

THE NOVELS OF MARGARET OLIPHANT

BY

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	ii
PART ONE	
CHAPTER ONE	
THE REPUTATION OF MRS OLIPHANT	1
CHAPTER TWO	
THE POSITION OF WOMEN	21
CHAPTER THREE	
ANTI-ROMANTICISM AND IRONY	57
CHAPTER FOUR	
CHARACTER AND MOTIVE	116
CHAPTER FIVE	
THEME AND STRUCTURE	149
PART TWO	
CHAPTER SIX	
EARLY NOVELS	197
CHAPTER SEVEN	
CARLINGFORD: THE CLERGY	228
CHAPTER EIGHT	
CARLINGFORD: THE COMMUNITY	271
CHAPTER NINE	
STUDIES OF INHERITANCE, CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS	304
CHAPTER TEN	
HESTER	335
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
SCOTTISH NOVELS: VERSIONS OF PASTORAL	362
CHAPTER TWELVE	
THE STORIES OF THE SEEN AND UNSEEN	401
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
FINAL VERDICT	419

APPENDIX A: MRS OLIPHANT'S REVISIONS	426
APPENDIX B: CLASSIFICATION OF MRS OLIPHANT'S NOVELS	433
APPENDIX C: CHRONOLOGY OF MRS OLIPHANT'S NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES	439
APPENDIX D: NON-FICTION BY MRS OLIPHANT	452
BIBLIOGRAPHY	454

PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to make a major revaluation of the work of Margaret Oliphant, arguably the most neglected novelist of any significance in the nineteenth century (neglected for reasons which my first chapter attempts to assess). This has entailed an extensive reading, not only of her entire work in fiction (novels, novellas, short stories), but of her journalism and of almost all available criticism (contemporary and twentieth century) of her work. It is surprising to see how few critics (apart from Mrs Q.D.Leavis) have seriously freed themselves from preconceived ideas to recognise what a very distinguished writer Mrs Oliphant is.

I have examined manuscripts of Mrs Oliphant's, mainly letters, in the National Library of Scotland, the British Library and other libraries listed in the Bibliography and have endeavoured to present a detailed picture of Mrs Oliphant's career as a novelist. (This is recorded in Appendix C.) Research has been carried out at the libraries already named and at the Bodleian Library, Cambridge University Library and London University Library. I should like to record my gratitude to Mr Charles Seaton, librarian of The Spectator, who allowed me to consult the manuscript books in the possession of The Spectator library identifying authorship of articles in that periodical from November 1874 to November 1877 and from November 1880 onwards; and to the librarian of the United Reformed Church History Society, who allowed me to consult the archives of St Peter's Presbyterian Church, Scotland Road, Liverpool (where Mrs Oliphant worshipped as a girl).

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the staff of St John's Wood Library, which under the London libraries' Joint Fiction Reserve

scheme holds a large number of Mrs Oliphant's novels (unfortunately not all) which I was thus able to borrow to read at home.

Although initially I read Mrs Oliphant's novels in later editions (many slowly accumulated from secondhand bookshops over the years) all references are to the first editions, usually in three volumes. (Where the first edition was not available this is indicated.) When dealing with Miss Marjoribanks it might have been easier to refer to the Zodiac Press edition (1969); but as I discuss this novel with reference to Mrs Oliphant's handling of the three volumes it seemed preferable to refer to the first edition here as elsewhere.

Full publication data are supplied when detailed reference is first made to a book, although data for The Chronicles of Carlingford and Hester are reserved for the appropriate chapters of Part Two.

I am grateful to the British Library and the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for permission to quote from manuscripts in their possession. Certain newly acquired manuscripts in Edinburgh (Acc 5678 and Acc 5793) are not yet foliated and are referred to by using an oblique stroke to mark off the number of the box in which the letter is contained.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout the thesis:

- A. & L. : The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M.O.W.Oliphant. Arranged and Edited by Mrs Harry Coghill. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1899.
- Colby : Vineta and Robert A.Colby. The Equivocal Virtue, Mrs Oliphant and the Victorian Literary Market Place. Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1966.

Those novels of Mrs Oliphant's which are frequently quoted are referred to in abbreviated form, which in the immediate contexts will be unambiguous.

Where novels have long titles (such as Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside, Written by Herself) the full title is given as early as is conveniently possible and subsequently a shorter title is used.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

THE REPUTATION OF MRS OLIPHANT

When people comment upon the number of books I have written, and I say that I am so far from being proud of the fact that I should like at least half of them forgotten, they stare - and yet it is quite true; and even here I could no more go solemnly into them, and tell why I had done this or that, than I could fly. They are my work, which I like in the doing, which is my natural way of occupying myself, though they are never as good as I meant them to be.
(Autobiography and Letters, 1899, p.5)

In 1906 in Victorian Novelists Lewis Melville spoke as follows of Trollope:

His has been the worst fate that can befall a writer; he has not been abused: he has been ignored; and he is not disappearing: he has disappeared: and reaction alone cannot satisfactorily account for the lowly position he occupies today, with few so poor to do him reverence. So entirely have his books gone out of fashion that, in this age of reprints ... it is impossible to obtain a set of his best books. 1

These words were not strictly true of Trollope even in 1906, and nobody could claim that they have been true of him since then. But if the sex were changed and the reference transferred to Mrs Oliphant the words would surely claim to be a very precise and accurate statement of the position of her reputation. She has been ignored; she has almost disappeared; it is quite impossible to obtain any of her books (except the recently reprinted Miss Marjoribanks and the Autobiography and Letters). In the 1960's and the 1970's the tide did begin to turn - slowly. Yet if the opinions of certain critics (notably Mrs Q D Leavis) are justified Mrs Oliphant deserves a high position among Victorian novelists, certainly to be mentioned with as much honour as Trollope. Yet books on Trollope continue to be published with great

1. Lewis Melville, Victorian Novelists (London: Archibald Constable, 1906), p.5

regularity, while still the only book on Mrs Oliphant is The Equivocal Virtue by Vineta and Robert Colby.²

The academic establishment is not yet ready to recognise the quality of Mrs Oliphant as a novelist. A notable instance of this is to be found in Gordon Haight's famous book on George Eliot, published in 1968. Mr Haight had read The Equivocal Virtue and briefly refers to Mrs Oliphant as follows:

George Eliot's prolific contemporary Mrs Oliphant regarded literature as "a commodity - a product sold in the market place", and the only diffidence she showed over turning out more than 200 volumes of fiction was in having to acknowledge them. Comparing her own career with George Eliot's, she asked wistfully, "Should I have done better if I had been kept like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?"³

This is entirely misleading, and is based on a misunderstanding of The Equivocal Virtue. It is not Mrs Oliphant but Mr and Mrs Colby who say that Mrs Oliphant treated literature as "a commodity - a product sold in the market place", and as a summary of her approach to her work it is greatly over-simplified. The number 200 appears to be a mistaken echo of "more than two hundred critical articles and essays"⁴ (contributed to Blackwood's Magazine). If we count the number of works of fiction published by her or on her behalf up to 1898, the year after her death, and including some books which she did not acknowledge at all, the number is 101, though many shorter works, "novellas" and short stories, remain uncollected. As for her "diffidence ... in having to acknowledge" all these books, she showed a healthily self-critical

2. Vineta and Robert A. Colby, The Equivocal Virtue, Mrs Oliphant and the Victorian Literary Market Place (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1966)
3. Gordon Haight, George Eliot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) p.369
4. Colby, p.3

attitude to her work combined with a certain reticence in the use of her name (but this was mainly in articles, not in her mature fiction.) She was often embarrassed at appearing so often before the public in any one year, afraid no doubt that they would grow bored with her or scornful. All this is to her credit; in it we can in no way recognise the insensitive woman described by Mr Haight. The quotation from her Autobiography which I use as an epigraph to this chapter is enough to disprove her alleged lack of diffidence about her work. Finally, Mrs Oliphant's words about George Eliot are correctly quoted, from the Autobiography and Letters,⁵ but presented in isolation and in this context they are misleading. Clearly Mrs Oliphant does not have the stature of George Eliot (and yet Mrs Leavis has compared Mrs Oliphant's heroine Lucilla Marjoribanks with Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch to the advantage of Mrs Oliphant);⁶ nevertheless in her wide practical experience of life, she had a knowledge of the world beyond any other woman novelist of the century. Beside her George Eliot was over-protected and cut off from direct experience ("kept ... in a mental greenhouse and taken care of", as Mrs Oliphant ruefully - a more convincing epithet than "wistfully" - recognised). She admits her own inferiority - and yet feels that there is a sort of unfairness in it. She considers that perhaps her over-production weakened the quality of her writing - and many critics, as I shall show later, would have agreed. Nevertheless she deserves far better than the rather patronising tone adopted by Mr Haight.

However we must allow the devil's advocate to have his say. The

5. The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M.O.W. Oliphant. Arranged and edited by Mrs Harry Coghill (London and Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1899), p.5
6. Mrs Q.D. Leavis, Introduction to the Zodiac Press edition of Miss Marjoribanks (Chatto and Windus, 1969), pp.11-16

over-production remains a difficult problem. A powerful representative of the devil's advocate is George Saintsbury, who included Mrs Oliphant in the third edition (1901) of his History of Nineteenth Century Literature. He says of her:

Unluckily, a pleasant pen and a pleasant wit ... are almost the sole merits of her miscellaneous work. With her novels, of which from their enormous number we cannot attempt a list here, it was different. The Chronicles of Carlingford (1862-1866) were of quite extraordinary promise in their kind - that of domestic middle-class story, only slightly satirical in fashion, and mothering itself back, through George Eliot and Mrs Gaskell, on Miss Austen. Some not incompetent judges were disposed to put this promise at least on a level with George Eliot's own. But this kind of writing, if any other, requires the most careful and delicate treatment; it cannot be done hurriedly, and it cannot be done often or in great volume. Mrs Oliphant never quite lost the touch to the last; but the wild hurry of her composition - two, three, four, even five books in a year, besides minor things - made it impossible for these touches not to be lost in inferior work. The second volume of her three-volume novels became a by-word with critics for their intrepid "padding" and some quite late novels (she had latterly tried a supernatural style, unequal, but at best good) showed also that there was no positive irreparable degeneration of her talent. But no human being, not Shakespeare or Scott, could have made the things that she wrote good in the time in which she wrote them. 7

Saintsbury's judicious fairness here, his willingness to pay due tribute to Mrs Oliphant's talents, ⁸ makes his final rejection so much more telling. Similar complaints were made by people more sympathetic to Mrs Oliphant, for example A.C.Benson and "one who knew her" writing an obituary in The Academy.⁹ The complaint has been repeated recently

7. George Saintsbury, History of Nineteenth Century Literature (London: Macmillan, 3rd edn, 1901), pp.347-8
8. Saintsbury reviewed several Oliphant novels in the last years of her life. His approach is much more sympathetic than in his History. See below, Section 4 of the Bibliography.
9. A.C. Benson, Memories and Friends, London: John Murray, 1924; The Academy LII (3rd July, 1897), 15-16

- for example, by Marion Lochhead and Valentine Cunningham.¹⁰ Indeed Mr and Mrs Colby in The Equivocal Virtue roundly dismiss most of the later novels as potboilers and imply that she destroyed her talents by the constant pressure of work under unremitting financial stress. This same argument, with a powerful feminist bias, was voiced by Virginia Woolf, writing about the importance of "culture and intellectual liberty", which, she maintains, are destroyed by overwork:

Mrs Oliphant sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn her living and educate her children. 11

Is it then possible to fight such an impressive army of critical disapproval (including Henry James, whom I will mention later)? If a novelist goes on without a break from one novel to the next, producing at the rate of three or more a year, must she inevitably rely on well-tried formulae and never on her imagination or her experience of life, let alone her artistic integrity? Must she in short become a circulating library novelist like Mrs Henry Wood, Miss Braddon, Ouida and many others? The only answer to such questions seems inevitably, Yes. And accordingly Mrs Oliphant was included by Alan Walbank in his anthology Queens of the Circulating Library.¹² (Yet it is notable that he praises her much more highly than the other writers in the anthology.) And yet, when we approach her work, unprejudiced by neat literary generalisations, determined only to see what in fact is there, it becomes

10. "Margaret Oliphant, a Half-forgotten Victorian", The Quarterly Review CCXCIV (1961), 300-10; Everywhere Spoken Against; Dissent in the Victorian Novel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) p.232

11. Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas (London: Hogarth Press, 1938) p.166

12. Alan Walbank, ed. Queens of the Circulating Library. Selections from Victorian Lady Novelists 1850-1900. (London: Evans Brothers, 1950)

clear that it was weakened by her over-production only in certain limited ways. Indeed it is not so much her over-production as the dangers inherent in the three-volume novel that produced the diffuseness of style and treatment that often disfigure her work. Yet even so those of her novels which have to be dismissed as feebly inadequate are usually the shorter ones. And her weakest novels were all written in the first decade of her career before she could possibly be accused of over-production - and before she attained the mature, ironic vision which she consistently maintained for the rest of her life. She was always too well aware of the dangers of literary stereotypes and of the stage properties of conventional fiction to fall into such traps herself - excepting only when betrayed by two temptations to which she had always been liable: to an elaborately complicated sensational mystery theme, and to a naively sweet and innocuous love story. Normally her acute anti-romantic stance and her quietly disillusioned view of English society protected her from lapses into the worst imbecilities of the circulating libraries.

And here I must modify a statement I have just made: that in the first decade of her career she could not be accused of over-production (that is, before the period in her life when she urgently needed to support several male dependants). In fact from the very moment when she published her first book, Margaret Maitland, in 1849 she was under a powerful compulsion to continue writing. She started work on her second novel, Caleb Field, the very night she had finished Margaret Maitland.¹³ And in 1852 she was writing to the publisher

13. See A & L, p.23

Richard Bentley apologising for following one book on a socially realistic theme with another of the same kind.¹⁴ It seems that from the first she was driven by an overpowering necessity to continue, possessed as it were by a "daimon". Much the same has been said of Trollope,¹⁵ who wrote only about half of what Mrs Oliphant wrote. It seems after all not impossible that she would have been obsessively compelled to continue working at an exceptional rate, even if she had not been pressed by economic necessity. Friends writing obituaries in and after 1897 described how she would sit up much of the night writing after a day's unruffled playing of her hostess role. This of course entailed an iron self-discipline, but it would scarcely have been possible without a driving inner compulsion, a monomania.

Mrs Oliphant's reputation, like Trollope's, began to decline in the last years of her life: the years of Henry James and Emile Zola, of the aesthetic movement, and of the economical art of the short story. She was very aware of this loss of reputation, and expressed the distress this caused her in the short novel Mr Sandford, serialised in The Cornhill Magazine in 1888 and published in The Ways of Life in 1897. Her own predicament is echoed in that of Mr Sandford, a ~~y~~ artist in the high Victorian style, capable of producing only narrative or history paintings, and now finding that nobody wishes to buy his work any more because new artistic ideals are developing:

14. British Library, ADD MS 46,616 f.38. Letter dated 2nd April, 1852.

15. See for example A.O.J.Cockshut, Anthony Trollope (London: William Collins & Son, 1955; University Paperback edn, Methuen, 1968), pp.17-20

"We want a far more profound knowledge of the human figure and beauty in the abstract - "

"Stuff!", said Harry; "the British public doesn't want your nudities, whatever you think".

"The British public likes babies, and sick girls getting well, and beautiful young gentlemen saying eternal adieux to lovely young ladies", said one of the girls. 16

(Harry is Mr Sandford's son.) Of course the British public was being educated to like different things both in art and in literature - and was perhaps willing to dismiss Mrs Oliphant's work as unredeemably old-fashioned. There were in fact many people, as I shall show, who valued her work and recognised its true merit; and yet the tide was running so strongly against the early Victorians that nobody in the new century was able to reverse this judgement, and it was not until very recently that a long needed rediscovery occurred.

Mrs Oliphant did in fact make some efforts to show that, although of the older generation, she was not a literary Mr Sandford. She read younger writers fairly extensively and at the end of her career she consistently praised J.M.Barrie (who, as I shall show, reciprocated) and Rudyard Kipling. And on at least two occasions she appeared to be proving that she could follow the new literary ideals if she chose. She wrote a short story "The Whirl of Youth", published in W.E.Henley's National Observer in October 1893, and afterwards included in A Widow's Tale and other Stories in 1898. The National Observer, although an anti-Yellow Book periodical, was one of the recognised vehicles for the short story in the 1890's, and in its pages appeared Hardy, Kipling, Barrie and Arthur Morrison. "The Whirl of Youth" is set in Oxford and is largely made up of discursive undergraduate conversation moving

very slowly to a resolution of the central figure's emotional and academic problems. It is not very convincing; but it is remarkable that Mrs Oliphant should choose to write a virtually plotless story of mood and theme which might meet with approval in the current literary climate. Even more remarkable is the short novel Two Strangers, which was published by Fisher Unwin in 1894 in the Autonym Library, one of the many elegant publishing ventures of the 1890's, with fine typography, handsome vignettes and other decorations, and narrow areas of print on small pages. The content matched this visual sophistication: much conversation, little plot and an inconclusive conclusion, understated and "left in the air". The whole action occupies less than 48 hours and concerns just seven characters; it is unmistakably Mrs Oliphant's demonstration that she could, if she chose, adopt the new mood-and-theme, incident-without-conclusion type of writing, the new reaction against plot - which she had already recognised as typical of, for example, Henry James. It is not entirely successful; old-fashioned melodramatic rhetoric tends now and then to invalidate the quiet creation of mood and atmosphere. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Mrs Oliphant deliberately set out to write in this way.

But such experiments were ignored, and forward-looking criticism in the 1890's was not likely to take Mrs Oliphant seriously. The obvious spokesman for these views was Henry James, the father (more or less) of the aesthetics of the novel. His comment on Mrs Oliphant's work was published as an obituary in London Notes, (Harper's Weekly) for August 1897, and afterwards republished in Notes on Novelists (1914).

At first James's tone is generous, but ironic, suggesting quantity without quality, but he keeps his criticisms in reserve. He makes

a very significant comment: "her singular gift was less recognised, or at any rate less reflected, less reported upon, than it deserved".

This is admirable and true, and is precisely the reason why I am making this study of Mrs Oliphant. But James modifies his comment:

.... unless indeed she may have been one of those difficult cases for criticism, an energy of which the spirit and the form, struggling apart, never join hands with that effect of union which in literature more than anywhere else is strength. ¹⁷

This sums up the criticism that James goes on to make of her work.

We are reminded of Ben Jonson's complaint that Shakespeare "lacked art". Certainly Mrs Oliphant lacked that perfect adjustment of means to ends that G.H.Lewes recognised in Jane Austen;¹⁸ her work was spontaneous rather than crafted, and it has both the strengths and the weaknesses of spontaneity. And in her best work she has an authenticity of form and style that largely blunts the force of James's criticism. His third paragraph is notable for its generosity, its perceptiveness - and also for its subtle unfairness:

The explanation of her extraordinary fecundity was a rare original equipment, and imperturbability of courage, health and brain, to which she added the fortune or the merit of her having had to tune her instrument at the earliest age....To say that she was organised highly for literature would be to make too light of too many hazards and conditions; but few writers of our time have been so organised for liberal, for - one may almost put it - heroic production. One of the interesting things in big persons is that they leave us plenty of questions,

17. Henry James, Notes on Novelists (London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1914) p.358

18. Referred to in a letter of Charlotte Bronte to Lewes, dated 18th January 1848: "you add, I must learn to acknowledge her as ... one of the writers with the nicest sense of means to an end that ever lived". (The Shakespeare Head Bronte, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932; Letters, II, 180)

if only about themselves; and precisely one of those that Mrs Oliphant suggests is the wonder and mystery of a love of letters that could be so great without ever, on a single occasion even, being greater. It was of course not a matter of mere love; it was a part of her volume and abundance that she understood life itself in a fine freehanded manner and, I imagine, seldom refused to risk a push at a subject, however it might have given pause, that would help to turn her wide wheel....She showed in it all a sort of sedentary dash - an acceptance of the day's task and an abstention from the plaintive note from which I confess I could never withhold my admiration. 19

In these words are the best answer to the charge of over-production; the more copious the production the greater the chance to develop her understanding of life. Mrs Oliphant was a true professional. But the subtle hint of potboiling weakens James's argument, and the complaint that Mrs Oliphant is "so great without ever ... being greater" is misleading. She is very frequently quite as good as she is capable of being, and is continually surprising an attentive reader by her ability to transcend herself.

James continues by noting Mrs Oliphant's capacity for industry and compares her to Sir Walter Scott in her lack of concern for fastidious artistry. The next sentence has been quoted by several critics and is important:

She was really a great improvisatrice, a night-working spinner of long, loose, vivid yarns, numberless, pauseless, admirable, repeatedly, for their full, pleasant, reckless rustle over depths and difficulties - admirable, indeed, in any case of Scotch elements, for many a close engagement with these. 20

19. James, pp.358-9

20. James, p.359

Here by implication he is comparing her with Trollope whom he had called a "great improvisateur"; and after the generosity of his previous paragraph he is damning her with faint praise ("yarns", "pleasant"²¹...rustle"). Perhaps it is true that most (not all) of her stories are "loose" - that is, not as closely organised as a James novel; but as much as Dickens she found her own way to a form of novel which is recognisably hers and hers alone. And as James had earlier said "her singular gift was less recognised ... than it deserved".

James concludes his comment with two paragraphs mainly on Kirsteen (1890), which was much admired in the 1890's as Mrs Oliphant's finest Scottish novel. He is here particularly severe and his comments need close examination - which I must reserve for the detailed treatment of Kirsteen in Chapter 11.

In reading James it is as well to recognise that his insights faltered in the face of the early Victorian novel, the work of novelists maturing in the 1840's, the 1850's and the 1860's, like Mrs Oliphant. His views of Dickens and of Trollope cannot be accepted unreservedly; and his views of Mrs Oliphant can be usefully treated as a means towards clarifying our ideas a little, so that we may discover a more useful, more constructive approach to her work. In short, James is the Devil's Advocate again.

James's view of Mrs Oliphant was by no means typical of 1897. There were a great number of obituaries, often very appreciative. And in 1899 when the Autobiography and Letters appeared, there were

21. This word "pleasant" was frequently used by writers who commented on Mrs Oliphant's work; it is very patronising and unhelpful.

many reviews which once again paid generous tribute to her work, not merely to her "heroic" and tragic life. Most of the obituary notices and reviews, inevitably, were adulatory and indiscriminating, or merely reminiscent and biographical; but four of them deserve special mention. These are the obituaries of J.H.Millar, W.Robertson Nicoll, Gertrude Slater and Meredith Townsend.

The literary portrait of Mrs Oliphant to be synthesised from these four critics is impressive. Her strengths and her special qualities (not always the right ones) are singled out for praise, and a fairly accurate assessment made of her gift for portraying the "physical and social surroundings of her characters" (Millar) and for sober domestic realism. Nicoll justly stressed the consistency of tone maintained by Mrs Oliphant, who "never wrote anything conspicuously above or conspicuously below her standards", while Gertrude Slater, writing on 'Mrs Oliphant as a Realist' emphasised her concern for objective truth, derived from "a sight free from illusion, a hand inapt at exaggeration or suppression", and praised her imaginative insight into the motives of her characters. Townsend, the most eloquent of the obituarists, wrote for The Spectator, to which he had already contributed many enthusiastic and perceptive reviews of Oliphant novels;²² in this obituary and in a review of the Autobiography and Letters in The Cornhill Magazine he compared Mrs Oliphant with Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott and Charlotte Bronte, and gives Mrs Oliphant the advantage over all three, placing her second only to George Eliot

22. The authorship of articles in The Spectator from November 1874 to November 1877 and from November 1880 onwards is identified by several manuscript books in the possession of The Spectator library.

as a woman novelist. "That the world will come round to this judgement", said Townsend, "we feel confident". His confidence can scarcely yet be said to have been justified.²³

If then by 1899 there were plenty of perceptive people ready to assess and evaluate Mrs Oliphant's work intelligently and with insight, it is so much more surprising that in a few years she had sunk almost out of sight. I have already quoted George Saintsbury's view in the third edition of The History of Nineteenth Century Literature; a similar verdict was passed on her by Richard Garnett in The Dictionary of National Biography, and Hugh Walker in his Literature of the Victorian Era was able to be unreservedly enthusiastic only about her biographies, taking the standard view that whatever talent she had was completely destroyed by her over-production.²⁴

The inevitable reaction against an author after his death was even more thorough and destructive for Mrs Oliphant than for most. Since critics tend to take their views from each other, rather than go direct to the author on whom they comment, then once her reputation as a slender talent destroyed by adverse conditions was established it needed a critic who would take the trouble of reading her objectively and receptively to ensure any chance of rediscovery for her.

23. J.H.Millar, 'Mrs Oliphant as a Novelist', Blackwood's Magazine CLXII (September 1897), 305-19; W.Robertson Nicoll, obituary article, British Weekly XXII (1st July 1897), 177; Gertrude Slater, 'Mrs Oliphant as a Realist', The Westminster Review CXLVIII (December 1897), 682; Meredith Townsend, obituary article, The Spectator LXXIX (3rd July 1897), 12-13; Meredith Townsend, 'Mrs Oliphant', Cornhill Magazine LXXIX (series 3, VI) (June 1899), 779
24. Dictionary of National Biography, First Supplement, 1901; The Literature of the Victorian Era (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1910), pp.749-52, 929-31

The best that could be expected was that The Chronicles of Carlingford would be mentioned with approval and, unfortunately, Salem Chapel described as her best novel (again, by critics who merely took their opinions from other critics).

Those of Mrs Oliphant's friends, like Anne Thackeray Ritchie and A.C.Benson who survived her wrote with great enthusiasm and affection for her,²⁵ but their comments were about her life and character, and they had little of interest to say about her work. However, J.M. Barrie, no doubt in gratitude for her generous and enthusiastic championship of his work from the beginning of his career, did show understanding of the true value of her novels. He contributed a preface to her posthumous volume of short stories A Widow's Tale and other Stories (1898). Like so many people Barrie over-valued Mrs Oliphant's supernatural stories; but he did not patronise her or damn her with faint praise, nor did he accept that her best work suffered because of over-production. Indeed he seems to imply that her hard work was to the direct advantage of her literary quality. His one adverse criticism is much more soundly based than those made by his contemporaries: he points out that she suffered from inability to condense, to achieve brevity and concision:

There nearly always comes a point in Mrs Oliphant's novels where almost any writer of the younger school, without a sixth part of her capacity, could have stepped in with advantage. Often it is at the end of a fine scene, and what he would have had to tell her was that it was the end, for she seldom seemed to know.... Condensation, a more careful choice of words, we all learn these arts in the schools nowadays

25. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, From the Porch (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913); A.C.Benson, Memories and Friends (London: John Murray, 1924)

- they are natural to the spirit of the age; but Mrs Oliphant never learned them, they were contrary to her genius (as to that of some other novelists greater than she), and they would probably have trammelled her so much that the books would have lost more than they gained. 26

Brevity and concision were rather overvalued in the 1890's and were not virtues much favoured by the early Victorian novelists, brought up when the three-volume novel was taken for granted. But Mrs Oliphant gave herself very little time for much revision, and when her writing is weak it is because of wordiness, otiose repetition, and a lack of precision. I shall have to point this out on many occasions when I deal with individual novels.

An examination of Ernest A. Baker's History of the English Novel, published in 1939, will give a fair view of Mrs Oliphant's reputation up to the Second World War. Baker devotes about ten pages to her and concentrates almost entirely on The Chronicles of Carlingford, with an extended commentary on Miss Marjoribanks. This is of course right and proper, but his opinion of these books is vitiated by a coolly patronising tone, by some inaccuracy of detail, by a perverse missing of the point on several occasions and by an undervaluing of her irony, which he notices but does not seem to consider crucial. His view of Miss Marjoribanks is friendly but entirely superficial.

It was not until after the Second World War that Mrs Oliphant - very slowly - began to be rediscovered in the general revaluation of the Victorians that has been one of the most remarkable cultural phenomena of our time. Lucy Stebbins took the first step, in an

26. Preface to A Widow's Tale and other Stories (London and Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1898), p.vii

27. Ernest A. Baker, History of the English Novel, 10 vols. (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1939), X, 199-210

enthusiastic, but very indiscriminating, chapter of A Victorian Album (1946).²⁸ But a real revival of interest did not begin until the 1960's,²⁹ although many articles published on her tend to be purely biographical rather than critical. Full details are supplied in the Bibliography, sections 6 and 7. One book which does give serious critical attention to her work is Valentine Cunningham's Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel (Oxford University Press, 1975), but here the treatment is severely critical. Although Mr Cunningham's views are disagreeable to admirers of Mrs Oliphant, they deserve close examination if we are to strike a fair balance. Mr Cunningham, writing exclusively about those novels, set in Carlingford or in Scotland, that deal with religious themes, considers Mrs Oliphant to be shamelessly repetitive, carelessly inaccurate, "cheaply melodramatic", naively ill-informed about religious life (at least in England), resorting to stereotyped characterisation largely derived from Trollope, Charlotte Bronte, Dickens, George Eliot and Mrs Henry Wood, thus consistently failing "to perceive where her best interests might lie" (that is, in close observation of detail and in truth to observed reality). Influenced by Henry James, he complains of "the consistent evasion of close imaginative engagement".³⁰ There is some grudging - and condescending - praise, but Mr Cunningham was not at all convinced by the enthusiasm of Mr and Mrs Colby. In that he had not attempted to read outside the specific books to which he refers, the onslaught is less to be respected than it might seem,

28. Lucy Stebbins, A Victorian Album (London: Secker & Warburg 1946), pp.155-91

29. Perhaps the start of this revival was Katherine Moore's article "A Valiant Victorian", in Blackwood's Magazine CCLXXXIII (1958), 231-43

30. Cunningham, pp.233-5

even though most of his criticisms could be substantiated by selective sampling of Mrs Oliphant's books. Cheap melodramatics and stock characterisation do disfigure her work, but only on those occasions when her imaginative energy was temporarily exhausted, or when she was allured by the conventions of the "sensation" novel (especially in Salem Chapel and The Minister's Wife, on both of which Mr Cunningham's adverse comments, and his praise, are largely justified).

Yet in almost all her books rhetorical melodrama belongs to the accident, not to the essence. And what Mr Cunningham sees as derivativeness is no more than influence. Mrs Oliphant takes certain ideas from Trollope or George Eliot and remakes them in her own idiom. (This admittedly is not true when she takes a "sensation" theme from Wilkie Collins.) As for her failure "to perceive where her best interests might lie", if we take her work as a whole, and survey her progress from the 1850's to the 1890's, this is an accusation not worth taking seriously. I will consider some of Mr Cunningham's complaints in more detail later when I deal with individual novels.

I must conclude by rather more detailed reference to The Equivocal Virtue than I have hitherto given. It remains the only book devoted solely to Mrs Oliphant, and its publication in 1966 ought to have - at last - given her back her rightful place in literature. But it has not really done so, largely because of a subtle note of condescension which Mr and Mrs Colby, half-unconsciously, adopt towards Mrs Oliphant. This no doubt is why Gordon Haight was led to make such an unfair use of the book in George Eliot. The Equivocal Virtue contains a very important chapter dealing with Mrs Oliphant's complex

relations with her publishers, especially Blackwood and Macmillan. We owe Mr and Mrs Colby a very great debt for the pioneer work of this chapter. Also they show great gifts for selecting telling quotations from Mrs Oliphant's miscellaneous journalism, thus showing her frequent insights into English writers. And yet - when it comes to the detailed analysis of individual novels I find Mr and Mrs Colby consistently disappointing. They overpraise A Beleaguered City, a curiously romantic, didactic ghost story; they entirely fail to recognise the true strength of Miss Marjoribanks and other novels; their comments on many novels are sadly superficial and even inaccurate;³¹ they quite unreasonably dismiss most of the later books as "potboilers"; and although they rightly stress her anti-romantic stance they do less than justice to her irony. There is only one critic who has really recognised Mrs Oliphant's true value. This is Mrs Q.D. Leavis, whose comments are to be found in two prefaces: to the Zodiac Press edition of Miss Marjoribanks, published in 1969; and to the Leicester University Press reprint of the Autobiography and Letters, published in 1974. A very appropriate conclusion to this chapter is a brief quotation from that second preface:

[T]here is about all her work a real distinction, an identifiable Oliphant manner and attitude and tone, more suited to a later age than the ones she lived through. It inheres in her honesty and unflinching realism and her recognition - without cynicism or resentment - of the lack of idealism in ordinary life (a very unVictorian trait).... There is something disturbing in even her liveliest fictions and just as Trollope's novels always contain unhappy people and that is where his real strength lies, so

31. For example, they include A House in Bloomsbury in a list of "sweet, pallid, innocuous" love stories. But although two young people are in love by the end of the book, there is virtually no love making at all before this. The book is exclusively about the parent-and-child theme. (See Colby, p.134)

Mrs Oliphant's concentrate on painful situations of all kinds. She wrote about life as she knew it and made her characters - often faulty or unattractive people - face and cope with, or come to terms with, the dilemmas, the disillusion, the mental sufferings, she herself had survived....She was the opposite, too, of the bestseller novel-writer who peddles day-dreams and wish-fulfilment. 32

32. Introduction to A. & L., p.(27). It is a pity that when reviewing this reprint in The Victorian Periodicals Newsletter in March 1978 (XI, 32-4) Mrs Colby was unwilling to modify her views by Mrs Leavis's.

CHAPTER TWO

THE POSITION OF WOMEN

Women have a great deal to bear in this world.
 Their lot is in many respects harder than that
 of men, and neither higher education, nor the
 suffrage, nor anything else can mend it.
 (Cousin Mary, 1888, p.85)

In one particular area it is very important to modify Mrs Oliphant's reputation. Invariably when her name is mentioned in connection with the feminist movement of the nineteenth century she is described as an anti-feminist, with no attempt to qualify this description. Even Mrs Leavis expresses such a view.¹ And Elaine Showalter in her book on the feminist tradition in English fiction, A Literature of Their Own, proves her point by what may seem an unanswerable quotation from a letter by Mrs Oliphant, referring to "Stuart Mill and his mad notion of the franchise for women".² This letter was written to John Blackwood in 1866 when she offered an article for Blackwood's Magazine on John Stuart Mill's proposal of the franchise for a selected number of British women. But three years after the date of this letter Mrs Oliphant's views on this very point had changed; and in the thirty years of her life that followed the letter all her views had dramatically changed, so that if we compared her views on the women's rights movement in 1890 with those she held in 1850 it scarcely seems to be the same woman writing. As the voice

1. Leicester University Press reprint of A. & L. (1974), p.454, note to p.70
2. Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (Princeton; Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1977) p.217. The quotation is to be found in A. & L., p.211

of feminism became more open, and as the successes of the movement accumulated (women's colleges, careers for women, the Married Women's Property Act and so on) she found herself more and more carried in the direction of feminism. And a close examination of her novels written in the 1880's and 1890's, and many earlier ones, shows her unmistakably protesting against the injustices which she believed women had to endure in English society. Almost everything that feminists were saying can be found in Mrs Oliphant's novels, either in specific statements by herself as narrator or by one of her more clear-sighted heroines, or by the implications of her plot-line and characterisation.

It is possible to trace the development of her views with very precise accuracy by examining a series of articles she wrote on the subject, including incidental references while writing on other topics, starting in 1856 and continuing almost to the last year of her life, and I must summarise these articles before proceeding to examine her attitude to the position of women as shown in her novels.

The first two articles were published in Blackwood's Magazine, respectively in April 1856 and in February 1858 ("The Laws Concerning Women" and "The Condition of Women").³ These articles demonstrate how total was the transformation of her views during the next twenty years, since they are uncompromisingly anti-feminist. The call for women's rights seems to her wildly exaggerated:

3. Blackwood's Magazine LXXIX, 379-87; LXXXIII, 139-54

To upset the ordinary social economy for any clamant grievance of a time, however just, would be the most shortsighted and ruinous policy imaginable. 4

If the law allows women to suffer injustice from men - for example by allowing custody of children, after separation or divorce, to go to the husband - how can it be considered right that our legislators "should take an unjust power from the husband, to give it to the wife"?

Her point of view, more or less, is that the disabilities of women have been created largely by nature, not by society, and that if the nineteenth century idea of progress involves social change this is entirely misleading when considering the role of women:

All the progress which we have really made, and all the additional and fictitious progress which exists in our imagination, prompts us to the false idea that there is a remedy for everything, and that no pain is inevitable. 5

And yet she allows that under the law as it currently stood women were the sufferers. Nevertheless she protests at any hysterically overstrained picture of the suffering endured by wives throughout the country. And the idea that men and women "are natural antagonists to each other, is, to our thinking ... a monstrous and unnatural idea". 6

In the 1860's the opinions of John Stuart Mill were made public and his famous book The Subjection of Women was published in 1869. He had already given his support for twenty lady petitioners appealing

4. "The Condition of Women", Blackwood's Magazine LXXXIII, 146

5. "The Condition of Women", p.153

6. "The Laws Concerning Women", Blackwood's Magazine LXXIX, 379

for the franchise for women householders, that is women who lived alone possessing their own property and having neither a father nor a brother nor a husband to represent their political interests by voting on their behalf. Mrs Oliphant published two articles which made severe criticisms of Mill's views: "The Great Unrepresented" in Blackwood's Magazine in September 1866 (the article which she offered to Blackwood in the letter from which Elaine Showalter quotes); and a review of The Subjection of Women in The Edinburgh Review in October 1869.⁷ The two articles adopt a sustained, almost bravura, tone of irony as Mrs Oliphant makes a systematic analysis of Mill's views. Her opinion is that women are quite distinct from men, having their own unique and separate role to play:

We are not men spoiled in the making, but women. We have our own uses in the world, and the loftiest genius and most admirable wisdom could make no expedient to replace us were we to strike work. 8

And, she says, it is really an insult to women to treat them as if they were bad imitations of men and ought to be given similar privileges:

[Woman] has been created for some purpose of her own, and not to jostle man in everything he is doing, and contend with him for a miserable equality.... It looks like the kind of vague, benevolent desire to give a protégée something, which occasionally stirs the mind of men who are imperfectly acquainted with women. What would she like? It must be something general - a present to the sex; and Mr Mill may have hit upon the expedient of giving her a vote, just as a helpless private individual in similar circumstances would give a bonbonnière of unusual grandeur and absurdity. 9

7. Blackwood's Magazine C, 367-79; Edinburgh Review CXXX, 572-602

8. "The Great Unrepresented", Blackwood's Magazine C, 376

9. "The Great Unrepresented", pp.377-8

And with extravagant humour Mrs Oliphant ends "The Great Unrepresented" by warning Mill that "if his uncalled for championship continues to expose us to the smartness of newspaper articles, and the gibes of honourable members, and all the little witticisms of all the little wits" then he will expose himself to the "indignation and resentment" of women who will "nourish an everlasting enmity and scorn of him".¹⁰ She maintains this tone almost throughout the article.

My quotations have already made one thing quite clear: in these articles Mrs Oliphant deliberately adopted what in effect is a fully feminist point of view, even though she makes a paradoxical use of it to combat the feminist views of Mill. In short her views and her tone of voice were changing; she was becoming a strong spokeswoman for the role of women in society (Miss Marjoribanks was published in 1866, the year of the first article), but not by legislation, the vote or any such means.

The 1869 article was a review not only of The Subjection of Women but also of Woman's Work and Woman's Culture, a series of essays edited by Josephine Butler, giving Mrs Oliphant an opportunity to comment on the theme of work for women. It is a measure of the progress that her views had undergone in ten years that she is on balance sympathetic to the need of women to find work, although she is contemptuous of the extremism of the articles in Josephine Butler's book, and warns women that if they wish to compete in a man's world of work, they must learn to balance the conflicting

10. "The Great Unrepresented", p.379

claims of career and family. But the bulk of the article is devoted to Mill whom she accuses of gross exaggeration and false reasoning.

She ironically represents his views of women as follows:

Weak in body, crushed in mind, all hope and natural delight gone out of her, the feeble creature drags her lengthening chain, the stronger mocks her with taunts, with jeers, with new impositions. 11

and she comments:

It is to him no complicated matter which a hundred subtleties of nature combine to render difficult, but a simple question to be settled by that sleight of hand which is called legislation. It is strange to find so profound a mind taking so superficial a view He mixes up the fundamental question - which we may call that of the official superiority of man in the economy of the world - with local laws of marriage and individual hardships resulting from the same; strangely conceiving the greater to be produced by the less, and not the less by the greater.
12

And yet in spite of this irony Mrs Oliphant's views were hardening. She was in full sympathy with the Married Women's Property Bill; and although in 1866 she had scornfully rejected Mill's call for the franchise for women householders, three years later her views (to her own surprise) had changed. She had in fact in 1866 allowed that Mill's view on this theme was unimpeachably logical, and yet unacceptable for reasons that were beyond logic; but in 1869 such a barren paradox no longer seemed worth offering. It was just ten years since her husband's death, so she now had had plenty of experience of being a woman householder; and her view now was that such women have a perfect right to claim political equality with men:

11. Edinburgh Review CXXX, 576

12. Edinburgh Review CXXX, 578

No rational creature can assert ... that a young fellow of four or five and twenty, just emancipated from the bondage of education, is by mere right of his manhood able to judge on any public or political question better than a highly educated woman ten or fifteen years his senior, who probably fills a much more important place than he does in the world. 13

and for this reason she has a perfect right to choose her MP "or for that matter if she likes to propose him on the hustings". It is interesting to compare her heavily ironic use of the word "logical" in the 1866 article with the perfectly serious use of "rational" in the above passage.

There are no articles specifically devoted to the women's rights theme in the 1870's, although one devoted to Harriet Martineau in Blackwood's Magazine deals interestingly with the condescension adopted by male reviewers to women writers, who have therefore to encounter worse difficulties than male writers.¹⁴ But in 1880 in Fraser's Magazine appeared an article called "The Grievances of Women".¹⁵ After the articles of 1866 and 1869 (and much more after the articles of 1856 and 1858) the tone is startling. The article is unmistakably and unambiguously feminist, written with bitterness and resentment against masculine attitudes to women. The women's movement had progressed considerably since the 1860's and had provoked much fierce mockery from unsympathetic men (for example, the expression "the shrieking sisterhood" - which Mrs Oliphant particularly resented). She now felt that men were making a cruel and unjust use of their

13. Edinburgh Review CXXX, 592

14. Blackwood's Magazine, April 1877; CXXI, 472-96

15. Fraser's Magazine, May 1880; CI (n.s.XXI), 698-710

inevitable physical superiority to humiliate women and keep them in an inferior position:

For the sentiment of men towards women is thoroughly ungenerous from beginning to end, from the highest to the lowest.... Whatever women do, in the general is undervalued by men in the general, because it is done by women. How this impairs the comfort of women, how it shakes the authority of mothers, injures the self-respect of wives, and gives a general soreness of feeling everywhere, I will not attempt to tell. It is too large a subject to be touched by any kind of legislation; ¹⁶ but without this the occasional wrongs of legislation, the disabilities at which we grumble, would be but pin-pricks and would lose all their force. They are mere evidence of a sentiment which is more inexplicable than any other by which the human race has been actuated, a sentiment against which the most of us, at one period or other of our lives, have to struggle blindly, not knowing whence it originates, or how it is to be overcome. ¹⁷

These are the last words of the article, and the words are the concentrated essence of Mrs Oliphant's whole argument, a protest against this ungenerous sentiment among men - which includes a consistent and intolerable inclination to undervalue the hard work that women do (as housewives and mothers). Elsewhere in the article she offers views on the economic subjection of women, on the right of women to work as doctors and in other professions, and of course on the right of women householders to the vote. She even boldly suggests that as a compensation for the denial of the vote women should be freed from the payment of "those rates which qualify every gaping clown to exercise the franchise". ¹⁸

16. It is worth noticing that Mrs Oliphant here shows that in one respect her views had not changed, that legislation was no answer to the problem of women's disabilities.

17. Fraser's Magazine CI, 710

18. Fraser's Magazine CI, 710

In the 1880's then Mrs Oliphant had come to identify herself with a great deal of the principles of the feminist movement, and it would not be difficult to isolate from her novels and articles an implicit or indeed explicit sympathy with the cause of women. One example will be quite enough. In 1889 in Blackwood's Magazine she reviewed the novel Ideala, published anonymously but in fact by Sarah Grand, a dedicated feminist. This was her view:

It is the expression of a great many thoughts of the moment, and of a desire which is stronger than it ever has been before, cultivated by many recent agitations and incidents, for a new development of feminine life, for an emancipation, which even those who wish for it most strongly could not define and scarcely understand.... There is nothing worthy of slight or scorn in Ideala or in the feeling which is expressed or responded to in this book.... The heroine of this book is an example of the new sentiment which has been developed by, or which has been the cause of - we do not know which to say - the singular and scarcely recognised revolution which has taken place in the position and aspirations of women during the last generation.... Hosts of young and ardent minds, once kept fairly in discipline and order, have begun to think and to struggle for their own career and destiny in a manner inconceivable to their mothers - or at least to their grandmothers, let us say - for the mothers have veered round in sympathy with them to the new standing point. 19

The last comment of course is very significant: Mrs Oliphant herself is one of the "mothers" who "have veered round in sympathy ... to the new standing point". A little later she says:

There are some [feminists] still, and those naturally the most prominent, who justify all the old vulgar commonplaces about the interference of women in matters which do not concern them; but the evil effect of these undesirable leaders is dying away in the general change which has come over the spirit of our dream. Our daughters are becoming what our sons used alone to be

19. "The Old Saloon", Blackwood's Magazine August 1889; CXLVI, 257

- independent existences, conscious of warm individual life and wants and ambitions, and no longer hampered in the means of fulfilling these ambitions. It is only those whose aspirations are political who come prominently before the public; and these are the most easy to laugh at or put down with a sneer (though also the most difficult; for the political women have come to be quite contemptuous of jeers which would once have fired them to passion.) The other revolutionaries are much less easy to deal with, and they are everywhere. It is not a sect or a party, but an atmosphere, and it breathes through almost every educated household in the land. 20

It is significant that in the total approval she gives to Ideala she views quite coolly the decision of the heroine to leave her husband and live with a lover - although indeed she approves of her eventual decision to renounce her lover (a decision which Mrs Oliphant recognises as tragic). Conversion from one point of view to another could scarcely go further.

During the 1890's Mrs Oliphant retreated to some extent from a radical feminist position. There was a great deal in this decade to repel her. The challenges to Victorian orthodoxies on sexual matters were far more insistent than they had ever been before, and the voice of feminism was much more vociferous and uncompromising, indeed at times strident. Women like Edith Sharp, Menie Muriel Dowie, Sarah Grand and, most aggressive of all, George Egerton (Mary Chevalita Dunne), proclaimed the new gospel of Woman, the 'New Woman', in every way the equal of Man (and in the view of some writers his superior), entitled to sexual, social and political emancipation, raising the standard of war and challenging the institution of marriage. It was the age of The Yellow Book, which (at least in its earlier issues) seemed to be subversive of all decorums and resolutely

determined to disturb the complacency of the public. Like so many older writers, Mrs Oliphant found herself unable to understand or accept her juniors. The tone of the 1890's was too much for her, too extreme, too flamboyant, too ruthless. The demand for flats and clubs for women, the challenge to the sanctity of marriage, the semi-proclamations of war against men: they disturbed her and made her in some ways more sceptical of the women's movement than she had been since the 1860's.

The main evidence for Mrs Oliphant's changing attitudes in the 1890's is to be found in the curious series of discursive articles called "The Looker-on" (six in all) published in Blackwood's Magazine from August 1894 to October 1896. They ramble distractingly from one topic to another, and might not seem to represent Mrs Oliphant's most serious views; but there is more than mere dilettantism. The articles which deal in part with the latest developments of the women's movement appeared in August 1894, January 1895, June 1895 and October 1896.²¹ And the theme dominates her notorious article "The Anti-Marriage League",²² with its fierce attack on Jude the Obscure. This article (which also contains an attack on Grant Allen and other writers) ought to be considered in the context, not of literary criticism, but of Mrs Oliphant's over-hostile reaction to the recent excesses of the women's movement.

Her opinion is basically that the New Woman is "a creation of the press":

21. Blackwood's Magazine CLVI, 285-308; CLVII, 148-70; CLVII, 902-29, CLX, 481-507

22. Blackwood's Magazine, January 1896; CLIX, 135-49

To be sure, there are a few live specimens of her about the world, though not a hundredth part as many as of the Old Woman, or the British Matron, or whatever other epithet may be used to note the ordinary member of Society; but her importance to the newspapers cannot be gainsaid. There can (almost) always be something found to say about her. You can laugh at her, jeer, despise, criticise, tell stories of her, to the production of endless copy. There are very few subjects, indeed, that hold out so long. 23

Yet it is only the more extreme views of feminism, the specific demands of many writers that woman should assert her autonomy and her separateness, that aroused Mrs Oliphant's scorn. In spite of everything her basic view as developed in the 1880's remained largely intact, chastened perhaps, but still recognisable. It was in the 1890's that she published Sir Robert's Fortune, the strongly feminist novel which I shall analyse at the end of this chapter. And in a contribution to The New Review dated March 1896, "A Noble Lady", an obituary of her friend Lady Cloncurry, she writes as follows:

She had no sympathy ... with the flutter of feminine agitations which have been so general; though she was never contemptuous as so many are, but was ready to discriminate between that which is modest and just and that which is noisy and silly, a thing which the wisest women do not always do. At the same time she was strong on her own side, if we may so express it - a thing which, apart from all politics and even with a strong sense of the moral impossibility of any remedy for certain grievances, most women are, and we all have a right to be. Nothing could be more characteristic than the stories she used to tell.... stories of men thoughtless and indifferent, of careless husbands, and unthought-of sacrifices. 24

This passage represents the balanced and moderate - but still feminist - view that Mrs Oliphant had held for most of her mature years.

