

**“Honour! that’s for men”:  
Satirizing Gender and Genre Confines in Margaret Oliphant’s *Phoebe, Junior***

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<1> In *Phoebe, Junior: A Last Chronicle of Carlingford* (1876), Margaret Oliphant satirises conventions of the mid-Victorian sensation novel in order to produce a heroine who breaks through gender confines by asserting women’s right to “honour.” Linking together the novel’s parallel plots—and parallel dissection of different social and gender issues—Phoebe Beechum does so simultaneously in an increasingly speculative society that is being reshaped by modern finance capitalism and in a marriage market that is necessarily affected by a changing economy. She becomes involved in crime by covering up a forgery, but there is nothing sensational about the way her actions are described. Instead of being scripted as a sensational villainess, Phoebe claims a personal sense of honour that at once includes and transcends what the businessmen she confronts term “commercial honour” (347). Her adapted “moral sense” (372) may put personal friendship above social conventions and rather dubious business ethics, but Oliphant is also careful to make sure that this choice cannot be dismissed as the result of a young woman’s ignorance. On the contrary, she depicts Phoebe’s actions as not “womanly” but done with “masculine” understanding. Well-versed in political economy, aware of economic shifts that are reshaping even provincial society, Phoebe clearly does not act innocently. That she understands the modern debt-credit system better than some of the men around her do adds another level of irony to the novel’s satirical depiction of social, gender-bound, and also readerly expectations of how a young woman should react to financial pressures and the different moral concerns they generate.

<2> This is further complicated when Phoebe’s able management of the changing economy’s undeniable impact on everyday domestic life facilitates her self-styled “career” through marriage. She somewhat facetiously terms it a “romance” that takes “an unusual form” (300). Phoebe exchanges her “brains” in a matrimonial speculation that promises vicarious entry into parliament through her union with a millionaire’s slow-witted son. His father’s allegations that she is simply mercenary, interested in a good match to guarantee her leisure, spell out a modern young woman’s struggles to be taken seriously in negotiations at different markets. The resulting discussion of honour in both economic and marital terms connects the novel’s parallel plots. Its satire of economic and social pressures, in fact, follows a two-pronged trajectory that, through this explicit connection, calls into question popular conceptions of domesticity as a shelter from the marketplace. At the same time, it plays with readerly expectations of sensational financial fiction and its transgressive anti-heroines. Before analysing *Phoebe, Junior* as an illustrative case

study of a domestic novelist's critical engagement with genre requirements—and its potential for their satire—at the Victorian literary marketplace, I shall therefore first briefly discuss sensation fiction's ready appropriation of and consequently common association with financial crises.

### **Beyond the Sensational Economy**

<3> It is hardly surprising that 1860s sensation fiction made the most of the narrative potential of sudden stock-market crashes and large-scale bank failures. Not only did the genre itself demand spectacular disasters and detail their effects on everyday life. Financial crashes of the time fuelled the attractiveness and need for financial plots that could articulate cultural anxieties. The cataclysmic collapse of the discount house Overend, Gurney, and Co in 1866 is only one of the best known examples. It was an unexpected panic, precipitated by longstanding ill-management. Walter Bagehot diagnosed it as “the model instance of all evil in business” (273). It quickly became shorthand for the ways in which a financial crash could upset Victorian families across social strata. “Out in the Streets,” a Christmas story by the popular sensation novelist Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood, published in her family magazine, the *Argosy*, in 1870, details the shock of the crash's impact on the middle-class home: “‘They say that Overend and Gurneys have gone. All to smash.’ Just at the first moment, Mrs Seaton did not perceive what the ‘going’ of Overend and Gurneys had to do with her or Miss Barle. ‘Dear me!’ she said. ‘Well?’ ‘Child, don’t you understand? It will be next door to a national ruin. Some banks closed yesterday; others close today’” (498). Although recurring speculation manias and crashes had become common ever since the seventeenth century, nineteenth-century panics were characterised by their widespread repercussions throughout society, and their fictional representation reflected this.(1) The new pervasiveness was met with a corresponding rise both in financial publications such as economic treatises or finance journalism and in popular fiction. As Mary Poovey has stressed, these two modes of writing about finance diverge from an initially parallel development (*Genres* 2). Fiction dealing with financial pressures became conceived as an alternative to economy theory.

<4> As fiction writers registered changes in social, economic, and literary landscapes, they critically reacted in particular to the excision of moral or sentimental concerns in economic discourse. Increasingly, they sought to provide alternatives: not necessarily large-scale reforms, but moral choices for the individual caught up in financial markets and their recurrent crises. The resulting narratives did more than just mirror the effects of specific fiscal or social developments. Cultural historians of Victorian economics as well as literary critics have now begun to pay more attention to “the moral dynamics that governed fictional approaches to the realm of corporate and government finance” (Finn 63).(2) Within the current boom in an economic criticism that goes beyond merely “productionist” or “contextualist” approaches,(3) the term “moral economy”—borrowed from earlier historical work on economic developments—has been invested with new significance. In a 1971 article, E.P. Thompson influentially described the “traditional, paternalist social system based on complex social relationships of trust, deference, and obligation” that was still in place at the beginning of the eighteenth century as a “moral economy.” In the course of the century, it was displaced by a more impersonal credit economy “disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives” (Thompson 90). As Mary Lenard has more recently stressed, what is of most importance to take into account here is “the *perception* of the moral economy's breakdown” (71).

