’s *Memoir* of his aunt (*Blackwood’s* 1870). This essay, which also reviews the recent three-volume *The Life of Mary Russell Mitford*, offers extensive commentary on Austen’s life and works, and like many nineteenth-century reviewers, Oliphant used the publication of the *Memoir* as an opportunity to revisit and write about Austen’s novels. Oliphant is unapologetic in her clear preference for *Emma* over all other Austen novels, and the more complex characterization of the heroine is largely responsible for that preference. Indeed, as several critics have noted, Oliphant’s own Lucilla Marjoribanks is something of a tribute to Emma Woodhouse.¹ Throughout her critical writings, Austen often served as a touchstone for Oliphant, standing as an originator of a new strain of women’s fiction with a renewed focus on the heroine that laid the groundwork for the Victorian woman’s novel and the tradition in which Oliphant herself was writing.

In her review of the Austen and Mitford biographies, she notes that the authors led full, satisfying lives and therefore did not need to use their writing as an outlet for frustrations: “it would be hard to find any trace of that (let our readers pardon us the horrible word) sexual unrest and discontent which, at a later period, found a startling revelation in the works of Charlotte Brontë, and have since been repeated *ad nauseum* in many inferior pages” (298). For Oliphant, Brontë’s 1847 novel *Jane Eyre* represented a new stage in the development of women’s fiction, and much of her critical commentary on Brontë focuses on this aspect of her work. Like Austen, Brontë represented a turning point in Oliphant’s

narrative about the development of women's fiction over the course of the nineteenth century.

Jane Eyre features in Oliphant's 1855 *Blackwood's* essay, "Modern Novelists – Great and Small" in which she notes the decline of fashionable fiction and simultaneous rise of more complex texts. Brontë's novels played an important role in bringing about this new phase in fiction, and following her summary of *Jane Eyre*, Oliphant writes, "Such was the impetuous little spirit which dashed into our well-ordered world, broke its boundaries, and defied its principles – and the most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*" (557). Although she struggles with the propriety of the subject matter and the way it is presented – particularly the frank conversations between Jane and Rochester – Oliphant nonetheless acknowledges that the novel is "remarkable." The publication of *Jane Eyre*, then, marked a move from the domestic fiction pioneered by Austen and others to a new way of representing women and their emotions and the emergence of psychological realism.

Her discussion of Brontë in the *Autobiography* suggests that Oliphant saw her own work as less compelling than Brontë's but representative of a broader experience: "my work to myself looks perfectly pale and colourless beside hers – but yet I have had far more experience and, I think, a fuller conception of life. I have learned to take perhaps more a man's view of mortal affairs" (43). This comment is one of many in which Oliphant evaluates her own work in comparison to that of her contemporaries and raises the question of how her fiction will fit into a longer-term narrative about literary history. The specific attention to feminine psychology and experience is a hallmark of Oliphant's Brontë criticism. In her chapter on the sisters in *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (1897), she asserts, "Their philosophy of life is that of a schoolgirl, their knowledge of the world almost *nil*, their conclusions confused by the haste and passion of a mind self-centered and working in the narrowest orbit" (5). Nonetheless, the portraits and characterizations are also the most "incisive and realistic" of their time

(5). Just as Jane Austen had marked one turning point in the characterization of women, offering something different from “the heroine in white muslin, the immaculate creature who was of sweetness and goodness all compact,” Brontë marked yet another turning point in her complex psychological portraits of the heroine who is motivated by her own desires (17). Oliphant recognized that as the century had progressed, women’s issues became more central to fiction, and women readers demanded more complexity from their heroines: “we have now arrived at a standard of opinion by which the ‘sex-problem’ has become the most interesting of questions, the chief occupation of fiction. [...] My impression is that Charlotte Brontë was the pioneer and founder of this school of romance” (*Women Novelists* 26-27). Oliphant suspects that Brontë would be surprised by the ways in which the ideas and attitudes of her 1847 novel had evolved by the 1890s, but she continues to credit Brontë with a new turn in the genre and its representation of women.

