

## REDESIGNING FEMININITY: *MISS MARJORIBANKS*'S DRAWING-ROOM OF OPPORTUNITY

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By *Andrea Kaston Tange*

“I must have a chaperone, you know,” she said. “I don’t say it is not quite absurd; but then, at first, I always make it a point to give in to the prejudices of society. That is how I have always been so successful,” said the experienced Lucilla. “I never went in the face of anybody’s prejudices. Afterwards, you know, when one is known –”

— Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*

MARGARET OLIPHANT’S WORK HAS OF LATE RECEIVED RENEWED attention for her portrayal of heroines who struggle against the confines of proper middle-class femininity – who are at once sympathetic and yet do not fit the model of the submissive Victorian domestic angel – and *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) is no exception. Without fully discounting the Victorian notion that there is a proper place women ought to occupy, *Miss Marjoribanks* raises complex questions about how that place is defined and limited. Recent scholarly attention to the novel highlights Oliphant’s sustained engagement with the issue of how far propriety and custom circumscribe a woman’s place.<sup>1</sup> Such examinations, however, fail to address the extent to which Oliphant demonstrates the flexibility of cultural notions of a woman’s place by focusing the action of *Miss Marjoribanks* almost entirely on the heroine’s creation of a very specific physical place for herself – her drawing-room. Examining *Miss Marjoribanks*’s portrayal of how a Victorian woman might capitalize on the centrality of the drawing-room in shaping cultural notions of feminine identity, this essay 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. This architecturally-motivated re-reading of Oliphant’s novel in turn suggests a re-reading of Oliphant’s own career. For I would argue that novels operated for Oliphant the way that drawing-rooms do for Lucilla: they provided a culturally-sanctioned place in which to locate herself, and thereby reaffirm her respectable feminine position, even while she undertook projects that challenged Victorian assumptions about gendered identity.

Margaret Oliphant has historically been described as an author and critic who, while perhaps not being a writer of the highest quality, at least, like the characters she created, “never went in the face of anybody’s prejudices.” Until very recently, in fact, the “wholesomeness” of Oliphant’s work – that is, its careful adherence to Victorian middle-class values – was generally accepted.<sup>2</sup> For her Victorian middle-class readers, the quotidian realism of her fiction and her forty-five-year career as a regular contributor to the conservative *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, during which she published over 200 articles, served to position her as the sort of stable and proper writer whose works one could confidently hand to children. Scholars, on the other hand, have long drawn on a self-deprecating letter in which Oliphant laments the pace at which she must write in order to support her family, to explain that the spotty and mediocre quality of her fiction is a direct result of the economic pressure she faced to produce quickly.<sup>3</sup> In turn, they argue, her mediocrity, and the fact that her novels are so “wholesome” as to be tedious, explains the obscurity into which her work fell after her death.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, literary critics further took her to task for being anti-feminist, citing as evidence Oliphant’s vehemently negative review of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* and several of her early essays for *Blackwood’s* in which she resists the vote for women.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning with Elizabeth Langland’s chapter on Oliphant in *Nobody’s Angels*, there have been studies focusing on Oliphant’s efforts to challenge Victorian assumptions about women. Arguing that Oliphant’s work is no more mediocre than her position on women is anti-feminist, scholars such as Langland and D. J. Trela offer compelling evidence to recuperate Oliphant as a talented and highly discriminating observer of a world which had no “sphere” to accommodate an intellectual and energetic woman. Insisting that one receives a skewed picture of Oliphant’s politics and of her talent by adhering to the common practice of selectively reading a few of her essays and her most self-critical letters, these scholars focus on the subversive content and style of Oliphant’s most widely-read works during her lifetime, her novels. Indeed, Trela’s collection *Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive* offers the moniker, “Gentle Subversive,” which has become the more recent critical interpretation of Oliphant.

Among those looking to recuperate Oliphant as a novelist, Lucilla Marjoribanks is described as being subversive by “appearing to personify conventionality itself” (O’Mealy 72).<sup>6</sup> Throughout the novel, Lucilla’s modesty, good taste, high moral code, skillful household management, and clear understanding of the finer points of social interaction demonstrate that she knows what is expected of the daughter of one of the most prominent men in town. Dutifully, she repeatedly proclaims that her “one object in life” is “to be a comfort to poor papa,” and she and everyone in Carlingford seem to accept the perfect truthfulness of this statement.<sup>7</sup> Yet despite the fact that she has all the advantages of a comfortable home and the social rank established by her father’s extremely successful medical practice, Lucilla highlights what a struggle it is for a woman to satisfy her intelligence and energy while living within the proprieties of middle-class femininity. As conventional as she is, she is simultaneously unlike the standard novel heroine in her insistently physical presence: she is a large girl with unmanageable hair and an unfaltering appetite, who takes over her father’s chair at the breakfast table and insists on taking charge of the spaces she will occupy. She is intelligent and energetic and thus refuses to entertain thoughts of marriage for years on the grounds that she has other more important things to do for ten years or so, until she will have begun to “go off.” Far from the delicate, soft-spoken, dependent ideal of a middle-class

young lady, Lucilla “always enjoys perfect health,” always says exactly what she means, and can clearly take care of herself far better than could any of the intellectually inferior suitors who pay her attention.<sup>8</sup>

Lucilla is portrayed as subversive not just in the force of her character and physical presence; she significantly challenges the notion of the Angel in the House not by rejecting it altogether but by carefully exploiting the position in which it places her. Within the spaces that are commonly accepted as a woman's sphere, she shows herself to be far more than simply a complement to a male provider. Most readings of the novel, however, conclude that the Lucilla's subversiveness is ultimately undercut, for after 475 pages of independent thinking, Lucilla agrees to marry her simple-but-adoring cousin.<sup>9</sup> The critical commonplace of pointing to ways a heroine is subversive throughout a text only to be contained finally by a conventional marriage may be a superficially accurate description of Lucilla's story. However, attention to the role of domestic space in shaping women's identities shows that Lucilla is more complicated than this subversion/containment formula suggests.

The model of subversion and containment relies upon a spatial metaphor of enclosure to explain how ideology is (re)inscribed upon individuals despite their resistance. Yet even while deploying the spatial metaphor of containment, many feminist scholars focus on the ideological issues at stake without considering whether these too might have spatial implications. Although Lucilla defines success as knowing when to give in to prejudices and knowing when this is no longer necessary, in fact her success in Carlingford is made possible precisely through her ingenious manipulation of physical spaces. Lucilla is careful to act strictly within the physical domestic boundaries that are considered feminine, creating her drawing-room as the town's social center and thereby giving in to the prejudice that a woman should locate her energies in the workings of the home and the social opportunities therein. Because she is so careful about the space she occupies, she quickly becomes acknowledged as the social genius of Carlingford. Moreover, the authority Lucilla derives from establishing herself as the premiere hostess of Carlingford is precisely what enables her to move beyond simply being a consummate hostess.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Lucilla is not submissive but calculated in her efforts to “give in to the prejudices of society.” For this reason, Elizabeth Langland has argued that Lucilla “seizes control of local society through a dexterous manipulation of domestic discursive practices and a clever staging of class and femininity” (156). As I will demonstrate, it is not simply the ideals that she manipulates, but *the location of that staging* – Lucilla's elegant drawing-room – that is the most important ingredient of her success. Indeed, Susan Harris claims in her book *The Cultural Power of the Late Nineteenth-Century Hostess*, that Victorian “hostess[es] influenced by creating the material – the spatial – possibility for influence” (6). While her book provides a thorough analysis of the cultural position of the hostess vis-à-vis literacy, however, Harris offers no sustained discussion of the “spatial” element of their influence.<sup>10</sup> Yet as the example of Lucilla Marjoribanks suggests, careful control of her proper place, in physical as well as figurative terms, was an important means by which a woman could create a stronger cultural position for herself.