23. "The Looker-on", Blackwood's Magazine CLVII, 904

24. The New Review XIV, 246

Her ideal basically was that men and women should move closer together, to work together on equal terms, and come to a better understanding of one another, for the benefit of their necessary interdependence. There is an illuminating passage in "The Looker-on" for October 1896, in which Mrs Oliphant complains of the increasing tendency towards the separation of the sexes as men drift to their libraries and clubs, while women, unable to reciprocate, grow more and more frustrated, less fulfilled than ever before.²⁵

My documentation of Mrs Oliphant's journalism on the women's rights theme has been extensive, but it is essential in order to make explicit what remains partly implicit, and therefore not immediately identifiable, in her novels - and also to show that her work was not ideologically homogeneous, but developed and matured in pace with her experience of life. We will expect to detect a similar development in her novels. This is indeed so, but paradoxically her attitudes seem to develop both more slowly and more rapidly than in her journalism: more slowly because there is no such dramatic reversal as from 1866 to 1869, and as we move forward from novel to novel we can watch her views "slowly broaden down from precedent to precedent"; more rapidly, because after the sharply anti-feminist views overtly expressed in earlier novels, a recessive championship of the rights of women rose to the surface and from the 1860's onwards influenced her treatment of the relations of the sexes more unequivocally than it was able to influence her journalism until 1880.

25. Blackwood's Magazine CLX, 483-8

I have said that her feminist views in her earlier novels are recessive because the views she expresses - or the views her characters express - in unequivocal refutation of women's rights are called in question by the line of action of the novel or by the dramatised predicaments of her characters. One example is enough to make this clear. Her third novel Merkland (three volumes, Colburn, 1851) contains a minor character, Marjory Falconer, who has strong views on women's rights, but Mrs Oliphant invites no sympathy for these views, which are shown to be the effects of an undisciplined mind which has not yet found a valid way to occupy itself:

Marjory Falconer was by no means so rude and unfeminine as she gave herself credit for being, and had bitter compunctions of outraged delicacy sometimes, after those masculine speeches, which revenged her womanhood completely.... The strong and healthful spirit of the motherless ill-educated girl was forcing itself through a rough process of development, and, like other strong plants, was rank and wild in its growth, and needed vigorous pruning - pruning which it could not fail, by-and-bye, to manage for itself, with an unhesitating hand. 26

And Anne, the heroine of the novel, takes Marjory severely to task:

"Let me convince you, Marjory, that we stoop mightily from our just position when we condescend to muddle with such humiliating follies as the rights of women - that we do compromise our becoming dignity when we involve ourselves in a discreditable warfare, every step in advance of which is a further humiliation to us....I do declare war against these polemics of yours - all and several. I would have you more thoroughly woman-proud; it is by no means inconsistent with the truest humility.... Strength and honour, Marjory; household strength, and loftiness, and purity - better things than any imaginary rights that clamour themselves into mere words." 27

26. Merkland I, 278-9

27. Merkland III, 33

And, sure enough, Marjory's views have been entirely changed by the end of the book, largely as a result of achieving a happy marriage.

Yet, if we look more closely at the action of this novel, Mrs Oliphant proves to be more feminist than she seems. Like so many of her heroines (and some of her heroes) Anne feels an urgent need to be of some use in the world - and there is a clear implication that uselessness is so often the fate of women. She devotes her energies to clearing her brother's name from a false accusation, saying to her mother "I am not merely an appendage, a piece of goods.... I am no longer a girl; there is some other duty for me now than mere obedience." Her other brother, Lewis, is:

somewhat struck by Anne's assertion of some little claim to her own judgment. He certainly did not think her so wise as himself, but he knew her quite equal to various of his friends, whose claim to independent will and action was quite indisputable. Only, she was a woman; that was all the difference. Lewis resolved to be very enlightened and liberal, to let his sister express her opinions freely, and himself to give a final and impartial deliverance upon them. 28

In this passage we hear virtually the first notes of the irony which Mrs Oliphant was to use so richly and so eloquently in her later novels; and the voice of male complacency and condescension is heard many times in them. In particular we find many brothers who despise their sisters and give them no credit for minds and independent existences. ("Whatever women do, in the general, is undervalued by men in the general, because it is done by women". These were her words of 1880,²⁹ but this passage of 1851 carries

28. Merkland II, 117, 119-20

29. See above, p.28

exactly the same implication.)

A similar examination of the position of women and their need to find a role in the world and combat the uselessness which has such a weakening effect of their character is found in Orphans (Hurst and Blackett, 1858) - although the theme is only lightly stressed. However, a new theme puts in an appearance in this novel, a woman's ability to fulfil herself and do good work in the world without being married; and this theme (a considerable challenge to the orthodoxies of Victorian fiction)³⁰ recurs with great regularity in her subsequent work. Examples of novels in which the theme is implied or overtly stated are Madonna Mary (1867), The Three Brothers (1870), Whiteladies (1875), The Curate in Charge (1876), Harry Joscelyn (1881), Hester (1883), The Marriage of Elinor (1892).

It was not until the 1860's - with The Chronicles of Carlingford, above all with Miss Marjoribanks - that Mrs Oliphant was at last able to discover her identity as a novelist. And subsequently her feminist stance, however muted it may sometimes seem, however much the theme is left implicit rather than made explicit, consistently modifies her approach to plot and character. It is not necessary to make a chronological survey of her novels to demonstrate my point, as I did with her journalism. It is enough to examine in detail the special qualities of Mrs Oliphant's feminism as maintained in the majority of these novels from Carlingford to the end of her career.

The characteristic heroine - though sometimes only the sub-heroine - of Mrs Oliphant's novels is a woman of independent mind,

30. For example it was Trollope's invariable conviction that a woman's best career is marriage.

proudly concerned to assert her individuality, and even to defy convention a little. Such a woman appears in her very first novel Margaret Maitland.³¹ This woman, Grace Maitland, has adopted a satirical and rather hostile attitude to life in consequence of unjust treatment by her family. But Grace's story is a thoroughly unsatisfactory muddle, consisting largely of sensational melodrama and stereotyped characters, inadequately motivated and quite unconvincing in detail; so nothing of interest can be made of her, apart from isolated speeches. And no consistent use is made of this type of heroine until the appearance of Lucilla Marjoribanks in 1866. Lucilla has no feminist feelings for most of the novel to which she gives her name, because she finds an adequate use for her superabundant energies in organising the social life of Carlingford. But, after her father's death and the discovery of her own financial insecurity, she begins to feel the injustices of a woman's position more keenly. Later examples of such a heroine (an incomplete list) are Mrs Severn in The Three Brothers (1870), Phoebe Beecham in Phoebe Junior (1876), Mrs Meredith and Agnes Burchell in Carita (1877), Hester in Hester (1883), Lady Markland in A Country Gentleman and his Family (1886), Anne Penton in A Poor Gentleman (1889) and Laura Lance in The Sorceress (1893).

Needless to say, the woman of independent mind is not Mrs Oliphant's only kind of heroine. She will happily create the supposedly typical Victorian heroine, submissive, conformist, innocent, wrapped up in her menfolk, and destined to a happy marriage in the last

31. Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside, Written by Herself, 3 vols (Colburn, 1849)

chapter. There are far too many sweetly insipid love stories, created without any imaginative engagement in the situations, scattered through her work. This indicates a curious ambivalence in her approach, in one of her recurrent moods revelling in innocent, vulnerable heroines while in another mood challenging this very convention; with one hand offering the public a charming idyll (and not merely out of cynical potboiling, since she really quite enjoyed it) and with the other presenting ironic views of the relations of the sexes. By no means all her innocent heroines must be dismissed as failures, but the more forceful independent heroines are much more interesting.

The woman who wants work occurs with great frequency in Mrs Oliphant's novels. This woman is generally a minor character in order that the novel may end in the orthodox way with a marriage for the heroine. But Cecily St John, the heroine of The Curate in Charge, (2 volumes, Macmillan, 1876), rejoices to find a purpose in her life in becoming the parish schoolmistress, even though this means a loss of social status; and she would prefer this career to the marriage which is offered to her in the last chapter. Rosamund Saumarez, the sub-heroine of The Railwayman and his Children (3 volumes, Macmillan, 1891), inspired by her careerist friend, Madeline, is keen to find work and makes no response at all to the love which is offered her. Her attitude to life is somewhat cynical and this is because of her poverty. She "knew the shifts of living when there is very little money to live on."³²

In some novels, although she accepts the convention of concluding

32. The Railwayman and his Children II, 253

a novel with marriage, Mrs Oliphant transforms the convention from within by making the heroine choose a husband, not for love, but frankly to further her career and ambitions, vicariously as the power behind the masculine throne. This is the choice made by two Carlingford heroines Lucilla Marjoribanks and Phoebe Beecham; and Marion Rowland, the main heroine of The Railwayman, marries in effect for the same reason.

If Mrs Oliphant was willing to take an approving view of marriage to further a career, she was equally willing to be tolerant of the adventuress or husband huntress who marries frankly for money. The characteristic attitude of the Victorian novelist to the husband huntress can be measured by Trollope's Arabella Trefoil (in The American Senator) finally forced to recognise herself as heartless and to make a very humiliating marriage; by Dickens' Bella Wilfer who must be cured of her craving for a rich husband if she is to be really happy (as the thoroughly corrupted Mrs Lammle never will). But Mrs Oliphant's approach is uniquely her own. She fully recognises the devices used by impoverished women to find husbands, but refuses to condemn them. Indeed she frequently challenges the reader's prejudices on this subject and asks him to show more understanding of such women. (And she is equally sympathetic to the match-making mother). The most remarkable example is in The Sorceress (3 volumes, F.V.White & Co, 1893) where, for many chapters, Laura Lance, the sorceress of the title, is kept "off stage" while the reader is led to accept the anger and disgust of the other characters for her scheming and her intrusion into the lives of unoffending young men. But then we meet her - and are forced to admire her

irresistible charm and her intelligence. And shortly after this Mrs Oliphant invites us to sympathise with her need to escape from the degrading humiliations of poverty - the only escape available for a woman. Similarly Julia Herbert in The Wizard's Son (3 volumes, Macmillan, 1884) dedicates herself to catching a rich husband, as does Beatrice in Agnes (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett, 1866); and although Mrs Oliphant is fully aware of the weakness and egotism of these women she refuses to condemn them but views them with compassion. For what other use can they make of their lives?

It was not a high view, certainly, of a woman's heart or hopes; but it was true that there were two or three in the past - as indeed there might even yet be some in the future - whose appearance had quickened in the mind of Beatrice all those thrills of ambition and hopes of advancement, which, if she had been a man, she might have carried out in more legitimate ways. It was not mercenary hope, either, poor soul - it was advancement to a better life, and not simply to greater wealth or rank. 33

"If she had been a man" - the blame is fairly placed, not upon Beatrice, but upon the frustrations of being a woman in nineteenth-century England. Certainly a woman ought to look first for love in marriage; but even if she looks first for wealth or for rank she may still intend to devote herself to the welfare of the man she marries, as does another Beatrice, called Bice, in Sir Tom (1884).

It is not only the adventuress whom Mrs Oliphant wished to rehabilitate. In her mature novels she constantly protested against all stereotypes, all the over-simplifications and falsifications in the popular view of women, especially as seen in novels. She was particularly annoyed at the half-patronising, half-ribald

stereotype of the old maid, supposed by men to be unable to win a man's love and consequently bound to decline into imbecility. Equally she protests against the stereotype of the woman whose only role is to be ornamental, as she is incapable of serious thought and mature judgement, or of any participation in a man's intellectual activities. She complains (at least some of her heroines do for her) against the over-protecting and over-chaperoning of women, and against the taking for granted of the domestic work they do. (This latter theme is very bitterly developed in the Fraser's Magazine article.) And she often - perhaps in revenge for centuries of misogyny - represents men as morally inadequate, smugly self-centred and coarse-grained, and sometimes lacking in any capacity for imaginative or charitable identification with another person's (that is a woman's) point of view.

According to Meredith Townsend, Mrs Oliphant had once told him in a letter that she "knew little of men who were at once good and strong".³⁴ She was thinking no doubt of her male relatives, brothers, nephew and sons, all of whom showed strange weakness and inadequacy in their lives, as did her husband. But it was an exaggeration that she had known only weak men; for example her great friend John Tulloch (a theologian and Principal of St Mary's College, St Andrews) whom she unreservedly admired, could not be described in this way. But if she wrote this letter to Townsend then she was well aware of her tendency to an animus against men.

It is only fair to add, however, that she can be equally severe on those who devise stereotypes of victimised, suffering women

34. The Cornhill Magazine, June 1899; LXXIX, 778

in order to feed the flames of the feminist movement.³⁵ And she can also present images of morally weak and inadequate women, greedy, primitive and self-obsessed, quite as effective as similar portraits of men.

In general Mrs Oliphant complains, half-jokingly, of "the strong sense of superiority which exists in the male bosom from the age of two upwards". This is from the Fraser's Magazine article,³⁶ but similar views might be quoted from several of the later novels. The quotation continues "It cannot be fear of a new competitor and yet it looks like it", since she is complaining of the hostility of many men to the desire of women to compete on equal terms in a man's world. Many of her heroines do just that, and adopt a tone of cool rational equality. This is particularly true of those women who work as artists: Rose Lake in Miss Marjoribanks, Mrs Severn in The Three Brothers and Menie Laurie in the immature early novel The Quiet Heart (1854).

It is when she is writing about the ruthless and unscrupulous use of masculine power, usually in marriage, that Mrs Oliphant's feminist note is most eloquent and powerful. I will examine this theme in detail when I analyse Sir Robert's Fortune; but the theme occurs in several novels. And, like Trollope and George Eliot, she has a gift for creating the atmosphere of unhappy marriages which reduce to nervous prostration wives like Mrs Joscelyn (Harry Joscelyn, 1881) and Mrs Douglas (Kirsteen, 1890). The bleakest study of an unhappy marriage is The Ladies Lindores (3 volumes,

35. See for example my quotation from The Edinburgh Review, CXXX on page 26 above.

36. Fraser's Magazine CI, 707

Blackwood, 1883) whose heroine, Lady Car, is subjected to constant humiliations by her husband and is forced to suffer in almost unrelieved silence until she is released by his death in a riding accident. Learning of his death, she makes no pretence of grief and can express only her sense of relief at her escape.

In the 1890's the feminist bias of her novels remained largely unchanged, in spite of the distaste expressed in her journalism for the extremism of many feminists. Discussion of women's rights takes place in the later novels, and confident 'New Women' appear, partly no doubt in concession to topicality. They are viewed with amusement, but not satirised. A good example is the very minor character Dolly Prestwich in The Marriage of Elinor (3 volumes, Macmillan, 1892). She is called a fin de siècle girl and she does social work in the East End, studies at the Slade School and is prepared to talk on equal terms with men about law and medicine. Her mother finds her alarming, thus enabling Mrs Oliphant - who of course is of the mother's generation - to remain detached. And yet the mother is a sharply satirised figure, an aristocrat, all mannerism, display and ostentation (who might perhaps have made a better use of her energies if she had found a useful role in life) - so in the end the sympathy is more with the daughter than with the mother. Again Mrs Oliphant shows her ambivalence.³⁷

37. A much more interestingly ambivalent study of a committed feminist appeared much earlier in for Love and Life (3 vols Hurst & Blackett, 1874). Lady Mary Tottenham is dedicated to the cause of higher education for women, a cause which Mrs Oliphant had always viewed with scepticism. She wants women to have "properly cultivated intellects" and regrets that they have remained unresponsive to this ideal. In fact she is seen as over-paternalistic (should this be maternalistic?) and is treated ironically in other ways; and yet on one occasion the hero of the novel is made to show sympathy with some of her views.

To show how the whole form and content of Mrs Oliphant's later novels was coloured by her feminism it is necessary to make a detailed analysis of one novel. Ideally this ought to be Hester (1883). But I shall be devoting a whole chapter to this one novel, and it is more convenient to use Sir Robert's Fortune (1895), though it is an extremely blemished novel, to illustrate in detail the strength and conviction of her feminist views.

Sir Robert's Fortune was serialised in the midly feminist periodical Atalanta³⁸ from October 1893 to September 1894, and was published by Methuen in 1895. Its central theme is basically that of the Fraser's Magazine article: the contempt for women that men take for granted, causing them to inflict humiliations on them with the implicit assumption that they are entirely acting within their rights. This theme is embodied principally in a developing relationship between the heroine, Lily Ramsay, and Ronald Lumsden, the man she eventually marries but, by the end of the novel, comes to reject almost unreservedly in a total protest of her whole personality. The initiating incident of the plot is one of the most hackneyed in Victorian fiction: Lily's guardian, Sir Robert Ramsay, orders her to give up Ronald and she refuses, although this means the loss of Sir Robert's fortune, since he will disinherit her for her disobedience. She will not "give up Ronald for the sake of his nasty filthy siller"

38. Atalanta lasted eleven years from October 1887 to September 1898. Its main editor was L.T.Meade and it was aimed at girls. It printed articles on work for women and featured an elaborate series on a comprehensive education of girls in English literature and history. During the months in which Sir Robert's Fortune was being serialised Mrs Oliphant also contributed a series of discursive articles on a variety of topics, including feminist themes. The views are similar to those expressed in "the Looker-On" series.

and would be glad to live in a garret. ("I could get my own living".) But she is not allowed the garret. She is sent off to a lonely house on the remote Scottish moors, there - so Sir Robert hopes - to come to her senses and learn obedience.

Ronald, however, has no mind to lose Sir Robert's fortune. Like so many mercenary young men in Victorian novels, he insists that he wants the money only for Lily's sake, since it would be intolerable for her to live in poverty. But, as he cannot make her share his point of view, he devises an elaborate scheme of deception. He insists on a secret marriage, but tells Lily she must remain at home in her moorland house while he, allegedly, looks for a house in Edinburgh. But he has no intention of buying a house, nor of living with Lily at all until Sir Robert's death frees him to come to the Highlands and claim her and the property. By marrying Lily he secures her for himself; by staying away he deceives Sir Robert about the facts.

Thus the novel moves to a rhythm of repeated deceits, excuses and prolonged absences which slowly erode Lily's confidence in Ronald as the secrecies and mysteries accumulate. The climax comes when Ronald suddenly arrives to carry off Lily's newly born baby, since Sir Robert is arriving and must on no account discover such fatal evidence of the marriage. This results in an acute emotional shock for Lily and a prostrating illness (a regrettable novelistic device).

Ronald's invariable technique with Lily is to make use of tender and romantic love making. As long as she believes in him the note is idyllic - though very ironically so; and early in the book there

is a beautiful courtship scene set amidst splendid Scottish scenery. But eventually Lily grows deeply disenchanted with romantic love-making, which she comes to see as a masculine device to avoid treating her as a responsible and mature woman:

She did not wish to be taken to his heart, to be kept by any caress from seeing his face and reading what was in it.

To call her my bonny Lily! to lean her head upon his breast that she might cry it all out there and be comforted, was no reply to the demand in her heart.

"Oh", she cried, with sudden impatience, drawing her hands from him, "call me by my simple name! I am your wife; I am not your sweetheart. Do I want always to be petted like a bairn?" 39

And never at any time is Ronald capable of understanding the distress and bitterness he causes her.

Yet Ronald is not treated as a villain, nor the mere stereotype of a deceiver. Mrs Oliphant insists that, in his inadequate way, he loves Lily - and he deceives himself as well as everybody else:

If he had not the highest ideal, he had not at all the lowered standard of a man whose mind has been debased by evil communications. He was, in his way, a true lover, at the climax of life which is attained by a bridegroom.... And though he was not a highly strung person by nature, he was today all lyrical, and thrilling with the emotions of a bridegroom. He was not unworthy of the position. 40

And after one of his meanest deceptions, early in the book, he is tormented by remorse - but resists the "temptation" to make a frank admission of the falsity of what he had said. Thus the

39. Sir Robert's Fortune, pp.251, 254, 255

40. S.R.F., p.142

true "villain" is not the evil in Ronald, so much as the endemic masculine contempt and paternalism towards women in nineteenth-century Britain. Sir Robert shares this contempt and in Chapter II Mrs Oliphant unequivocally states that most men do. And because of this underlying contempt for women (the more effective for being unacknowledged) Ronald is incapable of imaginative identification with Lily's point of view:

He was not indifferent to his wife's good name. He considered himself as the best guardian of that, the best judge as to how and when it should be defended. He had (he thought) the reins in his hands, the command of all the circumstances. If he should ever see the moment come, when the credit of his future family should be seriously threatened and the position of Lily become an affair of vital importance, he was prepared to make any sacrifice He regarded the situation largely as from the point of view of a governor and supreme authority. As long as the circumstances could be managed, the world's opinion suppressed or kept in abeyance, and the one substantial and important object [Sir Robert's fortune] kept safe, what did a little imaginary annoyance matter, or Lily's fantastic girlish notions about a house of her own, and a public appearance on her husband's arm, wearing her wedding ring and calling herself Mrs Lumsden? He liked her the better for desiring all that, so far as it meant a desire to be always with him - otherwise the mere promotion of being known as a married lady was silly and a piece of vanity, which did not merit a thought on the part of the arbiter of her affairs. 41

The book is very rich in ironies of this kind, ironies deriving from Ronald's total failure in self-knowledge, the frivolity and insensitivity of his attitudes, and his incurably arrogant condescension to women. And this, in the end, leads to an overbearing, authoritarian manner:

41. S.R.F., pp.321-2

He meant to show her that she was entirely dependent upon him - she and her child; that she had nothing, and no rights except what he chose to allow her, and that it was her interest and that of her child (whom besides he could take from her, were he so minded) to keep on affectionate terms with him. 42

On the page preceding this passage Mrs Oliphant points out that Ronald sees Lily as "the conventional woman ... in a book or malicious story"; and thus he cannot understand her at all, nor can he see why she has chosen by the end of the book to shut herself off from him altogether.

Mrs Oliphant constantly calls on the reader to readjust his response to Ronald's deceptions. Sometimes these seem a cold-hearted cheating; but then we are invited to feel that he participates in the deception to the very depth of his unintrospective personality:

But Ronald's look was fixed upon Lily, his eyes were touched with moisture, the deepest pain was in his face. Could it be that a man could look like that and yet lie? 43

He has just told her, quite untruly, that the baby is dead. Truth and falsity seem to co-exist. And the ironies are reinforced, at least in the earlier chapters, by Lily's constant efforts to give him credit for good motives and to make excuses for him, accepting appearance as identical with reality.

But this cannot last. If Sir Robert's Fortune traces Ronald's non-progress to non-self-knowledge, it also traces Lily's progress to disillusion - and virtually to feminism, represented by an acute recognition of herself as an individual, "her own woman" as Mrs Oliphant puts it. Disillusion begins to appear early, but Lily

42. S.R.F., p.398

43. S.R.F., p.342

at first counters it with a sense of shame at her distrust and a renewal of optimism. In due course Mrs Oliphant draws attention to "a sort of cynicism which began to appear in her". And Ronald observes with anxiety, but total incomprehension, her growing coldness of manner:

But Lily was taking things too quietly, he thought, with a little tremor. It was not natural for her to give in so completely. He watched her with a little alarm during that short stay of his. Not a word of the cherished object, which had always been coming up in their talk, came from Lily's lips again.... Indeed, for that time, all her jests were over, she was serious as the gravest woman, no longer his laughing girl, running over with high spirits and nonsense. This change made Ronald very uncomfortable, but he consoled himself with thinking that in a light heart like Lily's no such thing could last, and that she would soon recover her better mood again. 44

Ronald's imperceptiveness is total; this in fact is the start of an irreversible process. On the next page we move from Ronald's mind into Lily's:

But Lily soon learnt the great difference here between imagination and reality. There was not a day in which she did not go through that struggle again, and sank into despair and flamed with anger, and then felt herself quieted into the moderation of exhaustion, and then beguiled again by springing hopes and insinuating visions of happiness. Thus notwithstanding all the bitterness of Lily's feelings on various points, or rather perhaps in consequence of the evident certainty that nothing would make Ronald see as she did, or even perceive what it was that she wanted or did not want - the eagerness of her passion for the house which meant honour and truth to her, but to him only a rash risking of their chances, and foolish impatience on her part to have her way, as is the wont of woman; and her bitter sense of the impossibility of his calm establishment here in her uncle's house, a thing which he regarded as

the simplest matter in the world, with a chuckle over the discomfiture of the old uncle; all these things, by dint of being too much to grapple with, fell from despair into the ordinary of life. 45

The sudden ironic transition near the end from Lily's point of view back to Ronald's is highly effective and very economically emphasises the theme, compensating for a certain slackness of diction and imagery.

Lily eventually reaches the stage of asking Ronald "Are you a god to judge what is best?"⁴⁶ And her rejection of him, not so much by intellectual choice as by the inevitable emotional tendency of her personality, leads eventually to a remarkable self-discovery:

She was not even as she had been for a moment, and was bound to be again, a young wife astonished and disappointed at being left behind, not knowing how to account for this strange, new authority over her, which had it in its power to change the whole current of her life.

She had been often a weary, angry, dull, disappointed little girl before, but there were always breaks in which she felt herself, as she said, her own woman, and was herself, all the Lily there was. But now she had merged into another being, she was Lily no longer, but only a broken-off half of something different, something more important, all throbbing with enlarged and bigger life. 47

And in the next chapter she is once again a "creature full of energy and life, and thoughts, and purposes of her own", having thrown off her sense of subordination to a husband. She recovers, in short, the sense of her identity.

45. S.R.F., p.260

46. S.R.F., p.340

47. S.R.F., pp.181,182

By a familiar Victorian device Mrs Oliphant sets the story sixty years before the date of the novel - that is to say, long before the Matrimonial Causes Act, and the Married Women's Property Act. Thus, when Sir Robert has finally died and Ronald has come to claim his property and his wife, Lily is forced to recognise that she is at his economic mercy. This is ironically stressed when Ronald invites her to her own house in Edinburgh. It is not that he behaves tyrannously or cruelly, merely that he consistently shows (as he always did) not the slightest awareness of how she might be feeling. This is illustrated above by the first quotation on page 48.

To highlight the main plot and provide ironic contrast and episodic intensification Mrs Oliphant makes use of a sub-plot. Lily's friend, Helen Blythe, is unhappily involved with Alick Duff, a "black sheep" who wants her to marry him and thus rehabilitate him, shifting the responsibility for moral regeneration to her. The episode is much too rhetorical and Alick is a tiresome stereotype ("this wolf approaching the lamb ... demanding a maiden sacrifice to clean him from his guilt"); yet the sub-plot makes explicit what is merely implicit in the main plot: the selfish emotional blackmail with which many men exploit the yielding nature of women. Lily protests at Helen's submissiveness and this produces one of the most overtly feminist sequences of the book:

In those days there were no discussions of women's rights; but yet in those days, as in all other periods, the heart of a high-spirited young woman here and there swelled high with imaginative wrath, and indignation at the thought of those indignities which all women had to suffer. That it should be taken as a simple thing that any man, after he had gone through all the soils and degradations of a reckless life, should have a spotless girl given

to him to make him a new existence, was one of those bitter thoughts that rankled in the minds of many women, though nothing was said on the subject in public, and very little even among themselves. 48

And she goes on, very euphemistically, to refer to the sexual guilt of reformed rakes who distress and humiliate the innocence of young girls by making these egotistical demands for rehabilitation. "But the girls were not told, they did not know, they shrank from information which they could not have understood had it been conveyed to them". The suggestion here of a libertinism typical rather of Regency than of Victorian days gives some indication of a reason why Mrs Oliphant chose to set the novel so far into the past, even though she thus makes it seem less apt as a fable for the times.

Yet Helen loves her reformed rake and goes ahead with the marriage, joining Alick in America - where she does in fact succeed in rehabilitating him. This provides a thematic contrast with Ronald's return, as incapable of moral improvement as ever, to make his marriage to Lily public. But the book ends on a remarkable passage, in which Mrs Oliphant suddenly shifts the whole balance of the values hitherto taken for granted, and puts Lily's story in ironic perspective in the context of Helen's:

But Helen herself would have forgiven Ronald on the first demand. His sins would have been to her simply sins, to be forgiven, not a character with which her own was in the most painful opposition. She would have entered into no such question. 49

Until this moment we have been invited to identify with Lily's uncompromising, unforgiving feminist attitude. Suddenly Mrs Oliphant

48. S.R.F., p.224

49. S.R.F., pp.403-4

restores the balance - without invalidating the point of view of the book - and suggests that perhaps, in some ways, Helen's serene, self-effacing, loving confidence is the better way. It is a constantly recurring theme of her books that women will forgive men and go on loving them however often they offend.

Earlier in the book there is another striking reversal of values involving the double plot. Lily protests to Alick about his selfish demands on Helen, contrasting him with Douglas, who loves Helen with no hope of a return:

'He would keep her like the apple of his eye.
There would no wind blow rough upon her if he
could help it', cried Lily, shaking herself
free.
"And you think that a grand thing for a woman?"
[Alick] cried, scornfully, "like a petted bairn,
instead of the guardian of a man's life." 50

Suddenly Alick ceases to be a stereotype and is allowed a valid point of view. Lily's words are seen to be the hackneyed falsities they are, proving that her ideal of marriage is still too idealistic. The words "a petted bairn" are echoed later by Lily herself in the angry protest to Ronald ("Do I always want to be petted like a bairn?") which I quote above (page 46). This may be simple irony, but perhaps Lily has been able to use Alick's opinion to modify her own.

Of course in the above passage Mrs Oliphant is not inviting a naive identification with Alick's point of view, any more than with Lily's. The banality of "the apple of his eye" and "no wind blow rough upon her" is balanced by the equal banality of "the guardian of a man's life", the Angel in the House stereotype which

Mrs Oliphant unequivocally rejects elsewhere. The intention is simply to shift the balance a little, to let two over-simplified views of marriage cancel each other out to make way for a more mature view implied by the whole development of the main plot.

With all these remarkable strengths it is highly regrettable that Sir Robert's Fortune is very seriously blemished. The main lines of the plot strain probability beyond what is reasonable, and Mrs Oliphant makes unjustified use of mystery to puzzle and confuse the reader in the sensation-novel tradition so that we are unable to follow the development of motivation clearly. She lets us into Ronald's mind to a certain extent, but then stops short - an unsatisfactory compromise. (However, when his schemes are finally made clear, the veil is withdrawn and the insight into his mind is very striking, as several quotations in this chapter have shown.) The sub-plot fulfils its functions successfully, but in detail it is weak, perfunctory and banal. And above all Mrs Oliphant fails, as she often does, when it comes to emotional crises, making them hysterical and theatrical. This is particularly true in the sequence where Lily is deprived of her baby. The strength of the book is its sustained analysis of motivation, self-deception and complex states of mind; and the lapses into hysterical melodrama and novelistic clichés are the more glaring by contrast. It is just about excusable that Mr and Mrs Colby dismiss the book by including it in a list of sensation novels, which they call "her poorest work - murky, dull, improbable";⁵¹ and yet if they wrote The Equivocal Virtue with the avowed intention of a new evaluation

51. Colby, pp.135-6

of Mrs Oliphant, they ought to have taken more trouble to find out what sort of book it really is, in spite of its deficiencies.

A very interesting destructive analysis of the book by The Spectator deserves much closer attention than the view of Mr and Mrs Colby. The author of the review was James Ashcroft Noble. He claims to find three weaknesses in the book:

In the first place, it seems to us that there is not enough narrative material for the space occupied. The essential incidents in the book are few and almost wearisomely elaborated, while the non-essential incidents, which are much more numerous, are introduced in a way which is painfully suggestive of the word padding. In the second place, the book is much too uniformly gloomy, there being hardly a chapter between the two covers which can be described as positively cheerful. In the third place - and this is the most serious objection of all - the story never really takes a good hold of us, we fail to recognise a vital and inevitable relation between the characters and the course of events.

Noble goes on to complain of the implausibility of Ronald's motivation and of the events of the story. He continues:

Here and there we have an isolated situation which in itself is admirable and worthy of its author; but the entire narrative conception is inorganic, and, in the etymological rather than the colloquial sense of the word, incoherent.... What is lacking is the unity without which no artistic conception can be really satisfying. 52

If we remember that The Spectator greatly admired Mrs Oliphant's work, this complaint must be taken seriously. However, even though Noble here did isolate certain besetting weaknesses of her work as a whole, much of what he says fails to "bite" because he has clearly not identified the central theme of the book, the implicit feminist protest which supplies its principle of organisation.

Thus it is far more "organic" than Noble says, and the "inevitable relation between the characters and the course of events" is established. No modern critic would be in the least disturbed by the "gloom" which provides a necessary atmospheric unity to support the central movement towards disillusion and self-discovery through suffering. Apart from Noble's complaint about "wearisome elaboration" of detail⁵³ it is thus possible to reject his attack almost entirely - and perhaps to note with surprise that he has not succeeded in identifying the real weaknesses that do disfigure the book. But the elaboration of detail - which essentially is the constant repetition of a rhythmic sequence of hope aroused, hope deferred, hope crushed, hope re-aroused - is in fact very necessary if we are to follow Lily's progress from an adoring romantic idealist to a woman committed to the self-recognition which I quote above on page 50. The process must inevitably be a slow one and depends necessarily on iteration and a slow wearing away of resistance and of preconceived ideas. Noble had not identified the feminist theme and his whole indictment falls.

53. It is worthy of notice that the novel was not published in the usual three-volume form, but in one volume. The usual explanation of excessive detail is the tyranny of the three-volume system. Nevertheless, the book is still a full-length Victorian novel, and might have been in three volumes if the three-volume form had not been abruptly killed off by decree of the circulating libraries in 1894.

CHAPTER THREE

ANTI-ROMANTICISM AND IRONY

[T]he fine vein of feminine cynicism which pervades [Jane Austen's] mind ... is something altogether different from the rude and brutal male quality that bears the same name. It is the soft and silent disbelief of a spectator who has to look at a great many things without showing any outward discomposure, and who has learned to give up any moral classification of social sins, and to place them instead on the level of absurdities. She is not surprised or offended, much less horror-stricken or indignant, when her people show vulgar or mean traits of character, when they make it evident how selfish and self-absorbed they are, or even when they fall into those social cruelties which selfish and stupid people are so often guilty of, not without intention, but yet without the power of realising half the pain they inflict. She stands by and looks on, and gives a soft half-smile, and tells the story with an exquisite sense of its ridiculous side, and fine stinging yet soft-voiced contempt for the actors in it. ('Miss Austen and Miss Mitford,' Blackwood's Magazine, March 1870; CVII, 294)

I

If a passage from Mrs Oliphant's memoir of her namesake, Laurence Oliphant, can be taken seriously then it is to her Scottish background and birth that we must turn to explain her anti-romanticism. Mrs Oliphant quotes Oliphant's account of Polish patriots singing their national anthem and publicly demonstrating their national feeling against Russia. He was inclined to be sceptical because his was a:

mind too prosaic to be stirred by theatrical representations; for I confess I find it generally more easy to delude myself by believing in the sham of a reality, than in the reality of a sham....

Mrs Oliphant comments:

I quote the above passage chiefly from the curious little bit of self-disclosure which betrays the Scotch nationality of a man so cosmopolitan. Many Englishmen, and almost every Scot, will sympathise with this suspiciousness in respect to theatrical circumstances and instinctive horror of the sham, which sometimes reacts upon his appreciation of the true. That this keen intuitive criticism should exist in a spirit open to every enthusiasm and full of sympathy in this particular case, may astonish those who are not familiar with that remarkable and most interesting development; and it all throws a¹ very singular light upon his own after-career.

"Almost every Scot"! This seems strangely exaggerated. Scotland, certainly, is the country of Ane Satyr of the Three Estaitis, of The House with the Green Shutters, and of Robert Burns and the satirical tradition of which he was the climax; but it is also the country of Robert Louis Stevenson's full-blooded romances, and of J.M.Barrie's idealised portrait of his mother Margaret Ogilvie (which Mrs Oliphant admired); it is the country of the Jacobite romance and of the Kailyard school. And there is not very much "suspiciousness in respect to theatrical circumstances" in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, which Mrs Oliphant revered. It so happens that when she set her novels in Scotland, she tended to abandon her anti-romantic stance and adopt a highly idyllic, lyrical, uncritical tone: The Wizard's Son (1884) and Kirsteen (1890) are among her most highly, single-mindedly romantic books and the most romantic scenes of all are set in Scotland. Indeed, as an expatriate Scot, Mrs Oliphant tends to idealise many aspects of Scottish life,

1. Memoirs of the Life of Laurence Oliphant, and of Alice Oliphant, his Wife (2 volumes, Blackwood, 1891) I, 278

abandoning the detachment with which she usually writes.

Yet the quotation from the Memoirs of Laurence Oliphant remains very significant. Consciously Mrs Oliphant selected from her Scottish tradition that "instinctive horror of the sham" which promotes challenges to over-indulgence in idealism and romance; and when writing on specifically English themes she is aroused to ironic amusement at the absurdities and follies she sees (always conscious of her outsider status) in her adopted country. Nostalgia and defensive partisanship prevent her (usually) from adopting such a view of Scotland itself.

And yet one theme dear to the heart of most Scots did produce scepticism: Mrs Oliphant was no Jacobite. Very early in her career, in Katie Stewart, she wrote of Bonnie Prince Charlie as follows:

Ah! fair, high, royal face, in whose beauty lurks
this look, like the doubtful marsh, under its mossy,
brilliant verdure - this look of wandering imbecile
expression, like the passing shadow of an idiot's
face over the face of a manful youth.

And a little later Katie Stewart herself explains her refusal to be a Jacobite:

"No; his forefathers were ill men; and many a man
will die first, if Prince Charles be ever king." 2

Mrs Oliphant's publisher, John Blackwood, protested against these passages when he read them in manuscript, but she firmly declined to make any change:

I am, like my heroine, not much of a Jacobite; and
as I do not wish to claim loftier sentiments than
she possessed for Katie Stewart, I must, I think,
suffer her opinion of the Chevalier to remain as it
is. I think it accords better with the character than
anything of that imaginative poetic loyalty which seems
to have belonged by some strange right of inheritance
to those unhappy Stuarts. As to the Chevalier himself,

2. Katie Stewart (Blackwood, 1853) pp.114,122

my opinion of his face is formed from a youthful portrait taken before the vices of his later life could at all affect him. It may be that I judge wrongly of his expression - still I do judge so; it is an honest opinion, and this also I think must stand as it is. 3

This shows remarkable assurance in a 24-year-old author, already conscious of the particular tone that she wished to adopt in her work.

A similar point of view is expressed thirteen years later in A Son of the Soil (2 volumes, Macmillan 1866), where the hero and his friend, Lauderdale, come upon Prince Charlie's tomb in Rome. There is some sympathy for a Scotsman's instinctive reverence for the Stuarts; yet even so:

"Well", said Lauderdale, after a long pause, "they were little to brag of, either for wisdom or honesty, and no credit to us that I can see."⁴

Mrs Oliphant's anti-romanticism is essentially the effect of the experience of disillusion - indeed of disenchantment - which in her most satisfying novels is embodied either in her authorial voice or in the consciousness of her characters. Disillusion appears very early, in Mrs Oliphant's tentative, experimental first decade, the 1850's. In Orphans (1858) come these words:

Died of a broken heart.
When I was as young as Kate Crofton, I thought these words the most pathetic in the world; ten years later I am doubtful. Dr Harley died of a broken heart, for the loss of his fortune; leaving his

3. Letter dated 29th May 1852, A. & L., p.158. An earlier sentence in the letter shows that Mrs Oliphant was willing to make some change in Katie Stewart, to modify the use of Scots dialect.
4. A Son of the Soil II, 33

wife and children without it, and without him, to toil through life and the world as best they could.... Somehow, I think, only such a one as myself could afford the luxury; some one who was nobody's shield, nobody's comforter; childless, parentless, alone.... Hearts will break in this life - it is the nature of them; but if God wills, and it is possible, it is honester, braver, nobler to live than to die. 5

The speaker is the first-person narrator and heroine, but the opinion is Mrs Oliphant's own, expressed with the slightly over-rhetorical manner that she later largely outgrew. However, the device of giving the phrase "Died of a broken heart" an ironic paragraph of its own suggests the later sophistication of tone she so effortlessly achieved.

In her mature work Mrs Oliphant again and again challenges any naively over-simplified view of life, any surrender to uncomplicated, indiscriminating emotions which fails to do justice to the complexity of life, any false intensification or heightening of reality for dramatic effect or to gratify the complacent prejudices of the reader. (It is true that she often lapsed into all these weaknesses herself, when off her guard or driven by an urgent obsession from which she could not detach herself; but she would not be the only author who shows such a conflict between principle and practice.) A simple instance of such a challenge to a stereotype is as follows:

The sages of the village are sometimes dull and sometimes wise in a book. They were full of humour and character in George Eliot's representation of them, and they are very quaint in

Mr Hardy's. But I doubt much if they ever say
such fine things in reality. 6

Unfortunately, in this particular context, the comment does not clear the way for a more realistic treatment of villagers; the view expressed is merely negative, concealing a mildly condescending view of country people and, in spite of her precaution, her villagers remain stereotypes. But this reveals the limitations of her powers rather than a shortcoming in her theory.

More interesting are those occasions where Mrs Oliphant identifies the experience of disillusion within the developing consciousness of one of her characters, especially a heroine:

Her sister's arrival, and the disclosures involved in it, had broken up to her all the known lines of heaven and earth; and now that everything had settled down again, and these lines were beginning once more to be apparent, Frances felt that though they were wider, they were narrower too. She knew a great deal more; but knowledge only made that appear hard and unyielding which had been elastic and infinite. The vague and imaginary were a great deal more lovely than this, which, according to her sister's revelation, was the real and true. 7

There is in this a sort of nostalgia for lost naivety; Mrs Oliphant's ambivalence is operating once more and there is some sympathy for the innocent eye as well as for the new note of realism that Frances has acquired from her sister. Here is the ironic effect that is achieved by a balanced and partial resolution of two sharply contrasted views. Nonetheless, the experience of disillusion is the theme most

6. The Cuckoo in the Nest (3 volumes, Hutchinson 1892) I, 161.
The British Library copy is the Fourth Edition, still in three volumes, still of 1892. No copies of the first two editions seem to have survived. The National Library of Scotland possesses the Third Edition (identical with the Fourth), formerly Mrs Oliphant's own property.
7. A House Divided Against Itself (3 volumes, Blackwood 1886) I, 198

clearly illustrated in this passage. The process of extending the experience of life into psychological territory more "hard and unyielding" must be encountered both by heroines (and even by heroes) and by novelists; and if what is lost was "lovely" we must not forget that is was in fact "vague and imaginary" - in short romantic.

To illustrate Mrs Oliphant's anti-romanticism, a profitable study might be made of her challenge to the traditional "happy ending", with virtue rewarded, poetic justice attained and all wishes fulfilled. In her novels lovers may very well be united at the end, but often with a sense of disappointment or anti-climax; the unjust may go unpunished, or even ironically rewarded; or an ending is offered quite different from the one we have been led to expect; or if the ending does conform to conventional expectations Mrs Oliphant will invite us to feel disappointed with the loss of much more interesting possibilities for the characters. There is no need to go into detail at this stage, since analysis of individual novels later in the thesis will adequately illustrate her handling of endings.

I shall now examine Mrs Oliphant's anti-romantic handling of three themes: Parent-and-Child, Death, and Love; themes which dominate the Victorian novel.

It is always the love of a mother for her child that plays the most powerful role in giving a sense of purpose to her female characters. And men are most likely to seem heroic and noble if they are shown as loving, devoted fathers (especially to daughters). It was in this area if anywhere that Mrs Oliphant was most tempted to surrender to undisciplined emotion and to make grand eloquent gestures. Indeed, as I have indicated, this is one

of the weaknesses which disfigure Sir Robert's Fortune: Lily's love for her baby and her grief at being deprived of it produce some of the worst writing in the book. Yet, on many occasions, Mrs Oliphant was ready enough to view the subject with irony, to detach herself from it, to make realistic concessions. I shall illustrate from just one novel, Harry Joscelyn (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1881).

Although the grand emotional ending of Harry Joscelyn involves a son's abject appeal for forgiveness for deserting his mother, the emotive force of the theme is strengthened by an ironic questioning - almost rejection - of it in earlier chapters. The hero's sister feels:

that sort of faint contempt which children so often feel for their parents.... She felt towards her mother as she might have felt to a tiresome but amiable child, impatient of her vagaries, yet sorry for the useless trouble and pain the poor thing gave herself. 8

The mother is weak and querulous, much of the life crushed out of her by a bullying husband; the daughter, Joan, is inclined both to protect her against her father and to react impatiently against her weakness. Two passages of analysis are notable. The first one follows a grim description of Mrs Joscelyn's miserable marriage:

No one in the White House was happy after the age of childhood, but nobody minded much except the mother, who had this additional burden to bear that the expectation of at least some future happiness in her children never died out of her. Perhaps being no wiser than her neighbours she missed some legitimate if humble happiness, which she might have had, by not understanding how much

real strength and support might have been found in the stout and homely affection of her eldest daughter, who was not in the least like her, and did not understand her, nor flatter her with any sympathy, yet who stood steadfastly by her and shielded her, and furthered her wishes when they could be divined, with a friendly, half-compassionate, sometimes impatient support. But Joan had been critical from her very cradle, always conscious of the "fuss" which her mother only became conscious of making when she saw it in the half-mocking question in her children's eyes. 9

Only the vague epithets "stout and homely" blur the edge of this passage, weakening as they do the impression of a sharp and critical intelligence that gives "body" and clarity to the daughter's love for her mother. The tone is characteristic of the rather stoical pessimism which colours so much of Mrs Oliphant's most distinguished writing. The mutual love of mother and daughter is in no way neutralised by the undernote of contempt on one side and of imperceptive optimism on the other. Once Joan's love for her mother has been stressed after the word "yet", the positive values on which Mrs Oliphant insists are in no way muted; indeed they derive their strength from being held in reserve until this moment. Nor does the renewed stress upon Joan's reservations in the final sentence weaken the impact of the previous statement; it merely enriches the realism. Particularly effective is the understated word "friendly", suggesting the rational and moderate nature of Joan's feelings.

The subject is renewed in a later chapter, when events seem to be moving to a crisis:

Joan turned over all these things in her mind, as if her parents stood before the bar and it was her business to judge them. A woman of thirty cannot go on with those childish fictions of reverence which make criticism a sin. Indeed, even a child,

the youngest, unconsciously criticises as soon as it is able to think, and we are all standing before the most awful of tribunals, unawares, when we live our lives and show forth our motives before our babies; and Joan had long ceased to be a baby. She saw her father and mother all round, and estimated them calmly. He had not many qualities which were good, perhaps not any at all; she had a great many amiable and tender graces of character of which her daughter was vaguely aware, but she was of a nature which is very provoking to a calm and judicious spirit. Thus Joan saw them as they were, with the clearest impartial vision. What a pity that two such people had married to make each other unhappy! Joan had a sort of impatient feeling that, if she had only been in the world then, she certainly would have done something to prevent the union which had brought her into the world. This was the amusing side of her judicial impartiality. It went the length sometimes of a comical impatience that she had not¹⁰ been there to keep matters straight between them.

Clearly the last sentence here is superfluous repetition; indeed the transition to paradoxical humour at the end weakens the impact of the irony. Sometimes Mrs Oliphant does lose control over her material in this way. Effectively the paragraph should have ended at "vision" or perhaps at "unhappy". And yet perhaps even the stress laid on Joan's "impartial vision" is superfluous, having been made obvious enough by what precedes. This is the consequence of Mrs Oliphant's unstoppable flood of productiveness. The passage is thus not as sharp as the previous one, though it derives from an extending awareness of Mr and Mrs Joscelyn, both on the part of Joan and on the part of the reader. We are thus more aware of the commenting (but reliable) narrator mediating between our responses and the limited introspections, not easily capable of detachment,

10. H.J. I, 170-1. In the first edition the commas enclosing "unawares" do not exist. They are to be found in later editions. I have preferred to insert the commas since they give a sharper emphasis to the irony.

of Joan. The word "vaguely" specifically stresses her limitations, even though her "judicious" (or "judicial") approach, by the use of a sustained legal metaphor, is given unqualified approval - or, in view of the irony of the slightly exaggerated language ("the most awful of tribunals" and so on) almost unqualified approval.

The attitude of Joan's brother Harry to his mother is analysed with far less complexity and ambiguity. We are told on several occasions that he has been influenced in spite of himself by his father's contempt for his mother (a far more aggressive and vicious contempt than that felt by Joan):

It is almost impossible for a man to treat his wife with systematic scorn without weakening the respect of his children for her, even when ... they resent his conduct and are more or less her partizans. 11

In short Harry never has more than an hour's conversation for her and will never give up his pleasures "because of his mother's little feeble anxieties", not from dislike or unfilial feeling, but because it does not occur to him to take any other view.