Just as Oliphant acknowledged the progress of women’s fiction, she was also quick to criticize what she saw as developments in the wrong direction. Oliphant’s comments on certain sensation novels have often been taken as evidence of her broad distaste for the genre, yet in the context of her other critical writings, her arguments about sensation fiction can also be seen as part of a broader interest in the development of the novel and the construction of the heroine in particular. Oliphant notes that the plots, devices, and style of most sensation novels are sub-par, but her main criticism is very specific in its attention to the depiction of female characters. Where novelists do not commit transgressions in this area, however, she is quite generous. For instance, Oliphant writes about the sensation fiction of Wilkie Collins in an 1862 *Blackwood’s* essay in which she calls *The Woman in White* “striking and original” and (correctly) predicts a new fashion among novel writers in this vein (565). Oliphant praises Collins’ ability to create sensation for the reader without relying on the supernatural or other familiar literary devices and finds this to be a novel technique. Much of the essay is taken up with praise for Count Fosco, and Oliphant is both conflicted about and intrigued by

the way Collins creates sympathy for his villain. Following her lengthy praise of Fosco, Oliphant returns to the role of responsible critic, asserting "This, in the interests of art, it is necessary to protest against" (567). Her protest is somewhat pale, however; she expresses concern about the proliferation of attractive villains and novels that glorify vice, but she quickly falls back into praise for Fosco, concluding, with some resignation, that Collins "has given a new impulse to a kind of literature that must, more or less, find its inspiration in crime, and, more or less, make the criminal its hero" (568). Indeed, in her later critiques of novelists including Braddon and Ouida, it is not the criminality of their female characters to which Oliphant objects but, instead, the overt and pulsating articulation of the heroine's fleshly desires.

Oliphant's 1867 *Blackwood's* essay "Novels" is most frequently cited as an example of her attitudes toward sensation fiction. The essay includes an extended critique of the genre and the infamous claim in which Oliphant credits Mary Elizabeth Braddon as "the inventor of the fair-haired demon of modern fiction" (263). Oliphant uses the novels of Charlotte Brontë to provide context for her discussion of sensation fiction, explaining that prior to *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*, heroines were not expected to articulate desire or express an interest in marriage. With Brontë, however, came the heroine who "burst forth into passionate lamentation over her own position and the absence of any man whom she could marry" (259). Brontë was able to both understand and represent women's desire in a new way, and Oliphant recognized the importance of this change. Sensation fiction writers, however, took such portraits of female desire several steps too far, downplaying the psychological complexities and focusing on the lustful longings: "What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshly and unlovely record" (259). Joanne Wilkes points out that Oliphant "felt uneasy about" these developments in the character of the heroine and "dissociates her [Brontë] from her successors" in her critical writings (Wilkes 133). Oliphant enumerates the characteristics of the

problematic sensation fiction heroines who depart from Brontë's model, noting that the sense of romance in the novels has also been destroyed by the change in the characterization of women. The heroine no longer waits for a "knight of romance riding down the forest glades" but instead longs "for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her" (259). At least, Oliphant seems to suggest, Jane Eyre had the decency to keep Rochester's advances in check until they were properly married.

With regard to sensation fiction, Oliphant's primary concern seems not to be the subject matter itself but rather the way in which that subject matter is portrayed and the potential damage to the novel and its readers that might result. This interest in readership, and women's readership in particular, was widespread among nineteenth-century commentators as critics such as Kate Flint have noted: "By the mid-nineteenth century, the trope of fiction as a fast route to corruption was so familiar that it could be used not just in its own right, for didactic purposes, but as a way of encouraging the reader to think critically about their own practices when consuming novels" (266). Oliphant participates in this rhetoric, expressing specific concern for the way in which the construction of heroines could influence women "who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them" (275). She continues in an impassioned defense of female purity and asserts that novelistic portrayals of women as lustful and brazen are "debasing to everybody concerned" (275).