No matter how extensive, sudden, or clear-cut this development really was, it urgently called for a critical reappraisal of a deliberate disassociation between the moral and the economic.

<5> Far from merely reflecting discourses, Victorian novelists suggested alternatives by, in turn, sharply separating literature from economic thinking. Poovey speaks of a “process of generic differentiation” in economic and literary writing (*Genres* 2). The process of creative interchange in literary genre formation, however, was more complex than this growing divergence might at first sight imply. Whereas sentimental or social-problems fiction developed a counter-discourse that worked through “the hearts and feelings of their readers, exploiting the ‘feminine’ cultural value of feeling” (Lenard 69), sensation novels created attractive, central villains as well as victims of financial speculation. As Colin Nicholson has pointed out in his study of *Writing & the Rise of Finance* in eighteenth-century culture, the growing prevalence of financial scoundrels in fiction reflected “the emergence of new types of personality, unprecedentedly dangerous and unstable” in a replacement of the “traditionally valorised landed gentleman” (7-8). At first, these remained minor characters, which in itself served to convey the system’s impersonal nature. In Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1857) Mr. Merdle’s death brilliantly embodies a self-destructive economy, yet Merdle is hardly an important protagonist in the novel. Nor is he really conceived as more than a symptom of speculative society. By contrast, the mid-Victorian sensation genre makes stock-market villains central protagonists. They star in such suggestively titled novels as Charles Reade’s *Hard Cash* (1863), Charlotte Riddell’s *The Race for Wealth* (1866), or Mary Braddon’s *Birds of Prey* (1867). The latter creates a doubly condemned murderous dentist-cum-stockbroker who finds his due deserts only in the sequel, *Charlotte’s Inheritance* (1868). Such villains may ultimately meet with an appropriate punishment (if only in a sequel), but they retain their appeal as clever criminals.(4)

<6> By the end of “the sensational sixties” financial plots had firmly become associated with sensational writing. Literary scholars specializing in the genre have commented on its interest in financial misdemeanours, although in most cases it also symptomatically presents an entry point into more violent crimes. In her seminal study of Victorian sensation fiction, Tamar Heller mentions the centrality of different kinds of fraud and especially the symbolic use of forgery in Wilkie Collins’s early sensation novels (*Dead Secrets* 75). Rebecca Stern has even argued that “[a]s a rule, sensational plots *are* plots of domestic fraud: their thrills depend on incursions into private space and personal relationships” (42).(5) But when domestic women writers took up this newly prominent narrative potential without sharing the fascination with crime itself that informed sensation fiction, they made its re-plotting a catalyst for divergent developments at the book market. Financial crime expectedly had a devastating impact on the home. But economic crises could also externalise, or metonymically represent, personal difficulties, family crises, and breakdowns of household arrangements that paralleled the collapse of commercial houses. Oliphant created heroines who do not just manage at home, but who manage the household as a demanding economy. As a self-consciously anti-sensational domestic novelist, however, she centrally engaged with the problems of depicting such managing women without rendering them sensational villainesses. The last in her series of “Carlingford chronicles,” *Phoebe, Junior* presents a particularly revealing example of domestic fiction’s appropriation of sensational strategies.(6) The heroine asserts a superior sense of honour, wrenched away from businessmen who consider its very definition their exclusive property. As the novel thereby lets her commit

“unwomanly” actions without sensationalizing them, it simultaneously satirizes social, gender, and readerly expectations.

### “[O]nly her romance took an unusual form”: Phoebe’s Career

<7> The main plot of *Phoebe, Junior* pivots on financial crime, but refuses to sensationalize it according to prevalent readerly expectations. Instead, it satirizes genre and gender conventions both by implicating a young woman in financial fraud and by showing how “female” ways of dealing with problems (financial, familial, or social) offer practical alternatives that newly beg the question of a “commercial honour” that the men in the novel seek to monopolise. The partly parodic appropriation of sensational paradigms thereby crystallises the novel’s play with readerly expectations. Since *Phoebe, Junior* is a little known, non-canonical novel, I shall first briefly outline its intersecting narrative strands here. In the small town of Carlingford, a popular, wealthy minister’s daughter exerts her resourcefulness and better understanding of financial transactions to cover up an impecunious High Church clergyman’s clumsy attempt at forgery. Raised in London, largely self-educated in current theories of political economy, as well as equipped with an unashamedly practical attitude to the marriage market, Phoebe enters the provincial society familiar to readers of Oliphant’s earlier chronicles.<sup>(7)</sup> Unused to the fine gradations of Carlingford’s social landscape, Phoebe becomes the catalyst of shifting attitudes to class and especially class-crossing marriages. Simultaneously, her involvement in Carlingford life influences her own self-styled “career” in the marriage market. This two-pronged negotiation holds the novel’s main plots together, shows how they inform and indeed help satirise each other, and is central to Phoebe’s double assertion of honour in both economic and marital terms.