Although I have called attention to the point of view of Mrs Joscelyn's son and daughter, the role of the mother herself is presented with equal irony, the stress falling on her helpless over-protective clinging to her children, complicated by an absurd optimism that is incapable of learning by experience - so that every maternal disappointment is as great as the one before.¹²

Later in the novel the parent-and-child theme is enriched by the examination of a very different father and a very different

11. H.J. I, 271

12. See for example the first sentence of the quotation on page 64 above.

daughter, Mr Bonamy and Rita. The stress is on over-protective adoration on one side and spoiled self-indulgent charm on the other. Yet Rita is not merely spoiled and charming, but intelligent and able to share her father's interests; while her father has "a mature mind, which is yet not too mature, but still capable of the indiscretion of youth". So, although he is over-protective and she is spoiled, the relationship is almost an ideal one, and most ironies are neutralised.

They were everything to each other. She revered him, and she laughed at him, and patronised his ideas, and thought him the first of created beings. Nothing but a child could so mingle veneration and superiority, the freedom of an equal, the keenness of a critic, the enthusiasm of adoring love. 13

This provides a curious contrast with the passage I quoted earlier about that "most awful of tribunals ... when we live our lives and show forth our motives before our babies"; but there is no necessary contradiction. The Joscelyn parents have no qualities of personality to neutralise the unfavourable judgements of their children as has Mr Bonamy. (The name, no doubt, was deliberately chosen for symbolic purposes. Parents should be "good friends" of their children.)

There are many other novels in which the parent-and-child theme can be studied. Several of them cluster in the 1880's and 1890's, since Mrs Oliphant could draw on her own experience as a mother of two sons growing to maturity; but it is a measure of her objectivity that she does not invariably call for sympathy for frustrated mothers but draws attention to the unwisdom of those who are possessive and over-protective. This is strikingly seen in The Wizard's Son (1884), where a feckless son's exasperation at his mother's perpetual

solicitude is fully understood. Other novels in which the relations of parents and children are viewed ironically - or ambivalently - are A Country Gentleman and His Family (1886), its sequel A House Divided Against Itself (also 1886), Joyce (1888), Lady Car (1889), Kirsteen (1890, with a father, mother and daughter who largely repeat the pattern of Mr and Mrs Joscelyn and Joan), The Sorceress (1893), and Who Was Lost and Is Found (1894). A theme which was used on several occasions is that of the son (or daughter) who has highly inflated (and thus romantic) expectations of a father whom he (or she) has never seen. This theme is used in Joyce and in The Marriage of Elinor (1892) and, most remarkably, in a fine short story "John",¹⁴ originally published in The Pall Mall Magazine in March 1894, afterwards collected in A Widow's Tale and other Stories (Blackwood 1898). Inevitably the inflated image of a father is shattered by the disconcerting reality and the son (or daughter in Joyce) must reconcile himself to the new image. The stress, especially in "John", is on the potency of an image as a guiding-principle of our lives:

But the father was ... the true ideal, without fault, full of unknown treasures of tenderness and wisdom. It would have astonished [his] mother beyond measure, she who thought she knew her son so well and possessed all his affections, to know how much closer still all that vision was to John's heart.

But later, when John has discovered that his father in no way measures up to his ideal:

An inarticulate sound escaped from the boy's throat. Oh, the sailor who had never come home, who had left his son nothing but love and honour! It was the anguish of the pang with which at last and for

14. Not to be confused with John, a Love Story (2 volumes, Blackwood 1879), a far less interesting work.

ever that tender apparition floated away, which
 wrung that cry out of John's heart. 15

The contrast between these two passages very aptly brings the theme of parent-and-child to a conclusion, since they sharply highlight the tension between romantic ideal and disillusioning reality which is one of Mrs Oliphant's central preoccupations when writing on this theme and on many others.

A similar contrast between inflated expectation and prosaic reality occurs in Mrs Oliphant's treatment of death. Her approach is notably different from that of most Victorian novelists - who, when they write about death, often adopt a very special tone of voice, what A.O.J.Cockshut, writing of Mrs Gaskell's North and South calls her "organ-music voice". ("The description is a different kind of writing from the chapters which surround it.")¹⁶ One example will suffice. Guy Morville (in The Heir of Radclyffe) dies amidst a flurry of banal poetic language (white hills tipped with rosy light, the light streaming over the bed), looking more beautiful than in sleep, speaking with articulate and exemplary piety until the narrator too uses Biblical language.¹⁷ The death is built up from the beginning of the chapter and casts its shadow over the next chapter.

Mrs Oliphant does not always avoid the special tone of voice consecrated to death; indeed The Tales of the Seen and Unseen are saturated with tender poetic feelings, reverent prose and appeals to uncomplicated pathos. But The Tales of the Seen and Unseen represent

15. A Widow's Tale and other Stories, pp.328, 338

16. A.O.J.Cockshut, Anthony Trollope, p.84

17. Charlotte Yonge, The Heir of Radclyffe (1853), chapter 35.

no more than a sideline in her work, and her major novels were quite unaffected by the deep emotional obsession that produced these curious stories. Normally when she writes about death she adopts muted, ironic tones, to observe "that eagerness, half sorrow for the impending event, half impatience to have it over, which even the most affectionate of friends feel in spite of themselves, in respect to a long anticipated, often retarded ending".¹⁸ Mr Ochterlony in Madonna Mary (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1866) dies without any rhetorical heightening of the atmosphere:

He was not very clear about the unseen world - for one thing, he had nobody there in particular belonging to him personally, except the father and mother who were gone ages ago; and it did not seem very important to himself personally whether he was going to a long sleep, or going to another probation, or into pure blessedness, which of all three was, possibly, the hypothesis he understood least. Perhaps, on the whole, if he had been to come to an end altogether he would not much have minded; but his state of feeling was, that God certainly knew all about it, and that he would arrange it all right. 19

The off-handedness of this, the informal colloquialism at the end, the elaborate understatement ("nobody ... in particular", "possibly", "perhaps, on the whole", "he would not have much minded") are very striking; the "organ-music" is played with the damper on. The pieties and certitude of religion are implied, but muted and seem - in this context - to be largely irrelevant. Nor is the death accompanied by the breathless tear-soaked hush of surrounding relatives. Mr Ochterlony is dying in the presence of a rather bored nephew who does not realise that death is coming.

18. The Greatest Heiress in England (1879), I, 211-2

19. Madonna Mary II, 243

Mr Ochterlony is a shallow-minded dilettante, so it is inevitable that his death will be described in this way. Yet, even when a character is viewed in greater depth and with greater warmth of sympathy, the treatment of his death - or of the onset of it - will still be treated coolly and ironically:

He kept smiling to himself; so living as he was, and everything round, it was an odd sort of discord to think of dying. He felt a kind of blank before him, a sense of being shut in. So one feels when one walks along a bit of road surrounded with walls, a cul de sac from which there is no outlet. A sense of imprisonment is in it, of discouragement, too little air to breathe, too little space to move in - certainly a disagreeable, stifling, choking sensation. 20

The old man in question basically has Mrs Oliphant's sympathy - or at least her understanding; he appears at first in an unforgiving mood, but wins his creator's full approval when he unequivocally acknowledges two grandchildren whom hitherto he has studiously ignored. Indeed, after this event, she so entirely approves of him that she spares him from the death that is threatened in the above quotation. Thus she was obliged to postpone for another year the sustained study of a drift towards death and of a refusal to come to terms with it; this she achieved in 1878 in The Primrose Path.

What is remarkable in the quotation from Young Musgrave is the imagery, a bold attempt to convey objectively and imaginatively a peculiar and private psychological experience. The experience of dying is by its nature virtually undescribable, and inevitably nobody could be in any position to judge the authenticity of the description; yet Mrs Oliphant's vocabulary impressively conveys

this as an experience with no adventitious support from external observation or emotive language, apart from the fairly neutral "disagreeable" and the very beguiling understatement "odd".

Mrs Oliphant takes pains to modify not only the stereotypes of the way people die, but also those of how the survivors and the spectators behave. Although widows, sons and - especially - daughters are plunged into grief and the familiar clichés do appear: the vigil in the sickroom, the hushed voices, the weeping women, the tense visits of the doctor who will report of any "change"; yet she retains her ironic vision, noting, for example, that undisturbed life is going on elsewhere, that the servants are aroused to unseemly curiosity about visitors or take advantage of the relaxation of discipline when the family spends so much time in the sickroom.

A House Divided Against Itself (1885) contains a particularly spectacular example of a challenge to the sickroom stereotype. Mrs Nelly Winterbourne is young and married to an older husband whom she does not pretend to love (though she is troubled by guilty feelings for this). Eventually her husband falls ill while on a visit. The rather naive heroine observes Nelly's behaviour and tries to judge it according to the stereotypes, but has great difficulty in doing this:

Frances was a little surprised that the wife of a man who was thought to be dying should leave his bedside at all; but she reflected that to prevent breaking down, and thus being no longer of any use to the patient, it was the duty of every nurse to take a certain amount of rest and fresh air. She felt, however, more and more timid as she approached. Mrs Winterbourne had not the air of a nurse. She was dressed in her usual way, with her usual ornaments - not too much, but yet enough to make a tinkle, had she been at the side of a sick person, and possibly to have disturbed him.

Two or three bracelets on a pretty arm are very pretty things; but they are not very suitable for a sick-nurse.

This is a notable use of an ironically limited point of view. The scene continues even more ironically. Frances casts herself in the stereotyped role of the assistant sick-room nurse:

"I am very good for keeping awake, and I could get you what you wanted. - Oh, I don't mean that I am good enough to be trusted as a nurse; but if I might sit up with you - in the next room - to get you what you want."

Nelly's first reaction is that Frances is maliciously making fun of her. But then her view changes:

It was perhaps only that the girl was a little simpleton, and meant what she said. "You think I sit up at night?" she said. "Oh no. I should be of no use. Mr Winterbourne has his own servant, who knows exactly what to do; and the doctor is to send a nurse to let Roberts get a little rest. - It is very good of you. Nursing is quite the sort of thing people go in for now, isn't it? But unfortunately poor Mr Winterbourne can't bear amateurs, and I should do no good." 21

Mrs Oliphant is not unsympathetic to Nelly's tormented and unresolved emotions, but clearly enough here is another limited point of view, since Frances is unjustly dismissed as a "little simpleton"; and Nelly's lapse into slang and her covert snub to Frances partly alienate our sympathies. But, since Mrs Oliphant imaginatively identifies with the predicament of an unhappy wife, her treatment of the dying Winterbourne is entirely objective. He is conveyed to his own house "to die there, which he did in due course, but some time after, and decorously, in the right way and place". And Mrs Oliphant immediately comments:

Frances felt herself like a spectator at a play during all this strange interval, looking on at the third act of a tragedy, which somehow had got involved in a drawing-room comedy, with scenes alternating, and throwing a kind of wretched reflection of their poor humour upon the tableaux of the darker scene. 22

The epithets "wretched" and "poor" throw the emphasis of approval upon tragedy; but Mrs Oliphant's instinct when writing at her best is always to resist a total surrender to the tragic mood, in the interests of perspective and a multiple point of view. Nelly Winterbourne is, in many ways, a tragic character, but viewed without a trace of exaggerated rhetoric, because of the complex and ambivalent presentation of her predicament.

In her widowhood Nelly, torn by a turbulence of conflicting emotions, is quite unlike the stereotypes of grief familiar both in Victorian life (where mourning was a major industry and whole shops in the West End were devoted to the decorous celebration of it) and in much Victorian fiction. Indeed the happy (not merry) widow is a fairly familiar figure in Mrs Oliphant's work, though not necessarily presented with such forceful irony as is Nelly. If a husband is less disliked than Mr Winterbourne, still the sense of relief when he goes may be emphasised, and the self-conscious attempt to conform to the stereotypes of mourning be ironically described. A particularly fine example is in A Country Gentleman and His Family (3 volumes, Macmillan 1886). (A House Divided Against Itself was the sequel to this book.) The story opens with two deaths, producing two widows: Mr Warrender, a commonplace man, dies after a lingering illness; Lord Markland, a dissolute man and a brutal

husband, dies after a riding accident. Both widows, though very different women, feel as much a sense of relief as grief for their bereavement. The treatment of Mrs Warrender is remarkably subtle. There is a constant contrast between reality and an unattainable ideal of grief. The stereotypes of mourning (lying down to rest, the gown covered with crape, the tears) are contrasted with Mrs Warrender's irrepressible energy. There is a decorous conversation between mother and son, each of whom harbours fewer grieving thoughts than he or she tries conscientiously to show. Each of them begins to drift towards making long-needed changes in the house - and then accepts a reproach from the other that "It is too soon to think of that". In particular Mrs Oliphant is anxious to challenge the stereotype of the grieving widow:

In ordinary circumstances it would have been the duty of the historian to set forth the hardness of Mrs Warrender's case, deprived at once, by her husband's death, not only of her companion and protector, but of her home and position as head of an important house. Such a case is no doubt often a hard one. It adds a hundred little humiliations to grief, and makes bereavement downfall, the overthrow of a woman's importance in the world, and her exile from the sphere in which she has spent her life. We should be far more sure of the reader's sympathy if we pictured her visiting for the last time all the familiar haunts of past years, tearing herself away from the beloved rooms, feeling the world a blank before her as she turned away.

On the contrary, it is scarcely possible to describe the chill of disappointment in her mind when Theo put an abrupt stop to all speculations, and offered his arm to lead her upstairs. She ought, perhaps, to have wanted his support to go upstairs, after all, as her maid said, that she had "gone through"; but she did not feel the necessity.... The absolute repression of those five dark days, during which she had said nothing, had been almost more intolerable to her than years of the repression which was past.... Mrs Warrender went into her room by the compulsion of her son and conventional propriety, and was supposed to lie down on the sofa and rest for an hour or two. 23

Comment would be superfluous; but it is worth noting that the clichés mocked at the end of the first paragraph could at times be used with no ironic intention when Mrs Oliphant was deeply troubled by personal feelings of grief which she could not shake off. But here, by an ironic use of the "intrusive narrator" and by the abrupt transition to the second paragraph, Mrs Oliphant openly dissociates herself from the point of view.

Other novels in which there is an interesting, restrained treatment of death are May (1873), A Rose in June (1874), The Curate in Charge (1876), with a quietly moving death scene made more effective by its quietness, Carita (1877), The Son of His Father (1887), The Second Son (1888), Grove Road, Hampstead²⁴ (1896), Old Mr Tredgold (1896).

The theme of ungrieving widows leads logically to Mrs Oliphant's sceptical attitude towards love. As I have indicated in the previous chapter, her approach to love was coloured by her implicit - and indeed often explicit - feminism. She was prepared to challenge quite a number of Victorian orthodoxies. Her heroines - even when love is "their whole existence"²⁵ - are not usually viewed exclusively in terms of their suitability to warm a man's heart and console his griefs.

Before I proceed any further I must make it clear that if Mrs Oliphant's ambivalence operates anywhere it is when she writes about love. There are quite a number of heroines who are preoccupied with

24. Published by Methuen with The Two Marys. It had originally appeared in 1880 in Good Cheer, the Christmas number of Good Words.

25. Mrs Oliphant specifically challenged the view expressed in these words of Byron's; for example in "Miss Austen and Miss Mitford", Blackwood's Magazine, March 1870; CVII, 297-8

the over-riding passion of love. There are several insipid love stories. She finds loving husbands for her sweeter heroines, she rewards patient fidelity and single-minded devotion, she heals broken hearts, she can be lyrical about the first dawn of love in a woman's or a man's heart. Yet, when writing in this way, she seems to be writing merely with half her mind, with her imagination working only sluggishly - with the result that the inner voice of irony, usually such a valuable guide to her, is switched off, and the banalities which, on other occasions, she rejects greatly disfigure her style.

Yet virtually alone of her generation Mrs Oliphant was inclined to question the desirability of preoccupation with love, in novelists or in heroines. As she said in her autobiography, when comparing herself with Charlotte Bronte:

I have learned to take perhaps more a man's view of mortal affairs - to feel that the love between men and women, the marrying and giving in marriage, occupy in fact so small a portion of either existence or thought. 26

Accordingly she usually presents the whole complexity of the relationship between a man and a woman, not isolating one aspect and concentrating exclusively on this. The emotional surrender to a romantic passion is treated as something immature, misguided and likely to be a prelude to deep disenchantment, especially for the woman; a romantic fantasy may lead two lovers to surrender to self-deception and wishful thinking, they being unfit to cope with the more complex problems of the love relationship. Those who marry for money (at least the women who do so or wish to do so) are at least clear-sighted

26. A. & L. p.67. "A man's view" may seem strange in view of the firm belief in love of male novelists; but Mrs Oliphant was no doubt thinking of Byron's "'tis woman's whole existence" (which does seem relevant to Charlotte Bronte).

and less liable to be disillusioned when the first glow of enthusiasm fades. And I have already illustrated from Sir Robert's Fortune that the conventional language of romantic love, when used by a man, is often a mere trick for emotional effect (not that the man is likely to be conscious of the falsity of his language, since he deceives himself as much as the woman), causing a woman, beguiled by powerful appeals to her feelings, to surrender herself to a relationship with which she is quite unable to cope adequately. I will illustrate this theme later in the chapter when dealing with Agnes.

Since, during the rest of this thesis, I shall have many occasions to isolate the theme of love, I shall here do no more than illustrate it in one novel, A House Divided Against Itself, and conclude by isolating one special topic that interested Mrs Oliphant, self-sacrifice.

A House Divided Against Itself is a very mixed novel; its insights are fitful and some of its details are inadequately imagined. But in its treatment of love it covers a wide spectrum, from the obsessive infatuation of George Gaunt for the sophisticated and egotistical Constance Waring, to the reticent, discreet, but deeply felt affection of Lord Markham for the unhappily married Nelly Winterbourne. George's love in the end is transferred to Constance's sister Frances, partly in gratitude for her selfless devotion to him in his troubles. This theme is conventional enough and George is an almost total stereotype. But it is the obligatory "straight" love story against which all the other lovestories are set off. The young lovers are seen in the context of the reconciliation of Edward Waring (father of Constance and Frances) with the wife from whom he was separated years ago.

His wife explains the reason for the failure of the marriage:²⁷

"He had a great admiration", she said, "for a woman to whom he gave my name. But he discovered that it was a mistake; and for me in my own person he had no particular feeling".

But friends have made moves for reconciliation and both husband and wife have modified the intransigence that had separated them.

The thought of that possibility - which yet was not a possibility - suddenly realised, sent the blood back to Lady Markham's heart. It was not that she was unforgiving, or even that she had not a certain remainder of love for her husband. But to resume those habits of close companionship after so many years - to give up her own individuality, in part at least, and live a dual life - this thought startled her. 28

The feminist note in this quotation is obvious enough; and earlier in the chapter Lady Markham makes a quietly feminist point on giving advice to Claude Ramsay, who is in love with her daughter Constance. Claude is a bizarrely comic valetudinarian or hypochondriac, self-pitying and self-centred. Lady Markham points out that his valetudinarianism "is much less offensive than most things that men care for".

"Girls are brought up in that fastidious way; you all like them to be so, and to think they have refined tastes, and so forth; and then you are surprised when you find they have a little difficulty - " 29

Claude's self-regarding approach is later pointed out by Constance's sister Frances, usually represented as naive and innocent:

27. The causes of the separation were examined in A Country Gentleman and His Family, where Edward Waring is Theo Warrender and his wife, Lady Markham in A House Divided, is Lady Markland. Mrs Oliphant often changes names between sequels, whether deliberately or not it is not easy to say.
28. A House Divided II, 240-1
29. A House Divided II, 235-6

"Then" said Frances, recovering something of the sprightliness which had distinguished her in old days, "you don't want to marry any one in particular, but just a wife?" 30

In short, like Edward Waring, who loved, not the real Lady Markham but his own private image of her, Claude Ramsay does not concern himself with the real Constance, merely with the abstract idea of being married and having a notional wife devoted to him. Since Constance is totally out of sympathy with Claude for most of the book and her character is entirely out of harmony with his, her decision to accept him is rather implausible, although we are shown that she, as much as Claude, needs to adjust to the realities of the world and modify her egotism.

The love of Lord Markham (the son of Lady Markham by her first marriage) for Nelly Winterbourne is Mrs Oliphant's nearest approach to the infidelity (one cannot say adultery) theme. It is in fact handled with great discretion, and the lovers do not externalise their feelings until Winterbourne is dead. Markham is one of the most remarkable of her male characters, an ironic observer with a whimsically grotesque manner which is used partly as a self-protective device. Nelly is a complex, tormented character, as I have already shown earlier in the chapter. Both of them are the victims of weaknesses of character which they cannot fully acknowledge to themselves, and they are sufficiently disillusioned by life not to be deluded by any notion of romantic love. Since Nelly had originally been married for purely mercenary motives, a debate is created between marriage for love and marriage for money. This is not one of the novels in which mercenary motives are condoned, and Nelly finally chooses to forgo her immense wealth and marry Markham - for her

husband's will stipulates that she loses all she inherits from him if she ceases to be a widow. But her choice is not a romantic one, but made as a mature decision to escape from the vicious circle, the hard emotional trap in which hitherto she had been caught. Markham explains the decision they have made, when talking to his astonished mother:

"I was waiting to marry her when she was free and rich, you all thought; but I wasn't bound, to be sure, nor the sort of man to think of it twice when I knew she would be poor.... Well, mammy, you're mistaken this time, that's all. There's nothing to be taken for granted in this world. Nelly's game, and so am I. As soon as it's what you call decent, and the crape business done with - for she has always done her duty by him, the fellow, as everybody knows - "

"Markham!" his mother cried almost with a shriek - "why, it is ruin, destruction. I must speak to Nelly - ruin both to her and you."

He laughed. "Or else the t'other thing - salvation, you know. Anyhow, Nelly's game for it, and so am I."³¹

Markham's slangy tones are perhaps rather overdone; but they do guarantee that the marriage is a maturely achieved one, with cool assessment of what is involved, not just the high-romantic ideal of love triumphing over poverty. The word "salvation", discreetly placed, implies that the decision has been made in order to break free from the psychological traps in which Nelly and Markham have hitherto been caught.

In A House Divided there is one other relationship between a man and a woman which needs to be considered. Sir Thomas (we never learn his surname), who has been instrumental in bringing Lady Markham and her husband together again, develops a purely platonic friendship with Frances, which everybody persists in misunderstanding, misled by stereotyped ideas. But Mrs Oliphant believed that ordinary friendship

between a man and a woman was quite possible, in spite of the popular notion to the contrary. Writing of a platonic friendship of Thackeray's, she complained that "the one arbitrary love ... assumes that name as if it alone had the power of inspiring the heart".³² Believing this, she quite often shows the friendship of a man and a woman in her novels, with no sexual implications.

There is one theme which is not implied in A House Divided but which must be examined if I am to complete the picture of Mrs Oliphant's treatment of love. This is the theme of self-sacrifice as it specifically applies in love. The lover (usually the woman) realises that the achievement of happiness by accepting the love that is offered means ruining the happiness of someone else; so he (or she) submits heroically to a deprived life in order that that other person may be happy. The bias varies according to whether the other person is a rival in love or a parent. Of course in Victorian novels true love usually triumphs over parental opposition, however powerful. But self-sacrifice for the benefit of the other lover is frequent. Maggie Tulliver, though acutely conscious of her love for Stephen Guest, and although compromised in the eyes of society, remains faithful to the principles learned long ago from Thomas a Kempis, and refuses to destroy the happiness of Lucy Deane. In her pain she cries "O God, is there any happiness in love that could make me forget their pain?" and later "I have received the Cross, I have received it from Thy hand; I will bear it, and bear it till death, as Thou hast laid it upon me".³³ And yet one might feel that since Stephen loves only her she is thus making three people unhappy,

32. "The Old Saloon", Blackwood's Magazine, November 1887; CXLII, 700

33. George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, Book Seventh, last words of chapter 3; and chapter 5.

instead of only one.

Mrs Oliphant examines the ethic of self-sacrifice in Joyce (3 volumes, Macmillan 1888). Joyce Hayward is in love with Norman Bellendean and she astonishes herself by the abandon she experiences, the total surrender to her feelings. But Norman's mother appeals to her on behalf of Greta (another character who seems to have no surname) - who has long loved Norman and who has never been disappointed in her life. ("Never disappointed!" comments Joyce's stepmother. "Do they think she can get through life like that? And was this all Mrs Bellendean came to say? I think she might have saved herself the trouble. I would let Miss Greta look after her own affairs".)³⁴ Greta is an extremely nebulous, unsubstantial character, and this at first seems a weakness; but it may very well be intended by Mrs Oliphant in order that the reader shall not be distracted from the pure issue of self-sacrifice by considering the problems of any other character but Joyce. George Eliot makes Lucy a lovable, vulnerable character and her final interview with Maggie effectually balances the reader's sympathies and helps to make Maggie's renunciation of Stephen right and inevitable. But there is no such inevitability in Joyce. What is more, by a notable stroke of irony, Greta does not marry Norman in spite of Joyce's renunciation.

Greta married after a while, and was just as comfortable as if she had attained the man of her first choice, whose loss it was believed would break her heart. She was the only one quite unaffected by all that had taken place, although her comfort was the one prevailing cause of all this trouble. 35

34. Joyce III, 126. This passage is emphasised by being made the last words of a chapter.

35. Joyce III, 303

(Once again, Mrs Oliphant cannot let well alone and weakens the impact of the irony by needless repetition.)

Joyce's torment is intensified by a further problem; she is engaged to a man whom she finds she despises (he is intolerably complacent and egotistical), and yet she considers herself bound in honour to him. This extra complication is scarcely needed, and is in any case not entirely convincing. However, Joyce finds her conflict of loyalties more than she can endure, and she consults two people, a kind-hearted spinster and the clergyman of the parish, Canon Jenkinson. Miss Marsham insists that a woman must always sacrifice her pleasures to somebody else; but Canon Jenkinson firmly insists that self-sacrifice is morbid and foolish:

"I tell you ... women like Cissy Markham are a pest, they're a plague in the place, with their a b c , and their creed for a woman. Nonsense! my dear! That's nonsense, my dear! What's law for a man is law for a woman. There's no other. Don't break anybody's heart if you can help it; but in the name of common-sense, go your own way and take what God gives you, and have the courage to be happy if He puts happiness into your hands".

The Canon's remarkable argument - with its unmistakable feminist sympathy - is renewed a little later:

"If it's beautiful to make a sacrifice, as you women think, it's shameful to accept one. Remember that. You've no right to put a stress and humiliation upon another. It's a humiliation - you would yourself refuse it and scorn it.... But that you should make yourself the judge in other circumstances, and shame another by suffering for him when you know neither his heart, nor what is best for him, nor anything but your own wild enthusiasm - that I forbid, Joyce. I forbid it, being your priest, to whom you have come for light." 36

(The 'him' of this passage refers, not to any individual, but to the typical figure of the universal rule.) Joyce, however, finds that she is incapable of remoulding her image of herself, to make a blow for a woman's right to self-determination, and she does renounce Norman - and disappears mysteriously and romantically (a curious way to end the novel, diminishing the sense of reality we have experienced so far; if Mrs Oliphant wished to challenge romantic idealism, it is surprising that she chose to end on a glow of romance, hitherto so scrupulously avoided.)

The theme of self-sacrifice surfaces only in the third volume of Joyce, which thus suffers by a considerable shifting of its centre of interest. But a few years earlier Mrs Oliphant had devoted a whole story, no longer than a novella, to the theme. This was My Faithful Johnny, serialised in The Cornhill Magazine in November and December 1880, and afterwards collected in Neighbours on the Green in 1889. This time the sacrifice demanded is of two lovers to the egotistical demands of the bedridden father of the girl. The lovers are glad to deny themselves any satisfaction for the benefit of the father; but the first-person narrator protests:

"You sacrifice yourselves, and you encourage the other people to be cruelly selfish, perhaps without knowing it. All that is virtue in you is evil in them. Don't you see that to accept this giving up of your life is barbarous, it is wicked, it is demoralising to the others?"

And yet this is followed by a striking reversal of this point of view. The narrator challenges her own views:

... for a woman to argue, much less suggest, that self-sacrifice is not the chief of all virtues, is terrible. I was half frightened and disgusted with myself, as one is when one has brought forward in the heat of partisanship a thoroughly bad, yet, for the moment, effective argument. 37

But this is not a "thoroughly bad" argument; its justice is proved when the heroine, reduced by zeal for self-sacrifice, becomes a victim of progressive masochism and self-hatred, supposing that any pleasure or happiness is an improper thing for her; it is proved by the end of the story when the narrator finally reunites the lovers when all is thought to be lost. And the narrator rethinks her attitudes in a later chapter and defines her more balanced view, less extreme than either position quoted above:

[Sacrifice] may, perhaps - I cannot tell - bear fruit of happiness in the hearts of those who practise it. I cannot tell. Sacrifices are as often mistaken as other things. Their divineness does not make them wise. Sometimes, looking back, even the celebrant will perceive that his offering had better not have been made. 38

The narrator is aware that she is "saying something which will sound almost impious to many", and in many ways she is indeed challenging Victorian orthodoxy - though not so drastically in 1880. But there is a genuine ambivalence (rather than ambiguity) in Mrs Oliphant's attitudes here. One part of her wholeheartedly protests against any self-sacrifice which denies an essential part of the victim's personality, especially when the victim is a woman. Yet an equally powerful instinct makes her feel that there is a nobility, a beauty in renunciation. Each view is used to put the other in perspective.

37. Neighbours on the Green (3 volumes, Macmillan 1889) III, 272-3

38. Neighbours III, 296-7

In order to demonstrate how subtly Mrs Oliphant was drawn to modify the single-minded romantic mood of the nineteenth-century novel it is not necessary to choose one of her more satirical or comic novels. It is more effective to choose one which, on the face of it, conforms to the stereotypes. The Primrose Path (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1886) is not in any way a challenging book. It would be easy to isolate those aspects of it which make it appear romantic: a lovable, innocent, vulnerable heroine, an idyllic Scottish setting (and later an almost equally idyllic English setting), true love triumphing over difficulties, comic characters discreetly subordinated to the central love story, a structure which throws great stress upon the primacy of true hearts, simple feelings and purity of motive. These do indeed represent the values of the book, especially the purity of motive; but the treatment is complex and subtle, without any surrender to oversimplified emotions. Although there is an admirable hero who wins the heroine in the end, the message of true faith and simple heart is rather muted and conventional, and there is a sustained ironic study of the corruption and perversion of romantic love, as the heroine is harassed to desperation by the unwanted attentions of a young man whom for a while she considered her good friend, and who (like the hero of Sir Robert's Fortune) makes use of the high-flown rhetoric of love as an unscrupulous weapon (although he avoids acknowledging his motives to himself). Very strikingly, this young man is over-influenced by his mother in his persecution of the heroine, and it is only when he can cast off her influence that he can rediscover his chance of moral progress (a quiet challenge, this, to one Victorian orthodoxy).

The Primrose Path is most remarkable for its coolly scientific study of the slow process of dying; it is Mrs Oliphant's most sustained and subtlest survey of old age and death. The heroine's father, Sir Ludovic Leslie, through many chapters slides imperceptibly towards an experience of which he is vaguely aware but about which he cannot think objectively. Mrs Oliphant challenges our preconceived ideas by many passages, pointing out for example that:

the dying will rarely see things with the solemnity which the living feel to be appropriate to their circumstances, neither does the approach of death concentrate our thoughts on our most important concerns as we all fondly imagine it may, without difficulty or struggle. 39

Even the grief of the heroine for her father's death is handled lightly, since she finds to her surprise that she cannot abandon herself to grief so that she "wept for her own heartlessness as well as for her dear father".⁴⁰ And her two very worldly older sisters highlight the pathos, preoccupied as they are with the sense of occasion as they come to their father's deathbed.

39. The Primrose Path II, 41

40. The Primrose Path II, 116

II

In a late and accomplished novel The Prodigals and Their Inheritance (1894)⁴¹ the hero, Edward Langton, has apparently lost the heroine. But his distress is almost immediately deflated:

"What a fool one is! as if these were the middle ages! wherever she has gone, she must have left an address!" He laughed loud and long, though his laugh was not mirthful, at the bringing down of his despair to the easy possibilities of modern life. That makes all the difference between tragedy, which is medieval, and comedy which is of our days: though the comedy of common living involves a great many tragedies in every age, and even in our own.

Although "laughter that is not mirthful" is scarcely an original idea, nevertheless the value of this moment, undercutting what might otherwise have been a moment of over-wrought rhetoric, is considerable: Mrs Oliphant, without entirely dissociating herself from Edward's distress, invites us to see it in a sharply divergent perspective. But the matter is not allowed to rest here. In the next chapter (the last of the novel) Edward makes a comment to the lawyer Babington, in the spirit of the ironic recognition he has just achieved: "People don't disappear these days". But Mr Babington challenges this view, asking Edward:

whether he knew how many people did disappear, in the Thames or otherwise, and were never heard of, in these famous days of ours. 42

The tragic vision is reconstructed, put back on its pedestal, more secure, less vulnerable, precisely because it had been ironically

41. Published in two volumes by Methuen. It had appeared earlier in 1884, in Good Cheer, the Christmas edition of Good Words.

42. The Prodigals and Their Inheritance II, 363, 368

challenged in an earlier chapter. What is more, Mr Babington's ironic comment transforms the tragic theme of a human being lost and untraceable from something private and personal into something universal, social, contemporary.

Edward is a typical Mrs Oliphant hero, being a complex mixture of the admirable and the foolish, of moral inadequacy and earnest idealism. It is thus peculiarly suitable that by these double (or indeed multiple) ironies he should be viewed with cool detachment, his point of view first endorsed, then challenged, as he moves towards the carefully balanced point of view that is Mrs Oliphant's own.

"Tragedy ... is medieval, and comedy ... is of our days". And yet also "the comedy of common living involves a great many tragedies". Mrs Oliphant frequently uses the one vision to correct and modify the other. "There was something humorous in the tragic situation"⁴³ is a comment she makes on more than one occasion in her novels. I have already quoted the description of Frances Waring's bewilderment as the unloved Mr Winterbourne dies during a fashionable party: "like a spectator ... looking on at the third act of a tragedy, which somehow had got involved in a drawing-room comedy".⁴⁴ Both the tragedy and the comedy are valid; a dying husband highlights the misery and emptiness of the marriage that is ending, yet the wife's extravagant behaviour is played for comedy, and the author relishes the embarrassment of friends, unable to decide how to react to the situation. There is a striking resemblance to a characteristic

43. The Sorceress (1893) III, 249. The sentence continues: "but to them it was wholly tragic", reversing the irony in much the way that Mr Babington does in The Prodigals.

44. Page 75 above

technique of Trollope's - who also (in The American Senator) presents the sudden death of a man, most inopportunistly at a house party.

By such means Mrs Oliphant challenges any naively over-simplified view of life, any surrender to uncomplicated, indiscriminating emotions which fails to do justice to the complexity of life. We might ascribe to her the approach to life which Dr Johnson ascribes to Shakespeare:

exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature
which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow,
mingled with endless variety of proportion and
innumerable modes of combination; and expressing
the course of the world, in which the loss of
one is the gain of another; in which, at the
same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine,
and the mourner burying his friend; in which the
malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the
frolic of another; and many mischiefs and many
benefits are done and hindered without design. ⁴⁵

(Of course this is not to imply that Mrs Oliphant in any sense shared Shakespeare's world vision.) And Mrs Oliphant, being within certain limits a realist, also "exhibits the real state of sublunary nature".

But Mrs Oliphant's irony is not always as genial, balanced and relativistic as this. In a dark and bitter novel like Sir Robert's Fortune she uses it to dissociate herself from an offered point of view. Ronald's total self-deception, his complacency as he attributes motives to Lily in the romantic-love language, using them to justify his cruelty in depriving her of her baby, are presented in these terms:

The desire to be with him, to identify her life altogether with his, was sweet; he loved her the better for it, though as the wiser of the two, he knew that it was impracticable, and that it must be firmly, but gently, denied to her. And to desire to have her baby was very natural and very sweet too. What prettier thing could there be than a

45. Preface to The Plays of William Shakespeare, 1765

young mother with her child? But there were more serious things in the world than those indulgences of natural affection, which are in themselves so blameless and so sweet; and this in her own interests, he, her husband, her natural head and guide, was forced to deny her too. 46.

Each use of the word "sweet" sharply highlights, by its manifest falsity and condescension, the insincerity and meanness of Ronald's true motives. The irony of "the wiser of the two" would be almost painfully unsubtle, if it were not that these words do sound, superficially, like words of wisdom and rational judgement. But the "indulgence of natural affection" cannot be dismissed in these terms. Nor can we endorse Ronald's scorn for Lily's sentimentality when we remember his own use in earlier chapters of sentimental love-making to evade the serious discussion of his plans. The complacency of "firmly but gently" and "in her own best interests", and the patriarchal arrogance of the assumption of authority ("her husband, her natural head and guide") conclusively prove that Ronald is making use of language which diminishes and degrades what it is claiming to celebrate, and thus completes the process of alienating us from his point of view.

Mrs Oliphant takes the characteristic ironist's delight in contrasts between appearance and reality, between intention and achievement, between things seen with prejudice and the same things seen without prejudice. (For example, "She had little in her constitution of that rabid selfishness which people call a sensitive temperament". 47

46. S.R.F., p.350

47. Mrs Clifford's Marriage, Blackwood's Magazine, April 1863; XCIII, 419. This novella was serialised in the magazine in March and April 1863, but never republished.

Or again, "'If I were to say it was my duty and all that sort of stuff, you would understand me, Miss Wodehouse; but one only says it is one's duty when one has something disagreeable to do''").⁴⁸

A fine example of this kind of irony involves Mrs Morgan, wife of the rector of Carlingford (in The Perpetual Curate, 1864). "The real rector to whom she was married was so different from the ideal one who courted her", and for a long time she is unable to accept this, looking for impossible perfection and complaining when she cannot achieve it.

Was it her William, her hero, whom she had magnified for all these ten years [i.e. of courtship], though not without occasional twinges of enlightenment, into something great, who was thus sitting on his young brother with so little human feeling and so much middle-aged jealousy? ⁴⁹

"Twinges of enlightenment" is a peculiarly felicitous phrase for the sudden moments of understanding which can have no permanent effect and are immediately discounted; the phrase carries the ironic implication that the moments of understanding are set aside as disagreeable and cannot be used for the further extension of self-knowledge (let alone knowledge of the other person). For a while Mrs Morgan is disillusioned by her fallible husband:

She had been accustomed for years to think that her troubles would be over when the long-expected event [marriage] arrived; and when new and more vexatious troubles still sprang up after that event, the woman of one idea was not much better fitted to meet them than if she had been a girl.

However, in the end, she comes to terms with reality and learns to love her husband, not for what he might be but for the fallible

48. The Doctor's Family (in The Rector, and The Doctor's Family. 1863) p.108

49. The Perpetual Curate I, 198; II, 162

creature he is:

She had found out the wonderful difference between anticipation and reality; and that life, even to a happy woman married after long patience to the man of her choice, was not the smooth road it looked, but a rough path enough cut into dangerous ruts, through which generations of men and women followed each other without ever being able to mend the way. She was not so sure as she used to be of a great many important matters which it is a certain consolation to be certain of - but, notwithstanding, had to go on as if she had no doubts, through the clouds of a defeat, in which certainly, no honour, though a good deal of the prestige of inexperience had been lost, were still looming behind. 50

This is more than a study of marital disillusion (and far more than a comment on that conventional theme, the inadvisability of long engagements). It is an ironic insight into self-deception and the inevitable gap between prosaic reality and false expectations of that reality, into the painful process of learning by experience. My final quotation (in spite of the banal metaphor of a "road" or "path") triumphs when it reaches the neatly ironic paradox of "the prestige of inexperience", which implies that self-knowledge is an unpleasant experience, and that people tend to prefer a naively idyllic or romantic approach to life.

A very different contrast occurs in this passage from Sir Tom (3 volumes, Macmillan 1884). A worldly-wise woman is trying to enlighten the naive heroine about the character of her husband:

"When we know each other better I will betray all his little secrets to you", she said.

This was so very injudicious on the part of an old friend, that a wiser person than Lucy would have divined some malign meaning in it. But Lucy, though suppressing an instinctive distrust, took no notice, not even in her thoughts. It was not necessary for her to divine or try to divine what

people meant; she took what they said, simply,
without requiring interpretation. 51

The insight into an oddly incurious naivety here concentrates on the strikingly subtle "not even in her thoughts". Since any notice taken would have to be in her thoughts, the phrase presupposes a disillusioned or cynical observer who hopes that surely Lucy will "believe the worst" and if she does not appear to do so must be concealing such a belief for her private satisfaction. But Mrs Oliphant (who is less cynical than such an observer, or than the would-be informant) views Lucy's inexperience with some regret (Lucy ought to be "wiser") and some amusement at what amounts to self-satisfaction, almost complacency. ("It was not necessary for her to divine ...") The "instinctive distrust" is not suspicion of an innuendo; but distaste for the other woman's over-confiding manner. The word "simply", fenced off by its commas, is double irony; it deplores Lucy's imperceptive naivety, and yet admires her uncorrupted straightforwardness. (Perhaps I ought to add that a simple enough interpretation of "not even in her thoughts" is that Lucy does not merely not put into spoken words any reproach to the other woman, but does not even allow the thought to present itself to her mind. But this does not invalidate the ironies I have stressed. Indeed it slightly enriches them.)

A special case of the contrast between appearance and reality of which Mrs Oliphant was extremely fond draws attention to the willingness of people to attribute false motives to each other.

51. Sir Tom II, 5

Misled by idealistic love, women (and sometimes men) credit the loved person with virtues or good intentions that the reader recognises to be largely non-existent, or at least insincere. Doting parents similarly cannot recognise the truth about their sons and daughters. Or credulous observers are prepared to take hypocritical behaviour on face value, judging the observed person according to a rigid stereotype; this enables Mrs Oliphant to make a powerful and convincing attack on that stereotype. Consider this passage from May (3 volumes, Chapman & Hall 1873):

When Mr Hepburn came suddenly into the room, and saw this weeping creature with her fair hair ruffled by her emotion, tears hanging on her eyelashes, her piteous little pretty mouth trembling and quivering, the sight went to the young man's susceptible heart. No secondary trouble, such as quarrels with her servants, or the desolation consequent upon that amusement, occurred to him as the possible cause for the state in which he found her; no doubt crossed his mind that it was the woe of her widowhood that was overwhelming her.

And in the next chapter:

Yes, he thought, as he looked at her, Matilda was the kind of woman described in all the poets, the lovely parasite, the climbing woodbine, a thing made up of tendrils, which would hang upon a man, and hold him fast with dependent arms. 52

Mrs Oliphant is doing much more than record the hypocrisy of a woman and the credulity of an observer. The tears are in fact "genuine" enough, although the sentence "No secondary trouble...." gives the reader adequate information to enable him to trace them to their true source, a source Hepburn, misled by his stereotype, is incapable of seeing. The sentimental language of the first passage carries none of the narrator's endorsement; the "fair hair", the "piteous

little pretty mouth" carry a sardonic overtone of parody. The implication is that this is the kind of woman some men prefer. And the continuation of the second quotation confirms this:

Marjory was not of that nature. To be sure Marjory was the first of women; but there was a great deal to be said for the other, who was, no doubt, inferior, but yet had her charm. Hepburn felt that in the abstract, it would be sweet to feel that some one was dependent upon him.

We turn back from this whole passage to the episode in the previous chapter and find that Hepburn is totally incapable of seeing the real woman at all for the sentimental clichés with which he smothers her. Mrs Oliphant is not in sympathy with Matilda, any more than with Hepburn; the word "amusement" sees to that, and she is shown to be irredeemably shallow. But what the reader sees as shallowness Hepburn sees as a lovable clinging vine.⁵³ His inability to see the bitter irony of "parasite" is in itself enough to condemn his point of view.

This passage is effectively balanced in its sympathies, keeping the reader at a distance both from the observed and from the observer. But sometimes it is exclusively on the observer that the irony concentrates: morally inadequate observers can see nothing reflected in the people about them except their own base motives. In The House on the Moor (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1861) a good-natured uncle

53. Mrs Oliphant could have found this image, not only in the poets, but also in Trollope; for example, Barchester Towers, chapter 49: "When the ivy has found its tower, when the delicate creeper has found its strong wall, we know how the parasite plants grow and prosper. They were not created to stretch forth their branches alone, and endure without protection the summer's sun and the winter's storm.... What is the turret without its ivy, or the high garden wall without the jasmine which gives it its beauty and fragrance?"

has tried in vain to give good advice:

Industry and honesty, and straightforwardness, a homespun and sober interpretation of all human laws - Horace decided that his uncle lauded and urged these virtues on others just as he might recommend cod-liver oil or Morison's pills, and that he was unable to comprehend anything higher than that old code of respectability. But granting this, it was all the more wise to humour and yield to the old man, and permit him to maunder on in his own way. 54

We are confined within the consciousness of a limited mind and invited to share his ungenerous attribution of motives to his uncle, and to endorse his conscious pose of contemptuous superiority. But the reader is unable to make this act of identification; the grotesque anti-climax of "cod-liver oil or Morison's pills" is too crude to be acceptable by anybody but Horace. And an inability "to comprehend anything higher than that old code of respectability" does far less than justice to the virtues the uncle has been commending; indeed the inability "to comprehend anything higher" is precisely what we recognise to be Horace's own weakness. And "maunder on" directly contradicts the impression carefully built up by Mrs Oliphant of Uncle Edward's simple-hearted innocence and generosity. (As it happens Mrs Oliphant is largely unsuccessful in the character of Uncle Edward, who is a shadowy stereotype. But this does not weaken the impact of her insight into Horace at this early stage of the novel.)

Such ironies can be traced throughout Mrs Oliphant's career; sometimes the irony highlights the observer, sometimes the person observed, sometimes both. In Salem Chapel (1863) Mr Vincent is given credit by his admiring congregation for hard study when he is in fact daydreaming, and subsequently his sermon, hastily put together,

54. The House on the Moor I, 225. This is in fact one of the few entirely satisfactory passages in a grossly overwritten and overstrained novel.

is commended for the time supposedly taken on it. Mr Burton, the "villain" of At His Gates (1872), confers benefits for the meanest of motives, but he is viewed as a guardian angel, told "How kind you are!", and his ostentatious kindness is taken entirely on face value. The short novel Lady Car (Longmans Green 1889), turns on the self-deception of a wife who sees (at first) fine motives in her husband where the reader sees only indolence and self-indulgence. However she is trying to resist the progress towards disillusion, anxious to make excuses for him, as women in Mrs Oliphant's novels frequently have to do. Perhaps the irony emphasises both the husband's shallowness and the wife's over-readiness to suspect the worst (and thus in earlier chapters to over-compensate for this suspicion). The reader is never quite convinced that the husband is as weak as we are led to believe. James Ashcroft Noble, reviewing the book in an article headed "Blue-Rose Melancholy", in The Spectator,⁵⁵ very shrewdly pointed out that the value of Lady Car's observations is invalidated by her unmistakable acute melancholia (of which Mrs Oliphant is partly, but not fully, aware).

Perhaps the most startling example of this kind of irony is in Kirsteen (3 volumes, Macmillan 1890). Mrs Douglas, as she lies on her deathbed in the pious euphoria of death, says to her husband

55. The Spectator, 6th July, 1889; LXIII, 10-12. A much sharper comment has lately been made by Elaine Showalter in A Literature of Their Own (Princeton University Press, 1977) pp.178-80. Ms Showalter comments on Lady Car and its predecessor The Ladies Lindores, calls Lady Car a "feeble ... creature, so tepid and self-obsessed", and complains that "Mrs Oliphant never faced the dangers of a social myth that places the whole weight of feminine fulfilment on husband and children". Certainly the parental role, at least, meant a great deal to Mrs Oliphant, but she was far more feminist than Elaine Showalter supposes, and she was ready to challenge many "social myths".

"Neil, ye've been a good man to me", and she is convinced that he has blessed the children.⁵⁶ But the reader remembers her as a cowed, humiliated wife, and this comment is quite unacceptable. And yet the irony is not bitter or satirical; the reader recognises Neil Douglas as a man who - now at least - would show warmth of feeling if he knew how to. Either he has mellowed, or Mrs Oliphant's view of him has mellowed; the note of feminist protest has been modulated into muted tragedy. If there is irony there is pathos too.

Mrs Oliphant was deeply involved with many of her themes and was ready enough (when off guard) to surrender to the intensity of her feelings. And yet it is peculiarly characteristic of her best work that she constantly uses irony to achieve objectivity and distance. When writing on any theme involving intensity of feeling, she likes to undercut the high passion of the scene by some sharply observed incongruity or an indication of hidden motives in one of the participants. Or frequently she likes to draw attention to the relativity of points of view. This passage from A House in Bloomsbury (2 volumes, Hutchinson 1894) is very characteristic:

[The lady] might have cried at home, the girl thought. When you go out to pay a call, or even to make enquiries, you should make them and not cry: and there was something that was ridiculous in the position of the veil, ready to topple over in its heavy fold of crape. She watched it to see when the moment would come....