In marked contrast to the real hostesses Harris examines, whom she explicitly notes “were regarded as Exceptional People” (23) in occupying positions of highest privilege that enable their influence (one is wife of a prominent Boston publisher; the other is daughter of England's Prime Minister), Lucilla may be read as a representative role model for middle-class women. Only daughter of the town doctor, Lucilla is well-educated and wants for

nothing financially; nevertheless, hers is the privilege of comfortable middle-class existence, not of elite, nationally-visible, cultural status. Moreover, 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, for she recognizes the value of propriety for maintaining her comfortable social position. As she publicly confirms – through the weekly “Evenings” she hosts at which everyone respectable is always welcome – that she is capable of fulfilling ideals of femininity, she simultaneously takes an active approach to controlling public perception of her placement within her father’s home. Once she “is known,” she demonstrates that capitulation to social “prejudices” can have the valuable result of opening up possibilities for an enterprising middle-class woman rather than closing them off. In establishing the physical and ideological boundaries that will contain her actions, she uses her drawing-room space, coded as it is with all the middle-class respectability that one could muster, as the container for her original and often remarkably “unfeminine” projects. She ultimately demonstrates that to work to be a domestic “Angel” is to aspire to an ideal of passivity and that asserting oneself as a domestic “Queen” may result in taking on a figurehead title at the expense of any real power. By contrast, being a spectacular hostess might provide both a position of power and a role model within one’s community. In this context, Lucilla’s marriage becomes in fact a next stage in her careful control of her own destiny, using all the advantages of her respectable containment to redesign cultural notions of proper femininity. Moreover, such analysis demonstrates that characters like Lucilla Marjoribanks stand metonymically for Oliphant herself: “mak[ing] it a point to give in to the prejudices of society” may be a strategy that a woman employs in order to pave the way for resistance against the restrictive conventions that derive from such prejudices.

*“This is the Lady’s Apartment essentially”: Creating a Drawing-Room of Opportunity*

THE DRAWING-ROOM FUNCTIONS AS A PERFECT “container” for Lucilla’s ultimately political projects in large part because of its cultural associations. The emotional center of Victorian social and family circles, architecturally, it was also located at the heart of the house, occupying most, if not all, of the central story a house in town.<sup>11</sup> With dining room and men’s rooms such as the study, library, and/or billiard room on the floor below, and family bedrooms on the floor above, the drawing-room was carefully protected from the noise or the more “vulgar” associations of the street, the basement kitchen regions, or the servants’ attic. The importance of the drawing-room in the lives of the middle class went far beyond the simple metaphor of its location within the house, for it served to connect the daily lives of the family with the lives of their friends and guests by providing the space in which guests were invited to judge the respectability of the house. Thad Logan’s recent social history of the drawing-room, *The Victorian Parlour* (she uses the terms parlour and drawing-room interchangeably), provides a wealth of information on decorative arts and furnishings, as well as discussion of the role of the drawing room in family life. I would like to offer here a complement to her work by considering the drawing-room specifically in terms of the relationship between the creation of the place and the formation of women’s identities. The capability of the female manager, her grace as a hostess, her taste and style, and the degree to which she could maintain a proper household were all on display in the drawing-room. Furthermore, while the efficacy of the woman of the house might be measured by a visit to her drawing-room, it was also true that the rules of the drawing-room both reflected and

defined Victorian notions of femininity. Given that the Victorian woman was taken to be the heart of the household and that the drawing-room was the unquestioned locus of her realm, then, it is not surprising that the drawing-room came to stand for the qualities of middle-class femininity – moral righteousness, propriety, grace, ease, decorativeness, and a pervasive concern for others' comfort. In fact, textual discussions of the drawing-room imply that this space had the power to make the ideals of domesticity a physical reality by actualizing all that a woman was supposed to embody for her home and then extending those domestic comforts to all who might be received within the space.

Recent historical studies of the Victorian home contend – and Victorian domestic floor plans and advice manuals corroborate – that the middle-class home was carefully segregated and highly subdivided to ensure that members of the household had sufficient privacy and that the complex daily workings of the home could be easily monitored by the lady of the house.<sup>12</sup> At a minimum, in homes with resident servants (and having at least one such servant was the assumed sign that one was “truly” middle class), there would be male-, female-, and servant-identified rooms for sleeping and for socializing, and family- and servant-identified rooms for eating. The wealthier a family was, the more separate rooms there would be within each of these regions for further segregation of the home's occupants: upper- and lower-servant dining rooms; nursery quarters away from other family bedrooms; smoking/billiard rooms separate from the library for men; morning rooms, boudoirs, and formal and family drawing-rooms for women. Despite exhaustive catalogues of the many rooms a middle-class family might strive to have, however, middle-class women invariably spent most of their time in their drawing-rooms. Unlike any other room in the house, the drawing-room was multi-faceted, serving as the primary room in which a woman might be found during the day. It was “the lady's sitting room and reception-room for callers . . . [the place for] settling her household accounts, [engaging] in reading, music, sewing, or worsted work . . . the place for evening entertainments, for dancing, music and receptions . . . convenient for the access of servants and others coming to receive orders” (Stevenson 57, 62, 66).<sup>13</sup> As J. J. Stevenson explains in *House Architecture*, except for specific supervision of household processes, a woman's duties as well as her pastimes were contained within the drawing-room, which consequently came to be associated with her personal tastes and interests and served as the central gathering place of the home. It was, as architect Robert Kerr aptly expresses it in *The Gentleman's House*, “the Lady's Apartment essentially” (107), for it symbolically unified the disparate roles of the woman of the house, locating her functions as hostess, friend, household manager, and wife all within a single space.

As the space in the house that saw the most sustained use, drawing-rooms were expected to be comfortable, practical and elegant, rather than up-to-the-minute fashionable, since few families would have been able to afford to redecorate regularly. Thus, the main furniture would be serviceable rather than frivolous, and only the small decorative touches would change with the frequency of fashion. Victorian housekeeping texts fill many pages suggesting to new homeowners how to furnish the drawing-room, partly because the public aspects of the space – its many uses for entertaining – helped establish one's position within the community. Indeed, the cluttered appearance which we tend to associate with the Victorian drawing-room is in part a result of the room serving so many purposes.<sup>14</sup> For the benefit of new home-owners, writers of advice books, such as J. H. Walsh, F. R. C. S., as well as architects like Robert Kerr and J. J. Stevenson, were careful to enumerate what the room would require. Walsh's *A Manual of Domestic Economy* (1857), for example, provides

detailed information, room by room, on exactly what pieces of furniture are necessary for a household on four distinct budgets, ranging from L.100 to L.1000 per year.<sup>15</sup> Stevenson more specifically enumerates the furniture “without which no ladies’ drawing-room is considered to be complete” (59).

Although reading through scores of pages of such directions might seem tedious, Lucilla Marjoribanks understands that living up to these conventions is a womanly obligation. Furthermore, carefully controlling her space enables her to link her obligations to her father and his household with her desire to insert herself into the community and thus becomes the avenue to the “power” she maintains by the novel’s end. Having returned home from boarding school and her year-long Grand Tour with the expressed intention of “being a comfort” to her papa, Lucilla retains the equally important personal agenda of setting herself up as the center of Carlingford society. Significantly, she sees these two positions as synonymous. Working largely in her favor is the notion enunciated in countless advice books that the woman of a house should ideally function as both the comfort of all the home’s members and the central figure who creates the social link between the home and the world of the town in which the family lives. Capitalizing on this ideal, Lucilla represents her dual objectives as her “duty” – for just as her father has no one else but her to look after him, so Carlingford suffers from a lack of social genius capable of putting together its disparate parts into a harmonious social whole (43; ch. 3).

Lucilla’s father has become semi-famous for his weekly dinner parties, to which “naturally, as there was no lady in the house, ladies could not be invited” (42; ch. 3). Immediately, Lucilla knows that to reassure the community that she will occupy the proper place for a woman of her age and class position, she must have a female chaperone for these dinners. Although her father is a highly-respectable and successful doctor, his status as a widower has placed him rarely in social situations with ladies, and thus he is unaware of such niceties of etiquette. Adding, “I don’t say it is not quite absurd; but then, at first, I always make it a point to give in to the prejudices of society,” Lucilla identifies the social commonplace that it would be unseemly for her, unmarried and only nineteen years old, to sit as hostess at dinners for which the company is otherwise all male (72; ch. 7). Because Oliphant would hardly need to reiterate a social rule that would have been self-evident to her (likely female, certainly middle-class) readers, her careful elucidation of this point seems designed to facilitate identification between Lucilla and the reader of her story who would share Lucilla’s sense of this need for a chaperone. Moreover, Lucilla cleverly recognizes that the very fact that creates her need for a chaperone in her father’s own house also highlights a larger problem for the town: there are no regular social events for the ladies of the community to attend. Lucilla’s plan to host regular Thursday “Evenings” (after-dinner gatherings) implicitly promises to augment the tradition of excellent entertaining that has marked the Doctor’s dinners by providing a plan that will include the ladies of the town. Rather than offering formal parties that are complex to manage, Lucilla insists that these will be “Evenings” for which no invitations will be issued; her drawing-room will be a place where men and women will be able to socialize with propriety but without undue formality.<sup>16</sup> Devising a scheme that offers her opportunities to shine as a hostess without the burdens of formal, exclusive parties, Lucilla’s “no invitations” plan seems breathtakingly risky to the townspeople who come to admire her ability to create a glowing social occasion out of whatever unexpected elements arrive on a given evening.<sup>17</sup> That she ultimately enjoys tremendous success in crystallizing the Carlingford social scene demonstrates that mastery

over her drawing-room requires being an adept hostess rather than simply the lady of the house.