<8> Phoebe’s friendship with Ursula May, the clergyman’s daughter, at once introduces a more conventional heroine whose main function is to highlight Phoebe’s unusual management of financial and romantic crises and creates an intriguing social upheaval. Their social intercourse rips through established social divisions (defined in a High/Low Church divide). This rupture is cemented by—or can be said to culminate in—Phoebe’s intervention when her grandfather, Old Tozer, the retired buttermilk, discovers that the Reverend May has forged his signature. That Phoebe meets the millionaire’s son she ultimately marries at the Mays’ household at the same time shows how her marriage plot is intricately bound up within the potentially sensational financial plot. Their interconnection indeed metonymically conveys the increasingly determining factor of modern finance capitalism even in the reputed shelter of the home. The novel critiques this infiltration, even deplors it, but also satirizes those who are incapable of dealing with inevitable changes. The shabby-genteel Mays are subjected to what can best be described as fond satire, juxtaposed with a hilarious, if at times heavy-handed, exposure of the *nouveaux riche*. Clarence Copperhead, son of a railway millionaire, is to be “coached” (as his father puts it) by Carlingford’s scholarly, but cash-poor clergyman in order to be made passable for a parliamentary career. Debt-ridden Mr. May considers Copperhead junior a much-needed additional source of income, but underestimates the costs of maintaining this expensive article and hence dubious investment. Spending money he does not have, May ultimately resorts to financial crime: driven to distraction by an expiring accommodation bill, he sees Tozer’s signature on a private note to his granddaughter (Phoebe) and forges it to renew the bill. This is the novel’s turning-point, the culmination of its satire of social as well as financial anxieties. Its

parody of a typical sensational fraud plot climaxes in May's confusion about the modern credit system. At the very moment of crisis, he considers any form of "contact, even momentary, of his own household with that of Tozer, the old Dissenting buttermilk," as "so droll an event" (218). It is this "drollness" that ensures that the novel's treatment of financial crises remains anti-sensational. Phoebe, moreover, comes to the Mays' rescue, but then disappoints them (and most readers) by marrying not Ursula's brother, Reginald, but Clarence for his money, or rather, for the position it might bring with it.

<9> Phoebe's rescue of the Mays shows her evaluating personal loyalties and obligations as more important than legal or wider social implications. She repays the Mays' kindness out of a "moral sense" that is keener than businessmen's usual interpretations of "commercial honour." But this also makes emotional recompense a "pay off" that mimics financial language. Such breakdowns of neat dichotomies of commerce and morality, or speculative thinking and personal sacrifice—dichotomies that Victorian domestic novels regularly attempted to establish or sustain—clearly do not escape Oliphant's satire either. It is indisputably comical that Phoebe deals with a potentially cataclysmic crisis in the same calculative fashion in which she sorts out her too fashionable clothes to fit in better in Carlingford's small-town society. While negotiating the marriage market unperturbed by family or social pressures, she moreover regards (and thereby dismisses) conventional courtship in terms of literary clichés or readerly expectations. Reginald May is, to her, "just the sort of poor boy to yield to such folly [and fall] in love with her" (300), and she tells him to his face that she knows all about him from the pages of a typical High Church novel: "'I did not know I had been a hero of fiction,' said Reginald, who had a great mind to be angry" (234). Dismissing Ursula's brother as a typical romantic "poor boy," Phoebe instead chooses Clarence precisely because he is an intellectual nullity. Putting him into parliament "would be a career to Phoebe. She did not think of it humbly like this, but with a big capital—a Career" (300). This comically capitalised "Career" involves "all the possibilities of future power," and Phoebe consciously defines it as a "romance" that simply takes "an unusual form" (300). This conceptualization of a career as romance and of a loveless marriage as a career satirises attempts to maintain ideals of domestic shelter from the marketplace. Instead, it underlines how central Phoebe's negotiation of the marriage market is to the novel's play with a potential sensational plot.

<10> Simultaneously, the parallel plot of Ursula's class-crossing, but heavily sentimental, predictable courtship accentuates Phoebe's transgression of expected behaviour and common plotlines. The more conventional heroine's romantic speculations may be more satisfactory perhaps in traditional narrative terms, yet this is precisely why they are patronizingly detailed: Ursula is little, poor, innocent, wistful, and "not clever," having "no pretensions to be intellectual" (45, 47). The repetition of "little" in association with Ursula alone already creates a comic effect. She is successfully "rescued" by Northcote, a young dissenting minister and, like Copperhead junior and Phoebe, a newcomer into the Mays' insulated world. In a subplot that blatantly rewrites Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* (1855), and thereby further contributes to the novel's satirical reworking of various popular genre paradigms, Northcote begins by accusing May's son, Reginald, of living on a Church sinecure;(8) he ends up marrying Ursula. Symptomatically, he first takes an interest in this "little motherless housekeeper" when he sees her crying over the fashionable dinners she is supposed to arrange for her father's pupil while being asked to save money at the same time (276). This emotional scene over household and

especially cooking problems is in itself replete with a comic pathos and emphatically asserts the practical realities of economic pressures on and within the household.