She could not but feel that her new relation was a person with very little self-control, expressing herself far too strongly, with repetitions and outcries quite uncalled for in ordinary conversation. 57

The "new relation" is in fact her mother who has been separated from her in infancy. Mrs Oliphant does not invite the reader to

56. Kirsteen III, 106

57. A House in Bloomsbury I, 169, 179

endorse the sentimental delusion that a child will respond to an unknown mother with as much emotional abandonment as that mother is likely to show. A House in Bloomsbury is built round the theme of maternal love and deprivation; there are two mothers, each craving to be reunited with a child from whom she has been separated. And yet, as this passage shows, Mrs Oliphant was well aware that other people, even the daughter herself, will have other points of view and will find undisciplined emotionalism socially embarrassing. The most agreeable phrase in the passage is "quite uncalled for in ordinary conversation"; we are invited to relish the banalities of social etiquette and to see that what to the mother are the deepest expression of feelings are mere "repetitions and outcries" to an unsympathetic observer. One must admit, however, that here Mrs Oliphant is playing for comedy, quite frankly and with undue self-indulgence, since the daughter must surely have been troubled by the lady's emotional behaviour and been ready to recognise the truth of who she is. Nevertheless, the essential point of the passage is to stress the relativity of points of view.

With similar ironies, sometimes milder, sometimes sharper, Mrs Oliphant undercuts many of her heroes and some of her heroines, and of course her lesser characters: observers (or "choric" characters), agents of the main action, dealers in advice and opinion, those who influence the main characters or who are influenced by them, figures of authority and so on. The tradition is essentially the Jane Austen tradition of social comedy, but with a greater readiness to darken the irony, in one way towards tragedy, in another way towards angry satire. Self-deceivers, eroded by inadequate self-knowledge, abound

in Mrs Oliphant's work as in Jane Austen's; but Mrs Oliphant is less inclined than Jane Austen to limit her range by such self-denials as the famous "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious objects as soon as I can."⁵⁸ The refusal to limit her range by no means works to Mrs Oliphant's advantage, since she frequently goes beyond her powers into areas where irony cannot help her or will not come at her call; or she may become victim of an irony that the reader observes but that she would be unable to. If she had attempted such a portrait as Mrs Norris she would have made her a vulgar villainess or an odious caricature, since she would have been less likely than Jane Austen to concede a sort of social validity to the woman.

It took Mrs Oliphant many years to achieve an assured ironic manner, even though the voice of irony is heard, tentatively, in her first novel, Margaret Maitland, both in the narrator and in the secondary heroine, Grace, the first of a long line of satirical, independent young women in her work. But Grace is not put to any functional use, and appears as no more than irrelevant "light relief" in a nostalgic, domestic novel. Subsequently in the first decade of her career irony, when it does appear, is merely tentative or perfunctory, having no structural function. But as her style very suddenly matured in the 1860's, so did her irony. I will illustrate from Agnes (1865).

Agnes was an exact contemporary of the serial version of Miss Marjoribanks; yet the two books could scarcely be more different.

58. Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, opening words of chapter 48.

It is the most painfully personal of all Mrs Oliphant's novels, being a direct response to the intolerable grief of her daughter Maggie's death (in Rome in 1864). This leads to a mood almost of pessimism and questioning of God's providence, on which the book ends. No other such ending is to be found in her work, and her friend Mrs Craik was much troubled by the book and wrote to her "I dare say to you what I would not say to the world - that I think you will yet be sorry for having written Agnes: - because it does not 'justify the ways of God to men' - as its doubts may trouble weaker souls long after you have conquered them and lived to see that His ways are right - and His mercy endureth for ever."⁵⁹ Mrs Oliphant did indeed come to reconcile herself to the will of God where bereavement was concerned, and no later book is so rawly protesting as this one. It appears to have given her much trouble and was heavily abridged after the first edition;⁶⁰ however the theme of unreconciled bereavement at the end was left largely untouched (in spite of Mrs Craik's advice).

The book divides into three sections, corresponding to the three volumes of the original publication: they are concerned respectively with courtship, marriage and widowhood, with the richest ironies all concentrated on the middle section. The death of Agnes's husband is not tragic; it is no more, structurally, than a point of rest in the main tragic journey to the bitter, true climax, the death of her son. Marital love is a source of disillusion; the real enduring

59. Annotation to a forwarded letter from Jane M. Hooper, n.d., National Library of Scotland Acc 5793/5

60. See Appendix A below.

loves, the supreme emotions that carry tragic feeling, are the love of William Stanfield for his daughter Agnes, and Agnes's own love for her son Walter. (It took Mrs Oliphant many years to learn how to treat parental love with distancing irony.)

In an interesting preface to Agnes Mrs Oliphant illuminates part of her intention in writing the book. ("I will not say that the following Story has been written to carry out such a theory, which would not be true. It has grown out of much more natural and less premeditated causes; but that this theory is one which may justify the story.") She speaks with polite scepticism of the fiction "which confines itself to the graceful task of conducting two virtuous young persons through a labyrinth of difficulties to a happy marriage". She goes on:

I am far from despising the instinct which confines the art of story-telling within these limits, but think it on the contrary, as wise as it is natural; yet at the same time everybody knows that there are many lives which only begin after that first fair chapter of youthful existence is completed; as also that there are many more which end, so far as there is any interest or vitality in them, before the great conclusion which finishes all, so far as human vision goes. 61

Agnes in short is a heroine who begins to interest her creator only after her marriage, and whose life as a meaningful sequence of events is over long before physical death (that is when the purpose of her life is ended by the death of her child). As she so frequently does, Mrs Oliphant challenges the conventional requirements of fiction - even though she allows herself a certain degree of ambivalence in the expression of her views. But the preface prepares us for a systematically ironic treatment of marriage, and of courtship.

The ironies begin early, in chapter III - and very heavy-handedly:

If the young squire was indeed a goose, Agnes knew no more of it than if she herself had been as stupid as any heavy milkmaid; less, indeed, for at least the milkmaid might have seen him with real eyes where he sat beside her, leaning forward, with one red line marking his forehead and crossing the thin, well-brushed curls of his light hair; whereas Agnes saw, not Roger Trevelyan, but an impossible paladin of romance, the noblest and truest that ever swore fealty to happy maiden.

The irony is too overt; Mrs Oliphant is signalling much too insistently that we must on no account take Roger on face value, let alone on the valuation of Agnes. However, the reader now knows how to view him and can never be misled by Agnes's love. A later passage is much more effective: Trevelyan, after a sharp rebuff from Agnes's father, surrenders to a romantic fantasy:

Yes, that was true, very true, but - might it not, perhaps, be better that they should for one exquisite moment know that they loved each other, and part, innocent young martyrs, conscious of the delight as well as the anguish, as that they should part, always longing to know what was in each other's hearts. 62

This is a sustained parody almost in the spirit of Jane Austen's Love and Friendship; it highlights the self-deceiving immaturity of Trevelyan, his inability to cope with the complex realities of the love relationship.

Agnes herself is viewed ironically since "in the unconscious self-regard of youth her own immediate affairs seemed sufficiently important to her to eclipse everything in the world."⁶³ But the major stress is on her total inexperience of life (she being the over-protected daughter of a widowed father):

62. Agnes I, 24-5, 105

63. Agnes I, 206

And as her faith in him and admiration for his gifts rose higher, his admiration for the young believer rose in proportion.... Roger's mind and powers were stimulated, though he did not know it, by constant intercourse with a mind fresh and pure and more lofty than any he had before encountered; and for the time, what he had learned put on a semblance of life, even to himself, as if it came from his own original intelligence. Thus the light which was in Agnes's eyes, as she regarded him, threw a kind of delightful confusion on the face of things, and half persuaded even her young husband, as it wholly persuaded herself, that the radiance was within and not without.

During all this long summer there did not once enter into Roger's life that shadow which pursues Englishmen all over the globe. He said to himself, in the fulness of his heart, that it was impossible to be bored with Agnes; not that she had a great deal to say in her own person, or was amusing to speak of; but Roger had never in his life before felt himself so clever, so interesting, so full of sense and story and illustration, as he did with that fair ignorant understanding creature, hanging on his lips, drawing out of him her first knowledge of the world, and of art and nature, of books and men. She drew out of him so much that Roger never knew to be in him, that Roger rose in his own opinion; the light of her interest and tender curiosity brightened up the reminiscences of his school-days, and of his college, and of all he had learned and all he had forgotten.... As for her own experiences, she had so few, that the homely details which made a brief appearance now and then, only amused Roger, and did not wound his pride; and everything went on like a romance or a fairy tale. 64

Roger and Agnes are here on their wedding tour of the Continent.

Superficially the tone is idyllic. But the preceding paragraph has ended by warning the reader that Roger appears to Agnes "in her ignorance like a superior being". What is described is not the true happiness of a genuine marriage between a mutually compatible couple,

64. Agnes I, 281-3. The passage comes from the last chapter but one of the volume.

but the uncritical euphoria of a highly artificial relationship. It is a great pity that Mrs Oliphant has softened the irony with which she views Agnes by describing her mind as "fresh and pure and more lofty than any he had before encountered". Her naivety will be stimulated by sharp disillusion into a maturity beyond Roger's comprehension; it is not necessary here to insist meaninglessly that she is "lofty", or to use the vague banality of "purity". Apart from this, however, the passage very effectively draws attention to Roger's lack of self-knowledge, his unconscious contempt for Agnes (who had not "a great deal to say in her own person, or was amusing to speak of")⁶⁵ and the elaborate promotion of his own inflated image of himself by her uncritical admiration.

Roger is trying to educate his low-born wife to fit the social status to which he has raised her. But the unacknowledged contempt suggested in the above quotation begins to develop, especially as he is never capable of sufficient introspection to see his own motives and attitudes for what they are. Agnes - while never ceasing to love him - is slowly forced to recognise his shallowness, his weakness of character and his lack of any real understanding of her:

In short, Agnes Stanfield was, as wife of Roger Trevelyan, a failure. She felt it herself vaguely, with wistful hopes that he did not share that conviction; and he felt it, which was worse.... All this was within the first year after their marriage, and all the time they still loved each other with a love which would have asserted itself as the great primitive power of their lives, if anything had occurred to drive them back upon first principles. Roger was very fond of his wife, but he felt sure that she would commit and compromise him, if he did not keep his warning eye on her. He kept watching her when they were together, in constant

65. It is not clear whether the blame for the faulty grammar is Roger's or Mrs Oliphant's.

alarm for some gaucherie, such as Agnes never would have committed but for the panic he kept her in; and yet he goaded her on to spasmodic efforts, of which, in his mind, he predicted the failure. And Agnes had not in her innocent heart a thought which was not entirely consecrated to her husband; yet she knew that in her difficulties she could put no trust in him, and that he was much more likely to abandon than to stand by her, if she erred in her ignorance. These two distinct conceptions of each other came between them and their union; they were not simply a husband and wife, but a husband with an unsatisfactory idea of his wife, and a wife with an unsatisfactory idea of her husband, always present. Such things occur often in actual life. 66

Volume Two charts the progression of Agnes's disillusion until she is released by her husband's death. When Stanfield meets his daughter again after long absence, Mrs Oliphant's view of the tragedy of the marriage is reflected through his point of view:

He had been indignant and full of a great remorseful pity; but this pity was defeated and turned back by Roger's evident tenderness, and by the clear light in Agnes's eyes. For it was apparent to him that his daughter was not unhappy and oppressed, though at the same time she might have failed of the perfect life. 67

The balance and reasonableness of this is notable; as in all her best work Mrs Oliphant makes no attempt to heighten the colouring and stampede the reader's responses. The irony reflects the author's deep disillusion (which had so troubled Mrs Craik). The last paragraph of this chapter begins:

The truth was that the lot which had fallen to Agnes was the common lot, neither blessed nor miserable, with love enough and happiness enough to keep her going, and support her under the fatigues of the way, but nothing in the world to make paradise, or the ideal fate for which dreamers hope. 68.

66. Agnes II, 60-2

67. Agnes II, 161

68. Agnes II, 166

Here the irony ceases to be covert and openly states its disenchanted view. From this point the narrative proceeds rather too slowly - to Roger's death, a characteristic Oliphant death, coolly reasonable and understated.⁶⁹

After Roger's death the irony takes a new direction: Agnes is observed by "Public Opinion". (This is the title of the last chapter of Book II.) The chief agent of the irony is Mrs Freke, the wife of the vicar in Agnes's village. She is determined to adopt towards Roger the view de mortuis nil nisi bonum, but her husband is more dubious:

"Poor Roger is restored back again to the ideal shape which I have no doubt he wore when she consented to marry him; - and these children will grow up to think their father was the best man that ever lived, and the most dreadful loss to them, instead of finding him out to be very ordinary and very useless, as they would have been sure to do had he lived." 70

Through her ironic observer Mrs Oliphant can express a more sharply disillusioned view of Roger than, as narrator, she might wish to do with the full weight of the novel's meaning behind her. She need not be so totally dismissive of Roger as is Mr Freke. Mrs Freke's attitude on the other hand, a mixture of refusal to recognise the tragedy of Agnes's widowhood and a sort of contemptuous pity, ("And then, whatever faults Agnes may have, nobody could say she was not

69. It is a curious coincidence that Agnes, published in 1865, is a study of unhappiness in the Trevelyan marriage, and that the name of the unhappy married couple in Trollope's He Knew he Was Right (1868) is also Trevelyan. There are other coincidences; both heroines are distressed by the kidnapping of their little boys, and the husband's death ends both marriages. Coincidence it must be; Trollope is not very likely to have read Agnes, and if he had he would surely be at pains to choose a different name for the central figures in his own story of marital disillusion.

70. Agnes II, 161

fond of her husband. Poor thing! I am very, very sorry for her, for my part."), serves to heighten our compassion for Agnes. And later Mrs Freke's view hardens:

"If a woman is not happy in her married life, it is almost always her fault; and when you think what Agnes Stanfield was, and how much poor Roger had to go through - and to see her in her widow's cap --." 71

(Mrs Freke falsely supposes that Agnes is contemplating a second marriage. She strongly disapproves, but her husband hopes it is true, as it will mean a chance of happiness at last. Mrs Oliphant does not invite us to identify uncritically with Mr Freke's view, since she was almost always sceptical about second marriages.) Mrs Freke's view that "If a woman is not happy in her married life, it is almost always her own fault", coming so soon after the sustained analysis of the progress of the Trevelyan marriage, is highly ironic; yet it is not the kind of irony which must be reversed to find the truth; in one sense Agnes was partly responsible for the failure of her marriage, because of her naivety and her inability to differentiate between appearance and reality.

Mrs Freke, we are told, "felt a little like a benevolent tiger, whose natural prey had been restored" ⁷² when Agnes was released by her husband's death to the sympathetic solicitude of the neighbours. She is a noticeably successful study of misplaced, insensitive, tactless good nature, perhaps more gently handled than she would have been by Jane Austen.

Book Three of Agnes is a disappointing anti-climax. In place of sustained irony, we find melodramatics: villainy, plotting and

71. Agnes II, 309; III, 117-8 (this latter passage from a chapter entitled "Village Gossip").

72. Agnes II, 314

counter-plotting, kidnapping, adventure-story suspense, and sudden thrilling revelations. The book deepens towards the tragic, pessimistic ending - but the material used for this purpose is notably inferior. The only compensation is in the character of Beatrice Trevelyan, Agnes's sister-in-law, who takes part in plotting against Agnes and then repents. She is a fine study of a spoiled, weak, selfish woman obsessed with finding a purpose in life through marriage - and, owing to her complete lack of self-knowledge until the end of the book, she is involved in many classic ironies of character. She "had no confidence in love, not knowing it much more than by hearsay".⁷³ Defeated in a lawsuit in which she and her father claimed custody of Agnes's little boy, she plans a revenge that precipitates the final tragedy:

Beatrice had been galled to the heart by what she supposed Agnes's happiness, and she had been smitten with dire and miserable envy at the thought of Agnes's grief; feeling to the bottom of her heart, with the perception of the truth that showed the fallen angel in her, that her own mean and paltry existence was not good enough either for the grief or the happiness. But if this had been the case, while Agnes did her no further harm than that which was implied in her capacity for a loftier though more grievous lot, it may be imagined what Beatrice's sensations were when her sister-in-law attained the clear culpability of a victory over her. ⁷⁴

In spite of her "perception of the truth" she is almost entirely incapable of a fair examination of her motives. But the death of her nephew produces an intense and agonising remorse - which is not allowed to be the end of the matter. She is dismissed from the novel with these words:

73. Agnes III, 306

74. Agnes III, 242

Beatrice Trevelyan told her story very frankly and honestly to her old lover; but yet in the telling, either because she herself, being acquainted with it, could explain the intention as it existed in her own mind, and not the mere bungling performance which people could judge for themselves; or because of some involuntary softening in the narrative; the result was that he admired and trusted her more than ever, and thought her penitence and candour noble; and they were married and Miss Trevelyan, though so late, entered into the life which she had so longed for, and was a very good wife, and made her husband happy. She would have kept up a kind of friendship with her sister-in-law, had Agnes been disposed to it, and did not hesitate to say that, though it was a dreadful trial to the family, Roger's marriage had turned out a great deal better than could have been expected, and that Mrs Trevelyan was an estimable person, in her way. 75

Mrs Oliphant thus carefully avoids the sentimental falsity of a penitence that transforms the penitent out of recognition. She does not soften the impact of the ending as Dickens might have done.⁷⁶

Beatrice is capable of no greater penitence than her limited nature allows her. Once she has recovered her poise she begins to justify herself. ("It was for the child's good she had acted - and the accident was not her fault - and yet it was she who would have to bear the penalty".)⁷⁷ It is a measure of the confidence that Mrs Oliphant had already achieved in handling irony that she could safely trust the reader to draw his own conclusions from such a passage without pointing out the real truth of the matter.

75. Agnes III, 322-3

76. Mrs Oliphant specifically complained of Dickens's "maudlin repentances", for example in a letter to John Blackwood of 20 September 1865, where she refers to Dombey and Son (A. & L., p.205)

77. Agnes III, 310

In Agnes and in Miss Marjorie Banks, two very different books, Mrs Oliphant had achieved a mastery of and a confidence in irony that she retained for the rest of her career. Not that every subsequent novel is beyond criticism; far from it. The success of subsequent novels depends almost directly on the extent to which she is willing to maintain a consistent ironic vision; the sudden stress of strong feelings or the misguided pursuit of thrills, mysteries and awful revelations too often jeopardises the balance of some of her later books. One could cite a novel as late as Janet (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1891), with an ironically observed heroine, who herself ironically observes the family in which she works as governess. Janet is at first contrasted with the stereotypes of the governess in earlier Victorian fiction, but most of the ironies are swamped by a bizarre melodramatic mystery theme involving an insane husband concealed in a ruined wing of the house. The finest novels in the last three decades of her career are invariably those in which a consistent ironic vision is maintained to the end; and I shall examine several of these novels in Part Two of this thesis.

Mrs Oliphant uses irony, not only to dissociate herself sharply from a presented point of view, but also to facilitate an ambivalent treatment of a theme. I have already illustrated this ambivalence in her work - for example, the ironic reversal of values at the end of Sir Robert's Fortune when Lily's uncompromisingly feminist view is put in perspective by the more tolerant, more submissive view of Helen. She often concedes a degree of validity to a point of view (for example when she allows in the preface to Agnes that it is "as wise as it is natural" to concentrate on love stories);⁷⁸

78. See page 105 above.

while at the same time she half-privately dissociates herself from the view as a quiet gesture of independence. I do not suggest that her ambivalence was externalised as a deliberate policy; but simply that it was an instinctive approach deriving from an intuitive sympathy for two or more points of view at once. Her irony is often her most effective technique for reinforcing her anti-romantic attitudes; but it also promotes flexibility, balance and the maintenance of distance and detachment.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHARACTER AND MOTIVE

A reasonable man, he said to himself, must be able to give an account of all the mental processes he passed through; but here was a mental process which was inexplicable.

(The Greatest Heiress in England (1879) III,
84)

By her use of irony Mrs Oliphant highlights the complexity of human motivation which, on the evidence of her finest novels, was a source of endless fascination for her. But since this theme is central to my whole thesis, it is sufficient here to isolate one particular aspect of it: Mrs Oliphant's almost obsessive interest in complex, many-faceted states of mind. She uses analyses of complex states of mind for differing purposes, often strikingly contrasted. She shows characters sometimes trapped by self-deception, sometimes moving in the direction of self-discovery. Sometimes she analyses the perversity of an obsession or delusion; sometimes, on the other hand, she examines progress towards disillusion. Sometimes she shows characters profoundly tormented by irreconcilable motives; sometimes she shows them in the grips of an over-riding idea which entirely excludes the recognition of other possibilities. From the Carlingford novels onwards there is scarcely one novel in which she does not, as a matter of course, make a detailed analysis of the mental processes of some of her characters. Indeed, so automatic did this become, that she sometimes examined a character's thought processes even

when there had been nothing so far in the presentation of him to warrant such complexity.

Mrs Oliphant has a considerable gift for interpreting the thought-processes of the weak, the self-deceived, the morally inadequate. Wilfrid Ochterlony in Madonna Mary (1867) is led to suppose, quite wrongly, that he is the only legitimate son of his mother and thus should, by right, be the sole inheritor of his father's property. He is only 17, and Mrs Oliphant shows remarkable understanding of the young and inexperienced and the private fantasy worlds in which they live. Wilfrid's self-obsessed mind, his curiosity combined with ignorance, his self-pity and self-justifications, are all analysed in detail:

All this passed through the boy's mind before it ever occurred to him what might be the consequences to others of his extraordinary discovery, or what effect it might have upon his mother, and the character of his family. He was self-absorbed, and it did not occur to him in that light. Even when he did come to think of it, he did it in the calmest way. No doubt his mother would be annoyed; but she deserved to be annoyed - she who had so long kept him out of his rights; and, after all, it would still be one of her sons who would have Earlston. And as for Hugh [his eldest brother], Wilfrid had the most generous intentions towards him. There was, indeed, nothing that he was not ready to do for his brothers. As soon as he believed that all was to be his, he felt himself the steward of the family.... These ideas filled him like wine, and went to his head and made him dizzy; and all the time he was as unconscious of the moral harm, and domestic treachery, as if he had been one of the lower animals; and no scruple of any description, and no doubt of what it was right and necessary to do, had so much as entered his primitive and savage mind.

We call his mind savage and primitive, because it was at this moment entirely free from those complications of feeling and dreadful conflict of what is desirable, and what is right, which belong to the civilised and cultivated mind. 1

What is especially remarkable here is the ironic stress laid on Wilfrid's "generosity". ("He was not ungenerous, nor unkind, but only it was a necessity with him that generosity and kindness should come from and not to himself", she says a few lines earlier.) Here is no stereotype of a scheming villain, no caricature of egomania, but a fully understood character, complex and paradoxical, with an under-developed moral sense. Mrs Oliphant speaks of "that profound forlornness of egotism and ill-doing" and "the obtuseness of ignorance and self-occupation and youth"; and in such a context Wilfrid's generosity, however genuine, must remain sterile and self-defeating.

Mrs Oliphant can extend her understanding even to worse cases of moral inadequacy and disgracefulness than Wilfrid Ochterlony, and when she chooses (which is by no means always) she can transform a "villain" into a human being. A good example is Mr May in The Son of His Father (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1887), a convicted forger discharged from prison yet weakly ready to commit further acts of dishonesty. He is a cynical, self-justifying humorist, and when he is restored to his morally upright son John he is unable to face the prospect of living in future by John's standards and he takes himself off. Mrs Oliphant writes of him with a certain relish, and we are - almost - persuaded to see John through his eyes, as an insufferable prig. Mr May appears late in Volume II, and much of Volume III is devoted to an analysis of his moral inadequacy:

He had a quickly working mind, readily moved by any suggestion, taking up a cue and running on from it in lines of thought which amused himself and sometimes appeared to possess a certain originality, enough to impose upon the chance hearer, and always upon himself.

He was not very rigid himself upon any point of morals, after his long practice in thinking everything over, and blurring out to his own satisfaction the lines of demarcation between right and wrong: but he could understand that the young man, not having his experience, might think otherwise, and had even a sympathy for his want of philosophical power in that respect.

.... the curious loosely-formed intelligence which seemed to drift through everything - life, and morality, and natural affection - without feeling any one influence stronger than the other, or any moral necessity, either logical or practical. 2

The second of these quotations neatly illustrates Mr May's ingenuity in self-deception. We are ironically invited to identify with his self-justifying processes and to see John's strict morality as deriving from "his want of philosophical power". But the reader is much less likely than Mr May himself to suppose that his "long practice in thinking everything over", his "experience", have improved his insight.

It is not through John's eyes, but through the eyes of his sister Susie, and by implication through the eyes of their mother, that Mrs Oliphant's final judgment of Mr May is delivered:

Susie knew something, embittered by the feeling of the woman who had gone through it all, of the long and hopeless struggle that had filled her own childhood, and of which she had been vaguely conscious - the struggle between a woman of severe virtue, and an uprightness almost rigid, with a man who had no moral fibre, yet so many engaging qualities, so much good humour, ease of mind, and power of adapting himself, that most people liked, though nobody approved of him: the kind of father whom little children adore, but whom his sons and daughters, as they grow up, sometimes get to loathe in his incapacity for anything serious, for any self-restraint or self-respect. 3

2. The Son of His Father III, 19. 29-30, 205

3. The Son of His Father III, 193-4

Mrs Oliphant is scrupulously fair: she emphasises Mr May's "good humour" and his power to make little children adore him; and she draws attention to Mrs May's "uprightness almost rigid", which has made her hard to live with. (Indeed Mrs May, as she appears in the novel, is a cold, ruthless, largely unsympathetic character.) But the final effect of the word "loathe" and the words that follow is shatteringly final; there is no appeal against such a verdict.

Regrettably, The Son of His Father, taken as whole, is an unsatisfactory novel, too theatrical, too unsubtle in most of its characterisation; the insight into Mr May is untypical of the book. And it is untypical of her work as a whole, since usually when she tries to deal with real viciousness of conduct (as distinct from weakness) her touch is uncertain.

If Mr May is as far as Mrs Oliphant can safely go in the direction of total moral inadequacy, she can take us very interestingly to the other end of the spectrum and show us a basically "good" character with a clearly defined system of values who, nevertheless, can be tempted into wrongdoing. A fine example is Miss Susan, the middle-aged heroine of Whiteladies (3 volumes, Tinsley 1875). We see the events of this novel largely from Miss Susan's point of view, so the reader is induced to sympathise with and identify with her. To get revenge on a hostile relative, she is led to carry out a mean and contemptible deceit. Mrs Oliphant analyses in depth her obsessive state of mind, intensified by full scale self-deception. There are several levels in Miss Susan's motivation: an intense nervous sensation which obliterates the power of rational judgment; in cooler moments a refusal to admit to herself that what she wants is revenge and is morally objectionable, balanced by obsessive guilt feelings

(not always acknowledged as such) which nevertheless will not make her give up her purpose. Opportunity arises to carry out the deceit and the result is described as follows:

A curious thrill ran through [her] - the sting, the attraction, the sharp movement, half pain, half pleasure, of temptation and guilty intention; for there was a sharp and stinging sensation of pleasure in it, and something which made [her] giddy.

(Unfortunately the repetition of "sting" and "sharp" in this passage has a weakening effect.) A little later this "curious exaltation of mind" is further analysed in a very long paragraph. Miss Susan is window-shopping but unable to concentrate on this pastime because of the intense mental activity in which she is trapped:

A deeper sensation possessed her, and its first effect was so strange that it filled her with fright; for, to tell the truth, it was an exhilarating sensation. She was breathless with excitement, her heart beating.... This thought was not as other thoughts which come and go in the mind, which give way to passing impressions, yet prove themselves to have the lead by returning to fill up all crevices. It never departed from her for a moment.... She walked about as lightly as a ghost, unconscious as a ghost, unconscious of fatigue, unconscious of her physical powers altogether, feeling neither hunger nor weariness.

In this frame of mind she believes illogical things (supposing, for example, that her maid suspects her) because "it is one feature of this curious exaltation of mind, in which Miss Susan was, that reason and all its limitations is for the moment abandoned, and things impossible become likely and natural".⁴

Later Miss Susan discovers that "A righteous person has ... an immense advantage over all false and frivolous people in doing wrong" because nobody will suspect her and the deception she practises

4. Whiteladies I, 120, 124-6

is accepted without question by her enemy. But by this time she
is at last beginning to experience sensations of guilt:

In her guilty consciousness she could not realise that this man whom she despised and disliked could have faith in her, and watched him stealthily, wondering when he would break out into accusations and blasphemies. She was almost as wretched as he was, sitting there so calmly opposite to him, ...⁵ wondering, Was it possible he could believe her?

After this Miss Susan's motivation grows ever more and more entangled. She disputes with her own sense of guilt, but tries to quieten her conscience, while still possessed by the nervous euphoria which I have already illustrated. And subsequent feelings are described as follows:

This uncertainty it was, no doubt, which kept up an excitement in her, not painful except by moments, a strange quickening of life, which made the period of her temptation feel like a new era in her existence. She was not unhappy, neither did she feel guilty, but only excited, possessed by a secret spring of eagerness and intentness which made life more energetic and vital. This, as I have said, was almost more pleasurable than painful; but in one way she paid the penalty. The new thing became her master-thought; she could not get rid of it for a moment. Whatever she was doing, whatever thinking of, this came constantly uppermost. It looked her in the face, so to speak, the first thing in the morning, and never left her but reluctantly when she went to sleep at the close of the day, mingling broken visions of itself even with her dreams, and often waking her up with a start in the dead of night. It haunted her like a ghost; and though it was not accompanied by any sense of remorse, her constant consciousness of its presence gradually had an effect on her life. Her face grew anxious; she moved less steadily than of old; she almost gave up her knitting and such meditative occupations, and took to reading desperately when she was not immersed in business - all to escape from the thing by her side, though it was not in itself painful. Thus gradually, insidiously, subtly, the evil took possession of her life. 6

5. Whiteladies I, 273-4. These are almost the last words of Vol.I.
6. Whiteladies II, 3-4. The word "subtly" is as in the original.

Perhaps this passage is not so sharply written as it ought to be; in particular the metaphor of "possessed by a secret spring" is an absurdity, and the twice-used expression "thing" ("The new thing became her master-thought"; "to escape from the thing by her side") is vague and ineffective. And Mrs Oliphant shows her anxiety that Miss Susan should be punished for her sin, by her careful placing of the words "she paid the penalty" so that the reader must recognise that - despite the absence of remorse - the subsequent mental stress is a just process of retribution. Yet nevertheless the passage remains a very striking piece of insight into a complex, overwrought state of mind, with the moralising intention firmly subordinated to the observed movement of thought.

Although this passage repeatedly stresses that Miss Susan is not experiencing guilt, other passages earlier and later make it clear that she must adopt the sort of self-justifying techniques that I have illustrated in the thought processes of Mr May, for "Casuistry is a science which it is easy to learn. The most simple minds become adept at it; the most virtuous persons find a refuge there when necessity moves them."⁷ This echoes a passage much earlier in the book, when Miss Susan first conceives her plan to humiliate Farrel-Austin:

Perhaps ... it is more easy to exercise that curious casuistry which self-interest originates even in the most candid mind, when it is not necessary to put one's thoughts into words.

This introduces a detailed analysis of her self-deceiving mental

7. Whiteladies II, 99

activity covering nearly four pages to the end of the chapter, where her "casuistry" reaches an absurd climax: "The more she thought of it, the more did this appear a sacred duty, worthy of any labour and any sacrifice."⁸ Thus she shows her capacity for self-deception long before the exact nature of the injury she will inflict on Farrel-Austin formulates itself in her mind.

It is worthy of notice that Mrs Oliphant does not over-simplify the moral issues by making Farrel-Austin a likable character (though we are allowed on occasion to see his point of view). He is in fact a very unpleasant man; yet Mrs Oliphant still insists that the deceit which Miss Susan carries out is quite indefensible, and the final development of the plot inflicts a very severe punishment on her.

The characters I have so far examined are trapped by an imperfect self-knowledge in a false position which they only vaguely recognise if at all, or which they rationalise by means of self-justifying techniques. But sometimes a character is faced by a sudden unforeseen crisis, which obliges him to come to terms not merely with the situation but with his own nature. He must, in effect, ask King Lear's question "Who is it that can tell me who I am?", and travel the painful journey towards partial or full self-discovery. A very striking example is to be found in It Was a Lover and His Lass (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1883). Lewis Murray achieves self-discovery at the cost of a mental upheaval unlike anything he has ever known before. "He began to think, almost for the first time in his life". These words

8. Whiteladies I, 80-4

come at the end of a long paragraph which reviews the circumstances about which Lewis must now come to a sudden decision. The next paragraph begins by describing Lewis walking in the London parks which "gave a kind of unnatural background, familiar yet strange to his thoughts".

It might have been the extraordinary character of these thoughts that had thus altered the aspect of the visible world, in itself so well known.... His mind got only more confused, a greater whirl of imperfect thinking was about him as he hurried along, receiving all these external objects distractedly into the ferment of his brain.... Thinking was so new a process to Lewis that he felt as if some jarring machinery had been set up in his brain, and the whirl of the unaccustomed wheels made him giddy, and took away all consciousness of mental progress. He seemed to be in the same place, beating a painful round, with the whirl and the movement and the confusion, but nothing else, in his bewildered brain.

The end-product of this unprecedented mental activity is revealed to Lewis next morning, as "a resolution formed and perfect".

Where had it come from? Had the wheels been working while he slept, and ground it out? had something above earth whispered it to him out of the unseen? He was almost afraid, when he saw it looking at him, as it were, in the face, a something separate from himself, a definite thing, resolved and certain. 9

Lewis's crisis is precipitated by the sudden recognition, under pressure from another character (a lawyer), that he has been performing a most dishonourable and harmful deceit in the earlier part of the novel. He had never been much given to introspection; but now he is compelled to examine his motives and come to a definite decision - which involves him in a very severe self-sacrifice, the surrender of his income.

The whole passage with its rather eccentric imagery of machinery, its stress on the subjectivity of the external world, and the almost schizophrenic effect of the end (I use schizophrenic in its popular sense), is a bold attempt at something very difficult. Lewis has been presented to far as likable, but rather shallow; it is therefore necessary if there is to be such a volte-face that such elaborate analysis of a sustained crisis of self-discovery should be made. It would not be enough simply to say that under the stress of a sudden crisis Lewis was forced to reach a decision. But sometimes a quick, intense recognition by a character of his own individuality, his selfhood, is presented concisely and economically, when this self-discovery is the central intention of the story. This happens in a very fine short story, "The Story of a Wedding Tour";¹⁰ Janey Rosendale, humiliated neglected wife, is accidentally separated from her husband on the honeymoon in France, and impulsively makes a decision, discovering in herself a hitherto unsuspected self-reliance: "Janey herself, the real woman, whom nobody had ever seen before". She travels into the remote French countryside to make a new identity for herself. "Now that she had taken this desperate step, she must stand by it to the death".¹¹

There is one novel in which Mrs Oliphant deliberately set out to examine a very strange and disturbed state of mind and to follow it through towards self-discovery. This is Innocent: A Tale of Modern Life (3 volumes, Sampson Low 1873). In her Autobiography she describes her intentions in this novel: "the idea was one that pleased me,

10. A Widow's Tale and other Stories (1898)

11. A Widow's Tale, pp.309, 313. The sentences quoted are the last words, respectively, of chapters I and II.

- the development by successive shocks of feeling of a girl of dormant intelligence".¹² And indeed the book is a sustained study of a strange deprived mind, a girl who as a result of total neglect in her childhood, is emotionally undeveloped and anaesthetised. The intention is highly ambitious - and probably beyond Mrs Oliphant's powers. She herself admitted that Innocent "was not very good"; and taken as a whole it is one of her most disappointing books. Yet if it had not been written in great haste, to provide a serial for which The Graphic was asking, it might have been much better. The handling of the heroine, while not completely successful, never fails to be intensely interesting as a study of a deprived mind and as a quite remarkable piece of evidence for the fascination that strange mental conditions always aroused in Mrs Oliphant.

Innocent first appears when, following the death of her father, she is rescued from a bleakly lonely life by her cousin Frederick, to be taken home to his mother. She is delighted, but she is incapable of more than one idea at a time:

She wanted no more; no mothers nor sisters, no change, no conditions such as make life possible. She knew nothing about all that. Her understanding had nothing to do with the question. It was barely developed, not equal to any strain; and in this matter it seemed quite possible to do without it; whether she understood or not did not matter. She was happy; she wanted nothing more. 13

And for a long time Mrs Oliphant emphasises Innocent's passivity, her sluggish imagination, her incapacity for an active emotional life, "for the girl's heart and soul had been sealed up, and she loved nothing". And when she arrives at her aunt's house she "looked

12. A. & L., p.128

13. Innocent I, 137

at everything, taking in the picture before her with the quick eyes of a savage". She does not respond to the luxurious surroundings in which she finds herself, because she had no experience of comfort.

The ladies by her side thought she was admiring everything, which disposed them amiably towards her, but this was very far from the feeling in Innocent's mind. 14

Many complex analytical passages follow, as the baffled family, 'much discouraged in every way by the strange passiveness of the newcomer', attempt in vain to provoke a response from her.

Her intellect was feeble, or so partially awakened that she had never yet begun to think of her own position, either present or future, or connexion with the rest of humanity. All that life had yet been to her was a window through which she had seen other people, bearing no connexion with herself, moving about with mysterious comings, and going through a world not realised. She had watched them with a certain dull wonder.

One cousin falsely supposes that she is oppressed by the inferiority of her status.

Such a notion, however, was much too complicated, much too profound for the mind of Innocent. It was not so much that she had a false impression about her relationship with them as that she had no real conception of any relationship at all.... Gratitude was more than impossible to her; she did not know what the word meant.... Nothing was formed in her except the striking personality and individuality that shut her up within herself as within a husk, and kept her from mingling with others. This absence of all capability of thought or feeling, this perfect blank and stupefaction of intellect and heart, took away from her all that lively sense of novelty, all that interest in the unknown which is so strong and beneficent in youth. She did not ask to understand either the things or persons round her.... Their outcries and laughter, their manifestations of feeling, their fondness for each other, the perpetual movement of life among them, affected her only with a vague surprise too faint for that lively title,

and a still more languid contempt.... [S]he came among them like a thing dropped out of another sphere, having no business, no pleasure, nothing whatever to do or learn upon this alien earth. 15

This is all very impressive - like several other passages which I might quote - but it is troublesome because Mrs Oliphant eventually seems never to do more than repeat her key ideas. She can analyse Innocent's anaesthetised state of mind, but she cannot dramatise it. Indeed if an author chooses to describe total passivity, it would be an unprofitable paradox to show it, so to speak, in action. The very choice of such an extreme condition of mind is by its nature self-defeating. The striking imagery, with what appear to be Tennysonian and Wordsworthian echoes ("a window through which she had seen other people"; "going through a world not realised") is in the end just too inflated for its subject.

The previous quotation refers to Innocent's "striking personality and individuality" which at this stage is potential rather than actual. In her Autobiography Mrs Oliphant pointed out that she intended to show Innocent's "development by successive shocks of feeling". But we have quite a long time to wait before any moment of self-discovery. Many passages later, and after many such analytic passages as those I have quoted, Innocent accidentally causes the death of her cousin's wife - and her capacity for ethical judgment is awakened, sluggish and confused but real enough. But an uneasy feeling that she ought to have told Frederick what she had done weighs as heavily upon her as the killing itself:

15. Innocent I, 260-4. I have added the comma after "mysterious comings", which is not in the first edition; it is clearly essential for the sense.

Thus her secret had driven her out of the primitive region of sentiment in which her mind had hitherto dwelt, into that sphere of mental and moral complication in which most of us have our home. This it was that made her uneasy, embarrassed, almost unhappy with Frederick. It may seem strange to the reader that any additional weight was necessary to disturb the calm of an unhappy girl who thought herself guilty of a murder. But Innocent was passive in feeling, and imagination scarcely existed in her; and besides, I believe that though fictitious miseries are often very terrible, a fictitious guilt like this, though it may affect the mind as if it were real, can scarcely weigh upon the conscience like an actual crime. It is difficult to grope into such darkling corners of nature or to discriminate between moral and intellectual impressions to a point so fine drawn. I do not affirm this as a certainty, but I put it forth as an opinion. Innocent believed that she had been guilty of a terrible crime, and yet she knew, poor child, that she was not guilty. Her mind was oppressed by it, her life clouded, all her peaceful existence revolutionised; but her conscience was not affected to a similar degree. Her consciousness had entered upon an entirely new chapter since this terrible event. Herself had become revealed to her by the light of it, and it was only by this light that she could realise her own individual and independent being; but she was not so unhappy as in the circumstances she ought to have been. 16

And thus with this final sentence the moment of self-discovery is defined and described. Mrs Oliphant's authorial diffidence does not help the sharpness at which she is aiming; and if she is so unsure of the nature of Innocent's exact state of mind it is strange that she chose to complicate matters in this way by intermingling Innocent's guilt for a genuine - though "innocent"-murder with "fictitious miseries" about the mere concealment of facts. But it is clear enough that she is drawn to complexity of motive like a moth to a candle - and like a moth she often burns her wings, as here.

But even with these reservations the passage, like its predecessors, is impressive, especially the last sentence.

The "successive shocks of feeling" of which Mrs Oliphant spoke in the Autobiography follow: including Innocent's panic marriage to a man she does not love, a trial for murder, and a further, totally false, accusation of trying to poison her husband. Unfortunately it is impossible to believe that her self-discovery has really taken place, or is progressing. "Herself", it seems, had not after all "become revealed to her", since at the end of the novel she seems much the same as she was at the beginning, unable to comprehend any experience she encounters and reacting with a blank confusion of emotions. Mrs Oliphant was no doubt troubled by the risk of making a transformed Innocent seem quite irreconcilable by any hypothesis of moral and psychological self-discovery with the sustained study of pathological passivity in earlier chapters. If the transformation was to seem plausible it should have been shown as a slow process, not as an abrupt shock which could be supposed capable of exploding her into a new life - or even a succession of shocks. Thus the final effect of this novel, striking though it is, is disappointing.

Other examples of self-discovery, this time achieved as the result of a slow process of maturing, are Chatty (Charlotte) Warrender in A Country Gentleman and His Family (1886), Frances Waring in A House Divided Against Itself (1886) and Kirsteen in the novel of that name (1890), Lily in Sir Robert's Fortune (1895) and Agnes in Agnes (1866), as I have shown in previous chapters, make a progress towards self-identity as a result of bitter marital disillusion which makes them, partially at least, feminists. In Mrs Arthur (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1877) there is a curious echo of the situation

in Agnes with the implications entirely reversed: Nancy is an uneducated girl married to a man of higher rank who is humiliated by her vulgarity and her fierce hostility to self-improvement. Her aggressiveness alienates the reader's sympathies; but in due course she is chastened, learns her need for Arthur's love, educates herself and reunites herself with him, having separated from him for two years. The process of self-discovery, unfortunately, is not dramatised at all. There is a gap in the narrative, covering the two years' separation, after which Nancy has entirely changed her attitude to Arthur. However, there is an elaborate retrospective passage (two long paragraphs)¹⁷ in which her progress towards self-recognition is summarised.

In all her mature work Mrs Oliphant is constantly preoccupied with mental processes, and the inner life of her characters. We may ask whether this implies a particular view of human nature. In that it is possible to produce passages from her work that seem to contradict one another (evidence of the ambivalence of which I have already spoken) one must be cautious; frequently she will make a seemingly profound comment on the unfathomable mystery or paradox of human nature, which on examination proves to be merely superficial or not integrally connected with the theme of the book in which it is used. Nevertheless she reverts with great regularity to certain themes, and I wish to isolate two of these: the semi-solipsistic view that we live locked into an isolating world of our own ("Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison"),¹⁸ from which we communicate only with difficulty; the delusion that we think

17. Mrs Arthur III, 130-6

18. T.S.Eliot, The Waste Land, l. 414

when in fact we are surrendering to chance associations and incoherent feelings.

The notion that we "Cannot communicate" is often supposed to be peculiar to our own century, when assured beliefs in man's place in the universe have broken down. But the solipsistic view of human experience goes back to Bishop Berkeley, and the theme of human isolation is not unknown in the nineteenth century, for example in the poems of Matthew Arnold whose "~~T~~o Marguerite - Continued" is echoed in one passage from The Sorceress (1893), where Mrs Oliphant speaks of the "Strange veil of individuality which is between two human creatures, as the sea is between two worlds, and more confusing, more impenetrable than any distance".¹⁹ The echo of Arnold's words is unmistakable:

Yes! in the sea of life enisled,
With echoing straits between us thrown,
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,
We mortal millions live alone.
The islands feel the enclasping flow,
And then their endless bounds they know.²⁰

And the word "impenetrable" seems to echo the last line of the poem: "The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea". The phrase "The veil of individuality" is used elsewhere in Mrs Oliphant's work,²¹ and in her more pessimistic moods she was inclined to believe that man is essentially alone, cut off by this "veil of individuality" from other people. In The Sorceress the two wearers of this "veil" are mother and son, a relationship which to Mrs Oliphant involved an intimacy and warmth of communion more than most other relationships did.

19. The Sorceress II, 127

20. Text from Arnold, Poetical Works (Macmillan 1890)

21. For example, Madam (1885) I, 120

Yet these two are baffled in their attempt to find the explanation of a simple mystery because neither can see into the other's mind: "They looked into each other's faces and made out nothing". But if each were to supply just the right piece of information, the mystery would dissolve entirely. Again and again in her novels Mrs Oliphant keenly observes those moments when, often from a failure of imagination or from egotistical preoccupations, we are unable to identify with another person's point of view, even that of a close friend or relation; or when we withdraw into the isolation of our own estranged thoughts; or when because of "reflection ... prismatic changes ... oblique catchings of the light" from one mind to another we are capable of only imprecise insight into another person's thoughts.²²

There is a striking and very moving example of non-communication between father and daughter in Carità (3 volumes, Smith Elder 1877). The daughter has been brought up by her aunt since the death of her mother and, inevitably, when she and her father are reunited they are uneasy with each other. The mutual isolation is strongly stressed as they sit at breakfast, each of them entirely at a loss how to talk to the other:

He did not know Cara, and was somehow uneasy in her presence, feeling in her a suspicion and distrust of himself which he could by no means account for. And Cara did not know him, except that she did distrust and suspect him, yet expected something from him, she could not tell what; something better than the talk about collisions and shipwrecks in the papers. She tried to respond, and the breakfast was not a sullen or silent meal.... There was a perfect ferment

22. A Country Gentleman and His Family II, 220-1

of thought going on in her brain while she sat opposite to him, saying yes and no, and now and then asking a question, by way of showing a little interest.... She could make him out to some degree, only putting more meaning in him than he was himself at all aware of; but he could not make out her. Did thought dwell at all in such well-shaped little heads, under hair so carefully coiled and twisted? He did not know, and could no more divine her than if she had been the Sphinx in person; but Cara, if she went wrong, did so by putting too much meaning into him. 23

This represents the traditional mutual incomprehension of the generations, but also in Mrs Oliphant's ironic analysis of Mr Beresford's thoughts there is a touch of feminism; his preconceived view of women prevents him from much comprehension of her true nature, and makes him less able to read her than she him. The social tension or frustration of having nothing to talk about is familiar enough, but is usually played for comedy; here there is a quiet, restrained note of pathos. Other examples of failure of communication between parent and child can be found in The Wizard's Son (1884) and Who Was Lost and Is Found (1894). Both are concerned with mother and son.

The quotation from Carita sufficiently demonstrates that the world in which each individual dwells is self-coherent and self-justifying; minds cannot easily meet because we constantly refer experiences back to our own preconceived ideas and attempt to mould them to fit our own private universe. If this is true of parent and child, how much more of lovers, or of husband and wife. It will not be necessary for me to pursue this theme any further here, since

I have already fully illustrated the process of self-deception and the strong emotional preconceptions of lovers when dealing with Sir Robert's Fortune and Agnes and will do so later in the chapter in connection with In Trust. At this point I will merely make brief reference to one topic, the cyclical pattern which Mrs Oliphant frequently traces in the mental processes of lovers: a lover, though frequently presented with clear evidence of the worthlessness of the loved person or of the non-return of his love, repeatedly reverts to a firm conviction that the loved person fully measures up to his high opinions or that his love, despite appearances, is unreservedly returned. I use the masculine pronoun purely for grammatical reasons; in fact the victim of delusion is usually a woman. But there are several very notable examples of deluded love in a man, leading in the end to a compulsive monomania; for example, Frederick Eastwood's love for Amanda Batty in Innocent (1873);²⁴ Walter Penton's love for Emmy in A Poor Gentleman (1889); and Charlie Kingsward's love for Laura Lance in The Sorceress (1893). Sometimes, as with Frederick Eastwood, the bitter shocks of enlightenment cannot fail to produce sharp disillusion - and yet still the fatal power of the loved woman has its effect. However, it must be admitted that it is usually the woman who experiences the process of alternating idealism, disillusion and renewed trust. An extraordinary example of deluded love maintained virtually to the very end is Isabel Diarmid's love for the odious Horace Stapylton in The Minister's Wife (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1869); but this book is very seriously flawed by exaggerated rhetoric and melodrama.

24. Amanda, it is worth noting, is as vulgar, unrefined, vicious, malicious and unredeemed a woman as Mrs Oliphant ever created. For once it is the woman whose weakness she wishes to expose.