While her peers would consider the drawing-room the logical place that Lucilla might exert an influence, she finds it is necessary to clarify this point for her father, given the history of inactivity that characterizes the Marjoribanks drawing-room. Lucilla's active sense of a drawing-room's purpose stands in direct opposition to her invalid mother's earlier need for a space of quiet feminine retirement; thus Lucilla sees renovation of the room as a logical step in redefining its use. Her father reacts indignantly to her calm assumption that the drawing-room will be redecorated according to her needs and tastes.<sup>18</sup> But she expresses this necessity in spatial terms that imply that every person in a household has certain places that by rights ought to suit individual needs. "You are so much downstairs in the library that you don't feel it," she argues, "but a lady has to spend her life in the drawing-room" (65; ch. 6). Her father ultimately acquiesces to the redecoration on the grounds that, "to be sure, nothing could be more faded than the curtains, and there were bits of the carpet in which the pattern was scarcely discernible" (71; ch. 6). But it is notable that the practical motive of his logic differs from Lucilla's. He recognizes that the room is shabby, and that this shabbiness will be noticed now that Lucilla (unlike her mother) will have company into the drawing-room regularly. By contrast, Lucilla assumes the notion that housekeeping guides and architectural treatises forward that each room should suit its primary occupant, and she thus justifies redecorating the room on the basis of the accepted gendering of domestic spaces. Invoking the notion that "a lady has to spend her life in the drawing-room," Lucilla implies that if she has to spend her life in the drawing-room, then the cultural authority for making decisions about what will happen within this space does not rest with the man whose income makes these changes or Evenings possible. Thus redecorating becomes not a whimsical project, not an end in itself, but a means to an end, for a middle-class woman's identity depends upon her maintaining a proper drawing-room.

To redecorate for Lucilla is to do more than merely make the room look new; it is to make the room an extension of her persona. In a matter of moments on her first night home, Lucilla adeptly reconfigures the drawing-room, which has been at best uninspiring in its respectability, into a place of her own:

It was not an uncomfortable sort of big, dull, faded, respectable drawing-room; and if there had been a family in it, with recollections attached to every old ottoman and easy-chair, no doubt it would have been charming; but it was only a waste and howling wilderness to Lucilla. . . . [Yet] in the little interval which [her father] spent over his claret, Miss Marjoribanks had succeeded in effecting another fundamental duty of woman – she had, as she herself expressed it, harmonised the rooms, by the simple method of rearranging half the chairs and covering the tables with trifles of her own – a proceeding which converted the apartment from an abstract English drawing-room of the old school into Miss Marjoribanks's drawing-room, an individual spot of ground revealing something of the character of its mistress (48–50; ch. 4).

Significantly, the process of turning an "abstract English drawing-room" into "Miss Marjoribanks's drawing-room" is here represented as Lucilla's "fundamental duty" as much as is "amus[ing] her father." In fact, housekeeping guides consistently reiterate the obligation to maintain the family's comfort specifically *through* the creation of an attractive place that reflects all the best qualities of the woman of the house. That not just creating a comfortable

room but also individuating it is “fundamental” to the duties of good housekeeping may seem excessive, but the Victorian assumption was that the drawing-room ought to embody “the character of its mistress” so that the space itself could help extend the qualities of a good woman to all those who might come into her home.

Authors of texts on home style and furnishings support Lucilla’s assumption that such decorating is an activity that both constructs and displays one’s identity: since middle-class femininity was defined through domestic competence, careful management of the drawing-room provided a venue for displaying that competence to those invited into the home. Mrs. Orrinsmith’s *The Drawing-Room*, for example, identifies decorating as a positive way to spend one’s time because it produces a useable – and therefore valuable – commodity. She compares purposeful artistic needlework, wall stenciling, and similar processes of home decoration with the other “artistic” outlets with which a woman might fill her time, concluding that beautifying one’s home is a much more worthy way to spend time than in executing, “amateur sketches and copies which modesty fortunately saves from exhibition, and which find a suitable sarcophagus in portfolios as lasting examples of killed time” (37). Far from standing as a “lasting example of killed time,” a thoughtfully decorated drawing-room is a vibrant and active place that has real uses and real reasons to be viewed with approbation.<sup>19</sup>

The importance of decorative detail in establishing the connection between a woman, her duty, and the space in which she is supposed to discharge her duty is demonstrated by the steps Lucilla goes through in the process of renovating her drawing-room, which figures the room as her personal apparel. She chooses the fabric for the new curtains, for example, by examining the color against her face in one of the mirrors of the upholsterer’s shop. She has set out quite practically to find a “delicate pale green,” on the grounds that it will wear as well as any other color, that it possesses advantages of versatility and originality, and that “all the painters say it is the very thing for pictures” (68; ch. 6). Charles Eastlake (*Hints on Household Taste*) and Mrs. Orrinsmith in fact support Lucilla’s claim, suggesting greens or blues as the most appropriate color schemes for a drawing-room (despite fashions favoring pinks, whites, and golds), especially one that is to display fine pictures. However, Lucilla’s choice of a “delicious damask, softly, spiritually green” is additionally influenced by how well it suits her complexion. She assesses the suitability of the fabric not on the basis of its drape or weight, quality or cost, but in terms of how she looks against it as a backdrop. Although her extraordinary performance in Mr. Holden’s shop leaves “the fashionable upholsterer of Carlingford in a state of some uncertainty whether it was curtains or dresses that Miss Marjoribanks meant to have made,” a reader is given to understand that Lucilla is reasonable in making an effort to create a room that looks well on her (75; ch. 7). Her reasoning is that, “one can change one’s dress . . . as often as one likes – at least as often, you know, as one has dresses to change; but the furniture remains the same” (68; ch. 6). In this explicit link between her clothing and her drawing-room, Lucilla identifies the process of creating her drawing-room as one of putting on the trappings of a socially significant lady. In fact, she dresses herself in a flattering drawing-room as if it were robes of state. In choosing for her drawing-room a “difficult colour” that “her tawny curls and fresh complexion carried off triumphantly,” Lucilla ensures that her own attractive presence in this place will subtly outshine that of any other woman because this is not a color that most people can carry off (69; ch. 6). Her choice to design a room in which she will be the most lovely member of the company is doubly fascinating because we have already seen that Lucilla is in fact not a woman whose appearance accords with the conventions of beauty – and while she



laments this fact, she is also resigned to it. Although one might argue that her color choice is calculated to draw attention to her unique complexion in order to downplay her large stature and unmanageable hair, she seems less interested in creating herself as a beauty than in setting up a means by which her authority will be quietly but constantly confirmed to visitors. Thus, creating a backdrop of this “difficult colour” is a move psychologically calculated to position her as powerful by deploying the very ideals with which a woman is expected to concern herself. In fact, Lucilla increases the social power that her redecoration affords her by entertaining intense speculation about what the finished room will look like and using that gossipy interest in her proceedings to further the town’s collective impression that she is the most important hostess available to Carlingford.

Having amplified her potential for social influence by closely guarding the secret details of the drawing-room’s renovation, Lucilla understands that even once the room is presented to the public, she must continue to expend effort on creating it as an appealing place if she wants to maximize the power she is able to derive from her associations with it. She knows that a stable, unchanging space will rapidly bore her guests and that few people would attend her Evenings week after week if the entertainment, the food, the books on the tables, the conversation, and all the guests remained identical. Since it is not practical to sustain the curiosity of the town by regularly offering them newly redecorated venues in which to spend their Thursday evenings, Lucilla must “redecorate” in more subtle but equally effective ways. She relies on small touches to delight her guests, such as offering a blaze of candles on a cold winter’s night or having the whole party adjourn to the prepared garden on a balmy summer evening. Moreover, because much of the variety depends on the guests themselves and the details of their own lives that they bring into Lucilla’s drawing-room, Lucilla also chooses to decorate through her adroit collection and composition of the “world of heterogeneous elements” that make up Carlingford society. Architect Thomas Morris notes that the drawing-room is the room “to which embellishments permanent and portable are most liberally devoted” (159), and Lucilla’s attention to “portable” embellishments in the form of specially-invited guests is a distinguishing element of her success.