<11> But the novel's satire of presumably sheltered domesticity extends further to the financial rescue motif that is offered as a solution. That it is already undercut in the novel's prehistory renders the shabby-genteel young woman's deliverance by a wealthy suitor a repetition of a familiar plot that is cursorily, almost dismissively, dealt with in the opening chapters. Introducing the Copperheads into this last instalment of the Carlingford chronicles, the prehistory foregrounds the issue of women's shifting role in a changing economy and its most popular representation in the book market. It sums up clichéd narrative structures and typical plot-resolutions with satirical succinctness. Mrs. Copperhead's wife is a former governess whose apparent success story is at first scripted as a modern fairy tale: "Her old school companions told her story for the encouragement of their daughters, as they might have told a fairy tale" (46). But her "change from the governess-chrysalis [...] snubbed [and] neglected" (46) has been a reduction to an empty cipher among the millionaire's collections. It is sadly touching how, in detailed shopping scenes that capture well a culture of consumption in mid-Victorian Britain, Mrs. Copperhead selects presents for Ursula's younger siblings and becomes "quite transformed so long as this transaction lasted" (90). Her seeming significance in a woman's "public" sphere of fashionable London shops is the only pleasurable transformation the "governess-chrysalis" can expect, and it chiefly serves to mock her erasure at home. Both irony and pathos are completely lost on Ursula, for whose benefit her cash-poor, noble cousins (the former governess's pupils) detail Mrs. Copperhead's narrative as a cautionary tale:

To tell the truth, Mrs. Copperhead's eagerness to buy everything she could think of for the unknown children at Carlingford, the manner with which she was regarded in the great shop, her lavish liberality, her beautiful carriage, and all the fine things about her, had brought Ursula to this very thought, that it was extremely fine to marry a rich man. Sophy's irony was lost upon her simple-minded cousin, and so indeed was Mrs. Copperhead's pathos. (92)

Spending power is the only form of power the millionaire's wife has achieved. The next generation tackles the limited options for women differently, but transgressions as much as continuities are equally satirised. This is partly to convey, if not explicitly to critique, the inevitability of such limitations.

<12> Throughout the novel, the treatment not just of women's "careers" through marriage, but altogether of their search for significance—or "power," as Phoebe styles it, and which she ultimately manages to realize through her literal grasp of the modern credit system—in either the domestic or the public sphere is at once sympathetic and saturated with irony. Ursula is granted a sentimentalized class-crossing rescue through marriage in a fondly patronizing narratological dismissal, but Phoebe's choices complicate the standard narrative paradigm of the loveless marriage driven by monetary concerns. Her ironically presented musings on the "romance" of a political career through marriage raise the question whether she is simply entering into a new style of mercenary marriage or whether her dealings with the world of commerce and political power can be instrumental in offering an alternative approach. After all, she intends to achieve "power" through marriage to a nullity whose place she would fill by proxy. Still, even though the

millionaire's son is undoubtedly "a great prize" (380), it is overtly suggested that this does not necessarily make Phoebe mercenary in a conventional fashion. Here the novel's sustained satirical tone becomes pointedly ambiguous: "And yet Phoebe was not mercenary, though she was not 'in love' with her heavy lover in the ordinary sense of the word." (388) Although the authorial commentary is without doubt tongue-in-cheek, this admittedly slippery distinction is essential for the elucidation of Phoebe's character. What then catalyses the novel's ambiguously ironic slant in dealing with gender and genre expectations is that her participation in, or conscious covering up of, a crime can neither be explained away as the result of typical "feminine" ignorance of business nor simply be equated with an authorial vilification of the marketplace. Phoebe's comically literalized "grasp" of the credit system and management of the fraud case instead most clearly conveys the novel's ambiguous representation of women's role in a changing world of financial pressures and temptations.

### **Phoebe's Grasp of the Credit System**

<13> *Phoebe, Junior* satirizes popular narratives of financial crime in order to unpack moral ambiguities generated by finance capitalism's effects on daily life. Contrary to readerly expectations of mid-Victorian financial fiction, there is simply nothing sensational about the way in which the forgery takes place. Far from coldly contemplating crime in the style of sensational villains, May is tempted by an almost comically amassed series of coincidences. A quick reprise of the attendant circumstances illustrates the anti-sensational manner in which Oliphant treats financial temptation. During one of Phoebe's visits to the May household, Tozer sends her a note. A scrap of paper bearing Tozer's signature is literally blown at May's feet. It appears to him a providential windfall. It reminds him of a bill by its association with the buttermilk shop: "it was very strange to see [Tozer's handwriting] on anything but a bill" (218). This suggests to the financially naïve scholar that he may put it on a totally different kind of bill. To understand the significance of this confusion, it is important to remember that in Victorian Britain accommodation bills, or bills-of-exchange, were the most commonly used and most commonly abused credit instruments. Like other paper currencies (such as banknotes), these bills were "fully negotiable instruments" (Poovey, *Financial* 10). Until their due date, they could be passed along as payment or be turned into an investment. The signature May forges on the bill's back was called an "endorsement." It indicated that a new holder agreed to take the bill as payment and thereby become responsible for the debt. The reusability of such circulating bills formed the foundation of discounting services, a notoriously disreputable business.<sup>(9)</sup> Tozer, therefore, is justifiably outraged by his name's misappropriation. So far he has kept "it honest, and out of folk's mouths," and he will not have "disgrace thrown on it now": "A bill on me as never had such a thing, not when I was struggling to get on!" (365-366). In addition, the handwritten nature of such credit instruments alone was seen to invite fraud, so that "[s]ome bills that circulated were entirely 'fictitious,' in the sense that all or some of the endorsers' names were forged" (Poovey, *Financial* 12). This fictitiousness is at the heart of May's misreading of the credit system.