If Mrs Oliphant's interest in "the veil of individuality" is far from unique, and in a sense common to most novelists of any talent, her conviction that thinking is a very difficult process is a view that she stresses far more than any other nineteenth-century novelist. Thinking, she points out again and again, is hard work, and many people are incapable of it or can attain it only under conditions of great stress:

Indeed I do not think that reasonable sober thought, built upon just foundations, was ever possible to her. She could muse and brood, and did so, and had done so, - doing little else for many a silent year; and she could sit still, mentally, and allow her imagination and mind to be taken possession of by a tumult of fancy and feeling, which drew her now and then to a hasty decision, and which, had she been questioned on the subject, she would have called thinking - as, indeed, it stands for thinking with many of us. 25

This theme appears very early in her career: in John Rintoul, a short novel serialised in Blackwood's Magazine in 1853, there is a lyrical evocation of the thought processes of a highly imaginative young girl:

... an imagination ever ready to fill with vivid scenery and actors the vacant air, whereon her mind, passive itself and still, was content to look for hours - with a strong power of fancy, and a nature sensitive to every touch.... It was so much easier to let her mind glide away as usual into those long wanderings of reveries than to fix it to the question, momentous as that was. 26

After this the theme is repeated in novel after novel to the end of her career - and not only in novels. In a curious piece of

25. The Story of Valentine and His Brother (1875) II, 38-9
26. Blackwood's Magazine LXXIII, 421. John Rintoul appeared afterwards in Tales from Blackwood, Volume XI (1860)

naive piety called Sundays (Nisbet 1858), her first work of non-fiction, she writes:

A steady power of thinking is, perhaps, one of the very rarest of mental endowments; for most of us it is but a reverie, disconnected, broken, full of sudden starts and pauses, sudden pictures suddenly disturbed, a kind of panoramic contemplation of everything hovering within one mental range, which we dignify with the name of thought.²⁷

This is in Chapter I, and in Chapter VII she makes a further comment on the theme, starting by observing the effort required to concentrate on a long sermon:

A steady, monotonous, and persistent logic, is the most inhuman of mental powers, but it is only human teachers who make use of it. ²⁸

(The treatment of this theme is far more sophisticated and perceptive than anything else in the book.) Similarly at the end of her career "The Fancies of a Believer", an eloquent statement of her beliefs published in Blackwood's Magazine in February 1895, deals with the theme at length, relating it to the theme of human isolation. She also makes use of a habitual image, of winds blowing into the mind: "now one thing blows in and through the empty room, and now another, like straws or like falling leaves, or like rain or quickly melting snow".²⁹

It is not necessary to give detailed illustration of the inability-to-think theme from the action of the novels, since it underlies almost all her analyses of complex mental conditions, which I have

27. Sundays, p.20

28. Sundays, p.120

29. Blackwood's Magazine CLVII, 249

already treated very fully. Indeed when referring to Lewis Murray's crisis of self-discovery in It Was a Lover and His Lass I quoted the words "He began to think almost for the first time in his life".³⁰ And earlier I illustrated from The Primrose Path the confused thought processes of an old man dying.³¹ Elsewhere (to give just three interesting examples) she describes an intermingling of thoughts in the mind of a young girl, who is half reading a book, half surrendering to hurt feelings about her father's coldness (Carità 1877); the slow reawakening of memory in the mind of a man who has been injured (Janet 1891); the wandering, muddled mind of a stupid man who is incapable of more than one thought at a time (The Cuckoo in the Nest 1892).³²

On one or two occasions Mrs Oliphant carries her interest in the inability of her characters to think to the point where she virtually describes their stream of consciousness. For example in an otherwise unremarkable short story "Isabel Dysart"³³ the heroine attempts to deal with an acute emotional problem. The voices of her lover, her mother and others echo antiphonally in her mind as if Mrs Oliphant were writing a radio play some 40 years ahead of her time. Once again imagery of wind is used; the wind "came... bringing voices upon it in sudden gusts, flinging words and indistinct phrases in her face, sometimes like the noise of a distant tumult."³⁴ The treatment here is obvious enough and not particularly subtle.

30. See above p.124¹

31. See above p.89

32. Carità I, 186-7; Janet III, 10-14; The Cuckoo in the Nest I, 37-8; 208-10 etc.

33. Serialised in Chambers' Journal in January 1893, afterwards collected in That Little Cutty (with 2 other tales) (Macmillan 1898)

34. That Little Cutty p.220

But elsewhere Mrs Oliphant can describe a stream of consciousness more poetically, as in Effie Ogilvie (2 volumes, Maclehose 1886) where the heroine rushes through wild, dark scenery that reflects her emotions:

She felt as if she were outside of the world altogether, a little ghost wandering over the surface of the earth. There seemed to be no voice in her to call out for help against the darkness and the savage silence, through which she could not even hear the trickle of the stream: nothing but her own steps flying, and her own poor little bosom panting, throbbing, against the unresponsive background of the night. 35

The passage is self-indulgent and slightly whimsical and yet the coalescence of inner and outer worlds in one continuum of experience is striking. It would be affectation to see in this much of an anticipation of the twentieth-century use of stream of consciousness; but after all it has often been pointed out that the technique has been anticipated by many nineteenth-century novelists, often in rudimentary form; and passages like this one can be included in the ancestry of, say, Virginia Woolf.

In conclusion I shall examine one particular novel, In Trust: A Story of a Lady and Her Lover (3 volumes, Longmans 1882), which contains several very notable insights into character and motive. Thus I shall demonstrate how Mrs Oliphant's interest in complex states of mind relates to the overall effect of a complete novel. It will also serve to lead me into the theme of my next chapter, the total form and structure of Mrs Oliphant's novels.

35. Effie Ogilvie II, 193-4

In Trust's subtitle, A Story of a Lady and Her Lover, is ironic; it is really a study of the maturing of an over-idealistic, over-romantic heroine who learns not to trust the blind guidance of impassioned, uncritical love, and to recognise the shallowness, shiftlessness and moral cowardice of her lover Cosmo Douglas - until in the end she is obliged to break her engagement. This is one of Mrs Oliphant's recurrent themes, and I have already examined it in detail in connection with Sir Robert's Fortune and Agnes. But previously I illustrated the theme with the stress, first on Mrs Oliphant's feminist bias and then on her ironic, anti-romantic attitude to love. Both these preoccupations can be illustrated in In Trust; but with as little repetition as can reasonably be avoided I must now examine the theme as a psychological study of complex and paradoxical motives.

Anne Mountford has engaged herself to Cosmo Douglas in defiance of her father - who proceeds to disinherit her. This in itself is entirely conventional, and is very close to the situation with which Sir Robert's Fortune opens. Indeed Cosmo, like Ronald Lumsden, is a briefless barrister; so negligent was Mrs Oliphant of the principle of variety. But In Trust is entirely free from the sensationalism and melodramatics, and the over-contrived plotting, of Sir Robert's Fortune. Indeed it moves slowly, too slowly, before reaching the essential heart of the book, the sequence of events which obliges Anne to modify her over-romantic views under the irresistible pressure of experience. In the second volume the action is increasingly internalised, and we shift between the points of view of Cosmo and of Anne. Cosmo is unwilling to marry a wife with no income, and

yet lacks the courage to make a dishonourable break. He constantly evades committing himself or giving any definite indication of his intentions - even to himself. His arguments almost convince himself.

However:

It is the curse of sophistry that this sense of something better, this consciousness of a fundamental flaw in its arguments, is seldom quite obliterated; but at the same time it was far more in accordance with his nature to act according to the more elaborate, and not according to the simpler system. 36

(This is from a chapter titled "Sophistry" and devoted almost entirely to detailed analyses of the introspections of Cosmo and Anne.) To balance Cosmo's elaborate sophistries we are shown Anne's attempts to make sense of Cosmo's behaviour. She looks for support from him and finds she can never get an unequivocal response; she is continually driven to analyse his motives and her own feelings, sometimes harbouring contradictory opinions at the same time, sometimes elated with approval of what she believes to be his real motive and then lapsing into doubt once more.

The event that precipitates Cosmo's "Sophistry" is the death of Anne's father, obliging him to choose whether to attend the funeral as Anne longs for him to do, thus irrevocably committing himself to her in the eyes of the public, or to stay at home for reasons he proceeds to develop in two long paragraphs. Three pages before the reference to sophistry I have already quoted, the process begins as Cosmo almost packs his bags to go to the funeral: "then he took another thought". The subsequent sequence of arguments, each one subtler than its predecessor - or if not subtler, more elaborately

specious - must unfortunately be abridged:

If he identified himself with everything that was being done now, how could he ever withdraw after, how postpone ulterior proceedings? This, however, is a brutal way of stating even the very first objection that occurred to Cosmo. Sophistry would be a poor art if it only gave an over-favourable view of a man's actions and motives to the outside world, and left himself unconvinced and undeceived. His was of a much superior kind. It did a great deal more for him. When its underground industry was in full action it bewildered himself.... If he thus rushed to Mount to take his place by Anne's side, and yet was not prepared (and he knew he was not prepared) to urge, nay, almost force himself upon Anne's immediate acceptance as her husband, would he not be doing a wrong to Anne? He would compromise her; he would be holding her up to the world as the betrothed of a poor man, a man not so well off as to be able to claim her, yet holding her bound. He paused, really feeling this to throw a new light upon the subject....

This, however, was not all or half the mental process he had to go through. He paused for her sake; yet not in this way could the reason of his hesitation be made clear to her. She would not mind being "compromised". She would not insist upon the fulfilment of their engagement. He had to think of some other reason to prove to her that it was better he should stay away. He made out the case for her, gradually, at more cost of thought than the plea which had convinced himself; but at the end it satisfied him as full of very cogent and effective reasoning.... [M]anly self-denial, honour, and consideration for all parties required that in this emergency he should not think of what was pleasant either to her or to himself.

And the passage continues to the quotation I have already given

- about "the curse of sophistry". The long paragraph ends with Anne's initial reaction to his letter summarising his views:

"I see in a moment the truth and the wisdom and the fine honour of what you say. I am capable of understanding it at least, but I feel how far you go beyond me in delicacy of feeling as well as in other things."37

It is probable that if Mrs Oliphant had ever devoted herself to the art of brevity and concision she would have achieved the same insights more forcefully and with sharper diction. Indeed the very slowness of her movement in this passage contrives to suggest a greater hypocrisy and Pharisaism in Cosmo than she intends; it is a study of a progress towards complete self-deception, with all self-doubt thrust firmly down into the subconscious. This is clear enough from the sentence referring to the "underground industry [which] bewildered himself". But, in spite of this reservation, the invitation to identify with a point of view from which nevertheless the irony and the discreet authorial rhetoric dissociate us works very effectively.

I have quoted Anne's words in her answer to Cosmo's letter. After this the focus of interest shifts to her. She swings from euphoric, wish-fulfilling approval of all he does ("everything was right, everything noble") to a persistent ache of doubt that is nourished by the very charm and exemplary behaviour of Cosmo when he is with her. The stress is upon several levels of consciousness:

Her consciousness of something wanting was not put away, but it was subdued, put down, forced into the shade.... But in those early moments when Cosmo was so tender, when his love was so evident, how could she hold back and doubt him? It was easier by far to put a stop upon herself, and to silence her indefinite, indefinable dissatisfaction.

His winning manner, especially with her mother, almost convinces her - but does not convince Heathcote Mountford, a friend and cousin, whose disapproval of Cosmo's plausibility adds an extra dimension to Anne's complex state of mind:

All this lulled her heart to rest, and filled her mind with sweetness, and did everything that could be done to hoodwink that judgement which Anne herself would so fain have hoodwinked and drowned. This she did not quite succeed in doing - but at all event she silenced it, and kept it quiescent. She began to prepare for the removal [of the Mountfords to another house] with great alacrity and pleasure; indeed the thought of it cheered them all - all at least except Heathcote Mountford, whose views had been so different, and whose indignation and annoyance, though suppressed, were visible enough. He was the only one who had not liked Cosmo.... Anne, for her part, avoided Heathcote, and declared to herself that she could not bear him. What right had he to set up a tribunal at which Cosmo was judged? That she should do it was bad enough, but a stranger! She knew exactly what Heathcote thought. Was it because she thought so, too, that she divined him, and knew what was in his heart? 38

Mrs Oliphant continues to examine the conflicts of Anne's motivation through several more chapters until she is obliged to write a letter breaking the engagement, the process of disillusion having been completed. And thus she has, apparently, disinherited herself to no purpose. There is a long paragraph to end Chapter XXXI in which she surveys ("always with a half-smile, as being her own spectator, and more or less interested in the manner in which she acquitted herself") what appears to be the "shipwreck" of her life, experiencing a mixture of shock, frustration and bitter irony.³⁹

Anne's progress (very characteristic of an Oliphant novel) is towards the disillusioned view of life that was (usually) Mrs Oliphant's own, towards the recognition that she must look within herself for the resources needed to give meaning to her life, not to false images of other people. Her consequent growth in maturity

38. In Trust II, 252,256-60

39. In Trust II, 138

is further promoted by having work to do, the administration of her sister Rose's estates. It is Rose who is presumed to be the beneficiary of Anne's disinheritance - and the two sisters are sharply contrasted. In fact it is through a delayed insight into Rose's character that Mrs Oliphant achieves the most striking - I venture to say the most brilliant - revelation of motive in In Trust.

Until Chapter XXXII (the eighth of Book III) Rose appears as merely a foil to Anne, a charming wilful nonentity to set off the greater complexity of the heroine. But in this chapter she reads a letter she has been specifically forbidden to read at this stage, and discovers that she may not after all be her father's heiress if Anne does not marry Cosmo. And at this point our whole understanding of Rose is opened out by a sudden sustained entry into her point of view. Mrs Oliphant reveals her "irresponsible moral condition", her "entirely primitive nature".

Beneath all her gentleness and smoothness, and the many glosses of civilisation that clothed her being, Rose had an entirely primitive nature, tenacious of every personal belonging, full of natural acquisitiveness and a love of having, which children and savages share with many cultivated persons. She was one of those who, without any conscious evil meaning, are rendered desperate by the idea of personal loss.

Mrs Oliphant continues throughout a long paragraph to analyse Rose's "kind of cruel panic or fierce terror", her "cunning of ignorance and simplicity and the cruel directness of a childish mind", her vanity, her self-deception.⁴⁰ All at once our image of Rose is

40. In Trust III, 167, 189-93

clearly defined: her frustration, her developing persécution mania, her total lack of self-knowledge. This one sequence in effect proves to be the logical outcome of the presentation of her so far in the novel. As with Wilfrid Ochterlony in Madonna Mary, Mrs Oliphant displays her insight into the morally inadequate young.

In his review of In Trust for The Spectator, Meredith Townsend very perceptively isolated this treatment of Rose for special praise. He describes her first as being "a pretty, prosaic, direct little person, as able as is compatible with want of real intellect, and, unknowingly, profoundly selfish upon points". Later he resumes his analysis of Rose:

She is first merely described, then you are interested in her, then you know her as you know your friends, and then almost in a moment the knowledge becomes complete, and you see how the pleasant little girl, with her shallow but real affections, and her thin but straight-going mind, and her "primitive", almost childlike, qualities, has in her a capability almost of great crime.

And Townsend proceeds to quote at length the passage which I myself have quoted in part. Thus, as was characteristic of The Spectator critics, he goes to the heart of what is indeed the remarkable feature of In Trust. Unfortunately he spoils his insight by being not entirely convinced by Anne, and by perversely insisting that Cosmo Douglas is "artistically a failure", because a real-life Cosmo would either be much more ruthlessly selfish "or have been more the sport of good impulses from within". "He is scarcely natural, though we all know him, - an effect drolly incomplete and unsatisfying."⁴¹ The

41. "Mrs Oliphant's Latest Novel", 28 January 1882; The Spectator LV, 124-5

comment seems reasonable - until one realises that Townsend has entirely failed to do justice to the true complexity, the paradoxical complexity, of Mrs Oliphant's presentation of Cosmo. She shows that, intending no evil, he is drawn into a sort of fantasy world by his flight from reality. Her insight is far more searching than Townsend allows. Nevertheless, he takes her seriously enough to assess her by high standards and for this we must be grateful.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEME AND STRUCTURE

The introduction of Mr O'Brien's pert young heir ... is the only one (1) in which we are conscious of any redundancy disturbing the self-restrained closeness of the construction.

(Review of Emily Lawless's Hurriah, The Spectator, 30 January 1886; LIX, 148)

"I thought as much, and it's all an allegory", said Jock, who was blasé, and tired of parables. "I like a story best when it doesn't mean anything."

(The Greatest Heiress in England I, 214-5)

I have examined the special tone and stance of Mrs Oliphant's work. I have examined her distinctive approach to character, both in isolation and in relation to the other characters in the total pattern of a novel. What remains is to examine the totality of an Oliphant novel, confining myself inevitably only to those mature novels in which she avoids the snares of sensationalism and melodramatics, and shows herself able to structure a novel and build it round a theme, using those techniques that the Victorian novelists were developing; symbolism, episodic intensification, the patterning of characters, parallels between plot and subplot and so on.

There is no need to go into much detail of Mrs Oliphant's use of symbolism, since it would be absurd to think of mentioning her novels in the same breath as Wuthering Heights, or to compare her symbols with Dickens's use, say, of the River Thames in Our Mutual Friend or of the prison in Little Dorrit. Yet she can on occasion

1. Presumably the only introduction (of a character); Mrs Oliphant is unclear. Perhaps the article was abridged.

centre a book on a poetic image or concentrate the mood and emotion of an episode by means of a visual detail. For example, the extremely lyrical novel It Was a Lover and His Lass (1883) centres on the socially diminished Murrays of Murkley Castle; the ruined castle becomes a metaphor, partly nostalgic, partly ironic, for the decay of the family and its inclination to dwell on old-fashioned values, and not to come to terms with the present. And at the end of the book it is overtly linked with the heroine Liliias when she supposes she has lost the man she loves:

It was an emblem of her existence, she said to herself - unfinished: all ambitiously framed for life, life on a grand and beautiful scale; but never to be lived in, an empty memorial of what might have been, a house for dreams and nothing else, a place where never fire would be lighted, nor any sweet tumult of living arise. Oh! it was like her, her great deserted place, her strong-built emptiness. 2

Of course this passage is fairly self-conscious, with its affectations of diction and its mannered inversion; Mrs Oliphant is not at her best when striving for poetic effects. I quote it, not to demonstrate a marked gift for the use of symbolism, merely to show that she was consciously interested in it as a technique. And later, in my examination of The Wizard's Son, I shall illustrate a much more sustained use of symbolism.

But it is in structuring and patterning her characters that Mrs Oliphant most clearly shows her concern for the shape of a novel. It will be convenient here to illustrate from In Trust. The theme, as I have indicated by my examination of the characterisation, is

2. It Was a Lover III, 327-8

a challenge to the romantic, over-idealistic view of life. Anne Mountford must learn to see people as they really are, not according to her idealistic expectations of what they are. The spinal cord which integrates the book into one entity is the developing disillusion of Anne as she grows more and more unavoidably aware of the discrepancy between the real Cosmo and her romanticised image of him, until she achieves a fully mature attitude that entails self-discovery. To highlight Anne's idealism, two love stories are included and arouse her fervent interest. One is the extraordinary story of her cousin Heathcote's supposed loss of an Italian princess who chose security rather than love. But in fact the story was much more prosaic than Anne supposes; she has romanticised it out of proportion. The other story is a dilemma of Anne's maid Keziah, who must choose between the butler, Saymore, reliable and financially secure, and Jim, the man she really loves, but who, it is hinted, is scarcely worth loving. Again Anne takes the ultra-romantic view and sides with the true-love ideal; but she is wrong, Mrs Oliphant clearly implies. This whole episode is too obviously a mechanism for the purpose of ironic contrast; Keziah, Saymore and Jim are much too functional, and are of little interest as independent characters. But they do effectively serve their function of highlighting Anne's falsely romantic view of life, and preparing the way for her eventual adoption of the realistic view, when she breaks her engagement and devotes herself to practical work - and marries Heathcote.

The technique might be illustrated from many novels. I have already discussed the use of the subplot in Sir Robert's Fortune:

the story of Helen and Alick which makes explicit the theme of unscrupulous male exploitation of women left implicit in the story of Lily and Ronald. A similar parallel exists between the two plots in The Minister's Wife (1869). The heroine, Isabel Diarmid, has fallen in love with the vicious egotist, Horace Stapylton, who makes unscrupulous use of his power over her and finally marries her as her second husband. A close parallel to this is the story of Ailie Macfarlane, a prophetess who is in communion, she believes, with God. She is supported by John Diarmid, a converted sinner who is a remarkable anticipation of Alec d'Urberville since his conversion has made little difference to his egotism. When the woman he loves dies he transfers his love to Ailie, in a turmoil of emotions that terrifies her, but to which she submits. In short two overbearing egotistical men press marriage on two uncomprehending women - although the treatment of the two plots is markedly different.

Further evidence for the structuring of a mature Oliphant novel will be reserved for detailed analyses of novels, with which I shall end this chapter. But one technique which requires close examination is Mrs Oliphant's extensive use of choric characters, to achieve ironic perspective and complexity of point of view, and to direct the reader's responses to her characters. A curiously elaborate use of the technique is to be found in Mrs Clifford's Marriage (1863),³ a short novel, no more than a novella, which studies an innocent woman's victimisation by her unscrupulous second husband who attempts, until defeated at the end, to oust his stepson from his inheritance.

3. The date of its serialisation (March and April) in Blackwood's Magazine. It was not republished.

The first chapter is taken up with the discussion of various ladies, including sisters of the prospective husband. The second chapter consists mainly of the view of men at the Rector's dinner party - patronising, sneering masculine views. The third chapter contains the rather cloying views of the heroine's younger children. So short a novel is overloaded with so much choric comment and there is not sufficient complexity in the subsequent narrative to warrant this sequence of commentators; indeed the only effect is to demonstrate to the reader the shallowness and naivety of the heroine, which could scarcely have been Mrs Oliphant's intention. Mrs Clifford's Marriage must be considered a simple experiment in which the technique is disproportionate to the use made of it. It is of interest that the story interrupted the sequence of Carlingford novels, serialised in Blackwood's Magazine. It intervened between the last instalment of Salem Chapel (January 1863) and the first of The Perpetual Curate (June 1863). The Perpetual Curate makes interesting use of choric comment, setting its central narrative in the context of observers in the town. Perhaps Mrs Clifford's Marriage was intended as practice in a technique which Mrs Oliphant wished to perfect in her next full-length novel.

Choric characters make their appearance earlier than Mrs Clifford's Marriage. They first appear, tentatively, in Merkland (1851), and in subsequent Scottish novels she made much use of villagers (blacksmiths, peasant women, innkeepers and so on), speaking broad Scots, to provide commentary, usually humorous, on characters who cannot easily see their own story in perspective. I will give more detail

on this in my chapter on Scottish novels. In other novels throughout her career she made use of some six classes of people as commentators: lawyers, clergymen, old ladies (spinsters and widows), aristocrats, servants and (as in the Scottish novels) villagers. For the purpose of choric comment Mrs Oliphant frequently created a close-knit community, self-contained and often intensely parochial and inward-looking, to offset the main events of the narrative. The supreme example of such a community is Carlingford, and I shall devote a whole chapter to the study of this community. So here it is enough to list some of the novels in which interesting use is made of choric comment, selecting from my list above clergymen, old ladies and aristocrats. Clergymen appear as choric characters mainly in those novels whose central characters are not clergy. Their observations, rather surprisingly, are often shown to be naive and prejudiced, stressing the difficulty of the central situation by showing that even the clergy cannot handle it adequately. A clergyman's wife and the leading members of his flock will also be involved. Examples are the Wilberforces in A Country Gentleman and His Family (1886), the Durants in A House Divided Against Itself (1886), the Jenkinsons and the Sitwells in Joyce (1888) and the Chichesters (mainly Mrs) in The Sorceress (1893). Canon Jenkinson in Joyce is a notable exception to my generalisation, since the advice he gives to the heroine, although she cannot take it, is wise and shrewdly iconoclastic.⁴

Old ladies represent a group of characters with a powerful appeal to Mrs Oliphant. Whether widowed or unmarried they have developed

4. See page 85 above.

a rather caustic observer's eye view of their world, and offer disillusioned advice or sharp, almost cynical comments, drawn from a life on the sidelines. Since they often live independent lives there are feminist implications in the use of these characters. They appear early: Miss Willsie Foggo and Miss Anastasia Rivers in The Athelings (1857). But the elderly ladies who reward study appear in much later novels, notably Lady Betty Wardour in Agnes (1869), Miss Catherine Diarmid in The Minister's Wife (1869), Lady Caryisfort in Ombra (1872), Aunt Jean in May (1873), Aunt Barbara in The Ladies Lindores (1883), Miss Sarah and Miss Beenie Dempster in Effie Ogilvie (1886) and Miss Grey in Lady William (1893). Each of these character provides sharp and ironic complexity and "body" in episodes which might otherwise seem unsubtle or overwrought. A fine example is Aunt Jean, who observes two funerals in May, funerals which carry much tragic feeling. One is the funeral of a son, which breaks his father's heart and the other is the funeral of the father himself. But Aunt Jean observes with a cheerful lack of sentiment, much impressed by the crowd of mourners on each occasion - and an extra ironic dimension is added.

My list of aristocrats largely overlaps with the list of old ladies; and indeed the role of the two groups is not dissimilar. The aristocrat by virtue of his (or usually her) independent position is able to view events with an uninvolved eye, and sometimes offers a coolly patrician outlook on the emotional intensity or close personal involvement of the middle-class characters who take part in the main events of the story. Sometimes Mrs Oliphant offers their views

for ironic purposes: we deduce the right judgment of events by discounting or reversing the offered opinion. To those aristocratic ladies listed in the previous paragraph must be added Lady Mary Tottenham in For Love and Life (1874), Sir John Denham in Mrs Arthur (1877), Lord and Lady Hungerford in The Duke's Daughter (1882),⁵ and Lady Mariamne Prestwich in The Marriage of Elinor (1892). Lady Mariamne, one of the most entertaining of these characters, is the aptest choice to illustrate the theme. She is an extravagantly comic society lady, all mannerisms, display, ostentation and tactlessness, and her presence at the heroine's wedding turns the episode into broad comedy. On one occasion Mrs Oliphant is severe on her frivolity and her decayed, over-preserved beauty:

Lady Mariamne had, I fear, false hair, false teeth, false complexion, every thing that invention could do in a poor little human countenance intended for no such manipulation. The consequence was that every natural advantage (and there are some which age confers, as well as many that age takes away) was lost. The skin was parchment, the eyes were like eyes of fishes, the teeth - too white and perfect - looked like the horrible things in the dentists' windows, which is precisely what they were. 6

And Mrs Oliphant continues in this vein for the rest of a long paragraph. The passage occurs comparatively late in the novel, and serves to dissociate the author from any close identification with a character who has caused much entertainment in the story. Yet it does not invalidate Lady Mariamne's earlier role as choric commentator.

5. This is the date of the serialisation (January to June) in Good Words under the name Lady Jane. It was published by Blackwood along with The Fugitives, in three volumes in 1890.

6. The Marriage of Elinor III, 17

The Marriage of Elinor is one of Mrs Oliphant's many studies of marital disillusion. Elinor marries a dissipated aristocrat, Lady Marianne's brother, in defiance of the protests of her mother and her friends. The marriage drifts into failure and finally Elinor, outraged by her husband's infidelities, leaves him. This, however, is not one of the novels in which Mrs Oliphant invites unequivocal sympathy for the embittered wife. The reader's sympathies are divided, and he is meant to see Elinor as vindictive and fiercely unforgiving. This is where Lady Marianne is used. On one or two occasions she speaks of the marital breakdown with cool detachment, speaking as always with aristocratic slang:

"She should let him take his swing, and the chances are it will bring him back all right. I've told her so a dozen times, but she pays no attention to me. You're a great pal of hers. Why don't you give her a hint? Phil's not the sort of man to be kept in order like that. She ought to give him his head."

"I don't believe he cares a brass farthing for that other woman. She makes fun of everybody, and that amused him. And it amused him to put Nell in a state - that as much as anything. Why couldn't she see that and learn to prendre son parti like other people? She was free to say "You go your way and I'll go mine": the most of us do that sooner or later: but to make a vulgar rupture, and go off - like this."

(Prendre son parti indicates a wife's complaisance towards her husband's infidelities.) Much earlier, when rejecting warnings about her future husband's character, Elinor had said "When one accepts a man one accepts him as he stands, with all his habits."⁷ The development of the story turns this into dramatic irony, and the similarity between Elinor's view before the event and Lady Marianne's after

7. The Marriage of Elinor II, 129, 183; I, 89.

it is striking. As always, Mrs Oliphant is ambivalent, sympathising with both points of view, but the husband does repent and the marriage is reinstated, so the main emphasis of the novel falls on Elinor's unreasonable, unforgiving attitude. Lady Mariamne's role is to supply perspective, irony, aesthetic distance. Elinor's marriage is seen almost entirely through the eyes of observers, a technically sophisticated device (which, however, Mrs Oliphant does not handle very effectively, producing some imprecision of detail where clarity is essential). Balance and complexity of this kind (and what surely amounts to sexual tolerance) are a measure of Mrs Oliphant's progress and her maturity as a novelist by 1892.

Before I proceed to analyse the structure of three mature Oliphant novels it is desirable to list the recurrent themes and preoccupations which Mrs Oliphant uses to unify and centralise a novel. To do this as I approach the end of Part One of the thesis will enable me to draw together threads from the preceding chapters and topics which anticipate the more important chapters of Part Two. One may isolate some eight themes, sometimes chosen as the single theme on which a novel turns, sometimes interweaving, two or more, throughout a novel: the role of women; money; education; the role of the church, both in Scottish and in English life; parent and child; class as a factor in English life, often treated in relation to an inheritance theme; the problem of useless lives; the contrast between public and private charity. The role of women has already been considered in Chapter Two and will be of importance in my chapter on Hester. The theme of money is also reserved for the Hester chapter. The

theme of education will be treated later in this chapter when I examine The Greatest Heiress in England. The church is the special subject of the first of my Carlingford chapters, and also of The Curate in Charge, later in this chapter. Parent and child has been fully examined in my chapter on Anti-romanticism and Irony. Finally the theme of class and inheritance is so much the special preserve of one group of novels that I shall devote one whole chapter to it. This leaves useless lives and public and private charity for immediate consideration.

Again and again in her work Mrs Oliphant draws attention to those who live futile and meaningless lives and on the other hand to those (especially women) who long to find a role in life, a use in the world. College fellows in Oxford and Cambridge are often satirised for the decorative sterility of their lives; and the dilettante who sublimates his thwarted affections (having neither wife nor child) by pursuit of an artistic life, collecting china or bric-a-brac, is viewed with polite scepticism. A notable example of such a dilettante is Francis Ochterlony in Madonna Mary (1867), a recluse, a collector of porcelain and antiques, and a bachelor to whom his widowed niece's children are merely a constant threat to his precious porcelain and furniture. Mrs Oliphant deals with the theme in various ways: analyses of empty lives, especially those of women, imposed on them by the prejudices of society; specific discussion among characters; the dawning in the mind of a heroine (or hero) that the problem exists; and developments in the plot-line designed to give significance to the characters' lives. The theme makes its appearance for the first time in Orphans (1858), and later in its

two sequels, Lucy Crofton (1859) and Heart and Cross (1863).⁸ Orphans concerns a woman, seemingly deserted by her lover, who founds an orphanage to satisfy the resultant craving for a purpose in her life. Similarly two elderly spinsters find a purpose in life by looking after another orphan boy, and elsewhere the characters of the book discuss the welfare of deprived children. The theme becomes overt when the heroine creates astonishment by commenting publicly on the uselessness of the lives led by many women.

Interlocked in Orphans with the theme of uselessness and the answer to it is the question of how charity is administered. If the tendance of the poor, in particular the orphans of the story, is left to public organisations the result is an institutionalised harshness, reducing sufferers to mere labels or specimens in a charity list. Thus the heroine and her friends feel compelled to give their orphans a home with love and individual treatment. This theme was dear to Mrs Oliphant's heart. Not long after Orphans she contributed an article on the subject to Blackwood's Magazine.⁹ Her contention was that only private charity shows genuine person-to-person compassion, while public charity intrudes the middleman between the benefactor and the object of his charity, draining away man's instinct to love his neighbour:

Committee-rooms, offices, minutes and secretaries, are expensive articles to begin with - time, patience, and charity, are still more costly; and the agency which interposes itself in dead shadow between the helped and the helpers, is an institution as pernicious as it is convenient - a foreign intruder which chills

8. Short novels, each published in one volume, the first two by Hurst & Blackett, Heart and Cross by Chapman & Hall.
9. "Social Science", Blackwood's Magazine, December 1860; LXXXVIII, 698-715

the chief parties on either side of it - a blank non-conducting medium by which the human warmth of giving and receiving gets thrilled back again and turns to bitterness. 10

(The word "thrilled" is presumably a rather forced extension of the metaphor of "non-conducting medium", suggesting an electric shock.) The sources of her passionate conviction on this subject are twofold; her mother, and Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), a leading philanthropist and minister in the Church of Scotland. Of her mother Mrs Oliphant said:

Her opinion was, that every family like her own, consisting of sons and daughters, fulfilled its duty best by taking charge, so far as was possible, of another family among those who are perennially in want of help. This charge and overseeing was done in the most simple and natural way.

The system as developed in the article from which I am quoting sounds dangerously paternalistic, even though it did aim to promote initiative and independence in the objects of benevolence. But above all it is a person-to-person system.

It can be begun any day, and though to be effectual it must be continuous, yet even a little friendship is never thrown away, and nobody need be afraid of an undertaking which, if it lasted no more than a season, would still have an advantage in it. 11

Mrs Oliphant wrote a biography of Thomas Chalmers¹² in which she described his great achievement of taking over an impoverished Glasgow parish in 1819, separating it entirely from public charity and successfully mobilising compassionate and charitable feeling among his parishioners:

10. "Social Science", p.703

11. "Things in General", January 1894, Atalanta VII, 286-7

12. Thomas Chalmers, Preacher, Philosopher, and Statesman (English Leaders of Religion), Methuen, 1893

He had ... been greatly moved by the subject of the Poor Laws as lately remodelled in England, disapproving of them highly on principle, and feeling that kindness, and not legal right - sympathy and compassion and brotherhood, not doles of money, nor the dreadful expedient of a workhouse - were the things to neutralise and more or less abolish destitution and want.¹³

Mrs Oliphant's final verdict in this matter may be summarised in these words:

The charity which is twice blessed is not, I fear, the kind which contents itself with subscriptions, and with recommending "proper objects" to the beneficence of the world.¹⁴

The theme is discussed in many of her novels, and influences the plots of several of them, notably Lady William (3 volumes, Macmillan 1893) where the entire subplot is given over to the theme: Leo Swinford, horrified by rural poverty, tries to adopt a system of individual charity and is exposed by Miss Grey, an elderly spinster philanthropist, as a sentimental idealist with no system. (This is intended as distancing irony, since Mrs Oliphant is in entire sympathy with Leo's idealism. But as usual she aims at a balanced view.) The curate and the heroine, Mab Pakenham, observe Leo's activities with sympathetic interest and offer their views on the right way to alleviate poverty.

The only adequate way to deal with theme and structure is to make a detailed analysis of specific novels from Mrs Oliphant's maturity. Accordingly I conclude this chapter with three novels from the 1870's and 1880's: The Curate in Charge (1876), The Greatest Heiress in England (1879) and The Wizard's Son (1884).

13. Thomas Chalmers, p.117

14. Atalanta VII, 288

The Curate in Charge, in two volumes instead of the usual three,

is one of the most satisfying of Mrs Oliphant's novels, taking advantage of this brevity to concentrate on one clear theme, which grows more explicit as the book proceeds. The characters are economically patterned without any suggestion of artificiality or contrivance. The central moral issue is a dilemma of choice: a young clergyman appointed as rector must decide whether he can thus displace the elderly curate who - in the absence of the previous rector, permanently living abroad for his health, or rather to enjoy a life of self-indulgent pleasure - has been entirely in charge of 20 years, rector in all but name. The curate, Mr St. John, is a notably successful study of a mild, unambitious man, weakly incapable of making any decision or of pushing himself at all, unable to beg favours or indeed to cope with any challenging or unpleasant situation. But when the Rector dies Mr St. John is obliged to face the resultant crisis - or rather to refuse to admit it to himself with any definiteness. His Oxford college has forgotten him owing to his inertia and his self-effacing life, and they appoint as the new rector the aesthetic young clergyman, Mr Mildmay. Mr St. John not only loses his secure position but thus plunges his two daughters into poverty, a humiliating loss of status, and the need to earn their own living (which to Mrs Oliphant is an opportunity, and not a misfortune). In due course Mr Mildmay is confronted by the indignant Cicely St. John, the more forceful of the two daughters, and is obliged to recognise the dilemma in which he is placed and which he had not previously suspected.

Into this theme giving it a full context, Mrs Oliphant interweaves all her characters and subordinate themes. There are two themes which sharpen the reader's response to the central dilemma when finally it defines itself. There is a keenly ironic examination of the English "caste" system, concentrating on a finely observed pair of snobs, Mr and Mrs Ascott; Cicely's decision to earn her living as parish schoolmistress rouses their stern disapproval. And the book contains two useless lives seeking meaning and purpose: not only does Cicely discover a vocation in her work and thus achieve fulfilment, but also Mr Mildmay accepts his appointment as rector because he recognises that his life so far, that of a fellow of an Oxford college and a collector of china, has been of no value to mankind.

These two themes complement and counterbalance each other, since a secure place in a rigidly stratified society entails that uselessness which those in the more elevated roles - whether that of a "lady" or that of a fellow of that haunt of privilege, an Oxford college, - must take for granted, unless circumstances enforce an urgent self-examination. Thus the crises of choice of Cicely and Mr Mildmay are reflections of each other. Cicely specifically rejects the class argument when her aunt, Miss Maydew, and her sister Mab protest:

"Cicely! my dear child, of what are you thinking?" said Miss Maydew, in dismay. "A parish schoolmistress! you are dreaming. All this has been too much for you. My dear, my dear, you must never think of such a thing again!"

"O Cicely, it is not a place for a lady, surely", cried Mab.

"Look here", said Cicely, the colour mounting to her face. "I'd take in washing if it was necessary, and if I knew how. A lady! there's nothing about ladies that I know of in the Bible. Whatever a woman can do I'm ready to try, and I don't care, not the

worth of a pin, whether it's a place for a lady or not. O Aunt Jane, I beg your pardon. I know how good you are - but charity! I can't bear the thought of charity. I must try my own way."

But Aunt Jane is distressed and unconvinced, unable to "sacrifice her niece's gentility, the standing of the family."¹⁵

"There's nothing about ladies ... in the Bible". Thus, economically, Mrs Oliphant emphasises the contrast between the hierarchies of society and the universal brotherhood of religion. Unfortunately the Church also has its hierarchies, serving to perpetuate the caste system. Because of Mr St.John's name "many people at first entertained the notion that his proper title was Honourable and Reverend". And when the question arises at his college (so far as they remember him at all) of the possible promotion of Mr St.John to the post of rector the view is: "What so likely as that something good should fall by inheritance to a man with such a patrician name?" But in spite of his aristocratic name Mr St.John's is a humble status, as Cicely points out to Mr Mildmay, by stressing the class symbolism of meals:

"We are always glad to see any one whom papa asks", she said; "you must call it luncheon, Mr Mildmay, but to us it is dinner; that makes the difference between rector and curate", she added with a laugh.¹⁶

Mr Mildmay, however, is "a thorough gentleman, and so well connected" (as Mrs Ascott points out). For this irrelevant reason he is acceptable to the gentry as Rector where Mr St.John is not. Mr Mildmay, having recognised the situation in which he is involved by his appointment,

15. The Curate in Charge II, 216-8. The British Library copy is the Second Edition, and the Fifth Edition of volume I. There appear to have been five editions, all in two volumes, in 1876.

16.. C.C. I, 17,182; II, 30

attempts to withdraw and to encourage the instatement of Mr St. John, but he cannot achieve a sympathetic response.

"Why, the poorest labourer in the parish looks down upon the curate" [says Mr Ascott]. "'Parson's just as poor as we is', they say. I've heard them. He has got to run up bills in the little shops, and all that, just as they have. He has no money to relieve them with when they're out of work. The farmers look down upon him. They think nothing of a man that's poor; and as for the gentry - "

"Stop, Henry", said Mrs Ascott; "the gentry have always been very kind to the St. Johns. We were always sorry for the girls. Poor things! their mother was really quite a lady, though I never heard that she had anything. We were all grieved about this last sad affair, when he married the governess; and I should always have made a point of being kind to the girls. That is a very different thing, however, Mr Mildmay", she added, with a sweet smile, "from having a clergyman whom one can really look up to, and who will be a friend and neighbour as well as a clergyman. You will stay to luncheon? I think I hear the bell." 17

Here Mrs Oliphant effectively differentiates between two kinds of snobbery; the arrogant, forthright, masculine kind and the condescending, hypocritical feminine kind.

Mr Mildmay is not only "well connected"; he is also a man of high culture, a product of the aesthetic movement. In a splendid passage of sustained irony Mrs Oliphant describes his aestheticism and his growing disillusion with his exquisitely beautiful but barren world. Almost the whole of Chapter VIII in Volume I is given over to the description:

To hear him talk of art was enough to make all the Academy dance with fury, and drive the ordinary learner, however little attached to the Academy, into absolute imbecility; and his rooms were as good as a show, with all the last fantastical delights of the day - more like a museum of china and knick-knacks than rooms to live in.

His curtains had been embroidered in the art school of needlework on cloth woven and dyed expressly for him. An ancient piece of lovely Italian tapestry hung over one door, and another was veiled by a glorious bit of eastern work from Damascus or Constantinople.

But midway between these two passages Mr Mildmay's sense of futility and emptiness is highlighted:

After all, a man cannot live for china, for aesthetic arrangements, for furniture, however exquisite; or even for art, when he is merely a critic, commentator, and amateur - not a worker in the same.

Not that he needs a wife:

A man who makes a goddess of his room, who adores china, and decks his mantelshelf with lace, seldom (in theory) wants a wife, or sighs for a companion of his joys and sorrows. For why? He does not deal much in sorrows or in joys.

And the whole passage concludes as follows:

Mr Mildmay had got tired of it all. Suddenly in that dainty dimness of high culture it had occurred to him that studies of old art and accumulations of the loveliest furniture were not life. 18

It is this flight from barren aestheticism that motivates Mr Mildmay's acceptance of the rectorship. He develops - or tries to develop - a sense of duty to the rural poor, inevitably having to contend with self-doubt. In conversation with Cicely he says:

"But Miss St. John, you forget the only motive worth discussing.... Work, something to exercise one's highest faculties. I want to do something for my fellow-creatures; to be of a little use. There must be much to do, much to improve, much to amend in a parish like this -"19

18. C.C. I, 185-92

19. C.C. II, 8-9

It is into this rather over-solemn sense of purpose that Cicely explodes her fervent protest that Mr Mildmay is going to displace her father.

The two obsessions with the need to serve others, Cicely's and Mr Mildmay's, run in parallel through the second volume of The Curate in Charge. And Mildmay specifically compares his own achievement with hers as he finds that there is little, apparently, he can do in his parish to alleviate poverty while she, observed by him through the school windows, is unmistakably doing something of constructive value. A sense of fulfilment eludes him and he feels inclined, when anybody asks him for advice, to say, "Go to Cicely St. John at the school and ask. It is she who is living, not me. I am a ghost like all the rest of you."²⁰ This leads, perhaps inevitably, to love, and the question of marriage between Cicely and Mildmay arises in the last chapter of the book. But The Curate in Charge is not a love story and Mr Mildmay's dilemma of choice, like his need to be of use in the world, is balanced by Cicely's. Her choice is between the conventional fulfilment of a woman's life, marriage, and her need to find a meaningful role through a career in teaching. She is drawn by the comfort and social status that Mildmay offers as an escape from the dingy discomfort of her life. But she feels capable of carrying on "bearing her burden". And Mrs Oliphant's powerful instinct was that this should be the way the novel must end. In the last chapter but one of Volume II she included the most eloquent of her protests against the conventional happy-marriage ending, "the

20. C.C. II, 261

arbitrary and fictitious way of cutting this knot, that tour de force which is always to be thought of in every young woman's story, the very melodramatic begging of the question." A passage coming shortly after this must be quoted in full:

That Cicely's brave undertaking ought to come to some great result in itself, that she ought to be able to make her way nobly, as her purpose was, working with her hands for the children that were not hers, bringing them up to be men, having that success in her work which is the most pleasant of all recompenses, and vindicating her sacrifice and self-devotion in the sight of all who had scoffed and doubted - this, no doubt would be the highest and best, the most heroical and epical development of story. To change all her circumstances at a stroke, making her noble intention unnecessary, and resolving this tremendous work of hers into a gentle domestic necessity, with the "hey presto!" of the commonplace magician, by means of a marriage, is simply a contemptible expedient. But, alas! it is one which there can be no doubt is much preferred by most people to the more legitimate conclusion; and, what is more, he would be justified by knowing the accidental way is, perhaps, on the whole the most likely one, since marriages occur every day which are perfectly improbable and out of character, mere tours de force, despicable as expedients, showing the poorest invention, a disgrace to any romancist or dramatist, if they were not absolute matters of fact and true. Pardon the parenthesis, gentle reader. 21

In spite of the deplorably self-conscious address to the reader at the end this represents the deepest and sincerest of Mrs Oliphant's convictions. It is a protest, not merely against the stereotypes of literature, but against the stereotyping of life; it calls, not merely for a more open form, a freer representation in literature of the flow of experience, but also for a less rigid concept of the role of women and of the inevitability of marriage as a cure-all.

The second preoccupation clearly comes to the surface after the words "and, what is more".

After such a protest it will be expected that the end will be a firm rejection of marriage by Cicely. This is not quite what happens. The ending is deliberately ambiguous. Mildmay, who had fallen in love between Chapters IX and X, offers marriage. Cicely says she does not love him, speaking "in a low tone, looking up at him, the colour flaming over her face." She insists that marriage is impossible. And the novel ends as follows:

"Do you love anyone else?" he asked, too much moved for grace of speech, taking the hand she held up to demonstrate this impossibility. She looked at him again, her colour wavering, her eyes filling, her lips quivering.

"Unless it is you - nobody!" she cried.²²

The conventional reader may accept this as the conventional ending, after all. Cicely's "low tone", "colour flaming" and "wavering", "eyes filling", "lips quivering" can be taken as the signs of true love concealed and at last breaking forth; and her statement that she does not love Mildmay will be seen as a falsehood. But equally Cicely's signs of emotion can be attributed to embarrassment and unwillingness to hurt a man she very much likes. It is Mrs Oliphant's most deliberate use of what can only be called an ambiguous ending. Certainly "Unless it is you - nobody" can be interpreted in two entirely opposite ways. Yet no doubt she was conceding the conventional ending that the public required while retaining her private conviction that it was a "very melodramatic begging of the question".

All other characters in The Curate in Charge are firmly locked

22. C.C. II, 280-1

into the pattern of the book. Cicely's attitudes are highlighted by contrast with her milder sister Mab - who nevertheless seeks a career of her own, as a book illustrator (and no marriage is offered to end her career). Aunt Jane, more sympathetically viewed than the Ascotts, provides a balanced half-ironic view of her nieces' predicament. Since she is quite unable to understand Cicely's decision she thus functions as an ironic choric character. A choric character of more dubious value is Mrs Joel, an elderly parishioner, who comments with rustic prejudice on the replacement of Mr St.John by Mr Mildmay. She is too obviously functional and her comments reduce her to a caricature; so she would have been better omitted. Finally, the governess, Miss Brown, is used simply as one voice of the conventional views of class and of a woman's role. She adds a further complication to the plot by becoming the stepmother of Cicely and Mab, dying and leaving them with young half-brothers to add to their responsibilities and the claims on Cicely's attention. The scene where Mr St.John offers marriage to Miss Brown is one of Mrs Oliphant's finest sequences of ironic comedy. It was merely his intention to dismiss her, but such a bluntly ruthless action is contrary to his mild, yielding nature, so, finding himself trapped by pity for her, he contrives to convert the dismissal into a proposal. She recognises that his motive is pity and not love, and yet even so she has "a sudden romantic gleam of certainty that he must have been a victim of despairing love for her all the time".²³ Thus, early in the novel, there is a marriage based upon false expectations and intentions on each side; it almost provides an anticipatory irony, a long way ahead, for the ambiguous ending.

The Greatest Heiress in England (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett

1879) is one of Mrs Oliphant's most beautifully structured books. It is based on a familiar Victorian theme, fortune-hunting, but handled with considerable subtlety. Lucy Trevor, the "greatest heiress in England", is pursued by five young men, each of them sponsored by a female relative. The parallels in the pattern are clear enough, but they are not made unsubtly obvious. The young men vary in the extent of their independence of their female sponsors. (Indeed one of them virtually acts alone, with mere token, implied, support from his mother.) One of them eventually falls in love with somebody else, and so when the expected proposal to Lucy approaches he cannot speak. The fifth suitor, the most unlikely and yet the one who in fact succeeds, is held in reserve and suddenly makes his unexpected appearance when the other four have departed, discomfited. This fifth suitor, Sir Thomas Randolph, called Sir Tom, is the oldest and most mature of them, and although he is as much interested in Lucy's money as the other four, he possesses certain qualities that the others lack, a humorously worldly-wise point of view, an ability to transcend self-obsession, and a capacity for affection, even if a rather fatherly affection. Thus Lucy marries in effect to find a father figure, a substitute for her own father, whose death at the end of Volume I made her the greatest heiress in England. This perhaps is a disappointingly unfeminist conclusion, but clearly Sir Tom is superior to the weak egotists lacking self-knowledge and social graces who are the alternatives (although this is not really true of Philip Rainy, the one who chooses to marry another girl after all.)