On the same principles of decoration that housekeeping guides and architectural manuals use to describe the physical elements of the home, Lucilla understands that “harmony” and “variety” are the keys to decorating with people as well as with architectural elements.<sup>20</sup> Thus just as the color of the drawing-room was chosen explicitly to complement Lucilla’s complexion, so are the guests chosen to complement her own or each other’s attributes. Her Evenings bring together the most distinctive and the most mundane personalities of the town with an equanimity that is remarked upon as indicative of her character. With a boldness that is again breathtaking to Carlingford townsfolk, Lucilla maintains interest in her Evenings by periodically adding unexpected elements in the form of invited guests who stand socially beyond (above *or* below) the respectable middle-class people who are presumed welcome without explicit invitations. Upholding the principle that “there should be a little of everything in society,” Lucilla sees that not everyone is useful as an individual personality, but that some people are useful as props or background for the more individuated part of the company (165; ch. 17). Thus, for example, she tolerates “men who were hopeless, and good for nothing but to talk to each other . . . because they made a foil to the brighter part of the company, and served as a butt when anybody wanted to be witty” (122–23; ch. 12). To such men, she adds Mr. Cavendish who “fully justified Miss Marjoribanks’s opinion . . . that to have a man who can flirt is next thing to indispensable to a leader of society; that is to say, if he is under

efficient discipline” (126; ch. 13). Highlighting the fact that the drawing-room not only offers a respectable place for mixed company to assemble, the presence of Mr. Cavendish pointedly demonstrates that respectability requires men to be under the “efficient discipline” of women in their drawing-rooms. In fact, as the novel progresses, the degree to which Lucilla is able to manage, and at points discipline, the men who struggle against the confines of feminine standards of behavior becomes a notable factor in her success. Throughout the novel, Lucilla fills out the party with young ladies who can converse, older ladies who can chaperone, and Mrs. Woodburn to mimic everyone, adeptly rearranging her collection of people in order to maintain the freshness of the display – thereby illustrating that being a clever manager of any space requires adroit management of the people who occupy it.

Yet even with its creative extension of Lucilla’s active means of redecorating her drawing-room, the novel does not simply laud such feminine processes as empowering. Harris describes the hostess as being in an “ontologically *relational*” position, facilitating other people’s interactions, rather than being the “principle actor on a stage that hovers between the private and the public” (5). Although Harris claims it is a position of relative power, Oliphant qualifies that power quite clearly. A more sinister interpretation of a feminine interest in drawing-room occupations is presented by Dr. Marjoribanks, who wonders longingly about what might have happened if Lucilla had been born in a position to make a professional reputation for herself:

If *she* had been the boy instead of that young ass [her cousin Tom] . . . 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. (400; ch. 42)

The Doctor’s fear that his daughter will merely “drop down into worsted-work and tea-parties” caricatures the drawing-room’s centrality in women’s lives while simultaneously pointing to a significant concern. To identify decorative embroidery and light entertainment like tea-parties as a “dropping down” is to suggest that Lucilla would fall far short of her potential if she merely occupied the drawing-room as most middle-class women do. Clearly, a woman who is expected to spend her life in the drawing-room might easily end up creating “lasting examples of killed time” by perpetually doing worsted-work with no apparent purpose. It certainly would be easy to do so, in a social system that demanded that “respectable” women center their efforts on the domestic comforts represented by the drawing-room. Thad Logan has suggested that for such women, home decoration served multiple purposes: to establish the status and respectability of the household through appropriate displays of middle-class propriety, to offer women a means of aesthetic gratification and artistic expression, to give women an occupation to fill the time and vent their boredom, and to offer women a medium in which to assert their personalities.<sup>21</sup> As Logan acknowledges, however, it is debatable whether we ought to read these purposes as positive or negative, as constructing or expressing femininity, as enabling or circumscribing individuality. We might ask: does decoration afford a woman a means to access real power, or is it only a semi-satisfying occupation for a woman who, like Lucilla, has “so few other outlets” (395; ch. 42)? Indeed, the novel’s own position on the value of feminine decorative work seems ambivalent. While Lucilla’s process within her own drawing-room demonstrates that the act of decoration need not merely fill portfolios, the novel also expresses concern

that the authority she thereby gains within her community is only a portion of what she might have had, “if *she* had been the boy,” given that her gender requires that Lucilla ultimately have the financial support of a man – father or husband – in order to enable her to do anything in or for “society.”

Initially, Lucilla seems to ally such fears by exercising her talents to fashion herself as a social icon. Although she lives on the town’s most select street and is the daughter of its most highly-respected doctor, Lucilla realizes that what truly gives her authority is the respect that the townspeople invest in figures whom they collectively admire for taking actions beyond the ordinary. In establishing herself as a social exemplar, she shows time and again that she can read the desires of the community and give them what they want before they know they want it. Thus although she may seem to a reader to be simply exercising the same decorative skills any woman might be expected to display in her own drawing-room, she comes across to everyone within the narrative as almost magically more adept at those skills than anyone else in town.

While Lucilla may be particularly perceptive about people’s desires, and certainly can develop her ambitions with a freedom that would not be available to women with poorer fathers or larger families requiring their attention, the narrator in fact downplays these unique aspects of Lucilla’s condition in favor of suggesting that while she might be exceptional in her talents, her practices are not utterly out of the realm of general attainability. Hence the many scenes in which we see Lucilla “at work” in her drawing-room reveal that she is remarkably skilled at managing her place, yet they simultaneously imply that anyone who learns from Lucilla’s efforts and is a careful observer of human nature might – in theory – achieve similar success. Far from Ruskin’s vision of domestic Queens with “natural” feminine attributes, *Miss Marjoribanks* demonstrates that a woman must *learn* the skills required to become a socially-powerful figure: When Lucilla first returns home from school at her mother’s death, she fails miserably in her efforts to manage her father’s household because she has not yet learned the skills of gracefully reading, responding to, and even shaping others’ desires. It is only after further schooling, and her experiences traveling the Continent and living in the homes of her friends (where she sees the causes and effects of inefficient household management), that she is much better able to fulfill her role as woman of the house; and, as a consequence, she can turn that role to her advantage.

Almost from the first day of her return home, Lucilla’s “power” is demarcated by her having learned how to derive advantage from behaving in terms of gendered ideals. One of her first Evenings, she turns to her advantage the fact that working-class Barbara Lake (invited because of her exceptional singing voice) is openly trying to gain the affections of the man whom the town has understood as Lucilla’s suitor (Mr. Cavendish). Illustrating that she is able to work for the harmony of the social situation even at the apparent expense of her own personal interests, Lucilla puts a stop to the indelicate tête-à-tête that threatens to undermine her respectable Evening by sending Cavendish out of the room to get tea with Barbara. In suggesting tea, that most feminine of beverages, Lucilla is by extension gently emphasizing the feminine restraint and modesty that is supposed to characterize drawing-room interactions – insinuating that any true woman would disdain such displays as Barbara’s for their impropriety.

Ironically, however, in refusing to stoop to any kind of “mean action” in order to break off Cavendish and Barbara’s flirtation, Lucilla impresses her guests not as an ordinarily proper woman, but as exceptional: the narrator tells us that the consensus is that “Miss

Marjoribanks proved herself capable of preferring her great work to her personal sentiments, which is generally considered next to impossible for a woman. She did what perhaps nobody else in the room was capable of doing: she sent away the gentleman who was paying attention to her, in company with the girl who was paying attention to him” (120; ch. 12). That Lucilla is capable of “preferring her great work to her personal sentiments” significantly calls readers’ attention to the fact that to be a truly successful figure, Lucilla must at once represent feminine propriety and eschew the traps of feminine weakness and emotional display. This evokes the kind of capable household management that Isabella Beeton propounded so successfully in her *The Book of Household Management*, whose opening chapter on “The Mistress” exhorts:

AS WITH THE COMMANDER OF AN ARMY, or the leader of any enterprise, so is it with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment . . . She ought always to remember that she is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega in the government of her establishment; and that it is by her conduct that its whole internal policy is regulated. She is, therefore, a person of far more importance in a community than she usually thinks she is. . . . Therefore, let each mistress always remember her responsible position, never approving a mean action, nor speaking an unrefined word. (1, 18)

While the above example demonstrates that Lucilla clearly has taken to heart the notion that her conduct should provide a model of refinement in word and action, one might argue that – against Beeton’s modest claim – Lucilla has a very precise sense of her importance in her community.