Oliphant's complicated views on women's rights have often stymied contemporary critics who are unsure of where to place her in a continuum of mid nineteenth-century women writers. In her critical writings, Oliphant advocates for women's education and marriage reform yet also staunchly denies the need for married women to have the right to vote because "there is no social justice in giving two people so closely bound by all the complications of nature as to be, to all intents and purposes one, two voices in the commonwealth" (Review

Subjection 588). Merryn Williams aptly characterizes the contradictory nature of Oliphant's commentaries on gender across her numerous works, noting that she "is a complex figure, typecast as antifeminist, yet concerned throughout her life with the problems of women and the author of several novels that are rooted in this concern" (179). With regard to the portrayal of women in fiction, however, the message articulated in her critical works is fairly consistent. Oliphant notes that much ink has been spilled on women's rights, yet the crux of the matter for women – a matter of both personal and national importance – is "the duty of being pure" ("Novels" 275). "There is perhaps nothing of such vital consequence to a nation," Oliphant asserts, and she notes that the double standard for male and female "wickedness" may be unfortunate, but it is nonetheless true (275). At the same time, she expects literary heroines to be psychologically and philosophically complex characters who are able to engage with pressing contemporary issues. These two essays on sensation fiction contribute to Oliphant's arguments about the development of a female literary tradition by illustrating her belief in the power of the heroine to shape not only the tastes of the reading public but also the morality of the nation. The essays also demonstrate that Oliphant did not object to sensation fiction as a genre – indeed, she celebrates the accomplishments of Collins in *The Woman in White* – but that she is attentive to the subtleties of plot and characterization and fiercely protective of the genre and tradition in which she was working.

Throughout her critical writings, Oliphant articulates a fervent belief that the tone of literature can shape the tone of society and that the depictions of women appearing in sensation fiction are detrimental to readers. In "New Novels" (*Blackwood's* 1880), Oliphant offers an impassioned defense of the genre that is strongly reminiscent of Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*. Oliphant writes,

A novel is a book which some people are ashamed of reading, and most people speak of apologetically as an exception to their usual studies, – as a trifle taken up,

don't you know, when one has nothing better to do. Reading for the seaside! Under this description figure books in which the secrets of human life are sounded, sometimes with power, and often with sincerity as great as, or greater than, that of any of your philosophers, with gleams of natural insight, and sparkles of that perception which approaches genius. (379)

She notes the impact of fiction upon readers and its ability to both capture the imagination and prove instructive. Storytelling is an essential part of humanity that begins in the nursery, Oliphant argues, and novels are an extension of this impulse. Novels have the power to keep readers up at night, influence their behavior, and shape their speech; thus, the importance and impact of fiction cannot be underestimated, and there is a need to regulate the development of the genre. In this defense of novels, Oliphant echoes Austen's well-known passage in which her narrator uses a similarly faux-mocking tone to chastise readers and praise the novel as a work "in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (*Northanger Abbey* 22). Whether a conscious or unconscious homage to her literary predecessor, this passage nonetheless further underscores Oliphant's commitment to supporting a tradition of what she saw as good women's writing from the perspective of both the critic and the novelist.

Oliphant's awareness of her position within the literary world and her desire to shape how future generations of readers might see her writing within the context of the nineteenth-century literary marketplace is conveyed in her *Autobiography*, where she frequently compares herself to other novelists. For instance, she writes, "No one even will mention me in the same breath with George Eliot. And that is just" (51). Eliot was both a standard against which Oliphant viewed her own writing, and an important contributor to her overarching

narrative about the condition of women's writing and its place in the literary world. For Oliphant, the conditions of authorship were important for women writers. In the *Autobiography* she acknowledges that she may be somewhat jealous of Eliot, asking "Should I have done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?" (50). This comparison of a writing career allowed to grow slowly and be nourished against a writing career accelerated by the need for financial remuneration appears throughout Oliphant's journals, and she goes back and forth between validating and bemoaning her own path. She acknowledges that her finest calling was to support her family and that writing was both personally fulfilling and a way to earn a living, but she also bristles at the appreciation shown to writers such as Eliot but not to her. Her comment on Eliot and George Sand is typical of the way in which Oliphant expresses both sides of the situation: "I would not buy their fame with their disadvantages, but I do feel very small, very obscure, beside them, rather a failure all round" (52-53). Oliphant comes to very few definitive conclusions about the best conditions for women's writing in the *Autobiography*, yet it is clear that she considers the professionalization and success of women writers to be essential for the future of the genre and the tradition.