This narrative structure is fleshed out by the close study of three themes: education, class and money, which virtually interlock into a sustained ironic study of English society, that is, society in a small town. Characters are perpetually assessing themselves and each other according to a complex code of social determinants: professional status, religious sect, educational background, income, and smaller matters like the times of meals, the decoration of one's home, the particular locality in which one lives. Respectability of status, acceptability by the fashionable, seems a forbiddingly complicated achievement after a difficult obstacle race through a field liberally scattered with tripwires.

The three themes are united in the character of John Trevor, Lucy's father. Before he acquired his wealth by his first marriage he had been an obscure schoolmaster in an undistinguished school, and he has curious notions about education and the status of schoolmasters. His view of the English social system is maliciously ironic, a mixture of contempt for snobbery and a rigid belief in the hierarchical system, which he believes to be entirely consistent with a respect for the rights and needs of the individual, since all classes are entitled to parity of esteem in what might be called an apartheid system:

"Is a fine lady any better than a poor schoolmaster? not a bit! each one in the rank of life that is appointed, and one as good as another: that's always been my principle. I wouldn't have stepped out of my rank of life, or the habits of my rank of life, not if you had given me thousands for it; not, I promise you, ... for the sake of being asked to dinner here and there, as some folks are; but being in my own rank of life I thought myself as good as the King." 24

The rigid stratification of English society is epitomised in The Greatest Heiress by a careful grading of the status of the five women who sponsor Lucy's five suitors: Lady Randolph, the aunt of Sir Tom; Mrs Rushton, a lawyer's wife, mother of Raymond; Mrs Russell, an impoverished gentlewoman, mother of Bertie; Mrs Stone, headmistress of Lucy's school, aunt of Frank St.Clair, an unsuccessful barrister; Mrs Ford, Trevor's housekeeper, a relative of Philip Rainy, the young headmaster of the village school which Trevor once ran. I have listed them in roughly descending order of rank, although it is not easy to define priority as between Mrs Rushton and Mrs Russell. A distressed gentlewoman ought to come immediately below a genuine aristocrat and above a member of the professional classes; but Mrs Russell is running a school in Hampstead, and to be involved in teaching unmistakably lowers one's status, as I shall show. And as for Hampstead "Lady Randolph's coachman would not have betrayed any knowledge of that out-of-the-way locality for worlds, it was as much as his reputation was worth."²⁵ One or other of these five women is constantly aiming throughout The Greatest Heiress to influence Lucy's decisions and attitudes by a comment on the social status of one of the others. Mrs Rushton says that Lucy is "in a different sphere" from Mrs Stone, and that Mr and Mrs Ford "are excellent people, but they are in a different rank of society", so Lucy ought not to be living with them. Mrs Ford, from the bottom of the ladder looking up, disparages Lady Randolph:

"I know what fine ladies are", she said: "a fine outside and not much within. Horses and carriages and all that show, and footmen waiting, and silver dishes on the table - but not much inside ...

I don't give myself any airs, Lucy, but I know you'll find nothing like that here. No show, but everything good, and plenty of it, and not so much fuss made about you." 26

Mrs Stone, speaking of Philip Rainy, defines his status by reference to his religious sect:

"We have met him two or three times at the Rectory, so he cannot be a Dissenter; but he is not a gentleman either". 27

And Philip is unmistakably in an ambiguous social position, especially as he has no degree or teaching certificate. Thus he "occupied a kind of debatable position on the borders of gentility"²⁸ and aims to raise his status, for example by moving from Dissent to the Church of England. (This is why Mrs Stone has "met him two or three times at the Rectory".)

If Mrs Oliphant seems to be commenting on a rigidly stratified class-conscious society which elevates an arbitrary system of valuation above the duty to treat every human being according to his merits, her sympathies nevertheless cannot be easily pigeonholed. She does not invite us to identify with the anti-aristocratic prejudices of Mr and Mrs Ford, who are characterised with rather condescending malice. Although Lady Randolph is acutely class-conscious, she is treated very leniently, largely because she is anxious to give Lucy a sense of her own importance. However, one aristocrat is treated more satirically: Lady Betsinda, a choric character whose views are to be entirely discounted, and who is described in these astonishing words:

26. Heiress II, 329, 74, 316

27. Heiress I, 168-9

28. Heiress I, 73-4

She was an old lady of the first fashion; but she was, all the same, a very grimy old lady with a moustache, and a complexion which suggested coal-dust rather than poudre de riz. Her clothes would have been worth a great deal to an antiquary, notwithstanding that they were all shaped, more or less, in accordance with the fashion; but they gave Lady Betsinda the air of an animated rag-bag; and she wore a profusion of lace, clouds of black upon her mantle, and ruffles of white about her thin and dingy neck - but it would have been a misnomer, and also an insult, to call that lace white. It was frankly dirty and toned to an indescribable colour by years and wear. 29

This is only part of a passage of destructive satire which, however, is entirely untypical of The Greatest Heiress, otherwise a sober, restrained book. But a tone like this does occur sporadically in Mrs Oliphant's novels.³⁰

The clear lines of social demarcation are blurred as soon as money becomes a factor. Lucy has "no claim whatever upon the consideration of ladies and gentlemen, except on account of her money; which was not to say that she might not, however, have friends in a humbler class, who might care for her, for herself alone". (These are the views of Mrs Stone's sister, Miss Southwood.) But John Trevor, in spite of his firm views on the necessary differentiation of classes, believes that "money levels all spheres".³¹ Its effect on Lucy, however, is to increase her sense of isolation and intolerable ambiguity. She finds herself cut off from those who might have

29. Heiress II, 68

30. One grotesque example is as follows: "The dowager Lady Frogmore had a voice not unlike a policeman's rattle, and as she spoke her large bosom heaved as if with the effort to bring it forth." (The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent, 1892, I, 28) And compare the portrait of Lady Mariamne in The Marriage of Elinor (page 156 above)

31. Heiress III, 236; I, 43

been her equals and friends, such as Mr and Mrs Ford, and at the same time she is at a loss in the world of Lady Randolph. But her experience of fashionable life effectively unsettles her, and she cannot easily adapt herself to the intolerable responsibility of wealth, or to the strange status symbols of a maid and a horse and a groom of her own: "to have all the indulgences without any of the graces of existence!"³² Her attempts to carry out her father's wishes and redistribute her wealth only increase her miserable helplessness. She finds when she attempts to give money to suitable causes her lawyers are horrified, and the recipients are outraged, behaving as if they have been insulted, patronised, degraded into objects of charity.

The lawyer Chervil's reaction is worth quoting at length, as it epitomises Mrs Oliphant's ironic view of money in The Greatest Heiress:

"It is mere demoralization. You will make a race of paupers. You will ruin the character of every person who comes near you. For God's sake! Miss Lucy, think what you want to do. It is not to give away money, it is to spread ruin far and wide - ruin of all the moral sentiments; you will make people dishonest, you will take away their independence, you will be worse than a civil war!"

Mr Chervil was the most honourable of trustees - his own interest had nothing to do with his opposition. But prodigality in business matters was, to him, the master sin, above all those of the Decalogue. There was, indeed, no commandment there which ordained, "Thou shalt not waste thy money, or give it injudiciously away." But Mr Chervil felt that this was a mere oversight on the part of the great law-giver, and one which prudent persons had a right to amend on their own account. Mr Chervil,

32, Heiress II, 320. The whole paragraph (pp.317-20) is a sustained analysis of Lucy's social ambiguity, partly summarised above.

who here felt an unexpressed confidence that he was better informed (on matters of business) than the Almighty, was very sure he knew a great deal better than old Trevor. 33

Mrs Oliphant goes on to stress that the idea of great wealth has an almost poetic beauty to Chervil, and appeals to his imagination as a work of art does to some people. This enables us to understand his point of view, but Lucy's desire to operate personal charity as an act of pure kindness is so entirely in the spirit of Mrs Oliphant's social philosophy, derived from her mother and Thomas Chalmers, that Chervil's view is of value purely as a focus for the imaginative process, not as a significant contribution to economic theory.

If there is any efficacious antidote to the poison of snobbery and acute class-consciousness, then it ought to be education. This perhaps is the purpose of the education theme in The Greatest Heiress, ironically highlighted by the failure, total or partial, of the schools in the book to provide a really meaningful education. Lucy's young half-brother, Jock, whose education has been neglected (his father has been entirely uninterested in him) has devoted himself to an extensive reading (Greek legends, Shakespeare, Don Quixote, even Chaucer) which develops his imagination and his sympathies - and thus he has acquired the education that the school system could not offer him. Indeed he is frankly contemptuous of those who (largely to curry favour with Lucy) undertake to teach him, Bertie Russell and Frank St. Clair. Lucy herself by Lady Randolph's advice tries to educate herself for her status by reading history;

but she finds it boring and concludes that all education is boring and that Jock's escape into the imaginative world of books cannot be real education. (This is one of the rare occasions where Lucy is the victim of Mrs Oliphant's irony.) No less than nine characters are involved in the process of teaching (John Trevor, Mrs Stone, her sister Miss Southwood, Frank St.Clair, Philip Rainy, Mrs Russell, her son Bertie and her daughters Katie and Mary). But, as I have already indicated, the status of schoolmasters is ambiguous, and Frank St.Clair considers he is lowering himself by teaching Jock. Some of the others have, apparently, a higher estimate of the value of education. Philip has ambitions for the improvement of his school (a "commercial academy", as Trevor calls it) by appointing "a very nice fellow, a University man", pointing out that "people think so much more, nowadays - for the mere teaching, you know, only for the teaching, - of a man with a degree". He carefully avoids assessing the value of a degree by the status it confers; but we learn little of his ideals as an educationist anywhere in the book. Similarly, Mrs Stone says "I believe in education" as a necessary preliminary to direct experience of life for Lucy;³⁴ but she says nothing else of her views on this matter. Miss Southwood, Mrs Russell and Bertie have nothing of value to offer, and only Mary Russell, with a genuine vocation for teaching, unlike her mother and brother, seems to have a coherent ideal. Yet even this in the end is expressed in mainly material terms:

34. Heiress I, 108,129

She saw a long perspective of new boys filing before her, and a handsome house and big playgrounds, and an orderly, prosperous establishment. 35

Here the words "handsome" and "prosperous" quietly call in question the value of Mary's educational ideals. Cicely St. John's belief in teaching (in The Curate in Charge) carries far more weight. Katie Russell is one of the most attractive characters in the book, but she views the prospect of becoming a governess with no satisfaction since she fears the dangers of a "governessy" manner. However, on one occasion Katie does seem to be speaking for Mrs Oliphant when she speaks sardonically about the inferiority of the education of girls:

"If there is anything more tiresome than another, more tedious, less likely to please us, that is what we are made to do." 36

But even this is a purely negative view.

We are left with just two characters who seem to put a value on education for its own sake, two ill-assorted characters, John Trevor and his son Jock. One has outlived his days of teaching, and the other is too young to realise the value of the education he has acquired. Trevor takes a not unreasonable pride in having given a good solid grounding of education (for example, in arithmetic) to leading citizens of the town, which is of greater value than much that is taught in public schools. And I have already quoted his view that a schoolmaster is as worthy of respect as a fine lady.³⁷ Yet after all his ideas are purely utilitarian and the value of education as a true social force is never directly expressed in

35. Heiress II, 133

36. Heiress I, 199

37. See page 173 above.

The Greatest Heiress (except through the implications of Jock's absorption in his world of books). We must turn to another book for a view of education that helps to put the whole of The Greatest Heiress into perspective:

"Yes", said Edgar ... "but, after all, to desire a piece of knowledge because it is useful, is not an unworthy sentiment."

"Oh, no, not at all an unworthy sentiment; indeed, very right in its way; but totally subversive", said Lady Mary, sadly, "of the highest principle of education, which aims at thorough cultivation of the mind rather than at conferring certain common-place matter-of-fact requirements. Considered in that point of view, professional education would be the highest, which I don't think it is. Unless education is prized for itself, as a discipline of the mind, and not merely as teaching us some things we don't know, we can never reach the highest level ..." 38

Assessed against such ideals nobody in The Greatest Heiress except Jock has any clear idea what the purpose of education is.

My analysis of The Greatest Heiress in England makes it sound more satirical and disillusioned than it is. But the heart of the book is the gentle, affectionate nature of Lucy, her devotion to Jock and to her friends, and her need to be valued for herself and not for ulterior motives. (It seems she will achieve this by marrying Sir Tom, though a reader might very well doubt it.)³⁹ The intensely ironic treatment of class, money and education serves only to highlight the truly lovable (if at times rather cloying) qualities of the heroine. The hyperbolic title is a mistake, suggesting as it does a broadly satirical tone, an extravagance of manner, which, however, cannot be found anywhere else but in those passages describing

38. For Love and Life (1874) II, 112-3

39. These doubts are set at rest in the sequel Sir Tom (1884).

Lady Betsinda. The voice of mockery and irreverence in the sub-heroine Katie Russell is mild and playful, and Katie in the end is entirely subdued by true love.

To turn from The Greatest Heiress in England to The Wizard's Son is to move forward merely five years, from 1879 to 1884 (or a briefer period if we consider the serialisation of The Wizard's Son in Macmillan's Magazine from 1882 to 1883). But the contrast in tone, mood and intention is as extreme as can be found in comparing any two of Mrs Oliphant's novels. Where The Greatest Heiress is rich in comedy and irony, The Wizard's Son lacks irony (except in the early chapters), and aims above all at an eloquently lyrical tone. Where The Greatest Heiress makes use of a fairly objective, realistic setting, The Wizard's Son aims above all at mood and atmosphere. Where the theme of The Greatest Heiress is worked into the pattern and characterisation of the book, The Wizard's Son is as deliberately didactic in its opposition of Good and Evil as a medieval morality play or Marlowe's Doctor Faustus (which in some ways it resembles). Mrs Oliphant in this, above all of her books, seems to have deliberately set herself the highest possible objectives, since in intention it is her most complex and ambitious book, the most consciously structured and elaborated of her long career. What results falls very short of what she must have had in mind; yet the book is well worth close study to see what methods Mrs Oliphant adopted to write a masterpiece, even if the resultant analysis belongs to literary pathology, rather than to aesthetics.

The theme round which the whole book pivots is Ethical Compromise.

It seems necessary to use capital letters as Mrs Oliphant consciously sets out to draw attention to this theme in every possible way. The central character, Walter Methven, an amiable but shallow young man living in an English provincial town, finds himself unexpectedly inheritor of an estate in the Scottish Highlands and the title of Lord Erradeen. A half-ruined castle on the estate is on one of several islands in a loch amidst spectacularly beautiful scenery; and in this castle he meets the embodied spirit of a distant ancestor, the Warlock Lord, who very soon proves to be Walter's Evil Angel, tempting him constantly to make bad moral choices and disregard the demands of his conscience. Nowhere else outside the Stories of the Seen and the Unseen does Mrs Oliphant make such deliberate use of the supernatural, and the result is often very embarrassing in its humourless solemnity and its abandonment of her usual ironic detachment.

The story in due course develops as a conflict between Good and Evil for Walter's soul, during which he endures intense suffering before Good finally triumphs. Walter's Good Angel is Oona Forrester, whose home is on another of the islands in the loch. The name Oona derives from one of Mrs Oliphant's favourite heroines, Una in Book One of Spenser's Faerie Queene, "the emblem of purity and innocence - 'heavenly Una with her milk-white lamb'";⁴⁰ also a symbol of Truth. Walter's love for her is his salvation and preserves him from lapses into sin and degradation. This is a well-loved Victorian theme: Woman as moral guide, and saviour of sinful Man, Woman who is nobler, more

40 The Wizard's Son III, 206. The words 'heavenly Una with her milk-white lamb' are quoted from Wordsworth: Personal Talk, 1.42

angelic than Man and can set him right when he is under ethical threat. In many novels Mrs Oliphant views the theme ironically; for example in Sir Robert's Fortune, as I have shown, she is very severe on the notion that Helen should be "a maiden sacrifice to clean" Alick "from his guilt". But in The Wizard's Son the theme is offered without any irony, and the reader is obliged to take it seriously, for without it the book cannot hold together. Oona is fortunately a fairly credible human being with a mild sense of humour and a lightly critical eye for her lover; but her role is to be the Good Angel and we cannot evade it. At Walter's most agonising crisis when the irresistible psychic forces of Evil projected at him by the Warlock Lord are undermining his soul, he suddenly has a vision of Oona's sustaining love - and the power of Evil is broken.

The struggle of Good and Evil is too grandly rhetorical a subject for an ostensibly realistic novel, and in detailed treatment the theme is treated as one of choice: choice between high ideals and compromise, between a whole-hearted fulfilment of one's ethical nature and a weak and cowardly acceptance of second best, a mere evasion of responsibility. Walter is constantly tempted to a life of indolence, feckless dissipation and aimless drifting rather than pursue his responsibilities as laird of his Scottish estates and protector of his tenant crofters. Indeed, one of his specific temptations, implanted in his mind by the psychic powers of the Warlock Lord, is to abandon these crofters to their fate, eviction. Here in the crofter theme there is an echo of the central theme of Ethical Compromise. The crofters must choose between on the one hand poverty

and self-sufficiency on their home mountains and on the other hand an abandonment of their ideals by emigrating to America for a more "economic" life. This dilemma of choice is powerfully and realistically presented and produces some of the most moving scenes in the book.

Into this central theme everything else in The Wizard's Son fits with schematic neatness. For example, Walter, like the heroes of many novels, is drawn in two directions by two girls: by Oona and by Katie Williamson, the daughter of a millionaire - that is, by marriage for love and by marriage for financial security (Una and the false Duessa, one might say); yet another version of the contrast between single-minded ethical idealism and ethical compromise weakly accepting "second-best". (Walter knows that he loves only Oona, but he is inclined to marry Katie, since she best fits his second-rate nature.) It is a choice with which readers of nineteenth-century novels are very familiar, and we know what choice a hero is bound to make; but in this context it seems less banal and less sentimental than it often is, although on the other hand it has become very pretentious.

Oona is not as conscious of her role as Good Angel as the Warlock Lord is conscious of his; and thus Mrs Oliphant does avoid the worst dangers of overt didacticism although she makes discreet use of choric characters to comment on the action from an observer's point of view; in particular Mr Cameron, a Presbyterian minister, Duncan Fraser a crofter, and most obviously a crippled lady, Miss Milnathort, who once loved a previous Lord Erradeen (Walter's predecessor) but who was prevented by her injuries (caused by the Warlock Lord) from

marrying him. Love, she now sees, is the answer to Evil and she advises Walter to pursue his love for Oona and defeat the Warlock Lord among the very scenes where she, Miss Milnathort, was herself long ago defeated. And at the climax of the book Oona and Walter confront the Warlock Lord on the very same walls of the ruined castle where long ago Miss Milnathort and the previous Lord Erradeen confronted him.

Duncan Fraser offers homespun comments on the moral problem of the book:

"We have just to put the evil and the good against one another, and rejoice when the good is a wee predominant over the evil". 41

It is only the humorous moderation of the point of view that prevents this from being banal. But more interesting is the contribution of the minister Mr Cameron, because it creates a striking ironic ambiguity. Walter has been tempted by the Warlock Lord to accept "second-best" as everybody does, because otherwise we must be "born again". But "Ye must be born again" is the highest Christian doctrine and "second best" is a dishonest compromise. Yet in discussion with Mr Cameron just before his meeting with Duncan Fraser, Walter discovers another meaning of "second best": to accept our limitations and resign ourselves to the will of God:

Mr Cameron took everything from a different point of view. The second best to him meant manly resignation, devout religious faith.... According to the minister's belief, "what we wanted" was a thing to be given up nobly when it was proved to be God's will so. 42

41. W.S. II, 292

42. W.S. II, 284. The earlier crisis of conscience and discussion of "second best" with the Warlock Lord is II, 267-75.

Thus - untypically in this particular book - Mrs Oliphant attains an objective view of her central theme, and at the same time indicates an alternative road to ethical integrity.

Mrs Oliphant makes a more deliberate use of symbol and metaphor in this book than in any other. The central symbol is what she calls Mesmerism, though it would now be called Telepathy: the powerful psychic force exerted by the Warlock Lord from great distances. This mesmeric power is linked with a mysterious light that shines in the tower of the ruined castle; and eventually the light is shown to be produced by a powerful lamp which is then symbolically smashed by Oona and Walter. Light here, of course, carries not its usual symbolic meaning of Truth and Wisdom (enlightenment), but the very opposite, a deceptive vision of what is not Truth at all. The smashing of the lamp produces a violent explosion in which the Warlock Lord's stronghold is totally destroyed and the lives of Oona and Walter threatened; but they emerge injured but safe. The symbolic significance of this again is unmistakable. The violence of the explosion echoes the violence of Walter's emotional crisis earlier in the book.

The smashing of the light is worth extensive quotation to illustrate Mrs Oliphant's use of rather theatrical narrative, with symbolic meanings discreetly hidden:

It was the supreme crisis of all this story of her heart. For a moment she said nothing, but looked at them, meeting the keen gaze of the tempter, whose eyes seemed to burn her, gazing at Walter.... Then with the sudden, swift, passionate action, unpremeditated and impulsive, which is natural to women, she flung herself before him, and seized with her hands the table upon which the light was burning. "You said" she cried, breathless, "that you used small methods as well as great - and this is one, whatever it is." She thrust

it from her violently as she spoke. The lamp fell with a great crash and broke, and the liquid which had supplied it burst out and ran blazing in great globules of flames over the floor. The crash, the blaze, the sudden uproar, was like a wall between the antagonists. The curtains swaying with the wind, the old dry tapestries, caught in the fire like tinder. Oona, as wild with fear as she had been with daring, caught at Walter's hand with the strength of despair, and fled dragging him after her. The door clanged behind them as he let it go, then burst open again with the force of the breeze, and let out a great blaze, the red mad gleam of fire in the sunshine and daylight - unnatural, devouring. With a sense that death was in their way before and behind, they went forth clinging to each other, half-stupefied, half-desperate. Then sense and hearing and consciousness itself were lost in a roar as of the elements let loose - a great dizzy upheaving as of an earthquake. The whole world darkened round them; there was a sudden rush of air and whirl of giddy sensation - and nothing more. 43

This is spectacularly dramatic and narrative takes precedence over symbolism. But if "the blaze ... was like a wall between the antagonists" we know, symbolically, that the ethical threat to Walter has been averted. The fire is "mad" and "unnatural" because it represents the falsely deceptive ideas of truth that contrast with the "sunshine and daylight" of real Truth. Falsehood blazes up violently to demonstrate the violence it inflicts upon the soul, and the death-threatening explosion represents the intense emotional crisis that inevitably accompanies a determined rejection of false values in favour of true. Oona's decisive action is proof of the clear-sightedness and will-for-good of Love. There is just sufficient concrete detail to allow the passage to exist on the level of ordinary reality as well as allegorically. Nonetheless the sense of strain, of an author forcing herself to do something beyond her powers, is clear enough, especially in the rather inflated language.

Inevitably the Scottish setting is used for more than merely atmospheric purposes. It provides an appropriately poetic, though very self-conscious, setting for the moral conflict of the story. Oona's house, for example, on its island in the centre of the loch, is a symbolic fortress, a shelter for Walter against the Warlock Lord, a source of moral regeneration.

Even an episode when Walter, on a visit to London, goes to the theatre is made to fit the theme. The play is Tennyson's The Falcon in which an impoverished lover quixotically sacrifices his beloved falcon for the woman he loves - yet another idealistic choice of self-sacrifice rather than compromise.⁴⁴ Yet ironically the sacrifice proves futile and mistaken, so that at first sight the use of The Falcon as an ethical parable seems curiously double-edged. However, the moral that seems to interest Mrs Oliphant is that the lover, however quixotic and misguided his gesture, has finally induced the woman he loves to return his love; similarly other self-sacrifices in the name of high principles, as exemplified in The Wizard's Son, may seem equally quixotic and yet deserve unqualified approval.

To make a complete success of such ambitious intentions the combined gifts of George Eliot, Emily Bronte and Charles Dickens would be needed. Mrs Oliphant has no such gifts though her talents were considerable; and The Wizard's Son is a failure, though an honourable failure.

44. This illustrates Mrs Oliphant's obsession with topicality. The Falcon was performed by Mr and Mrs Kendal at the St. James's Theatre, in December 1879 for 67 nights. It was not published until February 1884, shortly before The Wizard's Son. But the episode describing the visit to the play was published in Macmillan's Magazine in June 1883.

Walter is never once convincing as a battlefield for Good and Evil; at no time is he any more than the amiable, shallow young man we meet in the early chapters. If the story is to carry any weight he ought to be capable of great wickedness; but Walter is no Raskolnikov and Mrs Oliphant cannot venture to challenge orthodox Victorian sensitivities by making her hero guilty of anything more than aimless drifting, vague pleasure-seeking and euphemistic dissipations under the guidance of one of the most unconvincing characters in all her work: Captain Underwood, another Evil Angel, this time in flesh and blood but appearing to the reader as nothing worse than a rather tiresome parasite, shabby and not very intelligent. (And surely Mephistopheles, whatever else he is, must have intelligence?) Attempts to deal with Walter's sinful nature produces vaguely rhetorical and euphemistically allusive dialogue like this:

"Mother, vice deserves damnation; isn't that your creed?"

"Walter!"

"Oh, I know; but listen to me. If that were so, would a woman like you stand by the wretch still?"

"My dearest boy! you are talking wildly. There are no circumstances, none! in which I would not stand by you."

"That is what I thought", he said, "you and - But they say that you don't know, you women, how bad a man can be: and that if you knew - And then as for God - "

"God knows everything, Walter!" 45

Fumbling inarticulacy may under certain circumstances be impressive, but this is no time for fumbling inarticulacy.

The use of the supernatural in the figure of the Warlock Lord is a grave error of judgment. Not only does it seem to suggest that

independent moral choice is not within the powers of the individual; it also produces a strangely humourless treatment of the theme which can be quite intolerable. There is, for example, a ludicrous scene when the Warlock Lord gives a conducted tour of Walter's island to a party of visitors which has arrived in the darkening evening and is much baffled by this mysterious, half-seen, stranger who is showing them the sights.⁴⁶ The conventions of the Victorian ghost story (a disturbing "atmosphere", unexplained and unheralded appearances and disappearances, an eerie light that comes and goes, terrified servants) simply do not have a place in a story which aims to ask fundamental questions about human life and values. J.H. Millar, in his obituary article, pointed out that a supernatural figure "who is merely the means of conveying moral lessons and who once incurs the suspicion of representing nothing more imposing than some great moral or immoral principle, has lost his true occupation." Even more perceptive was Meredith Townsend. Reviewing The Wizard's Son in The Spectator, he identifies the centrality of the "second best" theme, and interestingly notes that the Warlock Lord is wise and perceptive, but so morally flawed that his insight into right and wrong is entirely warped.

He goes on:

Mrs Oliphant has made the mistake of giving this being a purpose so inconceivably small, that it appears by the side of his powers ridiculous. An intelligence like his, versed in all men's natures, full of all experiences, swelling with triumph in the field of science, could not have striven through the ages to give a Scottish laird a little more money. The end is too petty - so petty, that the reader's power of belief, which it is indispensable to evoke, fails at every page. 47

46. W.S. III, 6-10

47. Blackwood's Magazine September 1897, CLXII, 315; The Spectator, 31 May 1884, LVII, 713-4

Although Townsend here is unduly generous in his estimate of the Warlock Lord his complaint is entirely to the point, stressing the incongruity between the highly imaginative and poetic concept of the character and the absurdly trivial motivation that appears in the actual details of the plot.

It is significant that the most enjoyable characters in The Wizard's Son are the two who have least to do with the central theme: Julia Herbert, a humorously sympathetic study of an adventuress; and Mrs Forrester, Oona's mother, a deliciously comic figure of amiably inconsequential garrulity.

To give detailed demonstration of Mrs Oliphant's failure I will examine the first of the two major climaxes of the book. The second climax, of dramatic action, when the Warlock Lord confronts Walter and Oona, I have already examined; but it is preceded several chapters earlier by what Mrs Oliphant intends as the emotional high peak of the book, an internalised confrontation between Walter and the Warlock Lord, taking place in the depths of Walter's mind. As a preliminary to the long episode Mrs Oliphant describes "that clanging of the pulses, that mounting of every faculty of the nerves and blood to his head, the seat of thought, which throbbed as though it would burst, and to his heart, which thundered and laboured and filled his ears with billows of sound". This is to precede an agonising mental crisis which lasts all through the night, while Walter's mother and a servant keep terrified watch in the silent castle. Walter is so tormented by his emotions that he is tempted to escape, to avoid the ethical test:

He had said to himself that he could bear it no longer, that he must escape anyhow, at any cost, leaving love and honour, and duty and every higher thought - for what could help him - nothing - nothing - in earth or heaven.

He is experiencing a savage onslaught on his values, and is driven to question the value of love, his own capacity for idealistic motivation, the purpose of his continuing existence. The language grows increasingly exclamatory and repetitive and Mrs Oliphant strains her resources to the utmost, indeed goes beyond her powers into hysteria and maudlin pathos. Walter goes out into a night of overstressed symbolism:

wild with a raving wind that dashed the treetops against the sky, and swept the clouds before it in flying masses; no moon, no light, gloom impenetrable below, a pale glimpse of heaven above, swept by black billows of tumultuous clouds.

And amidst the darkness his thoughts turn to Oona. The coming end of the chapter is clear enough, and in a strained accumulation of emotive epithets and nouns his thoughts are turned from suicide to the redeeming power of love. He sees what he thinks is a star and then recognises as Oona's window "shining in the middle of the night when all was asleep around". The light becomes by implication an antidote to the false light coming from the Warlock Lord; it is like a revelation to him that he is supported by the love and prayers of Oona:

Now it fell upon him in a great wonder, full of awe. He was hers, he was her, not himself henceforward, but a portion of another, and that other portion of him standing for him at the gates of heaven. His whole being fell into silence, overawed.

There is a great deal more symbolism of night and darkness, heaven

and stars, windows and lamps. And the chapter ends with these words:

The young man was silent in a great awe; his heart stirring softly in him, hushed, like the heart of a child. For him! unworthy! for him who had never sought the love of God, who had disregarded the love of his mother, who had profaned the love of woman; down, down on his knees - down to the dust, hiding his face in gratitude unutterable. He ceased to think of what it was he had been struggling and contending for; he forgot his enemy, his danger, himself altogether, and, overawed, sank at the feet of love, which alone can save. 48

What is meant to be a grand finale achieves only tumid banality and exclamatory vagueness. The Biblical language, straining at one or two overworked expressions (especially "awe"), only highlights the inadequacy of Mrs Oliphant's resources to meet the demand that she is making on them.

But it would not be right to end this chapter on so severely dismissive a note. The Wizard's Son was an attempt at something beyond Mrs Oliphant's powers; but unattainable ambition is more to be commended than complacent mediocrity. She did take the novel very seriously as an art form, and a concern for structure and thematic unity is unmistakable in all the most interesting of the novels written during the last thirty years of her career. Like Dickens and Trollope, though in very different ways, she found her way rather by instinct than by theory towards a complex structure; and when she seems consciously and overtly to aim at such complexity as in The Wizard's Son she loses the spontaneity which is characteristic of her best work. Novels like Miss Marjoribanks and Hester - and The Curate in Charge and The Greatest Heiress in England - in which there is no sense of strain, no uneasy striving after effect, make it clear enough that she had

a gift for the interweaving of theme and structure which I shall
illustrate in further detail in Part Two of this thesis.

PART TWO

CHAPTER SIX

EARLY NOVELS

But genius, in some kind and degree, certainly did belong to her, for the girl had that strange faculty of expression which is as independent of education, knowledge, or culture as any wandering angel.

(The Athelings. 1857, I, 21-2)

Mrs Oliphant's first novel, Christian Melville,¹ written when she was about 16 and published when she was about 28, is of no interest, and is justly dismissed in her Autobiography as "very silly".² Another novel "very much concerned with the church business"³ (of the Church of Scotland church she attended in Liverpool) was subsequently destroyed and she made her serious bid for fame with Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside, Written by Herself, published in 1849. Many comments have been made on the amazing achievement of this "first" novel coming from a girl not much over 20. And indeed where Mrs Oliphant does rate a mention in books of literary history Margaret Maitland is sure to earn a cautiously admiring comment. It was greeted enthusiastically by the veteran Scottish writer Francis Jeffrey (whose views I shall examine later). And Vineta and Robert Colby insist that it ^{is} the best of the books written in the first decade of Mrs Oliphant's career.⁴

1. Published in 1856 by David Bogue of Fleet Street.
2. A. & L.p.17. Christian Melville was published for the benefit of Mrs Oliphant's brother William Wilson for reasons explained later in this chapter. It is consequently attributed to him in the British Library catalogue.
3. A. & L. p.17
4. Colby, p.15

It is indeed a remarkable achievement for a girl of that age. But it is not a satisfactory novel and shows scarcely any of the distinguishing features of her finest work written in the last three decades of her life. It is essential to make a fairly detailed examination of the book, even at the risk of breaking a butterfly upon a wheel, because only in this way can I indicate growing points in her development and give some indication of certain basic weaknesses which bedevil her work throughout her life and which she very slowly learned to surmount, and then not consistently. By setting off her strengths against her weaknesses I can then, I hope, demonstrate the distinctiveness of her achievement in her finest books. And Margaret Maitland is the first stage on her journey towards self-discovery which was completed roughly seventeen years later with Miss Marjoribanks. Hence close analysis is unavoidable.

The great strength of the book is its setting within a recognisable, soberly delineated Scottish community at the time of the Disruption of May 1843, when the Kirk of Scotland split in two over the question of lay patronage. Margaret Maitland and her family remain loyal to their minister in his stand for the independence of the church and with him they go "out with the pure and free Kirk into the wilderness". However, the book is not in fact about ecclesiastical politics but simply a portrait of a community. The omission of details of the Disruption is deliberate:

... it is not my purpose to speak of the solemn and great things of the Kirk in a simple history like this, pertaining only to our own family and folk. 5

Consequently, Mrs Oliphant concentrates entirely on a loving accumulation of details of the life of a Scottish parish: the formal presentation of a minister to his parish, the first probationary sermon, the sacredness of the Sabbath and so on. Regrettably the local colour is overdone, and whole chapters are filled up with rural humours and chatter and irrelevant folk customs and rituals; self-indulgent and rather tedious. It is an error of judgment natural to a young writer and she was later able to limit local colour to a strictly marginal role, although she was always tempted to self-indulgence in her Scottish novels.

Margaret Maitland is middle-aged, placid and pious in temperament, a mere observer of events, and for the purposes of a plot Mrs Oliphant uses a secondary heroine, the heiress Grace Maitland (who very oddly is not a relation of Margaret's). Margaret and Grace are the two sides of Mrs Oliphant's personality: Margaret serious-minded and earnestly moralistic; Grace satirical, independent-minded, self-assured, lively and sensitive, the first of a long series of such heroines appearing at regular intervals for the next 48 years. They represent two contrasting moods that balance each other throughout her career.

Unfortunately the plot in which Grace is involved is grotesquely stagy, with a villainous father, a caricatured arrogant aunt, and a clumsy mystery drained dry of every element of suspense and tormented emotions, with brief melodramatic set scenes. Thus at the very beginning of her career, Mrs Oliphant disfigures a novel in this way. The "plot" simply does not belong to the same world of imagination as the picture of Scottish parochial society.

There is also a love story involving Margaret's niece, Mary,

and a young laird who is led away into extravagance and folly, separating him temporarily from the sternly puritanical Mary. This is conventional enough and Mrs Oliphant cannot breathe into this story any of the life she might have given it even ten years later. Much more interesting is the examination of the social conscience of the young laird - who transforms a rural slum into a model village with good housing, a library, a church, a school with games on the curriculum, and a Mechanics Institute lecturer. Later he provides employment for the villagers by a cotton mill on the highest Factory Act principles. He also designs another village on co-operative agricultural lines:

"I will portion the Moss out, Miss Grace", he said, "in allotments for each family of my colonists, provide them with all the means of improvement, and trust to their own industry and energy (which we must stimulate besides, of course, human nature being, as I am forced to confess, no better than it is called) for making the wilderness a fruitful field". 6

It all sounds too idealistic and utopian, and yet there is not so much difference between the ideals of Allan Elphinstone in fiction and the reality of Robert Owen who had created his model industrial community in New Lanark at the beginning of the century. The strong democratic feeling of Margaret Maitland is tempered, however, by indications that too much democracy is bad for the people, tempting them into foolish subversive actions. (They should have been contented with the paternalism of Allan.) This inconsistency suggests an uncertainty of tone - ideas not clearly thought out - and this is entirely

6. Margaret Maitland III, 182

typical of Margaret Maitland, which can never make up its mind what sort of a book it wants to be.

Margaret Maitland views Allan's experiments with the greatest interest and sympathy; but she has reservations about his introduction of public lectures, and through her lips Mrs Oliphant - rather too obviously - expresses her views on the education of the people. Margaret is talking to the lecturer Mr Novimundy (so called because he wishes to create a "new world"):

"And is it possible, madam", said Mr Novimundy, looking at me through his glasses in a severe manner, "that you would desire to keep the poor ignorant of all the refinements of life; that you would build up the old barriers between them and education; that you would smother talent, merely because it was found among the poor?"

"At no hand, sir", said I, being in a manner angered at the body; "and I would not call my old neighbours 'the poor' either, as the new-fangled folk of this generation do. I would have the lads read books, wheresoever they could lay their hands upon them, and truly, I would counsel Mr Allan to let them read their books at home, where other folk might have the benefit as well as themselves; and I would have their minds guided to all manner of wise and high thoughts, as becomes folk made in the image of their Maker, though it is dimmed and broken by reason of a fallen nature; but I would not learn lads that are in no degree more sensible than their neighbours, to set themselves up as guides and exemplars to other folk. And if there should in truth be a greater spirit than common among them, be not you feared, sir - the light will aye make itself seen". 7

The disapproval for the patronising expression "the poor" strikes a note which is sounded in many of Mrs Oliphant's subsequent books. However, it is regrettable that the educational philosophy expounded by her narrator in this passage is glibly vague and over-optimistic

(in spite of the reservation about "a fallen nature"). But this merely indicates that Mrs Oliphant was very young and inexperienced.

The immaturity of Margaret Maitland is made even more obvious when the language of the book is examined. At first the reader is confronted with a conscious and deliberate work of art, an extremely artificial object more like an archaeological specimen than a work of literature in living contemporary English. The language is intended to fit a first-person narrator who is middle-aged, deeply pious and heiress to centuries of Scottish tradition. The sentences are formal and elaborate, with many clauses, interweaving Scottish idiom with semi-Biblical diction. In a way it is impressive; but Mrs Oliphant overburdens herself and achieves a Pyrrhic victory at the expense of spontaneity and intuitive insights into character. One specimen from the second chapter will sufficiently illustrate:

... for if there be not a measure of pleasantness in that blythe morning season of youth when shall it be? No when the young spirit is standing on the edge of this world's tribulations, and knows not the sore plunge that is at its foot. It may be that that time has the brightest look, but truly it is but a glint, and departs oftenest in trouble and pain; and therefore my heart aye yearns over the playing bairns, that they may have their portion of innocent pleasantness, before ever their bits of minds are troubled with a thought of the weird that may be waiting on them. But that is not the thing I was going to write about. 8

The anti-climax at the ends effectively illustrates the danger to which such conscious striving after "style" is inevitably liable. It freezes the movement of a book into unyielding rigidity, and if the author is to make any kind of progress he cannot sustain it.

On many occasions a livelier, more humorous tone breaks through, especially when the sub-heroine Grace is concerned; and then Mrs Oliphant seems to draw back and resume the stilted style that I have illustrated, a style which intermingles banality and pretentiousness.

The reason for the adoption of this style is clear enough. Mrs Oliphant, aged 20, wishes to speak through the persona of a middle-aged woman, and attempts to make an imaginative identification with her point of view and her style of thought and speech. Young writers do not always fail when they make such an attempt (for example Nelly Dean in Wuthering Heights) but Mrs Oliphant was not yet technically sophisticated enough to achieve success. She was not yet capable of ironic objectivity and in this novel and its sequel Lilliesleaf the narrator seems to adopt a tone of self-approval as a wise elder person who knows life. Thus too often she seems priggish or worse. In her mature novels Mrs Oliphant never makes such a mistake; and she is far more successful as an older writer in creating the character of a young person than as a young writer creating the character of an older person.

Margaret Maitland was well received by the critics and secured a comfortable reputation for Mrs Oliphant from the first. A typical criticism came from an anonymous writer in Fraser's Magazine in 1850. The author praises Mrs Oliphant for her skill in "dispositions and motives of conduct":

The dramatic interest is secondary throughout to the moral interest. It is emphatically a novel of characterization, individual and national, and displays an ease and shrewdness in the portraiture of Scottish life which has been equalled by few writers, and, in many respects, surpassed by none....

Another point that strikes us in this book is, the unity of design and the harmony of colour throughout. It hardly affects us like other novels. 9

The praise is justified, though exaggerated. The "unity of design and the harmony of colour" is rightly singled out for comment - although the critic accurately notes what Mrs Oliphant intended rather than what she achieved.

The Fraser's Magazine article quotes from Francis Jeffrey's letter to Mrs Oliphant expressing very high enthusiasm for Margaret Maitland. (The letter had been passed to Mrs Oliphant by the publisher, who evidently also informed the Fraser's Magazine critic of it.) This letter is interesting, not so much for its excessive praise ("Nothing half so true or so touching (in the delineation of Scottish character) has appeared since Galt published his Annals of the Parish - and this is purer and deeper than Galt, and even more absolutely and simply true") as for the adverse criticism with which the praise is toughened:

It would have been better though and made a stronger impression if it had copied Galt's brevity, and is sensibly injured by the indifferent matter which has been admitted to bring it up to the standard of three volumes....

The charm is in Grace and Margaret Maitland, and they and their immediate connections ought to have had the scene mostly to themselves. It is debased and polluted by the intrusion of so many ordinary characters.

Jeffrey continues with great enthusiasm for "the sweet thoughtfulness and pure, gracious, idiomatic Scotch of Margaret"¹⁰ and no other

9. "A Triad of Novels", Fraser's Magazine November 1850; XLII, 574. The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals gives no information as to authorship.

10. A.& L.p.154. The letter, long preserved among Mrs Oliphant's papers, is now the property of the National Library of Scotland (Acc 5793/1)

serious criticism is offered. But what criticism he did make is apt and entirely valid.

Very recently, in the slow revival of interest in Mrs Oliphant, Margaret Maitland has again received attention. Francis Russell Hart is very enthusiastic about it and admires Margaret herself without reserve:

Her reticence is one of the most winning features, an effective check on a piety that might otherwise be self-righteous or shrill and thereby justify what the world recklessly says of it. The quiet assurance and chaste good humour of her piety in the face of the world are grounded in the Kirk, and its tradition....

In a strictly dramatic, nonallegorical way she is the Kirk, and her total engagement with the world has been a domestic parable of the Kirk's struggle.

And later Mr Hart overpraises the style of the book:

It puts no ironic distance - as in Galt's Annals or The Provost - between the enlightened reader and a writer of naive garrulousness or pawky self-righteousness. Her habits and prejudices are part of her cultural identity; her perspective is limited without being ironic. 11

This (as with the Fraser's Magazine critic) is praise for the potentialities rather than for the actuality. As I have already indicated, the lack of a detached, distanced view of her narrator is a serious limitation of Mrs Oliphant's achievement. David Craig's view is much more acceptable than Francis Hart's. He quotes a typical passage in which Margaret uses her mixture of Biblical English and idiomatic Scots, and he then comments:

Here the actual use in life of the old Kirk idiom is not brought home to us, for such phrases as "carnal pride" merely hit off the famous clichés of the subject, they do not take us deeper into

11. Francis Russell Hart, The Scottish Novel (John Murray 1978) pp.95-7

the moral preoccupations they are meant to represent. And as the life in the novel is wholly enclosed in the mentality of the God-fearing old woman, no other kind of experience can be brought up against it; simple-minded piety remains the sum of what is presented.¹²

This is somewhat overstated, since an alternative point of view, that of Grace Maitland, is frequently presented (although it has to be seen reflected in the mirror of Margaret's controlling outlook.) Nevertheless, Mr Craig's view seems entirely justified, and it reminds us that Margaret Maitland in no meaningful sense makes a significant start to her self-discovery as a novelist.

The sequel, Lilliesleaf,¹³ was published in 1855 (eleven other novels having intervened).¹⁴ It unmistakably demonstrates the maturing of Mrs Oliphant's style; the Scottish/Biblical diction is more under control and more obviously used as a reflection of the narrator's character. Two of the characters, Rhoda Maitland and Austin Bernard, show early evidence of Mrs Oliphant's interest in complex, perverse, self-tormenting, self-dramatising characters. But there is very little to suggest the use she would make of such characters in the last three decades of her career.

Margaret Maitland appeared in 1849 and the first of the Carlingford novels began to appear in Blackwood's Magazine in 1861 and in book form in 1863. Virtually all the novels published between these dates

12. David Craig, Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1835 (Chatto 1961) p.263
13. Lilliesleaf, Being a concluding Series of Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside, Written by Herself, (3 volumes, Colburn)
14. These include 3 novels which Mrs Oliphant never acknowledged, and which I discuss below; and also John Rintoul serialised in Blackwood's Magazine in March and April 1853. See also above, p.197, note 2

are in effect experimental new departures, in which Mrs Oliphant was practising her technique by writing novels of many different kinds and extending her range by the deliberate use of different narrative techniques. This seems the entirely natural explanation, both of the great variety and of the unsatisfactory quality of the novels of the 1850's. The variety results from Mrs Oliphant's constant investigations of what her talent could do; the unsatisfactory quality merely proves that she was attempting categories of novel for which she was not fitted. In particular, two historical novels, respectively of the Plague Year in London (Caleb Field, 1851) and of the Scottish Reformation (Magdalen Hepburn, 1854), can be dismissed as lifeless and sterile in spite of - or rather because of - their determined effort to create a historical style. The facts have been researched but there is no life of the past in them. Katie Stewart (1853), set in a more recent Scotland, is much better; like Scott, Mrs Oliphant can enter much more convincingly into the recent history of Scotland than into earlier periods. The other novels of the 1850's deserve attention for their unmistakable progress towards self-discovery. There is a constant sense of moving forwards towards the themes and techniques of her maturity, as she tries out new styles and either discards them or develops them.

Merkland (1851) is a "Story of Scottish Life" combined with a mystery story. It is the natural successor to Margaret Maitland and takes its nostalgic, evocative picture of Scottish life much further. The mystery theme involves the heroine in prolonged investigations to clear her brother of an accusation of murder. The two elements do not work comfortably together, and the plot is contrived and heavy-

handed, overloaded with portentous atmosphere, heavy rhetoric and unmitigated appeals to the reader's sympathetic responses. There is a death scene, of the true murderer, now spectacularly penitent, which is so overwrought and so earnestly solemn and moralistic that it almost parodies itself; Mrs Oliphant was not yet ready to write the kind of quietly cool and ironic deathbed scene that I have described in Chapter Three.

Mrs Oliphant's fourth novel, John Drayton (1851), is the first of a trilogy of novels that she never acknowledged. Instead she allowed her brother William to have the credit. His career as a minister in the Presbyterian church had collapsed owing to his besetting vice of drink; and it seemed, no doubt, an appropriate way of salvaging his self-esteem to let him start a notional career as a novelist like his sister. He had already written one novel Mathew Paxton (published in due course, in 1854). Perhaps he made attempts to write other novels and, unable to continue, left them to his sister to complete. Certainly John Drayton is stylistically Mrs Oliphant's work, in spite of its great weakness, but the main theme, unemployment and the life of industrial workers, with a strong trade union element, is in many ways a "masculine" theme and may represent Wilson's interests. There are nine novels attributed to William Wilson in the British Library catalogues. It was Sara Keith who first suggested in an article in Notes and Queries in 1955 that these novels were all by Mrs Oliphant. Subsequently, Vineta Colby, in Notes and Queries for February 1966, demonstrated that on stylistic evidence five of these novels must be by Wilson, while the other four, including Christian Melville, which I have mentioned earlier, must be by Mrs Oliphant. The trilogy,

published respectively in 1852, 1853 and 1854, consists of John Drayton, Being a History of the Early Life and Development of a Liverpool Engineer (2 volumes), The Melvilles (3 volumes), and Ailieford, A Family History (3 volumes). The first two were published by Richard Bentley, the third by Mrs Oliphant's usual publishers, Hurst and Blackett. I myself, after researches among letters in the British Library and the National Library of Scotland, published a third article in Notes and Queries in October 1981, showing that Mrs Oliphant acknowledged herself the author of the first two of these novels in letters to Richard Bentley, and that letters from her cousin, George Wilson, congratulate her on her authorship of the same two.¹⁵

The three novels are a trilogy only in a limited sense, in that they share a common theme, poverty and hardship among the industrial classes. A more tenuous link is the character Willie Mitchell who appears as the author of the prologue to John Drayton and as the first-person narrator of Ailieford. The story of Ailieford describes events that turned Willie Mitchell into a novelist, thus making him the fictitious author of John Drayton and The Melvilles. He is thus the alter ego of Mrs Oliphant, a persona to allow her to project herself into the masculine experiences she wishes to record (derived partly, no doubt, from Willie Wilson). The impersonation is not a

15. Sara Keith, Notes and Queries CC, 126-7; Vineta Colby, "William Wilson, Novelist", N. & Q. CCXI, 60-6; John Stock Clarke, "Mrs Oliphant's Unacknowledged Social Novels", N. & Q. CCXXVI, 408-13. I should like to acknowledge my debt to Royal Gettmann, A Victorian Publisher, a Study of the Bentley Papers (Cambridge, 1960), since I unfortunately failed to do so in my article. Professor Gettmann briefly examines Mrs Oliphant's correspondence with Bentley about John Drayton and The Melvilles. Mr and Mrs Colby refer to this book in The Equivocal Virtue (p.251, n.12), but make no comment on the evidence thus revealed for Mrs Oliphant's authorship of these two books.

very convincing one; however, Mitchell is a mild, scholarly recluse, so there is no need to attempt any extrovert, "masculine" writing.

