

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 17.1 (Spring 2021)

Sanders, Valerie. [*Margaret Oliphant*](#). Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2020. 213 pp.

Reviewed by Katie Baker, Independent.

<1>*Margaret Oliphant* is the latest edition in the Key Popular Women Writers series. In this thorough reappraisal of Oliphant's writing, Sanders locates Oliphant as "simultaneously insider and outsider" (2), and as a critical voice in a changing age. Re-evaluating Oliphant's somewhat erroneous reputation as a critic of women's issues and rights, Sanders focusses her attention on Oliphant's changing attitudes to domesticity, marriage, and gender throughout the nineteenth century, exploring how these shifts were defined and represented through Oliphant's many novels, short stories, and articles. Through comprehensive research and engagement with key texts, *Margaret Oliphant* provides an insightful and valuable contribution to our consideration of Oliphant's writing and place as a useful, important nineteenth-century woman writer.

<2>Separated into five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, the book considers key themes within Oliphant's novels and short stories. Chapter One explores Oliphant's self-imposed reputation as a "General Utility Woman", which Sanders suggests provided her with a unique opportunity to act as a "critic of her society, especially in response to the treatment of women both in fiction and in the social context in which she passed her life" (30). Opening with Oliphant's relationship with Blackwood's publishing house, Sanders explores Solveig Robinson's suggestion that Oliphant's voice changed and developed throughout the nineteenth century, taking decades to form (Robinson, 2005: 199). According to Sanders, this authorial voice took shape as Oliphant shifted her perspective on women's societal roles, especially in relation to 'rights of women' causes. Particularly interesting is Sanders' suggestion that Oliphant preferred to consider and explore real-life examples of women's lives, rather than theoretical arguments and debates—something that an increasing use of pseudonyms enabled her to freely enjoy.

<3>Chapter Two provides a close analysis of Oliphant's representation of women, offering suggestions as to why she was so often considered as unsympathetic to the 'burgeoning feminism' (59) taking shape around her. While Sanders suggests that Oliphant sometimes frustrates with her inability to provide active solutions for the societal constraints in which her competent female characters find themselves, she explains this by engaging with Oliphant's practical take on how women could use the domestic space to their advantage. This 'anti-theoretical, realistic, and intensely practical' (62) view is, according to Sanders, Oliphant's version of the younger generation's feminism. It is evidenced through her subtle acknowledgment of physical and marital incompatibility, and particularly through the clear representation of women who regularly outperform men but are denied the same intellectual outlets. The chapter gives special focus to the figure of the widow, and her disquieting and

unclear role as a sexually alluring, experienced woman. With studies of widows in *A Country Gentleman*, "Mrs Clifford's Marriage", "A Widow's Tale", and *Salem Chapel*, Sanders explores how Oliphant fashioned the widow as an ambiguous challenge to the norm, a woman whose identity was no longer entwined with a husband, and who, as a result adopted an unusual societal position. The chapter also begins Sanders' exploration of women and marriage in Oliphant's work. Though many of her novels and short stories consider marriage as an advantageous state for young women, Sanders provides examples where Oliphant allows her characters the choice of whether or not to marry and have children. With examples from *Hester* and *Kirsteen*, Sanders explores how Oliphant opens up the debate for women who choose, even when choice brings its own challenges, signalling Oliphant's shift into the arena of women's role and right to decide their own life trajectory.

<4>Chapter Three turns its attention to Oliphant's representation of clothes and bodies. Sanders engages with body theorists including Galia Ofek (2009), David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (2015), Fredric Jameson (2013), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2005), to explore the ways in which Oliphant finds value in the physicality of the body and its adornment in clothing. Especially interesting in this chapter is Sander's exploration of how characters' values and key features are represented through their physical appearance and choice of clothing. Non-verbal, physical signs such as hand-wringing and hand-holding are, argues Sanders, crucial to how Oliphant's characters represent their feelings, particularly those of an overtly emotional and even sexual nature. Sanders also explores Oliphant's use of physical tropes, including largeness (to suggest coarseness and over-indulgence, a regularly occurring theme in *Miss Marjoribanks*), and disability. Her representation of the latter, is, according to Sanders, more progressive compared to her contemporaries, not least because Oliphant's disabled female characters, such as Adelaide Tufton in *Salem Chapel*, are actively engaged in their community, despite their physical condition. Along with bodily representations, Sanders also considers the importance of dress as a symbol of identity. Engaging with theorists including Patricia Zakreski, Sanders analyses how Oliphant considered the importance of dress, including the plight of the seamstress, and how clothing in Oliphant's novels acts as a 'significant cultural narrative of women's attempts to assert their individuality and ambition (113).

<5>In Chapter Four, Sanders turns her attention to Oliphant's male characters and her representation of masculinity. Interestingly, she argues that Oliphant's men were frequently 'undermined by cultural change' (124) and not wholly centred on a 'social construct [of] virility.' The chapter considers Oliphant's personal relationship with her sons, especially focussing on her journalism at the end of the century, which frequently posits the benefits of pushing idle, young men into meaningful, and physical work. Oliphant's sense of dismay and disappointment at her son's lack of application is explored. Sanders reinforces this by considering the sons of Oliphant's contemporaries, including Dickens, Browning, and Mrs Humphrey Ward, all of whom were disappointed by their progeny's lack of application. Sanders dedicates a significant part of the chapter to critical approaches to masculinities, especially focussing on those of Judith Butler and Herbert Sussman. The chapter is divided into sections which consider different versions of masculinity in Oliphant's novels and short stories, including, 'Fathers, Sons, Brothers, Husbands' and 'Country Gentlemen.' One especially insightful section explores the role of clergymen in the Carlingford novels of the 1860s, *Salem Chapel*, and *The Perpetual Curate*, focussing on how, in

these texts, clergymen are held as accountable for their actions as are young women, with the idea of their personal 'respectability' equally as scrutinised.

<6>The final chapter deals with Oliphant's engagement with the sensational and the supernatural. Sanders suggests that loss in Oliphant's writing heightens her readers' awareness of the disenfranchised and overlooked, enforcing a sense of antagonism between the living and the dead. Giving special consideration to the stories of *A Beleaguered City* (1879), Sanders discusses the domestic themes of Oliphant's most successful ghostly stories, and their preoccupation with parts of the home, including windows, doors, and chambers. Themes such as interchangeability, warnings, female sexuality, and even female choice are, according to Sanders, central and important to Oliphant's supernatural tales.

<7>Overall, Sanders offers a focussed, interesting, and original exploration of an oft-overlooked, yet important nineteenth-century woman writer. Her study is useful for dedicated Oliphant scholars, and those new to her writing, alike.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2006.

Hillman, David, and Maude, Ulrika (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*. Cambridge Uni. Press, 2015.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies of Realism*. Verso. 2013.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. 2005.

Ofek, Galia. *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Ashgate Publishing, 2009.

Robinson, Solveig C. "'Expanding a 'Limited Orbit': Margaret Oliphant, Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, and the Development of a Critical Voice." *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2005, pp. 199-220.

Sussman, Herbert. *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*. Cambridge Uni. Press, 1995.

Zakreski, Patricia. "Fashioning the Domestic Novel: Rewriting Narrative Patterns in Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe, Junior and Dress*." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016.