<14> But how far is the reader of Oliphant's domestic chronicles really expected to understand the intricacies of these transactions? Is the scholar's ignorance just funny or perhaps tragicomic, or are we meant to share at least part of May's sense of confusion? In an elaborate misreading of

economic narratives, May distorts a commercial logic that relies on “quite fictitious and visionary money floating about” (181), as it is put in the novel with pointed irony. He tries to convince himself that such money “belonged to nobody—which was borrowed here to-day, and paid there to-morrow, to be re-borrowed and repaid in the same way, never really reaching anybody’s pocket” (181). Money that does not really exist cannot be stolen. According to the same logic, precisely since Tozer does not know that his name has endorsed the bill, this arrangement is arguably less uncomfortable than having “a bill really signed by a man of straw, whose ‘value received’ meant nothing in the world but a simple fiction”: after all, it is done “without any trouble to Tozer, or burden of responsibility” (263). In this comical literalisation of strawmen’s fictitiousness, May certainly has a point. Recent criticism has drawn attention to this satire of a scholarly clergyman’s inability to cope with the modern credit system. Clergymen as well as intellectuals generally, Ellen Michie has argued, “were seen as particularly remote from commerce” (78). This singled them out as the most logical exponents of a growing “uneasiness about the intrusion of new financial mechanisms into individuals’ personal lives” (Michie 78). But this is really only Tozer’s view of the case, who is notably satirized for conflating presumably incapable women and (feminised) scholars as unable to “understand business no more nor women do” (397). It also diminishes the contrast between May’s incapability and Phoebe’s able management of the situation. In a comical collapse of expected gender paradigms, he faints when the forged bill falls due, leaving Phoebe to come to the family’s rescue.

<15> May’s fainting fit conveys the general collapse of his world-view, while visibly emasculating him; Phoebe’s firm grasp of the situation is likewise literalized when she purloins the forgery “by instinct,” enveloping the paper in her handkerchief: “crush[ing] up the miserable bit of paper, which was the cause of so much evil and misery in its folds” (368). Throughout the novel, Oliphant plays with the comic potential of such externalizations and embodiments. These metaphorical constructions cast a different light on a still neglected non-canonical novel that is clearly more intricate in narratological terms as well as culturally pertinent than has so far been acknowledged. Symbolically domesticated, enfolded in a lady’s handkerchief and dress, the “fatal piece of paper” (399) is carried off on Phoebe’s body. There it remains hidden from the grasp of her infuriated grandfather, successfully countering May’s literalization of fictitious “holders” of the bill with its literal endorsement (wrapped up in the handkerchief). This alternative way of taking up a bill is completed by its cancellation: a literal destruction. Phoebe burns it in front of witnesses that include both the offender (May) and the victim (Tozer). But while poking fun at domesticity’s promise securely to enfold, wrap up, and thus safely do away with the infiltrating threats of the marketplace, the novel simultaneously inverts sensational detective plots. The bill’s destruction doubles up as a symbolic gesture that makes clear even to the frenzied culprit that all allegations are thereby withdrawn. Circumstantial evidence, a frenzy approaching to madness, and the amateur detective’s cavalierly treatment of legal justice have all been marked out as defining characteristics of Victorian sensational detective fiction.<sup>(10)</sup> In *Phoebe, Junior*, they are evoked as part of a familiar paradigm and then couched in a literalized way of “securing” fraudulent transactions.

<16> Although Phoebe is well aware that her “theft of the bill” is an “unjustifiable expedient which in itself [is] a kind of crime” (375, 372), it contrasts favourably both with May’s muddleheaded misinterpretation of credit’s fictitiousness and with her grandfather’s down-to-earth, uncompromising attitude to commercial honour. The old-fashioned scholar abuses the