John Drayton, very much the weakest of the three, and The Melvilles are novels of poverty and industrial life intended to be read by working-class readers, who are encouraged to better their status without resorting to radicalism and violence. In a letter to Bentley, enclosing a preface for the second edition of John Drayton, Mrs Oliphant said that even if the second edition sold as well as the first "the book will still scarcely have begun to fulfil the end for which from the first I have designed it", and she would like a very cheap edition "to reach if possible the class of whom the story is".¹⁶ The second edition seems to have entirely disappeared (and so has the third, "very cheap", edition, published in October 1853), so we cannot now know what Mrs Oliphant said in her preface, though it is not hard to guess. It is idle to regret the loss, since these are inferior books. Mrs Oliphant was aiming to write social novels (or "Condition-of-England" novels, as they were often called) on the model of Charles Kingsley (Yeast 1848; Alton Locke 1850) and no doubt also Disraeli (Sybil 1845) and Mrs Gaskell (Mary Barton 1848); she specifically asked Bentley to send a copy of the second edition of John Drayton to Kingsley with the author's compliments.¹⁷ And scenes, intended as stark realism, including a "fever" epidemic occur in both novels.¹⁸

16. Letter dated 12 November 1851; British Library Add.MS46,641 f.28-9

17. Letter dated "Tuesday", probably late November 1851; BL Add.MS 46,641 f.32.

18. The "fever" will be either cholera or typhus. There was a cholera epidemic in Liverpool in 1849, and a typhus epidemic lasted from June 1847 to 1848. Mrs Oliphant would no doubt have witnessed both.

But although there is some evocative, atmospheric description of Liverpool, John Drayton and The Melvilles clearly demonstrate that in spite of her intense compassion for the sufferings of the unemployed and under-privileged, Mrs Oliphant had no gift for writing social novels. The general effect is vague, sentimental and in no way realistic. The Allan Elphinstone episodes of Margaret Maitland are much more convincing, since Allan's experiments in the amelioration of rural poverty derive from the Scottish traditions of community loyalty and democratic feeling, which were very close to Mrs Oliphant's heart.

Aillieford is rather different from its two predecessors. The setting is not Liverpool, but Edinburgh and 'Moulisburgh' (Musselburgh, near to Mrs Oliphant's birthplace), and the story is domestic and sentimental. Willie Mitchell narrates his own story and that of his two brothers. It is better plotted than its predecessors, although it breaks down in Book III. Although it in no way deserves close analysis, it is unmistakably by Mrs Oliphant, since many themes that are recognisably hers can be identified. For example one of the female characters speaks with a note of stoical disillusion, doubting the possibility of happiness:

"I'm no expecting to be very happy - just to wear
through every day, neither very ill nor very well;
I'll no be disappointed, Mrs Mitchell - I look for
nothing more than that."

This is naive enough, but more impressive and deeply felt versions of this sentiment recur throughout Mrs Oliphant's career. Even more striking is a treatment of a theme which was to interest Mrs Oliphant intensely, and about which I shall speak in detail in Chapter Nine; the "identity" theme:

I settled inevitably into my meditative restricted orbit ... and only wondered sometimes how identity could be so strong in a character so unmarked and insignificant as mine. 19

And she shows great interest in the reserved, introverted character of her narrator who "must pass like a shadow, with all my soul uncommunicated to my kind". (The passage is a few lines later than the last quotation.) But Ailieford comes far too early in her career for the theme to be handled other than superficially.

To deal with the Willie Mitchell trilogy I have been obliged slightly to violate chronology. I now return to 1852, to the fourth of the acknowledged novels, Memoirs and Resolutions of Adam Graeme of Mossgray (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett). It is Mrs Oliphant's first attempt to build a novel round ironic plot-parallelism; there are three unforgiving old men, each perversely pursuing his hostilities, each unable to learn from the others, but each finally conquered by the ethic and the compulsive emotion of reconciliation. In another way it is technically an interesting new departure, since Book One is a first-person narrative by Adam Graeme, showing what has turned him into an embittered recluse, while Books Two and Three are third-person narratives, in which the stage, hitherto fairly empty, is filled with a lively cast of characters and Adam is pushed into the background, although his reawakening to life is watched by the other characters.²⁰ The "opening out" effect convincingly establishes the

19. Ailieford II, 121; III, 43

20. It is worth notice that Books One, Two and Three do not correspond to the three original volumes. Book Two starts rather more than half-way through Volume One, and continues to a little later than half-way through Volume Two.

contrast between Adam's bitterly secluded life and the "real" world from which he has withdrawn and which implicitly acts as a reproach to his seclusion. But the style of the book does not support the technical sophistication of the narrative; it is over-written and self-conscious, and at this stage of her career Mrs Oliphant was scarcely able to enter convincingly into the mind of a middle-aged man.

But 1852 was the year in which she began to take a serious interest in the appropriate style for writing a novel - and a most regrettable interest. She began a self-conscious experiment, devising for herself an elaborate tone of voice, which is entirely detachable from the content and effectively obscures the maturing of her skill as a novelist. It is made up from a mixture of the historic present, the apostrophising of characters, direct addresses to the reader and similar devices intended to draw the reader into the world of the characters. The style had been freely used in Christian Melville, but only briefly in the novels of 1849 to 1851. But then in 1852 it reappeared and it is frequently found in The Melvilles and in Katie Stewart,²¹ the novel with which Mrs Oliphant opened her lifelong connection with the firm of Blackwood. It recurs in John Rintoul, serialised in Blackwood's Magazine in 1853; and it is used more and more frequently in Harry Muir, published in three volumes by Hurst and Blackett in 1853, and this is especially true of the later chapters; and it reaches a painful and disastrous climax in The Quiet Heart, serialised in Blackwood's Magazine from December 1853 to May 1854 (afterwards published in one volume by Blackwood in 1854).

21. For the purposes of the examination of Mrs Oliphant's experiment in style Katie Stewart belongs to 1852, the date of serialisation in Blackwood's Magazine from July to November, not to 1853, the year of publication in one volume.

The purpose of this style was no doubt very serious indeed, but in her inexperience Mrs Oliphant gravely misjudged; and the effect is always coy, self-conscious and totally destructive of all objectivity. "Ménie Laurie, Ménie Laurie", says the narrator to the heroine of The Quiet Heart, "can this sad watcher be you?" and earlier she advises the reader to "Go lightly over ... this ... carpet" as he enters Ménie's room. At the end of the novel Ménie is reconciled to her lover and the narrator asks "What is this she leans upon - the arm of Randall Home?" The reader is constantly invited to love the innocent heroine and she herself is constantly encouraged by the narrator with assurances that "The window is open behind you, Ménie" or that "Your mother there looks gravely".²²

To illustrate in detail how Mrs Oliphant destroys the effect of what she is trying to do I will make just one quotation, from the opening of Chapter XXXI, where the heroine is painting a portrait of a young girl:

Courage, Ménie Laurie! Heaven does not send this breeze upon your cheek for nought - does not raise about you these glorious limits of hill and cloud in vain. Look through the distance - look steadily. Yes, it is the white gable of Crofthill looking down upon the countryside. Well, never veil your eyes - are you not at peace with them as with all the world?

Little Jessie here wearies where you have left her waiting, and trembles to move a finger lest she spoil the mysterious picture at which she glances furtively with awe and wonder. "The lady just looks at me", says little Jessie; "no a thing mair. Just looks and puts it a' down like writing on a sclate". And Jessie cannot understand the magic which by-and-by brings out her own little bright sun-burnt face, from that dull canvas which had not a line upon it when Jessie saw it first.

22. The Quiet Heart, pp.153, 13, 318, 5, 97.

Come to your work, Menie Laurie; they made your heart faint, these wistful looks and sighs. No one doubts it is very heavy - very heavy - this poor heart; no one doubts it is full of yearnings - full of anxious thought and fears, and solitude. What then! - must we leave it to brood upon its trouble? Come to little Jessie here, and her picture - find out the very scul in these surprised sweet eyes - paint the loveliest little heart upon your canvass, fresh and fair out of the hands of God - such a face as will warm cold hearts, and teach them histories of joyous sacrifice - of love that knows no evil - of life that remembers self last and least of all. You said it first in bitterness and sore distress; but, nevertheless, it is true. You can do it, Ménie. It is "the trade" to which you were born. 23

Apart from the pleasant humour of the Scottish dialect in Jessie's spoken thoughts, nothing can be salvaged from this disastrous passage. The narrator's presence as an observer in the scene can only vitiate Mrs Oliphant's intended effect, an intimate awareness of Menie's grief and her attempt to distract herself from it. The language is overloaded with repetitions, emotive epithets and trite imagery; there is no pressure of felt experience to justify any of these stylistic devices, which merely serve to emphasise the shallowness of what is communicated. Mrs Oliphant is aiming at intimacy when ironic objectivity is essential; indeed so far as she is moving away from irony to that extent she is losing control over her own development as a novelist. In particular her treatment of her heroine is totally misjudged; Ménie is over-protected by authorial sympathy, offered as a naive object for our pity and decorated by the tritely symbolic use of scenery saturated with the "pathetic fallacy" (as in the first quoted paragraph). Yet she is in the process of maturing and learning

by experience and this theme, potentially far more interesting than anything with which Mrs Oliphant assaults the reader's responses, makes no impact at all.

The Quiet Heart does in fact have a very serious subject. It is a study of disillusion, the first significant appearance of this subject in Mrs Oliphant's work.²⁴ Menie Laurie's "quiet heart" is rudely awakened when she is forced to recognise the meanness and arrogance of her lover and in the process she develops self-reliance and maturity. This is a theme well worth writing about - and similar later heroines such as Agnes Trevelyan, Margaret Leslie, Anne Mountford and Lily Ramsay (Agnes 1866; The Primrose Path 1878; In Trust 1882; Sir Robert's Fortune 1895) are handled with power and insight. But in The Quiet Heart it is entirely shipwrecked by the misguided experiment in style, although there are one or two occasions when Mrs Oliphant does prove herself capable of rising to the seriousness of the theme with economy and immediacy of language.

Most of the stylistic devices used in the novels of 1852 to 1854 are quite inadmissible in serious literature. However, the historic present has an honourable history. It is found in some notable passages of Charlotte Brontë's Shirley (1849, the year of publication of Margaret Maitland). And Dickens makes a consistent, purposive use of the historic present in Bleak House, in the third-person, narrative chapters, which give an effect of immediacy, creating the illusion that we are living through the experience with the characters in

24. Harry Muir, her previous novel, is a study of a morally inadequate man and the frustration and disillusion felt by his wife and sisters. The treatment is deeply unsatisfactory, and there is no progress towards disillusion as there is in The Quiet Heart.

a kind of perpetual Now, time held in suspension or watched slowly unrolling before us. Bleak House was published in monthly parts from May 1852 to September 1853; and Katie Stewart began to appear in Blackwood's Magazine in July 1852. It seems very possible that Mrs Oliphant, already interested in the historic present, was encouraged by Dickens's example to make a much more sustained use of it, especially now that she had improved her status by joining the firm of Blackwood, and even though the novels she was writing were quite unlike Bleak House.

John Rintoul, or, the Fragment of the Wreck, the shortest of the books of 1842 to 1854, no longer than a novella, is much the most effective in its use of the historic present. It is a lyrical study of a fishing community in the county of Fife, and the narrative is of classic simplicity. A totally unexpected storm destroys a boat and, apparently, the whole crew is lost. The womenfolk are reduced to grief and desolation, but a younger member of the crew, rescued and taken abroad, eventually returns to claim the girl he loves, and to comfort his mother. The heroine, Agnes Raeburn, is a very imaginative girl, living perpetually in a highly poetic fantasy world; and the seashore imagery of the book beautifully reflects Agnes's inner world. This in effect is the first appearance of what can be called symbolism in Mrs Oliphant's work. Time seems to stand still in her inner world - and the historic present is appropriately used to suggest this. It is also used to create the stillness and peace of domestic scenes, and the dramatic moment of shock when John Rintoul discovers the fragment of the wreck which proves that his father's boat had been destroyed:

And down upon the grass there ... what are these rude fragments, wet and jagged and broken, with sharp nails projecting from their sides, and traces of bright painting worn old by time and drenched by sea-water, lying on the peaceful turf? The water has been high here overnight, as you may trace by the mazed line of sea-weed and broken shells half-way up the brae. Memorials of some old wreck, perhaps - perhaps sad tokens to the storm of yesternight. Softly, John - take care that your heavy boot does not slide down all the way upon that wet and treacherous grass....

Warmly the strong life of manhood flushes on your bronzed cheek, John Rintoul; and the hand that lifts this piece of wood with sympathetic interest - moved at sight of the fate which every sailor knows may be his own, but otherwise all untroubled - could hold the helm, without trembling, in the wildest night that ever chafed these northern seas. But Heaven have pity on the strong man's weakness! what sudden spasm is this that blanches his hardy face into deadlier pallor than a woman's fainting, and shakes his sinewy arm like palsy? John Rintoul! - stout sailor! - easy heart! - what is there here to smite you like the hand of Heaven?

Nothing but his own name - his own name in awkward²⁵ characters, as schoolboys use to inscribe them....

Clearly this passage, though much better than the one I quoted from The Quiet Heart, is badly flawed. The rhetorical questions and the self-conscious inversion ("Warmly the strong life of manhood flushes...") suggest an inability to trust the power of the selected details to communicate the desired feeling; the direct apostrophising of John (as of Méné in The Quiet Heart) is an intolerable authorial breach of literary decorum; and the exclamatory style of "John Rintoul! - stout sailor! - easy heart!" threatens to blunt and invalidate the moment for which Mrs Oliphant has so carefully been preparing. Yet she does succeed in re-enacting a moment of shocked recognition against an ironic and poetic background of tranquillity, and the

quiet anti-climax with which the last paragraph begins is most effective.

After The Quiet Heart the self-consciousness of style which I am considering began to lose its grip on Mrs Oliphant. Zaidee was serialised in Blackwood's Magazine from December 1854 to December 1855. Here the historic present and the other devices appear very frequently in Book One, and then begin to diminish in Book Two, although there is a temporary burst of cloyingly self-conscious sweetness at the opening of Book Three (when Mrs Oliphant moves the novel forward seven years and introduces her heroine to a new setting). Finally, in The Athelings, serialised in Blackwood's Magazine from June 1856 to June 1857, the style appears hesitantly in the early chapters and then disappears. It had served its purpose and could be discarded (except for a few minor short stories) - and in the novels of 1858 (The Laird of Norlaw, Orphans) an approximation to Mrs Oliphant's mature style is heard. The effect on the novels of 1853 to 1856 is disastrous, but it served as a kind of personal catharsis for Mrs Oliphant, enabling her to purge herself of self-consciousness and coyness.²⁶

Zaidee and The Athelings are very ambitious novels, in which for the first time in her acknowledged books (apart from Caleb Field and the London scenes of The Quiet Heart) Mrs Oliphant decisively deserted Scottish settings and turned to the English country house background which later she was able to handle with considerable

26. However, to the end of her career she could never resist the temptation of thrusting her characters aside and appearing on stage as the intrusive author addressing the "dear reader", or inviting him to make the right response to her characters. But in the later books this is a mere nervous tic or mannerism which does little harm to the books in which it occurs.

skill. Both are long novels, with complex plots and large casts of characters; requiring far greater skill in manipulating such material than Mrs Oliphant had as yet acquired. The ironic and disillusioned vision of her later books began, tentatively, to appear, and so, sporadically, did her grasp of complex motive. But the plotting is conventional (missing wills, lost relatives, coincidences, villainous machinations, unexpected deus-ex-machina incomes) and the naivety of tone, especially in the treatment of the heroines, is scarcely mitigated at all. One peculiarity of The Athelings is that one of the heroines is a self-portrait. Agnes Atheling is a novelist and makes an implausibly rapid success with her first novel, Hope Hazlewood, a History. The epigraph to this chapter is Mrs Oliphant's optimistic comment on her heroine - and by implication on herself. Indeed, Mrs Oliphant did possess - or was eventually able to develop - "that strange faculty of expression"; but Agnes Atheling never seems very convincing as a novelist; although the astonished admiration she evokes among her family is unmistakably a faithful record of the reaction of the Wilson family to the discovery that their Margaret was a novelist. And there are some sharply ironic observations of the consequences of fame:

No one could possibly suppose anything more different from the fanciful and delicate fame which charms the young poetic mind with imaginary glories, than these drawing-room compliments and protestations of interest and delight, to which, at first with a deep blush and overpowering embarrassment, and by-and-by with an uneasy consciousness of something ridiculous, the young author sat still and listened.

The people who had been dying to know the author of Hope Hazlewood had all found out that the young genius did not talk in character - had no gift of conversation, and, indeed, did nothing at all to keep up her fame.... 27

The authenticity of this is unmistakable.

One other, very apt, quotation demands to be included. This is Mrs Oliphant's comment on her heroine's second novel:

It was not very much of a story, neither was it written with that full perfection of style which comes by experience and the progress of years; but it had something in its faulty grace, and earnestness, and simplicity, which was perhaps more attractive than the matured perfection of a style which had been carefully formed, and "left nothing to desire". It was speaking with youth, and it was warm from the heart. 28

One could scarcely wish to choose more appropriate words to sum up the general effect of Mrs Oliphant's more interesting books of the 1850's.

There are some studies of perverse and complex motivation in The Athelings, but they are not integral to the story and are of interest mainly because they rise above the general deadness of style of the book (as do the comments on the literary world) rather than because they are remarkable in themselves.

After The Athelings, published in book form in 1857, Mrs Oliphant made one final experiment in technique. She returned to the use of a first-person narrator and explored different ways in which this

27. The Athelings, or The Three Gifts (3 volumes, Blackwood 1857) II, 19-20, 47

28. The Athelings III, 128

technique could be used, in The Days of My Life (1857)²⁹ and in a trilogy of novels beginning with Orphans (1858). The Days of My Life is intended as a study of neurotic pride with a fiercely self-deceiving heroine who narrates in later years when she has been chastened and learned wisdom. Thus Mrs Oliphant does not achieve the ironic objectivity that she must have intended, because we are constantly guided by Hester, the chastened narrator, into an understanding of her foolish younger self. Yet at times the characterisation is impressive, as when Hester, having rejected her husband for perversely unjustifiable reasons, chooses to do charitable deeds to the poor; it is made clear that her main, unacknowledged, motive is a masochistic rejection of happiness, combined with a vindictive desire to get revenge on her husband - through humiliation of herself. However, Mrs Oliphant had not yet achieved the skill needed to sustain such a study through three volumes; and the first-person narration is clumsily used. This is scarcely surprising, since The Days of My Life is her first attempt to deal at length with complex, perverse motivation; and the result is exaggerated and unimaginative and involves some of the most unbelievable plotting in all her work.

Orphans is the first of a trilogy of novels, all narrated by Clare Nugent, afterwards Mrs Clare Crofton. The others are Lucy Crofton (1869) and Heart and Cross (1863). Although this last overlaps with the beginning of the Carlingford series it must be considered in this chapter because its naivety of tone ranges it with the novels of the 1850's and not at all with The Rector, The Doctor's Family and Salem Chapel, its companions of 1863. Unlike the narrator of

29. The Days of My Life, An Autobiography, (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett)

The Days of My Life, Clare is largely an observer of the events of the trilogy rather than a participant, even when young and energetic, in Orphans. Later, when married (in the second and third novels of the trilogy), she becomes a less insistent English version of Margaret Maitland, with the same wise and anxious concern for the welfare of her community and of her personal friends. Orphans is much the most interesting of the trilogy, being Mrs Oliphant's first serious attempt at structuring a novel round a unifying theme. Since I have already examined the structure of the book, I need only say here that the patterning of the book is rather too obvious to the reader; for example, there are rather too many orphans in the book, intended to demonstrate the relevance of the title but too obviously evidence of authorial intention. Once again we recognise signs of the inexperience of the young writer.

Lucy Crofton and Heart and Cross are an astonishing decline after Orphans. Clare continues her role as observer and adviser - and directress of the orphanage she established in Orphans; but Mrs Oliphant abandons her interest in thematic unity and reverts to conventional Victorian plot-patterns: love that suffers in silence, engagements concealed, a lover who returns from the war (covered, of course, with glory) and so on. Lucy Crofton has one continuous story-line, concerning an adventuress who coolly disregards the passion of a simple-hearted lover and marries a rich young lord to whom she has been secretly engaged. When we consider what rich and ironic use Mrs Oliphant makes of this theme in later novels (for example, Sir Tom 1884), it is quite impossible to take Lucy Crofton seriously. Heart and Cross partly picks up the theme of

useless lives from Orphans and contains some strikingly satirical passages about the fellow of a Cambridge college. There are some pleasantly ironic insights into character, such as the following:

Meanwhile the flirtation with Maurice did not advance so satisfactorily - he was so much accustomed to admire himself, that the habit of admiring another came slowly to him; and then, as Miss Reredos took the initiative, and did not spare to be cleverly rude to the young man, he, taking advantage of his privileges, was cleverly rude to her in reply, from which fashionable mode of beginning, they advanced by degrees to closer friendship, or, at least, familiarity of address.

Maurice, for instance - what was it that had set Maurice all astray from his comfortable self-complacency and dilettante leisure? Somehow the pleasure-boat of his life had gone among the rocks, and nothing but dissatisfaction - extreme, utter, unmitigated dissatisfaction - was left to the young man, as I could³⁰ perceive, of all his accomplishments and perfections.

These passages are successful as comedy rather than as irony, since the emphasis is placed a little too obviously on words like "cleverly rude", "privileges", "fashionable", "self-complacency"; and in her later work Mrs Oliphant would not have underlined her point by such an excess of adjectives as in "extreme, utter, unmitigated dissatisfaction". Maurice remains a stereotype, not observed with any depth; and passages such as this rise in lonely isolation above a naive love story which ends the trilogy with a sadly sentimental anticlimax.

In 1858 besides Orphans Mrs Oliphant published one more Scottish novel The Laird of Norlaw, which I shall consider in a later chapter; and the years of her apprenticeship were virtually over. About this time there was a slight gap in her career. In 1859 she published

30. Heart and Cross, pp.92, 187

only an uninteresting children's book Agnes Hopetoun's Schools and Holidays, with which she began an association with a third publishing firm, Macmillan, and then she was plunged into the misery of her husband's death while they were in Italy, followed by inevitable anxiety over an income and a home for herself and her three young children. To make matters worse, publishers began to reject her work and 1861 was for her a time of crisis, as described in her autobiography.³¹ She was beginning to experience great anxiety when suddenly the idea of the Carlingford series came to her and John Blackwood showed interest. And with the first Carlingford stories quite suddenly her talent achieved full maturity and all the experiments of the 1850's bore fruit.

One novel, The House on the Moor, was published in 1861; and it bears unmistakable evidence of the strain she was undergoing at the time. It is a mystery story, with a villain-hero tempted to murder, and this theme seduces Mrs Oliphant, as it always did, into overstrained, exaggerated writing. The book seems the effort of a temporarily exhausted imagination whipping itself into a frenzy. Though there is a sombre power at times the book is overwritten almost to the point of caricature. The villain-hero is horrible, diabolical, perpetually sneering or deadly pale, with "the cold dew bursting on his face"; and a kind-hearted friend of the family, Uncle Edward, is described over and over again in such terms as "his fatherly old heart", "the honest eyes of the old soldier", "all the affectionate sincerity of his unsuspecting heart", "the Colonel's tender heart" and so on, until the reader is driven to

31. A. & L. pp.65-71

refuse the affection that Mrs Oliphant is so insistently demanding for her character. But the sensation novel was Mrs Oliphant's Achilles' heel throughout her career - and in 1861 she chose a far wiser way to develop, through ironic objectivity, social observation and complexity of character. She was moving in the direction, not of Miss Braddon (or of Wilkie Collins, whom she admired but could never adequately imitate) but of Trollope and George Eliot.

In conclusion, as a brief summary of this chapter, I shall consider in what ways Mrs Oliphant had in effect trained herself as a novelist during the period 1849-1860. She had tried to write historical novels and social novels, and had produced nothing of interest; she never attempted again to write novels in these categories. She also wrote mystery novels (Merkland, The Athelings, The House on the Moor) and here unfortunately she was unable to recognise her failure and learn from it. But meanwhile she was studying and developing several aspects of the type of novel that was in due course characteristic of her: the patterns, tensions and pressures of a community (Margaret Maitland, Merkland, Adam Graeme, Ailieford, Lilliesleaf, Zaidee, Orphans); the complexities and paradoxes of human motivation (Adam Graeme, Harry Muir, The Quiet Heart, The Days of My Life); an ironic vision of human nature (Adam Graeme, The Quiet Heart, The Athelings, Orphans and its sequels); and a complex pattern of interlocking themes, characters and plots (Adam Graeme, Zaidee, The Athelings, Orphans). She achieved nothing of value but she was practising her art; what is more, her celebrated industry (or over-production, if it is preferable to call it this) ensured that she was acquiring an assured

technique, a professional competence that stood her in good stead when at last in the 1860's she "found herself". Her extraordinary experiment in achieving intimacy with her characters, immediacy of contact with the reader and a kind of direct transcript of experience, by means of the stylistic extravagances that I have illustrated, had the most disastrous effect for the brief period that it lasted; nevertheless once she had abandoned the style, she was able to communicate intimacy and immediacy, mainly by analysis of the inner life of her characters. In Chapter Four I have illustrated some of the ways in which she does this. The characteristic note of anti-romanticism appears only very sporadically in Mrs Oliphant's first decade, in *Grace Maitland* or Margaret Maitland, in Orphans and its sequels (though not consistently) and in the treatment of the Young Pretender in Katie Stewart.³² But it appears sharply and with assurance in the Carlingford series; it had been developing underground during the apprenticeship period.

32. See above p. 59.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CARLINGFORD: THE CLERGY

The very noticeable natural feature, the individuality or sectarianism - for the words come to be nearly identical - which set these men(1) afloat, each on his separate voyage, cannot fail forcibly to strike any one who studies the history of this great Church in England. A careful student, we should almost fancy, must find himself compelled to conclude, that there is wisdom in the latitude which leaves so wide a space between the "high" and the "low" of English churchmanship, and gives the genius of the people so much room to develop itself, while still within the consecrated grounds.

(Preface to Caleb Field, 1851, pp.ix-x)

The flowering of Mrs Oliphant's talents in 1861 is a most remarkable event when we consider that everything she had written before was tentative and lacking in real imaginative power and - more significantly - any real understanding of where her strengths and weaknesses lay. But through the experiments and failures of the 1850's she had, as I have indicated, been testing her powers, and half-unconsciously throwing aside styles and methods that did not suit her talents. It was as an ironic domestic realist that she found her feet; and in The Chronicles of Carlingford she put her own personal mark upon this form, and defined for herself the dimensions of her talent. Although The Chronicles of Carlingford were directly inspired by Trollope's Barchester series (The Warden, 1855; Barchester Towers, 1857; Doctor Thorne, 1858; Framley Parsonage, serialised 1860), they are in no sense a slavish imitation; they are novels (and novellas) of a pattern and style that are unmistakably Mrs Oliphant's and nobody

1. The religious leaders of seventeenth-century England

else's and are written with a total conviction and self-assurance that is only intermittent in the novels of the 1850's.

All the stories (apart from the final book, Phoebe Junior) were serialised in Blackwood's Magazine and it is convenient to list in tabular form the serialisation and subsequent republication by Blackwood:

	<u>SERIALISATION</u>	<u>PUBLICATION</u>
<u>The Executor</u>	May 1861	Not republished
<u>The Rector</u>	September 1861)	
)	
<u>The Doctor's Family</u>	October 1861 to)	1863, one volume
)	
	January 1862)	
<u>Salem Chapel</u>	February 1862 to)	1863, two volumes
)	
	January 1863)	
<u>The Perpetual Curate</u>	June 1863 to)	1864, three volumes
)	
	September 1864)	
<u>Miss Marjoribanks</u>	February 1865 to)	1866, three volumes
)	
	May 1866)	

Miss Marjoribanks was in effect the conclusion of the series, but in 1867 Trollope published The Last Chronicle of Barset and in 1876 Mrs Oliphant echoed this by adding one more book to the Carlingford series, Phoebe Junior, a Last Chronicle of Carlingford. It was not serialised and was published, not by Blackwood, who surprisingly declined it, but by Hurst and Blackett, another of the three publishing firms with whom she worked throughout her career.

Carlingford is a much smaller world than Barchester (let alone Barsetshire); there are no bishops or deans and no country gentry

in an adjacent park, and only in Miss Marjoribanks do we enter the parliamentary world and experience a parliamentary election. Nor do we ever leave this one English town and venture into the surrounding villages, except briefly in The Perpetual Curate (although the demands of the plot of Salem Chapel take us right outside the district to London and to 'Lonsdale near Peterborough'.) The clergy play as prominent a role in Carlingford as they do in Barchester, but here we meet only rectors, curates and nonconformist ministers, although an Archdeacon has an important role in Miss Marjoribanks. (But he is not a Carlingford man.) The other prominent figures of Carlingford society are the doctors, the young Dr Rider with his career to make, the hero of The Doctor's Family, and the older, well-established, Dr Marjoribanks. Perhaps Mrs Oliphant originally intended to give a prominent role to a lawyer, Mr Brown, who appears in The Executor, but this story was never republished and Mr Brown's role in later books is a very minor one. After the publication of Miss Marjoribanks Mrs Oliphant rewrote The Executor (which has only four chapters) as a full-length novel, which was not set in Carlingford. (And Mr Brown is now Mr Brownlow.) It was serialised in Blackwood's Magazine from January 1867 to February 1868 and published in book form in 1868, as Brownlows.

As we move from The Executor to Miss Marjoribanks we experience a steady broadening of Mrs Oliphant's concept of Carlingford. Each novel or novella is longer than its predecessor and we move to the logical climax in Miss Marjoribanks, much the richest of the books, the most complex and the most wide-ranging in its view of society

- and inevitably the longest. Characters move from book to book as in the Barchester novels; and those who appear as central figures in one book recur as minor figures, sometimes with a specifically choric role, in later books. Or alternatively a character will come and go in the background of a story before moving into the central position in his or her own book.

Mrs Oliphant's shrewdly sympathetic, yet ironic, view of English society appears for the first time in The Chronicles of Carlingford. It will be the main theme of my next chapter, but it is necessary to refer to it briefly here, since it is only within this context that her portrait of the English clergy, the essential theme of this chapter, can be fully appreciated. Her interest in the life of a small community appears intermittently throughout the 1850's; but in The Chronicles of Carlingford for the first time she was able to give a full-scale picture of such a community and study it in depth and with maturity and irony. She surveys society from the elegant and fashionable Grange Lane to the slums of Wharfside, where Frank Wentworth has set up a chapel to preach to the dockers. One part of Carlingford, where Dr Rider lives, is being rebuilt, and Grove Street, a less consistently fashionable part of the town, is where the humbler citizens live, though not the poorest. It is in Grove Street that Salem Chapel stands and the chapel draws its worshippers from the small shopkeepers of the town, Mr Brown of the Devonshire Dairy, Mr Pigeon the poulterer, and above all Mr Tozer, seller of cheese, butter and bacon, all of whom show a rather ostentatious pride of class and a keen sense of status. The only representative of the aristocracy is Lady Western, living in one of the finest houses

in Grange Lane, though other members of the gentry briefly appear. In Miss Marjoribanks Mrs Oliphant's interest broadens and she includes a small artistic community, also living in Grange Lane; very small indeed, as it consists of just one family: Mr Lake, who teaches Art, and his daughters, Rose and Barbara, and son Willy.

The major unifying theme of the Chronicles is the Church - or Church and chapel. Only The Executor and The Doctor's Family give no role, or only a minor role, to the clergy. However Miss Marjoribanks is concerned almost exclusively with the social organisation of Carlingford; and accordingly detailed treatment of it must be reserved for the next chapter. But the microcosm of Carlingford is intended by Mrs Oliphant to represent in miniature the organisation of Church and Dissent in England in general; and this aspect of the Carlingford novels must now be examined in detail.

It might be thought that Mrs Oliphant, brought up in the austere traditions of Scottish Presbyterianism, would find the more elaborate rituals and visual display of the Church of England uncongenial. In fact this was not so. Certainly she viewed Anglicanism with ironic objectivity; but she had come to love the church of her adopted country and one of the purposes of Sundays, her first work of non-fiction, was to express regret that the Church of Scotland did not make due allowance for celebrating the successive events of the Church's year as did the Anglican church. She treats the two Anglican churches of Carlingford with rather more sympathy and imaginative identification than Salem Chapel, "the only Dissenting place of worship in Carlingford",²

2. Salem Chapel I, 1

whose brand of Christianity most resembles her own background (as she entirely recognised).³ Significantly when in Phoebe Junior Mrs Oliphant dealt directly with the theme of Church versus Dissent she insisted that artificial barriers should be dropped. A fanatical Dissenter and an equally fanatical Churchman come to know each other better and thus learn to avoid prejudices and stereotypes. Mrs Oliphant had achieved an understanding of a wide range of Christian views including, after long stays on the Continent, Roman Catholicism, and this eclecticism (or rather peaceful co-existence) represents her considered opinion.

Mrs Oliphant was greatly interested in church politics: the party conflict between on the one hand Evangelicals ('low') with their stress on righteousness, austerity and uncompromising Protestantism, and on the other hand Puseyites, Tractarians or, as they were now being called in the 1860's, Ritualists ('high') with their love of ritual and vestments and "good works" and a leaning towards Anglo-Catholicism. She discussed the theology of these contrasting movements only to a limited extent, being interested mainly in the human problems in which the clergy holding these views are involved. In particular The Perpetual Curate turns on the conflict between the Evangelical and the Ritualist extremes: Frank Wentworth is very High Church, and this may imperil his chances of being promoted to a Rectorship which is in the gift of his strictly Evangelical aunts.

The Broad Church, the third of the three great religious movements

3. "I ... took the sentiment and a few details from our old church in Liverpool, which was Free Church of Scotland, and where there were a few grocers and other such good folk whose ways with the minister were wonderful to behold. The saving grace of their Scotchness being withdrawn, they became still more wonderful as Dissenting deacons...." (A. & L., p.84)

of the Victorian period, aroused much less of Mrs Oliphant's sympathy. Its eclecticism and the flexibility of its approach to religious questions seemed to her to challenge the foundations of faith, and Dean Stanley and Benjamin Jowett, two leading spokesmen for the Broad Church movement, were always viewed by her with scepticism. Archdeacon Beverley in Miss Marjoribanks is a Broad Church Spokesman and is a rather ridiculous figure, although she shows some sympathy for his democratic views.

It is likely that Mrs Oliphant's conception of Carlingford, and of its clergy, expanded rapidly after the first stories were written, as did Trollope's conception of Barchester. The Rector, like The Warden, is short, and is, like Trollope's novel, the study of the trials of a clergyman's troubled conscience. (Indeed all the early Carlingford stories are studies of ethical problems and cases of conscience.) Mr Proctor and Trollope's Mr Harding are alike in many ways, both being gentle, middle-aged men, temperamentally ill-suited to the hard realities of life. The Rector deals with one of the themes handled in the Clare Nugent trilogy: the inability of those who have devoted their lives to academic seclusion (in this case in All Souls College) to cope with the responsibilities of life. When quite incapable of acting in a true professional capacity at a deathbed, Mr Proctor begins to recognise his unfitness for life in a parish and accepts the inevitable consequence, resignation and return to All Souls. But his experience has changed him and he now understands the rewards of a clergyman's life:

The good man had found out that secret of discontent which most men find out a great deal earlier than he. Something better, though it might be sadder, harder, more calamitous, was in this world. Was there ever human creature yet that had not something in him more congenial to the thorns and briars outside to be conquered, than to that mild paradise for which our primeval mother disqualified all her children? When he went back to his dear cloisters, good Mr Proctor felt that sting; a longing for the work he had rejected stirred in him - a wistful recollection of the sympathy he had not sought. 4

By contrast with the satire of Heart and Cross the treatment of this theme in The Rector is delicate and soberly sympathetic, since throughout the story we share Mr Proctor's point of view and follow his agonising self-examination. It makes a very suitable prologue to the Chronicles of Carlingford, especially to the theme of a clergyman's sense of responsibility to his parish which recurs in Salem Chapel, in The Perpetual Curate, and, less centrally, in Phoebe Junior

With Salem Chapel the picture of Carlingford life opens out and acquires depth, complexity and irony, although here Mrs Oliphant confines herself largely to one sector of Carlingford society, the lower middle-class tradesmen who worship at Salem Chapel and act as deacons in the hierarchy of chapel government. Yet it is in this novel, rather oddly, that the only representative of the aristocracy, Lady Western, appears, although she would seem much more appropriate in Miss Marjoribanks.

Before I proceed I must examine the reputation and standing of Salem Chapel, for long the most admired of Mrs Oliphant's novels (with the exception of A Beleaguered City) and the only one to be

4. The Rector and The Doctor's Family pp.51-2. The passage ends the last paragraph but one of The Rector.

published in the Everyman Library. Consequently it is virtually the only one that until very recently has been given any serious critical attention - unfortunately so, because it is the weakest of the Carlingford books, and the severe critical judgments it has earned, largely for good reasons, may have seemed to justify those critics who wish to dismiss Mrs Oliphant. The book's major weakness is its wildly melodramatic plot. This has been said many times, for example by W. Robertson Nicoll in his introduction to the Everyman edition; and it is perhaps inevitable that in recent years the contemporary craze for challenging orthodoxies has twice produced vigorous defences of the melodramatic elements in the book. I must therefore examine the arguments of the commentators in question: Francis Russell Hart, and three authors of one article, Peter Widdowson, Paul Stigant and Peter Brooker.

Francis Russell Hart, writing in 1978, claims that the sensational plot derives from the honourable Scottish tradition of diabolism, and that the horrifying events with which Vincent, the much-harassed hero of the book, is faced (the abduction of his sister, a villain who personates another man, a vengeful woman who shoots her estranged husband, midnight pursuits by train up and down country with minimal regard for plausibility) deepen and enlarge his tragic experience of life and enrich his understanding of his flock.⁵ This is an astonishing example of reading into a work of literature just what you wish to find there. If we think of the great diabolic figures of Scottish literature (in for example Scott's 'Wandering Willie's Tale',

5. Francis Russell Hart, The Scottish Novel (John Murray, 1978) pp.99-100

in Douglas Brown's House with the Green Shutters, in Hogg's Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, in Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde) we think of an overwhelming energy, an imaginative, poetic, exuberant presentation of Evil as a mythic force. These are qualities that Mrs Oliphant scarcely possessed or did not seriously aspire to. It is significant that the one Victorian novel which does have such qualities, Wuthering Heights (which Rossetti described as "a fiend of a book" whose "action is laid in Hell - only it seems places and people have English names there"),⁶ aroused in Mrs Oliphant no more than a grudging admission of its power. But she did once attempt to follow in the Scottish tradition of diabolism; this was in the Warlock Lord, the supernatural villain-figure of The Wizard's Son, of whom I have already written. The Warlock Lord is so absurdly made a vehicle for ponderous didacticism, so involved in banal motivation,⁷ that it is impossible to respond with the awe or the imaginative identification that we give to the works that I have already listed as fine examples of the diabolic tradition. Mrs Oliphant's gift is for a different style of writing and the melodrama of Salem Chapel is, typically, crude and unconvincing. The villain, Colonel Mildmay, is a totally uninteresting stereotype, who scarcely ever comes "on stage" at all, is never convincingly motivated, and is involved in the most outrageous plotting and preposterous diction: grinding teeth, muttered oaths, "as sure as I live you shall die" and the like. He is merely a plot device to make sure that as many characters as possible undergo

6. Letter of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 19th September 1854; Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ed. Doughty & Wahl (OUP, 1965), I, 224.

7. See the opinions of J.H. Millar and Meredith Townsend, quoted above, page 191.

as much terror, tension and distress as possible. Far from having his tragic experience of life enlarged, Vincent is visibly reduced to a mere puppet of the plot by being involved in such absurdities. Mrs Oliphant admired Wilkie Collins, but she was never capable of the coolly detached, realistic tone with which he presented his complex mystery themes; when she attempts the coincidences, confrontations, hairbreadth escapes, mysterious appearances and disappearances dear to the writers of "sensation" novels, the result almost always is disaster.

The views of Peter Widdowson, Paul Stigant and Peter Brooker are to be found in an article in Literature and History in 1979. This article (did it really need three authors?) is written on Marxist and populist lines. Since melodrama is popular, it would be elitist to dismiss it with contempt, so Widdowson, Stigant and Brooker take Salem Chapel's plot melodramatics very seriously, seeing them as a reflection of the overwrought melodrama in Vincent's mind, and suggesting that as the "sensation" events follow directly upon Vincent's impassioned sermon attacking the established church (and thus by implication the whole English social structure) they function as a symbolic re-enactment of Vincent's attack on society (the villainy and the persecution of the innocent, I suppose, reflecting the vicious social injustice of the Victorian world.) The damage done to the "formal coherence" of Salem Chapel by the introduction of the melodramatic plot does not trouble Widdowson, Stigant and Brooker, since a concern for such matters is, in their opinion, mere "bourgeois" aesthetics.⁸ In challenging their approach to Salem Chapel I need

8. Peter Widdowson, Paul Stigant, Peter Brooker, 'History and literary 'value', the case of Adam Bede and Salem Chapel', Literature and History (Spring 1979), 2-39. The section on Salem Chapel ('Salem Chapel: Melodrama and Ideology') is pp.29-39.

not take issue with their artistic views, whose validity or invalidity is irrelevant to my purpose; it is enough to point out that the melodramatics are handled by Mrs Oliphant so clumsily, and with so little relation to observed or imagined reality, that they cannot possibly function in the way Widdowson, Stigant and Brooker insist. Colonel Mildmay is just a feeble villain-stereotype, as I have said, and by no means serves as an indictment of Victorian society. The Carlingford episodes, the chapel scenes (including the anti-Anglican sermon), are vividly and imaginatively created; the mystery elements by contrast are never adequately imagined. If the book were imaginatively all in one voice then the arguments of Mr Widdowson and his colleagues (and of Mr Hart) might be taken more seriously; and if Mrs Oliphant had not dissociated herself from Vincent's sermon by setting it in an ironic context, then it might plausibly play the role of externalising the implicit meaning of the book, as these critics are so ready to believe.

Mr Hart quotes Robertson Nicoll with the intention of challenging his views. I will quote him now as the fittest summary of what remains the most reasonable view of Salem Chapel:

Under [Wilkie Collins's] influence, she brought in the sensational element, and plunged into the region of mysteries and horrors. Thus the book seems to make two separate stories connected in an extremely forced and artificial manner. The beautiful young dowager, ... the profligate Colonel who went about seeking for victims, abduction, murder and the like, were totally incongruous with the admirable portion which relates to Salem Chapel and its organisation. One critic went so far as to suggest that in some new edition the Mildmay film might be skilfully removed from the book by some neat surgical operation,

and the simple squabbles of the Salem Independents left in all their purity and majesty. 9

I must now return to "the admirable portion which relates to Salem Chapel and its organisation", to "the simple squabbles of the Salem Independents". I have already quoted Mrs Oliphant's acknowledgment that the events of the book were partly based on what she had observed in her younger days in Liverpool.¹⁰ I shall give a few more details of this, as revealed by surviving documents. When Margaret Wilson (as she then was) worshipped with her parents and brothers at St Peter's Scotch (Presbyterian) church in the Scotland Road area of Liverpool, there was a prolonged campaign against the minister, the Rev. John Wiseman, which ended with his suspension from his duties; and the Wilsons played a prominent part in this campaign. The main issue seems to have been Wiseman's addiction to drink, and consequent neglect of his duties. Mr Wilson appears in the documents as "the representative elder of St Peter's, Liverpool" and Mrs Wilson as "temperance secretary", and there is one note dated 13 August 1845, stating that Wiseman was seen drunk in the street, and signed by "Miss Wilson" (then only 17) among others. Later the Wilsons called parish meetings at which Wiseman was called upon to account for his conduct. He was suspended on 2 September 1846 - and was finally "unfrocked" on 1 November 1848, after disobeying orders not to conduct services.¹¹

9. Introduction to the Everyman edition of Salem Chapel (Dent 1907), p.ix. The critic referred to (and quoted verbatim) in the last sentence reviewed the book in The Spectator, 14 February 1863; XXXVI, 1639. In the absence of written records for the 1860's Dr R.H. Tener has attributed this review to R.H. Hutton ('Richard Holt Hutton, Criticism of Five Nineteenth Century Poets', PhD thesis, 1960, Birkbeck College, London.)

10. Page 233 above, fn.3.

11. Archives of St Peter's Church, Liverpool; Library of the United Reformed Church History society. See also Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society of England, article by William B. Shaw, May 1940; VII, 24-5. (This article is rather inaccurate in its references to Mrs Oliphant.)

These then are the events on which, very remotely, the plot of Salem Chapel is based. Arthur Vincent bears little resemblance to John Wiseman, but he is in dispute with the governing body of his chapel, and he does neglect his duties (in their opinion) though not because of drink. And at the end Vincent's decision to resign his ministry is entirely his own; the community is concerned that he should stay. More strikingly, the whole balance of sympathies is reversed; reading the documents concerning the campaign against Wiseman, one is led to sympathise with the Wilsons in their belief that he was not fit for his duties (though one may regret the unhappiness he must have experienced during the crisis). But Vincent is largely viewed with sympathy and his unruly flock seems intolerably vulgar and petty, activated by prejudice and narrow views. These qualities are epitomised in Tozer, probably Mrs Oliphant's finest comic character, ostentatious, self-important, sometimes patronising Vincent, sometimes hectoring him, perpetually offering advice of whose distastefulness to Vincent he is entirely unaware, supremely confident in his opinions and in the use he makes of "tea-meetings" to pour oil on troubled waters. However his vulgarity is rather overstressed and the other deacons and their wives are rather caricatured; similarly Vincent's disgust is over-stressed so that he seems merely arrogant, injured in his private personal feelings, rather than (as Mrs Oliphant intended) in his professional sense of the sacredness of his calling. When he finally decides to resign he tells his assembled deacons and parishioners that he refuses to accept that "the voice of the people is the voice of God" and insists that "no man can serve two masters", God and his flock.¹² But this is a curiously anti-democratic

12. Salem Chapel II, 340-2

view coming from a Scottish presbyterian and, as many commentators have pointed out, Vincent - and apparently Mrs Oliphant - fails to recognise that the master whom he serves is not God but himself and his inflated view of his position.

It is necessary to strike a balance between those commentators who consider that Mrs Oliphant's portrait of Nonconformity is prejudiced and inaccurate, and those who consider that its authenticity is unmistakable. Valentine Cunningham is very severe on Salem Chapel for what he sees as its prejudiced and stereotyped view of the life of Dissenters, based on ignorance of the real situation in England.¹³ He quotes many comments from The Nonconformist review of this book and of others by Mrs Oliphant, complaining of inaccuracies of detail. Indeed Robertson Nicoll, in his preface to the Everyman edition of Salem Chapel, makes his own comments on inaccuracies. The memories of St Peter's Church were not necessarily a safe guide to English nonconformity; Dr I. Sellers, writing in The Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society of England, points out that this church possessed "a particularly turbulent and rather untypical Presbyterian congregation" and could not serve as a good model for what English nonconformity was like. Nevertheless, "the vulgarities, prejudices and alternate bullying and patronising of the minister are all well drawn, and many of the details seem unhappily authentic".¹⁴ And many of the commentators have pointed out that Mark Rutherford's portrait of a dissenting community (published in the 1880's), based on direct

13. Valentine Cunningham, Everywhere Spoken Against (Dissent in the Victorian Novel) (Oxford 1975), pp.240-3
14. I.Sellers, 'Mrs M.O.W.Oliphant', The Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society of England XIV, (1971), 159, 160. In a note to this passage Dr Sellers compares an incident in Salem Chapel with a similar incident in real life.

personal experience, is remarkably like Mrs Oliphant's. And Professor Robert Lee Wolff has compared Salem Chapel with an obscure novel published the very next year, Frederick Rivers, Independent Parson by Florence Williamson, an author with extensive experience of Congregationalism, the sect to which Salem Chapel belongs.¹⁵ He quotes Frederick Rivers to show that the stereotyped religious views and theological jargon of Salem Chapel are remarkably like those used in Florence Williamson's book:

When seeking for a new minister and listening to the sermons of candidates, the deacons speak a language like that of their counterparts at Carlingford. When they like a sermon, it is "the very marrow and fatness of the blessed Gospel - wine on the lees. None of your new-fashioned notions that one never heard of before."