Indeed, this sense of her own importance is precisely what has led many readers of this novel to identify its tone as “mock heroic.”<sup>22</sup> Referring to the potentially petty domestic politics of the drawing-room as “great work,” the narrator uses similar language throughout the novel, as Lucilla is repeatedly compared (perhaps following Beeton’s lead) to a “great General,” and her plans are discussed in terms of battle strategy. However, it seems to me that to label the language of the narrator as mock-heroic is to undercut both the significance of Lucilla’s vision and the complexity of Oliphant’s text. Mock-heroic language uses aggrandizing terms to describe actually quite mundane events or people, and it is typically employed as a strategy whereby the narrator takes the reader into his or her confidence at the expense of the character. In short, a narrator employs a mock-heroic tone in order to make the point that a character such as Lucilla has undeservedly high opinions of herself. In effective mock-heroic mode, calling Lucilla a “General” would simultaneously describe her sense of her own importance and indicate to readers that we should understand that she is simply a small fish with big pretensions. Yet, given that Beeton seems thoroughly sincere in her declaration that a woman is “the Alpha and the Omega in the government of her establishment” and ought to be understood as comparable to “the commander of an army,” I would argue that it is important to think of Oliphant’s use of these terms with some nuance. Although identifying Lucilla as a great General or statesman must carry with it the irony that she can never *actually* be these things, the novel does not simply mock Lucilla’s ambitions through the use of militaristic metaphors and exaggerated descriptors like “great work” to describe drawing-room machinations. Rather, it uses them to demonstrate that the position Lucilla occupies as a respectable, middle-class, domestic woman makes a mockery of her talents, which deserve a far wider scope.

In this regard, perhaps the most interesting trope used for Lucilla is that of “Queen,” and analysis of its use helps illuminate the thorny issue of tone. Margaret Homans, in her investigation of the Victorian notion of the middle-class Queen, concludes that to be a “queen” means “someone whose public powers – whether direct or indirect – are subordinated to the exigencies of her domestic life” (83). Interestingly, Gail Houston argues that Queen Victoria in fact consolidated her power precisely by emphasizing her domestic life: by prolonging the image of herself as a grieving widow, she created her authority as a “powerful, matriarchal sovereign” (149). These alternate interpretations of the (lack of) power invoked by the image of a domestic Queen are central to an understanding of Lucilla’s position within the novel, given the Victorian preoccupation with figuring middle-class women as queens of their domestic realms (à la Ruskin’s famous “Of Queen’s Gardens”). Indeed, Houston’s sense of the power of Oliphant’s text derives from her claim that Oliphant is rewriting the queen Ruskin presented by focusing the reader’s attention on “the material conditions of women’s lives” rather than “on the spiritual power of women as metaphorical queens submissive to a priori masculine authority” (143).

It is undoubtedly tempting to concur that a woman like Oliphant might find a way to challenge Ruskin’s almost certain use of the term as a palliative intended to placate middle-class women denied opportunities at real, public action. However, the means of that challenge is worth exploring in some detail. Houston and Homans both interrogate how the novel ultimately undermines Lucilla’s power by labeling her a Queen of Carlingford.<sup>23</sup> Homans argues that the “mass production” of images of Queens – both of Victoria and of generic domestic middle-class queens – “diminish[es] the boldness of claims [of queenly power] for domestic women” (77). While Homans accurately demonstrates the emptiness of the trope Queen, due to its incessant repetition throughout the culture, I would go one step further to suggest that the term is purposefully employed in this case precisely as an empty trope. Homans argues that one cannot ultimately decide what to do with the irony in this text: “ambiguity makes the running joke of the novel, which makes it impossible to decide whether Lucilla really thinks only about trivia or whether she is cynically manipulating the language of female domestic values . . . to achieve her personal ambitions” (79). I would like to suggest that far from being mock-heroic (a term Homans employs), the novel demonstrates the irony of identifying women as domestic Queens but denying them any sphere of public or political action that would enable them to utilize the qualities that term supposedly implied. The novel ultimately insists that one *must* decide whether Lucilla is empty-headed and obsessed with trivia or is ambitious and critical of her lot. Moreover, understanding this trope to be deployed precisely because of its emptiness illuminates how the people of Carlingford can view Lucilla as “a Power,” while the reader simultaneously recognizes that Lucilla herself sees the relatively bankruptcy of the title Queen of Carlingford (394; ch. 42).

Carlingford takes Lucilla seriously from the moment of her first feminine, moral victory over Barbara Lake and Cavendish. As Lucilla adroitly manages “delicate matters of social politics,” she demonstrates the potential to be a great leader because she is able to discern the needs of her constituents (122; ch. 12). Thus, after nearly ten years of brilliant weekly Evenings, she comes to be uniformly considered a powerful social force and a respected social authority. Yet, she laments that gender restrictions limit her ability to do more with her life. Although generally lauded as “queen” of a “cosy empire of hospitality and kindness and talk and wit, and everything pleasant” by the people of Carlingford, Lucilla is only somewhat satisfied by the life this insipid descriptor suggests (425; ch. 45). Herself implicitly

critiquing the title “Queen,” Lucilla recognizes that the title has enabled her influence within the community, while at the same time she remains unsatisfied by its limitations:

To have the control of society in her hands was a great thing; but still the mere means, without any end, was not worth Lucilla’s while – and her Thursdays were almost a bore to her in her present stage of development. They occurred every week, to be sure, as usual; but the machinery was all perfect, and went on by itself, and it was not in the nature of things that such a light adjunct of existence should satisfy Lucilla. . . . when a woman has an active mind, and still does not care for parish work, it is a little hard for her to find a ‘sphere.’ . . . Lucilla had become conscious that her capabilities were greater than her work. She was a Power in Carlingford, and she knew it; but still there is little good in the existence of a Power unless it can be made use of for some worthy end . . . parish work was not much in her way, and for a woman who feels that she is a Power, there are so few other outlets. (394–95; ch. 42)

As Homans’s analysis of the trope might suggest, identifying her as a queen has established Lucilla as a “Power” at the same time that it has limited her to a “light adjunct of existence” by aligning her with every other middle-class queen and thereby circumscribing her within a domestic sphere. Although until this point, the novel has suggested that control of one’s own place is a means to the end of controlling society, the narrator seems to be arguing here that taking the next logical step is both important and difficult for women. The “control of society,” which has hitherto seemed to be Lucilla’s goal, has thus become a “mere means” that serves to highlight how limited her options actually are, given that – as a middle-class “queen” – she has no public scope available in which to use this control to a “worthy end.” What occurs to Lucilla, and what this passage comes to defend, is that she might move from social politics into national politics by using the influence of her drawing-room to help get a new Member of Parliament elected for Carlingford. Notably, although the narrator argues that a woman with an “active mind” might feel unduly limited by the bounds of femininity, she still invokes the idea of finding a “sphere” rather than of breaking out of one. Restricted as she feels, Lucilla is careful not to reject the comfortable place offered by her class position; instead, she stages her “battles” (to borrow the narrator’s militaristic descriptor of Lucilla’s efforts) on wall-to-wall carpet and under the brilliant candle-light of her well-appointed drawing-room. As this eminently respectable place sanctions her actions, she is able to take risks in her social leadership – ultimately resulting in her involvement in politics – that she never could were she not so comfortably settled amongst fine upholstery. Her subsequent actions thus suggest that Lucilla’s story is not mock-heroic and that she might move beyond the limiting position of drawing-room queen to consider national, domestic issues of governance.