retired buttermilk's name because he considers it as rightly belonging on any kind of bill. What is more, he fails to understand the gradations of legality and ethics in the world of trade because he has previously dealt with middlemen whose "sense of commercial honour was not so very keen that the dishonouring of [a bill] should have given [them] a very serious pang" (347). Hence, it is not only that Phoebe has a firmer grasp over the power of paper. As she wraps up the "fatal paper" that metonymically represents the threat of "moral death," she also safely infantilises May as "her charge, her burden, as helpless in her hands as a child" (378). This domesticates her management of financial affairs, but in a satirical inversion of gender roles. That she nurses the collapsed patriarch is expressed in terms of a rescue motif that does not make her so much a nursing angel in the house, but instead "the champion of the sufferer, the saviour of the family" (361). This is a traditionally male role. Adjectives like "masterly" and "majestically" express Phoebe's energetic mastery of the situation, although Oliphant's pervasive ironic tone again partly undercuts Phoebe's triumph. Phoebe escapes from her grandfather's violent grasp as she attempts to hide the forged bill from him by "turn[ing] round majestically [...], lock[ing] the door hastily, in genuine terror," and then doing "possibly the most sensible thing in the world, in every point of view" by going to sleep: "Of all the clever things Phoebe had done in her life, it must be allowed that there was not one so masterly as the fact that she, then and there, went to sleep." (394) It is arguably even more ironic that she evinces her resolute character by being asleep (and hence inactive). And yet, it is of course the best way to harness her energies. It is in pointed contrast to May's nerve-racking insomnia, although it has also more affinities with her grandfather's down-to-earth attitude than she would like to acknowledge. Clearly, while Phoebe's capability is impressive, it by no means escapes Oliphant's satire.

<17> What complicates this reworking of financial crime's sensational appeal further is that the forgery is based on an already disreputable credit instrument. Tozer's stress on the dishonourable nature of accommodation bills underscores the fluid lines of demarcation between amoral, illegal, and disreputable financial transactions. Bill discounting is legal, but not honourable, whereas forgery had long been punishable by death and would still mean "moral death" to the Mays, as Phoebe quickly realizes:

Generalisations are unsafe things, and whether it was because she was a woman that Phoebe, passing over the crime, fixed her thoughts upon the punishment, I do not venture to say; but she did so. After all a few lines of writing on a bit of paper is not a crime which affects the imagination of the inexperienced. Had it been a malicious slander Phoebe would have realised the sin of it much more clearly; but the copy of her grandfather's signature did not wound her moral sense in the same way, though it was a much more serious offence. [...] But the consequences—disgrace, ruin, the loss of [May's] position, the shame of his profession, moral death indeed, almost as frightful as if he had been hanged for murder. (372)

I am quoting this passage at some length because Phoebe's understanding of the forgery signposts the novel's critical negotiation of gender expectations. Oliphant is notably careful not to fall into clichéd and hence "unsafe" generalizations about women and economics.

<18> It would be facile, therefore, to imply that Phoebe helps conceal the crime simply out of "womanly" sympathy for the Mays' threatened "moral death." On the contrary, she claims her

right to a sense of honour, a claim she then asserts even more emphatically in her dispute with the millionaire Copperhead about his son's marriage proposal. This parallel negotiation continues the discussion of financial fraud almost seamlessly. Threatening to disinherit his booby son if he insists on marrying Phoebe, Copperhead expects any mercenary girl to break off a now spoilt bargain. But Phoebe asserts that "honour prevents [her] from giving him [Clarence] up" and so "the big, rich, noisy man was silenced" (411). Phoebe is indeed "incapable of anything dishonourable," although the idea of marrying Copperhead junior without the "career" (i.e. without the money that can put him into parliament) makes "her shiver as with a cold icy current running over" (405-406). In marrying for a career, she may opt for a "romance" that takes "an unusual form" (300), but she simultaneously claims "honour" for women in a commercial world. Her debate with Copperhead becomes more abstract, going beyond their marriage negotiations: "'Honour! that's for men,' [Copperhead] said hastily, 'and folly for them according as you mean it; but for women's there's no such thing, it's a sham and humbug'" (410). Copperhead clearly considers it "folly" for men as well, but he also expresses a dismissal of women's role in public or financial affairs that he shares with simple-minded old Tozer.

<19> Phoebe's claim resonates with a controversial issue at the time. In a recent essay, Heather Milton discusses the question whether "honour is a concept that applies, or can apply, to women" as a theme that already appears in Oliphant's earlier novels (202). Milton suggests that *Salem Chapel* (1863) "illustrates that while women are expected to obey the law to the letter, it does not protect them in return. They thereby develop an ambivalent relationship to the word of law" (202). This rejection of the law as a patriarchal would-be protector—a rejection quite common in sensation fiction, of which *Salem Chapel* was meant to be a part(11)—threatens to extend to "honour" itself. John Kucich has similarly pointed out that honour and perhaps even truth as abstract concepts were often regarded a man's domain and not nearly as important in the construction of women's subjectivity (11-12). But whereas *Salem Chapel* sympathises with a clearly outrageous and ultimately murderous anti-heroine in a subplot,(12) in *Phoebe, Junior* honour is explicitly reclaimed as accessible and applicable to women. Phoebe even goes further in asserting a better version as women's prerogative, although the authorial rejection of "[g]eneralisations [as] unsafe things" qualifies this: it is not "because she was a woman" (372) that Phoebe thinks more of the May's threatened "moral death" than of legal implications. Reducing her decision to a gender-bound, predictable, and hence stereotyping reaction would only repeat (by simply inverting without really undermining) the generalizations circulated by men of the previous generation like Copperhead, Tozer, or also May. Instead, what Milton terms debated "gendered subjectivities" (202) are successfully dismantled.