Oliphant's most extended critical commentary on George Eliot comes in her review of J.M. Cross's 1885 biography of Eliot (*Edinburgh Review*), but Eliot, like Austen, was a touchstone for Oliphant, often appearing in her critical pieces on other writers. Although Oliphant disliked much of what Cross did in the biography, she used the occasion of its publication as an opportunity to comment on Eliot's fiction. Indeed, Elisabeth Jay points out, Oliphant bristled against the idea – presented in popular biographies of writers – that "the animus of the life had been, or was represented as having been, committed to or shaped by the demands of the writer's art. Her own energies, she felt, as she deconstructed her life, had been more widely dispersed" ("Introduction" 18).² Oliphant observes that Eliot's sense of propriety was more developed in her fiction

than in her life, claiming that she would never place one of her fictional heroines in a position like that of her own relationship with George Henry Lewes: “George Eliot had far too profound a sense of what is and is not permitted by art, ever to place any imaginary woman in a similar position” (537). For Oliphant, Eliot contributed a sense of philosophy and ethics to the development of the nineteenth-century literary heroine: “She was nothing if not a truth-seeker, a teacher of the highest morality” (548). Dinah from *Adam Bede* is cited by Oliphant as an exemplar of Eliot’s philosophical heroine: “with ‘Adam Bede’ began that high sense of her position as a moral teacher which increased with the years” (545). Interestingly, in this essay she does not comment upon the morality of Hetty Sorrel who becomes pregnant outside of marriage and whose story received far more attention from contemporary readers and critics. However, she does mention Hetty later in *The Victorian Age of English Literature* where she calls her a “shallow, selfish, yet absolutely natural being” (II:467). Although Hetty does not match Oliphant’s ideal of the moral heroine, the reality with which she is drawn and her unsympathetic treatment by Eliot makes her a useful counterpoint to Dinah in what Oliphant saw as Eliot’s broader endeavor of endowing her heroines with a moral center and sense of ethics.

In her critiques of Eliot’s work, Oliphant expresses a clear preference for the early novels and the heroines depicted therein. She praises Maggie Tulliver as a creation of “unity and depth” but passes over *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* with little commentary, other than to note that they are “more artificial and not so perfect as their predecessors” (Review of *Life* 546, 553). *Middlemarch* does receive some attention in a later *Blackwood’s* essay (“New Novels” 1880) where Oliphant discusses the scene in which Mary Garth refuses to burn Featherstone’s will as an example of the kind of moral challenges presented by Eliot’s fiction. While she disagrees with Mary’s behavior, Oliphant nonetheless notes the power and responsibility of novels to depict social life and “exhibit men and women in the midst of all its complications” (380). She ultimately claims that Eliot “fails” in

choosing morality over practicality and allowing Mary to preserve a will that disinherits Fred, but she nonetheless notes the clear moral message of the scene. Indeed, the conflicts between morality and practicality presented in Eliot's later fiction may help explain why Oliphant said less about these novels and found them to be less useful for her broader endeavor to chart the development of the literary heroine.

In "Two Cities – Two Books," Oliphant suggests that Eliot may have taken the philosophical heroine too far, putting her on a lofty pedestal that makes her inaccessible to the reader: "there is no tender amusement in the author's tone, as if she meant us to feel her beautiful Romola to be a victim to youth's delusive innocent grandeur of self-contemplation, but a gravity which precludes all possibility of humour" (78). As she does with Austen and sensation novels, Oliphant is careful not to make generalizations. She identifies the way in which Eliot moves the heroine forward but does not suggest that all of her novels contribute to this progression. Because Eliot is greater than many of her peers, she has farther to fall, and in writing about her depiction of Romola's ability to detach her love for her husband, Oliphant notes, "This is, we cannot but think, a failure in art, as well as a lessening of nature" (79). Although Oliphant seems to take some pleasure in the "failure" of the novel – inserting an anecdote in which a Florentine bookseller suggests that the book is more popular as a travel guide than as a novel – she ultimately leaves judgment on *Romola* and its heroine to the reader, noting that Romola is beautiful and lofty, but also distant and cold. She levies a similar complaint against Dorothea Brooke and Daniel Deronda in *The Victorian Age of English Literature*, noting that in creating such perfection "this admirable genius fails and sinks into morasses of fictitious imagination, and labored utterance" (II:174). Across her various commentaries, then, Oliphant seems to conclude that Eliot's genius in endowing the heroine with philosophy and ethics endures, yet she questions the direction to which Eliot sometimes puts that genius in her individual novels.