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 (167). Lucilla demonstrates this power through acts that initially seem to mark her feminine *misunderstanding* of the political situation. She boils his campaign platform down to the simple slogan that he is “the man for Carlingford” and somewhat to his consternation convinces him to throw away his speech explaining his position on the key issues that frame the election. And in a series of conversations with the most influential men of the town, in which she claims to have understood them to promise that they will back Ashburton’s candidacy, she manages to gain Ashburton crucial support by insinuating that no gentleman would be so duplicitous as to go back on a promise he made in a lady’s drawing-room. Through her strategies, she succeeds in getting Ashburton elected despite the skepticism voiced by her father that she has created an awkward position for herself by not keeping to what he calls “your own place” (357; ch. 38). Adding that “young ladies should let these sort of things alone,” her father argues that Lucilla’s social influence should have limits, and that extending that influence to the realm of politics is an unfeminine step beyond the boundaries of her proper place

Apparently to appease this potentially critical view of her involvement in the election, Lucilla repeatedly responds with, “I am so sorry I don’t understand politics” when people try to engage her in speculating about the election (373; ch. 39). Yet as the narrator remarks, “What was really wanted, as Lucilla’s genius had seen at a glance, was not this or that opinion, but a good man” (377–78; ch. 40). That is, Lucilla’s sense of what Ashburton should use for an election statement is precisely what the town wants to hear. Lucilla, in fact, understands politics perfectly. Certainly, her own involvement in the social life of Carlingford has been characterized by the diplomacy and flawless judgment on the subject of public taste that characterizes a good politician – so it is not surprising that she has a clear sense of what the town will want from a candidate. Yet she does not seem to be ironic when she pleads with the men who insist on talking politics with her: “Please don’t make fun of me . . . as if anybody cared what *I* say about politics” (379; ch. 40). This statement, far from contradicting her actions throughout the novel, sadly speaks the truth. Despite Lucilla’s influence within the town, she is ultimately “only” a woman, whose voice on issues of politics matters not at all to the state. Her actions in fact match precisely Ruskin’s assessment, in “Of Queen’s Gardens,” of the difference between masculine and feminine power: “The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention . . . But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle, – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision” (90). Lucilla, as Homans notes, ultimately is relegated to a sphere of influence rather than of independent action (78).

While Homans argues that this limitation in part derives from the diminishing power of the moniker Queen, if one looks beyond the world of the novel, Lucilla’s abilities speak louder than this trope. That is, while her rhetoric locates her within the boundaries of feminine ideals by figuring her largely as an advisor rather than as an actor in this election, her actions and savvy suggest that far from limiting herself to “sweet ordering, arrangement and decision,” she really belongs in politics herself. In inviting us to see how politic Lucilla has always been, the narrator insinuates that there is something inherently wrong with a system that presumes that a drawing-room is the only appropriate place for a woman of Lucilla’s energy. The narrative reminds us again of what she might have done “if she had been the boy,” for, as the narrator observes, “She had come to an age at which she might have gone into Parliament herself had there been no disqualification of sex” (394; ch. 42). Certainly age

and sex are not the only requirements for going into Parliament, yet while Lucilla might deserve the chance to take over her father's medical practice or go into Parliament, Oliphant highlights the fact that Lucilla's options are limited by her gendered position: sex may not be the only requirement for public success, but it is the only one necessary to disqualify Lucilla. Moreover, this statement suggests that while the trope of middle-class queen relegates the question of women's power to a symbolic realm (since no middle-class woman could actually be queen), the vision of a middle-class woman making forays into positions currently held by middle-class men (doctor, M.P.) opens up more pressing questions. Just as Oliphant demonstrates that to be a domestic queen is simply to be a figurehead of an empire whose "machinery . . . went on by itself," her novel concomitantly suggests a more pointed critique. For while Lucilla partially redefines a woman's place, she can do so, Oliphant suggests, only within the already-familiar social terms of domesticity by creating a drawing-room in which she is highly active rather than merely decorative. In the explicit contrast between what Lucilla does and what she might do in other circumstances, readers are asked to critique the contradiction inherent in defining "power" as working carefully within boundaries set by others.

*"For a Woman Who is a Power, there are so Few other Outlets"*

LUCILLA'S CONTRADICTIONARY POSITION OFFERS a critique of the position of middle-class Victorian women generally; however, it also works as a commentary on the construction of fictional heroines and of their relationships to the female reading public. Moreover, in Lucilla's actions, we might see a reflection of at least one aspect of Oliphant's career: as a writer who was certainly "a Power," she nevertheless carefully located her work of this period within boundaries set by others in order to maintain her respectability.<sup>24</sup>

To understand the significance of this character in terms of Oliphant's own career it is helpful to consider Lucilla against heroines of the sensation fiction of the 1860s that Oliphant so famously despised. The three long review articles on contemporary popular fiction, published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, are the work of hers perhaps best known today, for scholarship on sensation fiction typically points to Oliphant's criticism of the genre as representative of the moral outrage voiced by many of her contemporaries.<sup>25</sup> However, when one examines these essays in conjunction with the fiction she was publishing at the same time – the early novels in *The Chronicles of Carlingford*, which includes *Miss Marjoribanks* – the essays are less obviously straightforward statements of a conservative position on the moral obligations of authors and the dangers of reading. Read as Oliphant's principles for creating a literary heroine, these essays suggest a fascinating relationship between the content of Oliphant's mid-career fiction and her sense of the difficult cultural position occupied by the female novelist.

Oliphant's fiction has recently received greater attention in defense of her need to work within the "wholesome" format of the three-volume domestic novel, on the grounds that her financial situation demanded that she write what would be marketable. Yet this argument oversimplifies Oliphant's long and complex career and sidesteps the question of why, with a career lasting from the early 1850s until her death in 1893, Oliphant would refuse to produce sensation fiction, given its highly lucrative popularity in the 1860s. Given her status as sole provider for her growing family, the Oliphant of *Miss Marjoribanks* suggests a writer conscious of the fact that the position she took on social issues in her essays or her



fiction might affect her marketability.<sup>26</sup> Her reviews imply that she was intent on maintaining hers as the career of a respectable author, for Oliphant identified the primary problem with sensation fiction as its “imperfect and confused morality”; however, it is important to note that she explicitly linked the dubious morality of the genre with its preoccupation with “those personages, male and female, with whom you would certainly permit yourself or your family to associate only in print” (*Blackwood's* 1863, 170). For Oliphant, then, the central problem with such novels lay in their characters, specifically, in the fact that the female protagonists of sensation fiction typically present to the world of the novel an exterior that seems thoroughly middle-class, while in fact acting in ways that defy social expectations, custom, and even the law. Unfit to associate with respectable readers, these heroines – whose outward appearance seems to fulfill all the culture's ideals of femininity – shocked other reviewers besides Oliphant by exploiting feminine stereotypes to satisfy their own desires. The central character of M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, perhaps the most infamous of sensation fiction's women, is physically small, delicate, and ladylike in every “public” moment, yet she is extremely cunning and acts only with regard to consequences for herself. She threatens the cultural commonplace that femininity was innate rather than learned by using her apparently fragile feminine exterior to mask “unfeminine” actions (which range from covert indelicacy to criminal acts). Although each of Oliphant's reviews has a slightly different focus, the recurring criticism through them all is that sensation novels like *Lady Audley's Secret* present the reader with heroines who are supposed to be believable but who are sadly nothing “like the honest English girls we know” (*Blackwood's* 1867, 277). In all three essays, Oliphant devotes the most space to discussing the discord produced when readers are asked to take as realistic behaviors that are highly implausible, morally reprehensible, and often illegal.

Although she deplores the fact that “the honest English girls we know” would shun the lapsed morality evidenced by heroines like Lucy Audley, it is striking that Oliphant does not attack sensation novelists for their choice to present a highly critical picture of the domestic lot of women; rather, she simply takes them to task for the lack of realism in their portrayals. Her 1867 article opens with the observation that there has been a change since English novels first gained a reputation for “wholesomeness.” She writes:

The change perhaps began at the time when Jane Eyre made what advanced critics call her ‘protest’ against the conventionalities in which the world clothes itself. We have had many ‘protests’ since that time, but it is to be doubted how far they have been to our advantage. The point to which we have now arrived is certainly very far from satisfactory. (258)

This statement raises but refuses to answer the question of whether the act of protest itself is a problem, choosing instead to focus on the “far from satisfactory” results of this type of protest. One might easily conclude that Oliphant would in fact support a protest that was more “to our advantage” in achieving changes in those restrictive “conventionalities.” And given her portrayals of strong, independent, unconventional heroines in many of her novels, this sense of an alternative kind of protest—one perhaps less flashy and thus potentially more successful – is not far-fetched. It is no coincidence that Oliphant's own novels were praised for the “wholesomeness” she identifies as the mark of English fiction, for she clearly expresses in her essays that fiction plays a valuable role in providing wholesome examples of lives well-lived.