<20> Phoebe triumphs over Copperhead, who can only console himself by asserting that his expensive booby son's choice of Phoebe facilitates a "buying of brains": "Fortune ain't worth thinking of in comparison with brains. It was brains I wanted, and I've bought 'em dear; but I hope I can afford it." (412) But then, this consolation also echoes—and parodies—Phoebe's substitution of a second-hand or virtuous career for a romance. As Michie has pointed out, this is the reason that "*Phoebe Junior* was, and still is, most outrageous to readers in its representation of Phoebe's marriage to Clarence" (93). In an even more ironic twist, Phoebe's careful differentiation between marriage for money and its conversion into a "career" in which she may accomplish "a great work" mirrors the distorted logic May employs when he convinces himself

that he cannot steal money that does not physically exist. Much of the novel's power as satire indeed arises from the fact that the satire is in itself double-edged.(13)

<21> What I wish to highlight in conclusion is that Phoebe's rescue of the Mays in the role of their "champion" (361) yields an emotional gratification that works as a recompense for Phoebe's rejection of romance. But precisely because it works, it is questionable as moral redemption. Instead, it is a repaying for the "obligations to all of them":

They had given her unbounded kindness, friendliness, everything that is most sweet to the solitary; and over and above, as if these were not enough, they had made her the exquisite present of a heart [Reginald's], the best thing that can be given or received by man. Phoebe felt herself penetrated with gratitude for all this, and she resolved that, if anything she could do could benefit the Mays, the effort on her part should not be wanting. (360)

The "affectionate fervour of friendship which had completely changed the tenor of Phoebe's life at Carlingford" (360) prompts her to exert her grasp of financial contingencies to save a friend's family. Yet the emphasis on recompense and payment undermines any clear-cut redemption, which adds yet another dimension to the novel's satirical dissection of women's stereotyped ways of dealing with various kinds of (interconnected) financial issues.

<22> The languages of financial exchange persistently inform Phoebe's understanding of any kind of relationship or contractual bargain. The representation of her choices remains ambiguous. What makes the novel such a complex take on prevalent genre and gender confines is, in fact, its extension of satire to its self-consciously modern heroine. However intriguing she may be in her able management of various crises, this coolly calculative young woman by no means presents an ideal. Phoebe generally considers herself "the person most interested" (300) and has "her own ends to serve like other people" (278). That this is a common trait (shared by "other people") of course does not turn it into an admirable quality, but it certainly makes Phoebe a realistically depicted character who is neither "goody" like the heroines she used to read about in the High Church novels about which she teases Reginald May—notably without at all feeling inclined to emulate them—nor a sensational anti-heroine.(14) The substitution of a "career" for conventional romance finds a narratively rewarding recompense in the elevation of friendship over legal requirements or social conventions. And yet, there is something peculiarly cynical about the idea of compensation that underpins this exchange. There are no easily sentimentalized tradeoffs, no clear-cut villains and victims, no elaborate schemes of sensational appeal, and certainly no complete excisions of commercial interests from the home.

<23> In charting and already satirizing new opportunities as well as challenges for modern-day heroines, *Phoebe, Junior* illustrates the extent to which mid-Victorian domestic fiction could capitalize on adaptable sensational financial plots. Oliphant's satirical representation of everyday engagements with debt, credit, and fiscal speculation, including marital speculation, brings together various interconnected money matters at home: the temptations and pressures of expenditure, titillating shopping forays, the difficulties of managing home economies even—or especially—among the cash-poor shabby-genteel, and above all, the priority of personal considerations amidst shifting commercial and social demands. This priority might invite

transgression, and yet Oliphant refuses to produce sensational anti-heroines who deliberately transgress. Instead, her ambiguous treatment of gender expectations is part of a complex satire of shifting genre confines and readerly expectations. A close reading of her textual strategies hence also asks us to take a new look at the significance of this domestic woman writer for Victorian literary culture.

#### Endnotes

(1)Earlier crises manifested themselves in full-scale financial novels only in the century's second half, including William Harrison Ainsworth's *John Law, The Projector* (1864) and *The South Sea Bubble* (1871).(^)

(2)Claudia Klaver speaks of "a/moral economics" in Victorian culture (*passim*); Margot Finn of the "character of credit," stressing that "[f]iction provides a vital perspective on personal debt and credit relations, for novels were essential imaginative tools with which English consumers probed the lineaments of individual character and the moral limits of market exchange" (26). Mary Poovey refers to the "genres of the credit economy" (*Genres passim*) as they developed from the seventeenth century up to circa 1870, and Catherine Gallagher similarly suggests the need for "a more synthetic and a less platitudinous picture" of "formal relations between literary and economic writing" (3, 1).(^)

(3)As Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee have already stressed, there is now a growing "body of literary and cultural criticism founded upon economic paradigms, models and tropes" (3).(^)

(4)For a discussion on the "Victorian stock-market villain" see Wagner (*Financial* 62-78).(^)

(5)Stern proceeds to evoke "examples from the sensational 'big three,'" i.e. Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), to show that "most sensation fiction features characters who use false pretenses to access the profits of domestic relationships. They derive their narrative tension from the breach of proper boundaries and property rights" (43). On the sensational appeal of the mid-Victorian stock-market novel see Wagner ("Speculators" 43-44; *Financial* ch.2).(^)