Toward the end of her career, Oliphant penned one of her best-known accounts of contemporary fiction, “The Anti-Marriage League” (*Blackwood’s* 1896), in which she critiques the representation of gender, particularly the heroine, in Thomas Hardy’s 1895 novel *Jude the Obscure*. The article prompted a retort from Hardy in a 1912 Postscript to the novel’s Preface in which he referred to her commentary as “the screaming of a poor lady in *Blackwood*” (qtd Wilkes 113). Like her 1867 essay “Novels,” this piece challenges the digression of the heroine from the path on which Oliphant would like to place her. She opens with a section on “the prominence of fiction” noting the fine qualities of fiction and its capacity to improve the minds and manners of readers – particularly young readers. Reasserting her familiar claims about the power of fiction sets the stage for her condemnation of Hardy’s novel and its ability to influence perceptions of reading. Oliphant notes that although Hardy may succeed in discrediting marriage, he accomplishes this by discrediting women: “We rather think the author’s object must be, having glorified women by the creation of Tess, to show after all what destructive and ruinous creatures they are” (139). This tendency to demonize female characters, Oliphant observes, is a recent development in fiction by men and has set back the development of the heroine, returning her to the role of temptress and denying her a more complex existence. She concludes the section on Hardy with an objection to his treatment of children in the novel, citing this as yet another example of anti-marriage sentiment, since children are “a most serious part of the question of the abolition of marriage” (142). The heroine who is merely a temptress and operates from lust rather than love with no commitment to the sanctity of marriage is not the heroine Oliphant wants to see as the inheritor of Austen, Brontë, or Eliot.

Although these essays represent only a small fraction of Oliphant’s critical writings, they demonstrate a consistent trend in their attention to the importance of fiction in shaping cultural ideals and the careful tracing of the evolution of the heroine over the course of the nineteenth century.

Oliphant certainly took her role as a reviewer seriously and believed fiction to be a serious business. In her own 1866 novel *Miss Marjoribanks*, Oliphant demonstrates how young women are often uncritical readers of fiction by showing how her heroine Lucilla's ideas about behavior are derived from novels. As a result, Melissa Schaub suggests, Lucilla learns to operate through "manipulation of the textual roles provided by society" (204). Oliphant introduces Lucilla at fifteen as a young woman whose mind "was considerably enlightened by novels and popular philosophy" (3). Having recently lost her mother, Lucilla is convinced that she should leave school, take over the role of mistress of her father's house, "and become the sunshine of his life, as so many young persons of her age have been known to become in literature" (4). Lucilla is, predictably, devastated when her father rejects this heroic impulse, and although she eventually outgrows her dependence on novels as models for life, she nonetheless retains her tendency to self-narrate and view the actions of those around her as scenes in a drama, to be arranged and rearranged at will.

This construction of Lucilla is part of the novel's self-reflexive humor, and it also serves as further ballast to Oliphant's frequent argument about the importance of fiction and the creation of strong heroines who can be models for women readers. Oliphant is committed to the heroine not only as a critic and a reader but also as a writer working within the very tradition that she is trying to define. Indeed, the specific kind of heroine that she champions – rooted in domesticity, passionate yet philosophical – may have been the kind of heroine that she herself strove to write. As noted above, Oliphant's *Autobiography* betrays some insecurities about her place in literature and the future of her writing, but she holds firm to her beliefs about the characterization of women in fiction. In her *Literary History* Oliphant asserts "the new reign of fiction came in, in individual womanhood, with Elizabeth Bennet" (249). Whether the rise of heroines such as those created by Hardy and Braddon had effectively ended this period in literature or whether they were mere deviations on a path to greater enlightenment, Oliphant would not be able

to discern. She died in 1897, eighteen months after her publication of "The Anti-Marriage League." The debates in which she participated, however, about women writers, the literary marketplace, and the future of fiction would continue well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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Notes

¹ See Q.D. Leavis and June Sturrock.

² Elisabeth Jay discusses Oliphant's attitude toward biography and autobiography in her Introduction to *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*.

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