Yet, her fictional portrayals of women are complex and sometimes – as in the case of Lucilla Marjoribanks – ambivalent. Her work can oscillate between valuing women’s domestic labor and critiquing the fact that, for many, domesticity represented the limit of a woman’s existence. The Oliphant of these reviews seems neither ultra-conservative nor particularly subversive; rather, she is practical. She expresses the need to talk openly about the conditions of real women, but feels that cloaking such “protests” in the trappings in sensation fiction is doing a disservice to the representation of “the problems of human life” (*Blackwood’s* 1863, 183). By creating heroines who were “unnatural” and situations that were impossibly contrived, coincidental, or melodramatic, authors of sensation fiction, she implies, make it seem that only exceptional women face difficulties – or, more disturbing, that only “unnatural” acts like bigamy and murder can alter the situation of an unhappy woman.

Rather than “young women, moved either by the wild foolhardiness of inexperience, or by ignorance of everything that is natural and becoming to their condition,” Oliphant calls for more realistic portrayals of women (*Blackwood’s* 1867, 258). Significantly, this realism for her does not necessarily include capitulation to the ideals of femininity commonly supported by Victorian notions of the Angel in the House. Oliphant may at points claim that the most important duty of woman “is the duty of being pure,” but she goes on to say outright that “women are neither so passive nor so grateful as they are made out to be” (*Blackwood’s* 1867, 275–6). Elsewhere, she proclaims that, “A woman is in reality a creature not a whit more holy and sacred than a man, though lingering chivalry has instituted, in theory at least, a different creed” (*Blackwood’s* 1863, 173). At these and other points, including the passage above in which she seems at least tacitly to be supporting the idea of a “‘protest’ against the conventionalities in which the world clothes itself,” Oliphant suggests to her readers that she is not in favor of the insipid and unquestioning heroine. Nor does she seem to support the restrictive ideals of femininity commonly described as Victorian propriety, resisting as she does the “lingering chivalry” that creates women as “passive” and “grateful” to be dependent upon men. Yet to voice a truly “satisfactory” protest against these conventions, she suggests that an alternative heroine must be one to whom women will be able to relate. The sensation heroine does not fit that bill because, she writes, “for our own part we do not believe, as some people do, that a stratum of secret vice underlines the outward seeming of society” (*Blackwood’s* 1867, 259–60). Given that real women are unlikely to turn to the common sensation fiction devices of bigamy, murder, arson, or the adoption of a fake identity as a solution to their domestic problems, Oliphant’s argument of the 1860s is that novelists ought to create heroines who face real challenges with realistic attempts to overcome them.<sup>27</sup> Lucilla Marjoribanks, even in her dissatisfaction with her lot, is just such a heroine.

Precisely opposite to Lucy Audley in appearance, Lucilla’s candor, her boldness, and her sheer physical size are far from an idealized representation of femininity. Yet, everything Lucilla does is morally sanctioned by those around her, and even her brightest moments of personal triumph contain an element of attention to the greater good. Perhaps like the middle-class readers to whom she would appeal, Lucilla begins with all the advantages of a comfortable home and the social rank established by her father’s position as a highly respected doctor – a situation that at first would seem to have nothing challenging about it. Yet the novel ultimately demonstrates that it takes far more than the building blocks her family and class position offer for the active and intelligent Lucilla to feel satisfied with a life restricted by the proprieties of middle-class womanhood. She makes a relative success of her life through her ability to take the material comforts provided by her middle-class position

and use them to expand the boundaries of her place, thereby suggesting to readers how the limits of feminine propriety may be more flexible than they at first appear. As an alternative to sensation fiction heroines, then, Lucilla is a brilliant example, for she concurs with their premise that the presumably ideal existence of the middle-class woman may be fraught with frustrations while simultaneously suggesting that there are less dramatic antidotes that might at least partially satisfy real women.

As we have seen, it is precisely because Lucilla has limited her world to the accepted feminine space of the drawing-room that she can assert the expansive nature of the boundaries of femininity without suggesting that she has forgotten the proper ideological place of women. However, her notion of giving in to the prejudices of society also qualifies how far she can go in creating opportunities for herself. One might argue that the marriage which seems such a recontainment of Lucilla at the end of the novel is in fact her best effort at creating some “worthy end” out of her social power, for she commits herself to moving out of Carlingford and into the town of Marchbank, which she claims requires reform on a scale beyond that of simply creating a social life. As the “first lady” of the town, she will stand in a position to undertake charity work and social reforms that will have tangible lifestyle benefits for the working population there. Through her marriage to a wealthy and indulgent husband, who is perfectly happy to let Lucilla be the brains of the pair, she may indeed accomplish ends like those a government officer might effect through legislative reform. Lucilla’s success implies that through a combination of class position, feminine sympathy, and social action, meaningful ends may be reached. Nevertheless, that power is qualified by the fact that her father’s death (apparently of shock over the crash of his investments) strips her of her fortune and necessitates that she marry in order to continue having any social influence. Although the marriage does not recontain her potential to challenge the boundaries of femininity, it does demonstrate that realistically her realm for active influence is limited by her gender. Although she does not exactly “drop down into worsted work and tea parties,” she does not have the opportunity to realize the great potential she might reach if she were allowed to run for public office herself.

Oliphant’s own career might be understood in similarly ambivalent terms, at once powerfully challenging stereotypes of femininity and forced to work within them. In writing “wholesome” three-volume novels, Oliphant clothed herself in the respectability of the genre just as Lucilla did with her drawing-room. Within that context, Oliphant’s heroines were far less shocking in their methods than those of sensation fiction, yet they in fact shared some similar motives. Although both sets of heroines chafe under the restrictive conventions of their gendered positions, characters like Lucilla implicitly provide a contrast to the sensation heroines’ largely-failed efforts to get beyond those conventions. If Lucy Audley’s ultimate confinement in a madhouse suggests that there is no appropriate cultural place for an entirely self-interested woman, then Lucilla Marjoribanks offers an alternative kind of self-interest based on combining personal desires with working on behalf of one’s community. Yet while Oliphant peoples her novels with characters who may reflect or model realistic behavior for readers, her heroines reveal that “for a woman who considers herself a Power, there are so few other outlets” beyond working for the social good. Given the many ways that readers historically have understood Oliphant to be highly conservative in her opinions on women’s positions (and have condemned her for that conservatism), and given the fact that paying detailed attention to both her fiction and her non-fiction prose suggests her own dissatisfaction with the cultural position of Victorian women, it seems clear Oliphant’s career

exemplifies the problems of “giving in to social prejudice.” As a highly-respected journalist, reviewer, and novel author, the widowed Margaret Oliphant was able to support a large family solely on her own income, largely because she appeared more to support than to condemn the status quo. Yet this career critiques the same paradox Lucilla faces: while one might gain some measure of influence by exploiting the “Power” of one’s sanctioned cultural position, ultimately, Oliphant’s world, like Lucilla’s had “no sphere” to fully accommodate an intellectual and energetic woman.

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### NOTES

1. For detailed discussion of the ways in which Oliphant’s strong heroines challenge Victorian gender stereotypes, see Peterson, Rubik, and Terry. Homans and Houston complicate this reading of Oliphant as subversive by investigating the novel’s use of the problematic moniker “Queen” to describe its heroine.
2. See the introductions and biographic chapters of Rubik, Terry, Trela, and Williams on the Victorian perception of Oliphant as a respectable and “wholesome” writer.
3. Even despite recent efforts to reread Oliphant, scholarship continues to take Oliphant at her own word, assuming that because she lamented the pace at which she had to write, her readers must conclude that to be prolific is inevitably to produce inferior work. “As many scholars have noted,” Houston writes in her examination of the relationship between Queen Victoria and a number of different Victorian writers, “the downside of having to view her profession as a ‘trade’ was that Oliphant gave up the possibility of literary greatness” (140).
4. The most notable and damaging of these assessments was leveled in the 1966 study *The Equivocal Virtue* by Vineta and Robert A. Colby, whose book was the seminal work on Oliphant for decades.
5. The most cited of these are “The Laws Concerning Women” (1856) and “The Condition of Women” (1858), although there were other places in print where Oliphant similarly resisted the notion of votes for women. Heilmann offers an excellent analysis of Oliphant’s position in these early essays, taking into account her personal as well as professional position in the 1850s, and putting these into a much larger context of Oliphant’s increasingly overt expressions of women’s problematic legal (non)entity throughout her career, which lasted into the 1890s.
6. See also Rubik, Schaub, Terry, Trela, and Williams for discussion of how the novel offers a protest cloaked in conventionality.
7. The morning after her arrival home, Lucilla enlists her father’s brilliant but set-in-her-ways cook Nancy as an ally by announcing, “I want to tell you my object in life. It is to be a comfort to papa” (51; ch. 4). She repeats this phrasing, that “the object of my life is to be a comfort to poor papa” once more in the same conversation, and again at every available opportunity as she is reacquainting herself with the people of Carlingford (52; ch. 4). The construction changes slightly, depending on whom she encounters, so that sometimes she says her “grand object in life is to be a comfort to poor papa” (56; ch. 5) or that “the great aim of my life is to be a comfort to dear papa” (61; ch. 5), always varying the adjectives according to her assessment of the listener. The net result is that soon everyone in town is repeating to each other that Lucilla’s object in life is to comfort her father – they become convinced that she intends to proceed with propriety and a clear sense of her feminine place. Lucilla’s strategy thus paves the way for her more unusual projects by defining the boundary within which she will operate throughout the novel.
8. Numerous Victorian conduct manuals, dating from those by Sarah Stickney Ellis in the late 1830s, enumerate the ideal of the modest, dependent woman. In addition to Ellis’s books, see, for example,