(6)The heroine of *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) perhaps most explicitly applies her studies of political economy to a restructuring of provincial social life. Lucilla Marjoribanks is "at liberty to exercise her faculty [and] reorganising genius" (26-27) in managing social events. Phoebe Beecham's prioritisation of a "Career" partly works as a satirical reference to different women's divergent ideas of (likewise capitalised) "Careers" in the earlier novel. O'Mealy has called *Miss Marjoribanks* "an ironic comedy about power" ("Oliphant" 46).(^)

(7)First serialised anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine*, *The Rector and the Doctor's Family* (1863), *Salem Chapel* (1863), *The Perpetual Curate* (1864), *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), and *Phoebe Junior* are loosely connected through their interest in the social panoramas surrounding church and chapel.(^)

(8)Much has been written on Oliphant's reworking of Trollope's *The Warden* (1855) in her ambiguous representation of Reginald May's doubts about accepting a lucrative sinecure. See O'Mealy, "Rewriting." Similarly, the father's forgery pushes Trollope's probing of a scholarly clergyman's slow breakdown over a cheque he is wrongly assumed to have stolen in *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867) into a comical reversal of sensational plotlines. Counterexamples to the clever criminals of sensation fiction, both suffer from the same sense of being befuddled by the modern credit system. Yet since Oliphant's forging clergyman is guilty, his suppressed exposure inverts the victimisation of the financially innocuous in Trollope's novel. As Michie has pointed out in a comparative reading of this "pair of interconnected novels," "[b]oth these novels address anxieties about the expansiveness of late-Victorian commerce through the story of a clergyman who becomes inextricably involved with the mechanisms of the credit economy." But whereas Trollope "uses the Reverend Mr Crawley as a valedictory figure through whom to explore a set of ascetic values that were ceasing to be tenable in a culture where social interactions were depending more and more on the credit nexus," Oliphant's Mr May is guilty (77-78, 79).(^)

(9)Poovey describes the discount market in detail: "Having endorsed the bill, the new recipient could then pass it along to another person, and so on, until the bill was due. Because bills represented indebtedness, moreover, it was possible to purchase bills (for less than their face value), then sell them to others whose business was to arrange loans between lenders and borrowers" (*Financial* 10).(^)

(10)Amateur detectives in Victorian sensation fiction succeed mostly through an obfuscation of legal justice. Public trials are replaced by an exacting of personal revenge or a private concealment of the culprits in an attempt to avoid scandal. As Schramm notes, "the *telos* of the plot is generated by its very dissimilarity to a trial; the conception of law as foil in turn liberates fiction to pursue its own idea of justice" (12). In the process, detective-figures become implicated in violations that are all too similar, if not identical, to the transgressions they seek to police.(^)

(11)Precisely because of its introduction of a sensational subplot, *Salem Chapel* has recently received more attention. Its bifurcated or lopsided structure has generally been regarded as "an example in Mrs Oliphant's work of a potentially good novel which is almost wrecked by the author's efforts to make it a best seller" (Colby 52). As Elisabeth Jay already points out, *Salem Chapel* "suffers badly from the sensational plot, which sits ill at ease with the comic realism with which the Dissenting milieu of its setting is depicted" (5). More recently, critics have highlighted the "generic boundaries slippages, the blurring of sensation and realism," that "resist critics' attempts to maintain the safe dualities established in earlier fictional modes" (Tromp 18). Nonetheless, the fact that *Salem Chapel* became a best-selling novel "could only have heightened [Oliphant's] ambivalence about the marketplace by underscoring her complicity in its process of commodification" (Heller, "Sensationalism" 103).(^)

(12)Milton argues that that “the sheer repetition of the debate in the novel about women’s honour” suggests that this is not simply “semantic debate about what giving one’s word means— they are debating gendered subjectivities and competing epistemologies” (203, 202). But the anti-heroine’s argumentation is facile, and neither her actions nor her reasoning are condoned, even though she is presented as a victim of circumstances.(^)

(13)Schaub refers to “Oliphant’s characteristically ironic tone, which complicates all interpretation” (225, 198). Oliphant “pushes irony and narrativity (two of the most basic building blocks of literary meaning) to their limits, even perhaps past their breaking points” (Schaub 225). Cohen similarly speaks of Oliphant’s “politics of satire” as aestheticising topical debates (101).(^)

(14)In one of the most overt intertextual influences in Oliphant’s fiction, Ursula’s younger sister objects to any comparison with the “goody” characters starring in domestic chronicles by the religious writer Charlotte Yonge. Phoebe is clearly well read in them, as are the Mays themselves, and yet none of them have any intention of emulating the “goodness” Yonge promotes. Such emulation is instead dismissed as something childish or “girlish” that may be nostalgically remembered, but which has no bearing on modern young women: Phoebe is reminded by the Mays’ name “of a family in a novel that [she] used to admire very much in [her] girlish days—”: ““Oh ! I know,’ cried Janey, ‘the Daisy Chain. We are not a set of prigs like those people. We are not goody, whatever we are’” (195). This “goody” set has no place in Oliphant’s fictional world, showing how her version of the domestic chronicle actively participates in the formation and ongoing adaptation of the genre.(^)

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