*The English Maiden* (1842), *Home Truths for Home Peace* (1851), *The Lady's Own Book* (1859), and *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony* (1865). Housekeeping guides such as *The Book of Household Management* by Isabella Beeton or *Cassell's Household Guide* offer a more active vision of a woman's place but are no less committed to ideals of feminine modesty and virtue.

9. Cohen is apparently willing to write off Lucilla's subversive potential solely due to this marriage, although she uses this as the occasion for interesting analysis of the implications of this (unsatisfying) ending for an understanding of Oliphant's career. Langland offers an extended discussion of Lucilla's subversion and containment; this point is mentioned in passing in Rubik and Trela. Schaub's article provides a useful summary of the different ways this rubric has been used to explain Lucilla's behavior. Although not explicitly focusing on the question of subversion and containment, Homans argues that Lucilla bears a title ("Queen of Carlingford") that highlights her containment within a domestic sphere rather than her power because it associates her with Queen Victoria who was, during this period of mourning the recent death of her husband, carefully demonstrating to the nation that she was at heart a domestic woman.
10. Harris's analysis focuses on the lives of two real women, Annie Adams Fields and Mary Gladstone. Conceptualizing the role of the hostess as a function of literacy (cultural literacy as well as being thoroughly well-read in literature and history), Harris focuses primarily on the ability of these hostesses to create themselves on paper (in letters and diaries) and subsequently to shape influential discussions on literature, politics, and social reform due to their cultural positions as hostesses in the homes of powerful men. Focusing on women years younger than Oliphant, Harris claims that Fields and Gladstone demonstrate how hostesses had "the power and money to participate in institution-building as much as gender restrictions would allow" (8). Examining Oliphant's ideas of a generation earlier, we find a precursor to the more overt actions of Fields and Gladstone.
11. Perusal of dozens of architectural treatises, as well as floor plans and sketches in the Royal Institute of British Architects, makes obvious that this arrangement was commonplace. Few novels specify this location explicitly, presumably because there was no need to; however, this explains why gentlemen in novels typically escort ladies "down" to dinner rather than "in" to dinner, since the dining room would be on the floor below the drawing room in a town house. See Brown (204); Kerr (458–60); "How to Build a House, pt.1 . . ." (760) for details of the drawing-room in a town house. Country houses typically contained all rooms except bedrooms on the ground floor, since larger parcels of land enabled houses to be more spread out. This essay confines itself to houses in towns/cities, however, in large part because country houses were the exclusive province of the very wealthy.
12. Logan provides a brief but thorough discussion of the motivations for this segregation of domestic spaces and the role and cultural meaning of the drawing-room in this context in the first chapter of *The Victorian Parlour*; see especially 26–27.
13. See Mitchell's *Daily Life in Victorian England* for a summary of the formalities of calling procedures. Walsh's 1857 *Manual of Domestic Economy* contains a chapter on the "Social Duties of the Heads of Families," with a long section explaining the proper timing, duration, dress for, and other details of calling etiquette. The finer points of this etiquette changed, as do all fashions, and are explained in guides such as *The Lady's Own Book* (1859) and *Etiquette, Politeness, and Good Breeding* (1870).
14. It is worth noting, too, that the photographs that are often the source of our conception of the Victorian drawing-room as a highly cluttered space may be somewhat deceptive. People frequently crowded all of their belongings into one end of a room for a photograph, so that the picture would show everything in the room, thereby inadvertently creating a much more cluttered impression (Docent, tour of Linley Sambourne House, Kensington, London, July 1998).
15. See chapters 2 and 3 of Logan's *The Victorian Parlour* for detailed discussion of the process of fitting out drawing-rooms. She explains how fashions evolved over the early decades of the nineteenth century, prior to which drawing-rooms were more formal places with furniture ranged around the perimeter of the room rather than in more relaxed, conversational groupings.

16. Beeton's *The Book of Household Management*, for example, explains the expected attributes of formal parties in enough detail to clarify that they are too formal and complex to manage on a weekly basis (14–17).
17. Although Lucilla carefully manages the interactions of her guests, she is not in complete control over who arrives on any given evening. This is in marked contrast to the careful planning of guest lists that Harris notes was a hallmark of the hostessing endeavors of Fields and Gladstone and suggests another way in which Lucilla is far less exclusive than the women Harris examines. Lucilla notes on more than one occasion, for example, that it is important to have “a little bit of everything in society” (165, ch. 17) a guiding principle that would likely have horrified the more exclusive Fields and Gladstone, who apparently confined their interactions with those “below” them in class to charity events.
18. Conduct manuals and housekeeping guides offer women quantities of advice on how to decorate a drawing-room economically and tastefully. *Cassell's Household Guide*, for example, not only suggests appropriate furniture, but gives women options for how to rejuvenate second-hand pieces to make them fresh and attractive. Novels make similar assumptions of a woman's right to redecorate this room to her taste. In Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, widowed Mr. Gibson has a friend help him allocate the L.100 he has set aside to re-do the house for the arrival of his second wife, but he explicitly notes that the drawing-room redecorating will be his wife's prerogative and that he has “a little spare money for that room for her to lay out” (150; ch. 12).
19. Logan's book offers a detailed analysis of how such decorative processes were seen to confirm a woman's position as a competent household manager.
20. See Brown, Ellis, Kerr, and Wheeler on these principles.
21. Logan's “Decorating Domestic Space: Middle-Class Women and Victorian Interiors” focuses more specifically on issues of sexuality than on gender relations, though her frameworks are useful. Langland's *Nobody's Angels* similarly offers a reassessment of women's roles as placing them in positions of cultural power, although she focuses on the sanctioned power of middle-class women who were responsible for the moral upkeep of men and managed a significant part of the social interactions integral to the perpetuation of the middle-class ideology.
22. Cohen, Homans, and Schaub are among the most recent to use this term to describe the novel; however, it occurs with great frequency throughout the body of scholarship on *Miss Marjoribanks*. Cohen offers a nuanced discussion of the ironic elements of the novel, though, that helps complicate the idea of “mock-heroic” by considering the novel a “case stud[y] of the relationship between genre construction and cultural moment” (102).
23. Houston argues more specifically that Oliphant succeeds at critiquing the notion of queenliness by offering the figure of the artist as an alternative avenue to feminine power. I find this a not-fully-convincing claim, for she puts forth a minor character (Rose Lake) as the novel's model of positive femininity at the expense of extended analysis of Lucilla.
24. Heilmann's examination of the changes in Oliphant's politics over her long career suggest that her depictions of heroines in the 1860s may not represent all of her heroines in all of her novels.
25. The three essays are: “Sensation Novels,” May 1862, 564–84; “Novels,” August 1863, 168–83; and “Novels,” September 1867, 257–80.
26. Widowed in 1859, with two young children and a third on the way, Oliphant was the sole provider for her children for most of their lives. In 1868, two of her brother's children also came to live with her. In 1870, her brother, with three more children, became part of the extended family that Oliphant's income supported. Cohen offers brief consideration of Oliphant's choices, including the complexity of her tone, particularly in light of her career position.
27. Recent scholarship on sensation fiction focuses heavily on the issue of how these novels critique the social and domestic positions of women. For discussion of the role of sentiment in these critiques and of why these novels appealed to women readers, see Cvetkovich's *Mixed Feelings*. For a range of approaches to Braddon's novels, see *Beyond Sensation: Mary Elizabeth Braddon in Context*, edited by Tromp, Gilbert, and Haynie.

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