And other passages from Frederick Rivers confirm the vulgar commercial attitudes of the Salem hierarchy (especially Tozer) and of their intolerance of any deviation from Nonconformist orthodoxy.¹⁶

Mrs Oliphant clearly enough writes with little sympathy for the doctrines of Salem Chapel, and Dr Sellers insists that her view of Dissent is a hostile one, "uncomprehending of any kind of spirituality, albeit a perverse and stunted variety, lurking beneath the anties of its clergy and laymen".¹⁷

To pursue the debate any further would be unprofitable. The historian will inevitably be more offended by Mrs Oliphant's lapses from authenticity than will the literary critic. A novelist does not stand or fall by the totality of his documentation; indeed too much authentic

15. Florence Williamson, Frederick Rivers, Independent Parson, Williams & Norgate, 1864.

16. Robert Lee Wolff, Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt In Victorian England (John Murray, 1977), pp.333-5.

17. Sellers, p.160

documentation (as Mrs Oliphant recognised in the work of Charles Reade) can harm the literary validity, the "sense of truth" that a book communicates. And it is high time to do justice to Salem Chapel, which has a very important role to play in Mrs Oliphant's progress towards self-discovery as a novelist, and does contain a great deal to admire. I have suggested that at the end of the book Mrs Oliphant's ironic vision of Vincent partly breaks down; but in her earlier chapters she is admirably consistent in her view of him. Indeed the opening of the book is most impressive, and it is only her later surrender to the melodramatic plot which shipwrecks her ironic objectivity.

We first see Vincent as the victim of self-deception and full of an inflated image of himself. He is more concerned than a Nonconformist minister ought to be about his clothes, prefers to call himself a clergyman rather than a minister, and supposes:

that his own youthful eloquence and the Voluntary principle were quite enough to counterbalance all the ecclesiastical advantages on the other side, and make for himself a position of the highest influence in his new sphere.

Later he experiences "a thrill of not ungenerous ambition" and "pictured to himself" how he would spread his influence beyond the middle-class worshippers of Salem Chapel to the more aristocratic world of Grange Lane.¹⁸ And through the first part of the book Vincent's continuing self-deceptions are stressed. He sees himself as a great democratic reformer of social abuses and religious inequalities - on the strength of a few popular lectures, which are, in any case, largely motivated by his resentment at being snubbed by the patronising Lady Western:

18. Salem Chapel I, 7, 7-9

Mr Vincent thundered forth the lofty censure of an evangelist whom the State did not recognise, and with whom mammon had little to do. He brought forth all the weapons out of the Homerton armoury,¹⁹ new, bright and dazzling; and he did not know any more than his audience that he never would have wielded them so heartily - perhaps would scarcely have taken them off the wall - but for the sudden sting with which his own inferior place, and the existence of a privileged class doubly shut against his entrance, had quickened his personal consciousness.²⁰

This is well observed, and the eloquent language ("thundered", "lofty", "new, bright and dazzling") is seen to be entirely derived from Vincent's self-conceit and self-deception; Mrs Oliphant in no way associates herself with it. It is in this context that Vincent's extravaganza of romantic love for Lady Western (indeed her whole presence in the book) should be seen; not as a deplorable lapse of Mrs Oliphant's into the high romantic themes she elsewhere avoided, but as adding an extra dimension of irony to the book.

Eventually self-awareness does begin to affect Vincent's view of himself:

For the first time in the commotions of his soul, in the resentment and forebodings to which he gave no utterance, in the bitter conviction of uncertainty in everything which consumed his heart, a doubt of his own ability to teach came to Vincent's mind. He stopped short with an intolerable pang of impatience and self-disgust.²¹

19. Homerton College was the theological college where Vincent had trained. According to Robertson Nicoll this involves Mrs Oliphant in an inaccuracy, "for so far were the students from being brought up upon the Nonconformist and the Eclectic Review, that these journals were tabooed by the quasi-conservative alumni of that venerable institution" (Introduction to the Everyman edition of Salem Chapel, p.x)

20. Salem Chapel I, 120-1

21. Salem Chapel I, 276

Vincent here has to deal with a severe reproach from Tozer for neglect of his duties and, resenting this, is now obliged to decline the "coarse of sermons" that Tozer wants from him - the real reason being that he is now involved in the mysterious threat to his sister which precipitates the melodramatic plot.

From this point Mrs Oliphant's ironies grow sporadic and the major interest of the story comes from the efforts of Vincent's mother to hold the fort in her son's absence, to conciliate the angry deacons and their angrier wives, and to sustain her son's credit in the community. Mrs Oliphant has a gift for describing devoted maternal love without lapsing into sentimentality; and Mrs Vincent was much admired by Victorian critics ("an etching of marvellous delicacy and art, with every line and shadow separately touched in", said The Spectator).²² Nevertheless the interest here is marginal to the main theme; and in pursuit of plot Mrs Oliphant loses theme. The final confrontation of Vincent and his flock, now heartily sorry to find they must lose him, is impressively dramatic, but all the ironic life has gone out of it.

The essential interest of Salem Chapel is in the conflict of personalities between Vincent and his parishioners and deacons, not in matters of doctrine. Dissent is set over against Anglicanism, but Vincent's attack on the Anglican church is largely on the score of its privileged position, its "anomalies" (to use Tozer's word), that is the incongruity between Church wealth and the professed poverty

22. "Chronicles of Carlingford", The Spectator, 14 February 1863; XXXVI, 1639. The author of the article is identified by Dr R.H.Tener as R.H.Hutton. (See above, page 240, fn.9)

and humility of Christianity, and on the invidiousness of its position as established Church - not on the score of its theology.

And yet in spite of his vehemence Vincent is less hostile to Anglicanism than he - or Tozer - supposes. When Tozer has been encouraging him to "Give us a coorse upon the anomalies, and that sort of thing - the bishops in their palaces, and the fishermen as was the start of it all", advising him to "lay it on pretty strong" and emphasising that the advantage which Nonconformists have over Anglicans is "freedom of opinion and choosing your own religious teacher", Vincent answers:

"Well, one can't deny that there have been enlightened men in the Church of England", said the young Nonconformist, with lofty candour. "The inconsistencies of the human mind are wonderful; and it is coming to be pretty clearly understood in the intellectual world, that a man may show the most penetrating genius, and even the widest liberality, and yet be led a willing slave in the bonds of religious rite and ceremony. One cannot understand it, it is true; but in our clearer atmosphere we are bound to exercise Christian charity. Great as the advantages are on our side of the question, I would not willingly hurt the feelings of a sincere Churchman, who, for anything I know, may be the best of men."

Mr Tozer paused with a "humph" of uncertainty; rather dazzled with the fine language, but doubtful of the sentiment. At length light seemed to dawn upon the excellent buttermilk. "Bless my soul! that's a new view", said Tozer; "that's taking the superior line over them! My impression is as that would tell beautiful. Eh! it's famous, that is! I've heard a many gentleman attacking the Church, like, from down below, and giving it her about her money, and her greatness, and all that; but our clearer atmosphere - there's the point! I always knew as you was a clever young man, Mr Vincent, and expected a deal from you; but that's a new view, that is!" 23

The ironies here are complex, highlighting on the one hand Tozer's imperfect comprehension leading him to an almost total misinterpretation

of Vincent's meaning, on the other hand the arrogance of Vincent, with his "lofty candour" and his condescending use of words like "wonderful", "I would not willingly hurt the feelings" and "for anything I know" and the insincerity of "we are bound to exercise Christian charity". But there is another level of irony: Vincent's concessions to Anglicanism, however condescendingly he intends them, illustrate an attraction he unconsciously feels but would scarcely acknowledge to himself. And earlier he experienced a complex emotion on meeting Mr Wentworth, perpetual curate of St. Roque's; it is not merely sectarian hostility:

There were various points of resemblance between them. Mr Vincent, too, wore an Anglican coat, and assumed a high clerical aspect - sumptuary laws forbidding such presumption being clearly impracticable in England; and the Dissenter was as fully endowed with natural good looks as the young priest.

The passage continues by stressing the great social advantages of Mr Wentworth and Vincent's disillusion is seen to be motivated largely by envy and class feeling. But it is the beginning of a modification of attitudes that runs right through the book:

He was rapidly becoming disenchanted, and neither the Nonconformist nor the Patriot, nor Exeter Hall itself, could set him up again. 24

At the end of the book Vincent, thoroughly disillusioned with Salem Chapel, develops an ideal of "a Church of the Future" which is not unlike the Anglican church. Indeed:

It began to be popularly reported that a man so apt to hold opinions of his own, and so convinced of the dignity of his office, had best have been in the Church, where people knew no better. 25

24. Salem Chapel I, 28-9. The reference to The Nonconformist should be compared with footnote 19 on page 245 above.

25. Salem Chapel II, 348

But even now Vincent is too hampered by his upbringing to take that final step into Anglicanism, since he does not see the implications of his belief in the Church of the Future.

At one point Vincent finds his religious position challenged by Mrs Hilyard (the mysterious parishioner who eventually becomes the avenging heroine of the melodramatic plot). Vincent adopts the arrogant tone which is habitual with him in the earlier part of the book:

"But indeed I should be glad to believe that the services at the chapel might sometimes be a comfort to you", added the young pastor, assuming the dignity of his office....

"Comfort!" she cried; "what a very strange suggestion to make! Why, all the old churches in all the old ages have offered comfort. I thought you new people had something better to give us; enlightenment", she said, with a gleam of secret mockery, throwing the word like a stone - "religious freedom, private judgment. Depend upon it, that is the role expected from you by the butterman. Comfort! one has that in Rome."

And a little later she points out:

"Comfort will not let your seats and fill your chapel, even granting that you knew how to communi-
cate it. I prefer to be instructed, for my part."²⁶

Mrs Hilyard's view seems to be basically Mrs Oliphant's, a protest against the presumption that any church, new or old, should claim "enlightenment, ... religious freedom, private judgment" to the disadvantage of any other, and, by implication, an idealistic vision of an end to sectarian confrontations in favour of a harmonious relationship between all branches of the church. This theme, merely implicit in Salem Chapel, becomes explicit in Phoebe Junior.

The central irony of Salem Chapel turns on the contrast between the proud claim of Nonconformity that it represents liberality of views, a right to "private judgment", a freedom from priestly dogmatism, and the tyranny, as stringent as that of any priest, imposed by the illiberality of the views of deacons. This irony is effectively epitomised by these words of Tozer when Vincent has shown signs of rebellion:

"Them as likes to please themselves would be far better in a State Church, where it wouldn't disappoint nobody ... but if the Chapel folks is a little particular, it's no more nor a pastor's duty to bear with them, and return a soft answer."²⁷

And Mrs Oliphant's irony, behind Tozer's back, agrees that a State Church is the place for "them as likes to please themselves". Her whole sympathy was for an established church. Her love of Presbyterianism is not inconsistent with her sympathy for Anglicanism, since Presbyterianism is the established church of Scotland, and her view was that in any country the established church is the one best fitted to define and express the essential religious life of the people.

It is useful to make further comment on Tozer, who is Mrs Oliphant's broadest and most uninhibited comic character. His opinions, as I have already illustrated, are misguided, overbearing and egotistical, but - as is the way with comic characters from Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath down to the Good Soldier Schweik - his very wrongness by its completeness and its extrovert self-assurance arouses a paradoxical delight and admiration, the delight and admiration that creative energy always evokes. Tozer is irrepressible and Mrs Oliphant does

27. Salem Chapel I, 273-4

not always stress the perversity of his views, and is at times fascinated by his exuberance of character. Indeed her view of him was rather modified during the course of the book; faced by the deep resentment of Vincent towards his flock and the undoubted need to conciliate his injured feelings, he delivers an eloquent speech to the assembled deacons and parishioners praising Vincent and protesting against their overbearing attitudes. This is not irony; we do not note Tozer's illogicality in attacking attitudes that once were his own; instead we feel, either that Tozer has mellowed and changed his attitudes, or that Mrs Oliphant has warmed to her own creation and now aims to make him more likable.

Valentine Cunningham insists that "Tozer's unction, blending with grease from the bacon and butter, [is] by no means distant from Chadband".²⁸ It is true that Mrs Oliphant insensitively overstresses the "grease" and the "bacon and butter" that represent Tozer's profession; but there is no other resemblance between him and Mr Chadband. Tozer is perhaps Mrs Oliphant's most Dickensian character, but his style of talk, the mellowing of his character, the recognition of an inner life under his hectoring manner, the pleasure evoked by his exuberant, extrovert energy, are as unlike Mrs Chadband as they could be. It is a pity that Mr Cunningham should give way to such a barren pursuit of supposed derivativeness.

There is one small, but troublesome, freak of style in Salem Chapel which must be mentioned, although it is not typical of Mrs Oliphant's work as a whole. I have already illustrated it in earlier

28. Cunningham (as in fn.13,p.242 above), p.243

quotations. There is a frequent use of stereotyped and stylised epithets or sobriquets for characters. Mrs Hilyard is "the needlewoman of Back Grove Street", Tozer "the buttermilk", and Vincent "the Nonconformist". This does indicate a weakness in the book; the effect is always condescending and dismissive; the epithets intrude on the reader and militate against objective understanding of the characters. "The Nonconformist" for Vincent is particularly ridiculous; since almost all the characters in the book are Nonconformists why single out Vincent by giving him this name? It might serve a purpose if he were constantly seen against a background of members of other sects. There are other examples of self-consciousness of style, derived from a determination to create comedy; for example, people tend, not to pour tea but to "dispense the fragrant lymph", and Vincent, embarrassed by a flirtatious parishioner, "made a hasty effort to exculpate himself from the soft impeachment". This suggests an insecurity in Mrs Oliphant's authorial voice, which nevertheless does not survive into later novels (though perhaps a slight trace is to be found in Miss Marjoribanks).

It was not until The Perpetual Curate (and even more remarkably Miss Marjoribanks) that at last after years of experiment Mrs Oliphant achieved a form and manner that entirely suited her special talents. Salem Chapel in the end failed to be what it ought to have been and what it promised to be. But The Perpetual Curate largely succeeds. Everything is integrated into a harmonious unity, and directly or indirectly serves the central theme. There is a mystery, but this time firmly held in control, treated lightly and ironically and made

relevant to the main theme. The Perpetual Curate is another study of the problems, professional, emotional and social, of a young clergyman, Frank Wentworth; but now Mrs Oliphant is capable of sustaining simultaneously an ironic and a sympathetic view of Frank - who convincingly possesses the fine qualities required for the onerous position he holds. And religious themes are central to the book and remain so from beginning to end. Those two great conflicting factions of the Church of England, Evangelicalism and Tractarianism, are dramatised and discussed, and Roman Catholicism is introduced as being for some people the logical conclusion of Tractarianism, since Frank's brother, also a clergyman, has decided like John Henry Newman to make what he considers that inevitable journey. (By an interesting coincidence Newman's Apologia Pro Vita Sua was published in 1864, during the serialisation of The Perpetual Curate.)

Frank is a convinced Tractarian or Puseyite and puts flowers on the altar, and clothes his choirboys in surplices; but his aunts, on whom he depends for financial and professional security, are sternly Evangelical and disapprove of his conduct of church services (or rather Aunt Leonora, the most forceful of the three aunts, takes this view). Yet Frank is not concerned with mere aesthetic beauty in his church. He is interested in the welfare of the poorer members of Carlingford and runs a chapel at Wharfside, the docker's quarter. Strangely, Salem Chapel, technically the church of the poorer classes, was in fact patronised by the prosperous middle classes and Mr Vincent shows little concern for the poor. It is a measure of Frank Wentworth's superiority to Arthur Vincent that he does show such a concern for his responsibilities in that area. It was always Mrs Oliphant's way

of assessing the worth of a church to consider its relationship with the poor, its handling of the responsibility of personal charity.

The whole religious theme centres on a debate between Frank and Gerald in Chapter XL. Gerald has made his journey to Rome, in spite of his wife's acute distress:

"I want a Church which is not a human institution.... I take refuge in the true Church, where alone there is certainty - where ... there is authority clear and decisive. In England you believe what you will, and the result will be one that I at least fear to contemplate; in Rome we believe what - we must".

But Frank is not convinced.

"Instead of a Church so far happily imperfect, that a man can put his life to the best account in it, without absolutely delivering up his intellect to a set of doctrines, you seek a perfect Church, in which, for a symmetrical system of doctrines, you lose the use of your existence!"

(It is worthy of note that Frank's words can stand as a rebuff, both to the narrow dogmatism of Tozer and his fellow deacons and to the vague idealism of Vincent.) The debate is between authority and individual interpretation; but immediately it broadens its scope and deals with the problem of suffering. The authority of the Church can be trusted in matter of doctrine; but authority alone is powerless to deal with suffering:

...outside lies a world in which every event is an enigma, where nothing that comes offers any explanation of itself; where God does not show himself always kind, but by times awful, terrible - a God who smites and does not spare. It is easy to make a harmonious balance of doctrine; but where is the interpretation of life? 29

The answer to the problem of suffering for both Frank and Gerald (though interpreted in different ways) is "Trust God".

Frank, with his practical compassion for the poor, and his concern that religion should genuinely deal with the tragic predicament of human life rather than retreat in face of it, is shown to be a true priest, unlike Gerald. Mrs Oliphant was frequently described as being unable to create a male character who is not merely weak and ineffectual; but Frank proves that this generalisation simply is not true.

Frank's religious problems are seen, not in isolation but in relationship to the whole urban community of Carlingford, with their curious outsider's-view comments, their social pressures, their misunderstandings and, above all, their prejudices. Mrs Oliphant was moving towards the full scale study of an urban community which she finally achieved in Miss Marjoribanks. In The Perpetual Curate Mrs Oliphant concentrated on the theme of prejudice. The initial suspicion of Frank in Carlingford is fostered by an absurd scandal; by a series of coincidences, each one quite convincing, his name is connected with the 17-year old Rosa Elsworthy. Rosa is abducted, Frank is suspected, and his career is threatened, especially when the Rector, Mr Morgan, feels obliged to investigate the scandal and calls a public enquiry.

It is a curious instance of Mrs Oliphant's sensitivity to real life that about this time just such a commission had been sitting in a parish in Derbyshire on a charge against a clergyman similar to that against Frank. This was mentioned in a letter to Mrs Oliphant by her publisher John Blackwood, who commented, "He was honourably acquitted and my brother-in-law who sat on the commission tells me that your description of the proceedings is as like as possible."³⁰

30. Letter dated 22 May 1864, National Library of Scotland, Acc 5678/5.

This does away with the complaint of some Victorian critics that the Elsworthy scandal was inherently improbable. But the treatment is notably restrained and free from undue sensationalism or melodrama and is an effective study of how the most unassailable reputations cannot easily resist the effect of circumstantial evidence. And stranger things have been said - and proved - about clergymen than are said about Frank Wentworth.

The prejudices examined in The Perpetual Curate result from "that wonderful moral atmosphere of human indifference and self-regard which surrounds every individual soul";³¹ in other words the "veil of individuality" which I have already discussed in an earlier chapter, the egocentricity which prevents so many people from emerging from the solipsistic prison of their own private world. So Carlingford society prefers to listen to gossip and believe the worst of Frank. A more good-humoured study of prejudice is the high-Tory country gentleman, Squire Wentworth, father of Frank and Gerald, whose notion of Church and State as twin supports of the established order is described as "semi-feudal, semi-pagan".³² (In spite of her irony Mrs Oliphant, Scotswoman though she was, treats the Squire's half-aristocratic view of English society gently and leniently.) A deeper study of character is Aunt Leonora; carried away by unthinking disapproval of her nephew's Tractarianism, she is led into a cruel hostility against him - from which she eventually awakes in a sharp and humiliating crisis of conscience.

31. P.C. II, 196.

32. P.C. III, 127.

But it is through Frank's consciousness - and conscience - that the main values of the book are reflected. A clear indication of Mrs Oliphant's point of view comes in his Easter Sunday sermon, which opens Chapter IV.

It was a curious little sermon, such as may still be heard in some Anglican pulpits. Though he had heart and mind enough to conceive something of these natural depths of divine significance, which are the very essence of the Easter festival, it was not into these that Mr Wentworth entered in his sermon. He spoke, in very choice little sentences, of the beneficence of the Church in appointing such a feast, and of all the beautiful arrangements she had made for the keeping of it. But even in the speaking, in the excited state of mind he was in, it occurred to the young man to see, by a sudden flash of illumination, how much higher, how much more catholic, after all, his teaching would have been, could he but have ignored the Church, and gone direct, as Nature bade, to that empty grave in which all the hopes of humanity had been entombed. he saw it by gleams of that perverse light which seemed more Satanic than heavenly in the moments it chose for shining.... 33

The quiet irony of "very choice little sentences" diminishes the value of Frank's eloquence which, it is implied, is not concerned with the fundamental of Christianity ("that empty grave" of Easter Day). "Beautiful" has unironic significance, and yet reminds us that aesthetic effects in a church service are not the highest ideal. Thus the weight of the book's sympathy does not fall upon Frank's Tractarianism. Aunt Leonora's Evangelicalism may make her uncharitable and harsh; but the rituals are the mere accident of a church service, not its essence.

Later in the chapter Frank preaches another sermon in his bleak chapel among the dockers; this time the "empty grave" does play a

prominent part:

He told them about the empty grave of Christ, and how he called the weeping woman by her name, and showed her the earnest of the end of all sorrows. There were some people who cried, thinking of the dead who were still waiting for Easter, which was more than anybody did when Mr Wentworth discoursed upon the beautiful institutions of the Church's year; and a great many of the congregation stayed to see Tom Burrows's six children come up for baptism, preceded by the new baby, whose infant claims to Christianity the Curate had so strongly insisted upon, to the wakening of a fatherly conscience in the honest bargeman. 34

Regrettably the writing here is greatly inferior to the description of the other sermon. The self-conscious attempt at humour at the end merely seems patronising, an effect confirmed by the irritating epithet "honest"; Mrs Oliphant fails to give us any true feeling of the real life of the dockers and bargemen. The vagueness of the details communicates a shallowness of feeling. Nevertheless the passage serves its function of emphasising the true Christianity that speaks to the heart, not to the aesthetic feelings.

Yet Frank's honesty and clarity in the appraisal of his own religious stance ensures that he is "about the best man for a parish priest, even though he did have choristers in white surplices, and lilies on the Easter altar" (as Aunt Leonora is obliged to admit to herself); because he was "a man who did his duty by rich and poor, and could encounter all things for love and duty's sake". He shares this devotion to duty with Lucy Wodehouse, the girl he loves, who has joined the Anglican Sisterhood of Mercy which he founded. Together they practise the individual charity which, as I have already indicated, was

to Mrs Oliphant the truest test of a man's sincerity of feeling and his love of people. And he can effectively expose the lack of human feeling in his aunts' Evangelicalism, when he speaks in these words of Exeter Hall, the London headquarters of the Evangelical movement:

"Your Exeter-Hall men, Aunt Dora, are like the old ascetics - they try to make a merit of Christianity by calling it hard and terrible; but there are some sweet souls in the world, to whom it comes as natural as sunshine in May." 35

(He is thinking of Lucy.) And with his Wharfside parishioners there is nothing "hard and terrible" in his approach; he is truly "carrying the word of God to the people" (which is precisely what Aunt Leonora wants him to do). On Wharfside there was "only a quantity of primitive people under the original conditions of humanity, whose lives might be amended, and consoled, and elevated. That was a matter about which Mr Wentworth had no doubt." 36

Yet Frank is not viewed with unqualified admiration. His was "a generous and hasty temperament, which has high ideas of honour and consistency, and rather piques itself on a contempt for self-interest and external advantages", and on such a temperament "the lessons of experience, however valuable, are sometimes very slow of impressing themselves". He is given to acting on impulse and when he boasts that he has "patience to console myself with", the facts scarcely bear him out: he consistently behaves indiscreetly or impatiently. Thus for example he is over-confident that the outcome of his love for Lucy can be decided by himself (and Lucy reveals a touch of feminism in reproaching him for his presumption).³⁷

35. P.C. I, 232, 67.

36. P.C. I, 64, 160-1.

37. P.C. III, 262; III, 152; III, 242-3.

Gerald Wentworth makes an effective and moving contrast with Frank. He is single-mindedly devoted to his calling of priest but after his conversion to Catholicism (in which, as I have indicated, he seeks for security and a dispensation from the need to think for himself) he realises that as a married man he is now in an impossible position. In deference to his wife's great distress he becomes "a simple Catholic layman, nothing more"; but "I am aware I am as good as dead", although he bleakly attempts to console himself by saying "it is the glory of the true Church to subdue and restrain the last enemy, the will of man. I am content to be nothing, as the saints were."³⁸ But such self-mortification is a hollow victory; he experiences sharp envy of his brother's retained priesthood:

His hope of being able to resign all things for Christ's sake had failed him. Too wary and politic to maintain in a critical age and country the old licence of the ages of Faith, even his wife's consent, could he have obtained it, would not have opened to the convert the way into the priesthood. A greater trial had been required of him; he was nothing, a man whose career was over. He stood idly, in a kind of languour, looking on while the Curate performed the duties of his office - feeling like a man whom sickness had reduced to the last stage of life, and for whom no business remained...³⁹

Here Mrs Oliphant effortlessly achieves a subdued note of tragedy which is rare in her work, since when she aims at such an effect she too often surrenders to melodrama.

Later Gerald is moved to an extempore sermon for the benefit of the prodigal Tom Wodehouse (Lucy's brother) and he recovers his sense of vocation:

38. P.C. III, 67

39. P.C. III, 71

The light returned to his eye while he spoke; he was no longer passive, contemplating his own moral death; his natural office had come back to him unawares. 40

'Passive, contemplating his own moral death' is a remarkably felicitous piece of ironic psychological insight. But this recovery of his vocation offers no new direction to his life. It is shortly after this that he has the debate with Frank which I have already quoted; and his consolation of 'find[ing] one's self at last upon a rock of authority, of certainty' must be seen in the context of his unassuaged sense of loss. The note of quiet tragedy, deepened by irony, recurs at the end of the chapter:

As he went up to his own room, a momentary spasm of doubt came upon the new convert - whether, perhaps, he was making a sacrifice of his life for a mistake. He hushed the thought forcibly as it rose; such impulses were no longer to be listened to. The same authority which made faith certain, decided every doubt to be sin. 41

Since Mrs Oliphant views Tractarianism, Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism with equal critical detachment we can reasonably conclude that her ideal, like Arthur Vincent's, is a Church of the Future, purged of irrelevant detail, and making the best of what is supremely valuable in Christianity, its power to speak to the heart and offer comfort and moral support. And I shall show that in Phoebe Junior she recommends a reconciliation between Church and Dissent in the interest of the Christian values that both have in common. But before I proceed to examine Phoebe Junior in closer detail I must glance at her presentation of a Broad Churchman in Miss Marjoribanks, since

40. P.C. III, 100

41. P.C. III, 112, 115

the Broad Church in one sense aimed at softening the impact of the proliferation of sects by "preferring balance and compromise, sometimes professing to see truth and goodness even in heretical or agnostic views, emphasising those matters which all Church of England Christians held in common and not those that separated High from Low."⁴²

Archdeacon Beverley is introduced to us as follows:

He had a way of talking upon many subjects which alarmed his hostess. It was not that there was anything objectionable in what he said - for, to be sure, a clergyman and an archdeacon may say a great many things that ordinary people would not like to venture on, - but still it was impossible to tell what it might lead to; for it is not everybody who knows when to stop, as Mr Beverley in his position might be expected to do. It was the custom of good society in Carlingford to give a respectable assent, for example, to Mr Bury's extreme Low-Churchism - as if it were profane, as it certainly was not respectable, to differ from the Rector - and to give him as wide a field as possible for his missionary operations by keeping out of the way. But Mr Beverley had not the least regard for respectability, nor that respect for religion which consists in keeping as clear of it as possible; and the way in which he spoke of Mr Bury's views wounded some people's feelings. Altogether, he was, as Mrs Chiley said, an anxious person to have in the house; for he just as often agreed with the gentlemen in their loose ways of thinking, as with the more correct opinions by which the wives and mothers who had charge of Their morality (43) strove hard to keep them in the right way; and that was the reverse of what one naturally expected from a clergyman. He was very nice, and had a nice position; and, under all the circumstances, it was not only a duty to pay attention to him, but a duty from which results of a most agreeable character might spring; but still, though she could not be otherwise than kind, it would be impossible to say that it was out of personal predilection that Mrs Chiley devoted herself to her guest. She admitted frankly that he was not like what clergymen were in her time. For one thing, he seemed to think that every silly boy and girl ought to have an opinion

42. Wolff (as in fn.16, p.243 above), p.22

43. "They" with the capital T is the humorous way in which Carlingford women refer to men.

and be consulted, as if they had anything to do with it - which was just the way to turn their heads, and make them utterly insupportable. 44

The richness and complexity of the irony is typical of Miss Marjoribanks and of no preceding book. The point of view is entirely distanced from Mrs Oliphant's own, being at the beginning and end that of Mrs Chiley, a leading choric character, but always used as the naive representative of unsophisticated normality. Her alarm at unorthodox ideas, especially the Archdeacon's democratic views, carries no authorial endorsement; and the transition to the more sophisticated (or more hypocritical) views of "good society in Carlingford" emphasises that the true reason for suspicion of the Archdeacon is an inability to respond to the claims made by religion, as a result of false values. "Respectability" is a very foolish and inadequate reason for supporting a clergyman, and the Archdeacon's superiority to it carries full authorial approval. Here is a man whose religion is intended to have an effect. Nevertheless Mrs Oliphant does not offer the Archdeacon as a focus for consistent admiration; his role in the plot is to be manipulated by Lucilla Marjoribanks and usually to look a fool as a result of his impetuosity, his prejudices (even though "he was one of the men who take pride in seeing both sides of a question; and to tell the truth, he was always very candid about disputed points in theology, and ready to entertain everybody's objection"),⁴⁵ and his rash emotionality. On one occasion he is described as a "muscular Christian" (indeed a "formidably" muscular Christian) in a context which reduces the expression (and the Archdeacon) to absurdity. He

44. Miss Marjoribanks (hereafter M.M.) I, 247-8

45. M.M. II, 257

goes on to attack "the false and tyrannical conventionalism called society" and the "monstrous mistake" by which women were educated into frivolity; these views are probably Mrs Oliphant's own, but the intemperate language used to express them is clearly objectionable.⁴⁶ Evidently, Mrs Oliphant considered that what the Broad Church gained in breadth it lost in depth; that "seeing both sides of the question" is by no means compatible with having clear perceptions and a thought-out set of values.

Phoebe Junior was very much an afterthought to the Carlingford series. In October 1872 she wrote to William Blackwood: "I have begun, partly to amuse myself, and on a sudden impulse, a new series of the Chronicles of Carlingford to be called Phoebe Junior, and to embody the history of the highly intellectual and much-advanced family of the late Miss Phoebe Tozer".⁴⁷ (There were no other books in the "new series", however.) In some ways it does make an effective conclusion to the Chronicles, since it draws together themes from Salem Chapel and The Perpetual Curate (and, as I shall show in the next chapter, from Miss Marjoribanks). Both Salem Chapel and St Roque's appear, but we hear little of services in either church. However, Horace Northcote, first visiting preacher at Salem Chapel, afterwards temporary minister, plays a central thematic role. Like Arthur Vincent he makes a fierce attack on the Anglican Church. Indeed Mrs Oliphant seems

46. M.M. II, 246-8. The words "the false and tyrannical conventionalism called society" are not the Archdeacon's, but the narrator's interpretation of his views - allowing a partial, but not total, identification with them.

47. A.& L. p.239

guilty of self-plagiarism here. Unlike Vincent, Northcote feels no inclination, however unacknowledged, for the Anglican Church; yet he too modifies his extremism, for it is the intention of the book to humble his arrogance and teach him to view Anglicanism with more charity. The change of views is brought about by a developing friendship for Reginald May, son of the curate of St Roque's - who in his turn recognises that Northcote does not conform to his stereotype of Dissenters. Both Northcote and Reginald are further influenced by distaste for the arrogance of authority in their two churches. Exactly like Arthur Vincent, Northcote finds the overbearing deacons and parishioners of Salem Chapel irksome; and Reginald is offended by the hostility of the Carlingford rector (un-named and appearing only once, solely to perform his thematic function) towards Dissenters. Both young men confirm their changing views by falling in love with girls from the opposite camp, Northcote with Reginald's sister Ursula, Reginald with Phoebe Beecher, granddaughter of Mr Tozer.

Mrs Oliphant was no doubt inspired to give her wholehearted approval to a reconciliation of Church and Dissent by a novel which she reviewed in Blackwood's Magazine in 1863,⁴⁸ Church and Chapel, by the author of No Church (Frederick William Robinson). The stress in this book is on the need to bring the two extremes of Christianity together by a rediscovery of what they have in common. Valentine Cunningham is very scornful of Mrs Oliphant's approach:

The two young, hopeful ministers turn out to be only factitiously opponents (both are "foolish, wrong and right"), and realise their true rapport in the Mays' drawing-room where Northcote woos Ursula and May yearns after Phoebe....

48. "Novels", Blackwood's Magazine, August 1863; XCIV, 179-83

The ludicrous inadequacy of this as a solution to the differences between Church and Dissent is abundantly clear, and equally clearly this simplistic but confident resolution is based on ignorance of the problem and the issues. The ease with which Dissenters are made to abandon their opposition to the Church reflects Mrs Oliphant's simplified view of the quarrel. 49

Certainly, no ecumenical movement in the nineteenth century would have had much chance of success; but Mr Cunningham's vocabulary is exaggerated. If Mrs Oliphant is idealistic and over-confident, there is a need for idealism as well as realism, for the theme of "what ought to be" as well as "what is". Mrs Oliphant's growing experience of various branches of Christianity had led her to the kind of idealism which Mr Cunningham scorns.⁵⁰

In its detailed working out the theme, it cannot be denied, is weakly developed: the two love stories are insipid and deserve Mr Cunningham's ironic handling. The reconciliation of Church and Dissent virtually disappears in the long chapters of conventional wooing. An effective episode is the confrontation of Horace Northcote and Reginald May in the chapel of Carlingford College, the almshouses of which Reginald has become warden, where Northcote is obliged to admit that the medieval beauty of the chapel does possess positive value; but Northcote subsequently becomes involved with Ursula May, who is never made a spokeswoman for Anglicanism. This is largely because Mrs Oliphant intends a contrast between Ursula and Phoebe; Phoebe is to be the sharply intelligent heroine, with clearly defined ideas

49. Cunningham, pp.238-9

50. It is of interest that the concern to stress the common ground that all Christian sects shared was one of the tenets of the Broad Church movement. Mrs Oliphant's sympathy with this view is at odds with her distaste for Broad Churchmen.

and a perceptive understanding, while Ursula is to be the gentle and affectionate sub-heroine highlighting Phoebe's greater complexity and depth. Thus Mrs Oliphant was unable to use her love story to continue the theme of the reconciliation of Church and Dissent in other than a superficial manner.

But Phoebe herself is given a coherent point of view on the central theme of the book. In conversation with Mr May, Reginald's father, speaking of Northcote's public lecture attacking the Church, she says:

"Don't you think the Church has herself to blame for those political Dissenters, Mr May? You sneer at us, and look down upon us -"

"I? I don't sneer at anybody."

"I don't mean you individually; but Churchmen do. They treat us as if we were some strange kind of creatures, from the heart of Africa perhaps. They don't think we are just like themselves: as well educated; meaning as well; with as much right to our own ideas."

Mr May could scarcely restrain a laugh. "Just like themselves." The idea of a Dissenter setting up to be as well educated, and as capable of forming an opinion, as a cultivated Anglican, an Oxford man, and a beneficed clergyman, was too novel and too foolish not to be somewhat startling as well. Mr May was aware that human nature is strangely blind to its own deficiencies, but was it possible that any delusion could go as far as this? He did laugh a little - just the ghost of a laugh - at the idea. But what is the use of making any serious opposition to such a statement? The very fact of contesting the assumption seemed to give it a certain weight.

"Whenever this is done", said Phoebe with serene philosophy, "I think you may expect a revulsion of feeling. The class to which papa belongs is very friendly to the Established Church, and wishes to do her every honour." 51

The very sharp irony here against Mr May's hypocrisy, his class-conscious condescension, and his lack of self-knowledge (for he is the one

who is "strangely blind to [his] own deficiencies") is as effective as anything in Mrs Oliphant's work; and there is a quieter irony against Phoebe whose "serene philosophy" is in fact a little too glib. She is unaware that her father's interest in the Established Church is a mere expression of his social ambitions and his desire to mix on equal terms with the fashionable people whom he (and Phoebe) has met in London. But her protest against prejudice and the stereotyped views of other people remain Mrs Oliphant's own.

Equally false views are expressed by the Dissenters:

It was pleasant to know how unstable "The Church" was on her foundations; that aristocratical Church which looked down upon Dissent, and of which the poorest adherent gave himself airs much above Chapel folks; and how much loftier a position the Nonconformist held, who would have nothing to say to State support

"For my part", said one of the speakers, "I would rather abandon my sacred calling tomorrow, or make tents as St. Paul did in its exercise, than put on the gilded fetters of the State, and pray or preach as an Archbishop told me; nay, as a Cabinet Council of godless worldlings directed. There are many good men among the Church of England; but they are slaves, my friends, nothing but slaves, dragged at the chariot wheels of the State; ruled by a caste of hard-headed lawyers; or binding themselves in the rotten robes of tradition. It is we only who can dare to say that we are free!"

These views are received with "self-complacency". This precedes Mr Northcote's public attack on the Church, supported by Mr Tozer with his curious mixture of demotic and Biblical idiom:

"Bravo, Mr Nor'cote", called out old Tozer, on the platform, "that's what I call giving forth no uncertain sound. That's laying it into them 'ot and 'ot." 52

The satire here is broader and is more burlesque than irony. It is clear enough that, however much Mrs Oliphant intends to keep a fair

balance of sympathies between Church and Dissent, she is much more inclined to lean more heavily upon Dissent.

A similar limitation affects Mrs Oliphant's treatment of the social structures that correspond to the Church-Dissent polarity. This polarity, Mrs Oliphant shows, tends to perpetuate the stratification of English society; Dissent wins its support from the underprivileged and the tradesmen, the Church from the gentry and the professional classes. Thus Mr May's contempt for Dissenters is a class-coloured contempt, that of a "cultivated Anglican, an Oxford man" (Oxford in the 1870's, as in *Jude the Obscure*'s 1890's, was no place for working men). Mrs Sam Hurst, a Churchwoman with a choric role, makes this point humorously:

"....after all, you know, most tradespeople are Dissenters; some are sorry for it, some think it quite natural that gentle-people and tradespeople should think differently in religious matters; however, what I say is, you can't tell the difference in butter and bacon between Church and dissent, can you now?"

Mrs Oliphant relishes the flippancy of Mrs Sam Hurst, and is not much inclined, whether directly or ironically, to use her to protest against class bias. Mrs Hurst says of herself "Of all people to take in interest in Dissenters I am the least." She goes on to express amazement to see Mrs Tozer "looking like an old washer-woman" while Phoebe was dressed very elegantly. But "I don't suppose she has any position, being old Tozer's grandchild."⁵⁵ These snobbish views are not distanced in any way, indeed they are endorsed by other parts of Phoebe Junior. Northcote expresses distaste for the vulgarity of the tradesman parishioners and deacons of Salem Chapel, for "the Northcotes were infinitely richer, and quite as well-born and well-bred

in their ways as the Mays, and [Horace Northcote] was a more costly production, as well as a more wealthy man, than the young chaplain in his long coat"⁵⁴ - and thus when his sectarian hostility to Mr May is modified he is simply aligning himself with the "true" theological position of his own class. Even more notably, Phoebe is dismayed to encounter the shop-keeping background of the Tozers and experiences a sharp conflict of loyalties before she - rather condescendingly, one feels - decides to stand by her own class.

I must reserve my final verdict on Phoebe Junior until the next chapter, since I must see it in relation to Miss Marjoribanks, and assess those aspects of the book (in fact the major portion) which have no relevance to the religious themes I am examining in this chapter.

54. Phoebe Junior II, 190-1

CHAPTER EIGHT

CARLINGFORD: THE COMMUNITY

March 8

Don't frighten me, please, about Miss Marjoribanks. I will do the very best I can to content you, but you make me nervous when you talk about the first rank of novelists, &c.: nobody in the world cares whether I am in the first or sixth.

(Letter to John Blackwood, 1865; A. & L., p.198)

"Tom, let us leave off talking nonsense - the thing we both want is something to do.... Do you know that I have always been doing something, and responsible for something, all my life?"

"Yes, my poor darling", said Tom, "I know; but now you are in my hands I mean to take care of you, Lucilla; you shall have no more anxiety or trouble. What is the good of a man if he can't save the woman he is fond of from all that?" cried the honest fellow - and Lucilla could not but cast a despairing glance round her, as if appealing to heaven and earth. What was to be done with a man who had so little understanding of her, and of himself, and of the eternal fitness of things?

(M.M. III, 267-8)

One of the most striking effects of a consecutive reading of The Chronicles of Carlingford is the opening out of our picture of town society, of the community. This represents a development of Mrs Oliphant's own concept of Carlingford, and no doubt a more confident and coherent imagining of what was at first conceived only in vague and general terms. The early stories are basically simple studies of ethical problems or cases of conscience, viewed largely as private

and personal matters, not public and social ones (although Mr Proctor's need to make professional self-discovery, in The Rector, certainly has a direct bearing on the welfare of his parish.) This is true of The Doctor's Family, which is in many ways untypical of the Carlingford books. Dr Edward Rider's relationship with his patients is not stressed as is the relationship of the various Carlingford clergymen with their parishioners.

The Doctor's Family centres on the intolerable burden of responsibility imposed on two people, a man and a woman, Dr Rider and Nettie Underwood. Symmetrically, each is burdened with the moral weakness of a sibling, Edward Rider with his brother Fred, Nettie with her sister Susan, Fred's wife. Edward's brother is entirely degraded and dissipated and now irrecoverably reduced to indolence and sponging on Edward; as he constitutes a threat to Edward's medical practice, to that extent the presence of the Carlingford community is of significance. But a more complex moral problem is that of Nettie - who must single-handed carry the demanding responsibilities of her disastrous brother-in-law, his highly undisciplined children, and the foolish, querulous, self-pitying mother of these children, who is quite incapable of playing the role of wife and mother, or any role at all.¹ Nettie is one of Mrs Oliphant's most remarkable characters, resourceful,

1. In his obituary article J.H. Millar said of Susan that she was "almost the only female personage in her works towards whom the author's attitude is one of unqualified disapproval" (Blackwood's Magazine CLXII, 309). This simply is not true, and is surprising from a critic as perceptive as Millar usually was when writing of Mrs Oliphant. If one wishes to write of female characters of whom she wholly disapproved, one would mention Mrs Stanfield in Agnes, Amanda Batty in Innocent, Rose Mountford in In Trust and Letitia Ravelstone (Lady Frogmore) in The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent - and others, including probably Barbara Lake in Miss Marjoribanks.

ironically self-aware, self-reliant, fiercely independent, coolly accepting the inevitability of self-sacrifice. But her problems do not need the background of Carlingford to give them perspective; she and Susan are not natives of Carlingford, but Australians. Through her Mrs Oliphant makes a feminist point about the inevitable exploitation of women, and this may usefully be compared with the feminist themes of Miss Marjoribanks and Phoebe Junior, where the heroines find a way out of the subordination and stereotyping that society inflicts on women.

The Doctor's Family has an important place in Mrs Oliphant's development: it is her first work in which the note of ironic, anti-romantic disillusion that I have already described appears in full confident maturity. For example when Edward considers his love for Nettie, he also recognises - what she herself has stressed - the impossibility of burdening himself with his brother and sister-in-law and their children:

Love, patience, charity, after all, are but human qualities, when they have to be held against daily disgusts, irritations and miseries. The doctor knew as well as Nettie did that he could not bear it. He knew even, as perhaps Nettie did not know, that her own image would suffer from the association; and that a man so faulty and imperfect as himself could not long refrain from resenting upon his wife the dismal restraints of such a burden. 2

Other Carlingford characters appear, some as choric characters, but they play only a minor role. It may be that the community was intended to play a larger role, since the story begins by emphasising the social circumstances of Edward who "lived in the new quarter of Carlingford", in "a new house, gazing with all its windows over a

2. The Rector, and The Doctor's Family, p.203-4

brick-field", a situation "of a kind utterly to shock the feelings of the refined community". It is a "chaotic district of half-formed streets and full-developed brickfields". Choice of such an environment is almost social suicide, and accordingly he must content himself with a very inferior practice, and accept a very inferior role to Dr Marjoribanks, whose surgery is on the very fashionable Grange Lane.³ But here Mrs Oliphant is offering a theme which she largely fails to follow up.

In Salem Chapel there is a central role for the community, specifically the parishioners of Salem Chapel, and - as long as Mrs Oliphant concentrates on Vincent's relations with his flock - a theme is developed on the conflict between the individual and the crowd, between the pressure to conform and the need to define one's identity and to respond to the demands which it makes. The community is largely epitomised in Tozer, whose comic extravagance tends to make him an individualised eccentric as much as a representative voice. But other deacons appear: Mr Brown of the Devonshire Dairy, and Mr Pigeon the poulterer. And their wives are stern sticklers for the formal rituals of conduct required of a minister, in particular a regular attendance at "tea-meetings" and social visits to his flock, whereas his visits to Lady Western are considered shameful snubs to his offended parishioners.

The treatment of Mr and Mrs Brown and Mr and Mrs Pigeon, as Valentine Cunningham has pointed out, is malicious and condescending;⁴ potentially much more interesting is the presence among Mr Vincent's flock of

3. The Rector, and the Doctor's Family, pp.55-6

4. Cunningham, p.242

Mrs Hilyard (or Mrs Mildmay) a mysterious needlewoman living in Back Grove Street, but obviously a lady. Grove Street itself was described in The Rector, with very effective imagery, as containing "on the humbler side of the street ... a row of cottages with little gardens in front of them - cheap houses, which are contented to be haughtily overlooked by the staircase windows and blank walls of their richer neighbours on the other side of the road",⁵ and if Back Grove Street is behind the row of cottages it must be a near-slum. The presence of Mrs Hilyard in this setting makes a more sharply ironic comment on social contrasts in Carlingford than the earnest vagueness of the treatment of Wharfside in The Perpetual Curate. Mrs Hilyard, by virtue of her ambiguous position, which arouses much curiosity among the community, is a sharply ironic observer of events and of Mr Vincent. As I have shown on page 249, it is she who challenges the complacency of his religious views. But in due course she is almost totally caught up in the melodramatic plot and the coolly observed ironist collapses into a preposterous female avenger.

More consistent in her role as an ironic observer is Adelaide Tufton, the crippled daughter of Mr Vincent's retired predecessor as minister of Salem Chapel. Her malicious wit is an obvious enough compensation mechanism for her physical condition; and she provides a much-needed satirical perspective on the sensational events of the Mildmay story and on the role played by Lady Western. By means of Adelaide Tufton and Mrs Hilyard/Mildmay Mrs Oliphant is making comments on the emptiness and futility of women's lives in Victorian society:

5. The Rector, and the Doctor's Family, p.30

"But don't you understand yet that a woman's intention is the last thing she is likely to perform in this world? We do have meanings now and then, we poor creatures, but they seldom come to much." 6

Cynical and satirical wit is a woman's only available method of self-defence and self-protection.

In The Perpetual Curate the social picture extends further and it has a central role in the Rosa Elsworthy affair. A series of incidents when Rosa apparently meets Frank is more and more consistently interpreted to Frank's discredit by a wide range of townsfolk, by no means mainly the malicious and scandal-mongering. Indeed it is a notable irony of the book that kind-hearted gentle and innocent characters (the ineffectual Miss Wodehouse, Frank's mildly well-meaning Aunt Dora, the evangelical spinsters the Misses Hemmings) are so anxious not to misinterpret facts that they seem to weight the evidence against Frank by the implication that they are defending him against the indefensible. Under the pressure of prejudice (fomented by Mr Elsworthy, Rosa's uncle, newsagent, stationer and seller of ecclesiastical goods and parish clerk of St Roque's) and of the human craving to believe the worst, Carlingford moves fairly rapidly from "I tell you I don't know - that's what people say" to "a man as meddles with an innocent girl aint nothing but a blackhearted villain".⁷ Elsworthy is a forceful, though very unsubtle, study of vicious malice and self-dramatising vindictiveness. Unfortunately his illiterate manner of speech seems

6. Salem Chapel I, 304. The speaker is Mrs Hilyard.

7. P.C. I, 206; II, 213. The speakers are, respectively, Mr Wodehouse and Mr Elsworthy.

gratuitously to be made an extra indictment against him, as if it is his class, in reality, that makes him so vicious. A more troublesome weakness is the presentation of Rosa, who potentially is a remarkably frank study of a weak, confused, corruptible adolescent girl, led away by vanity, curiosity and nervous self-assertion to give apparent reality to the gossip which she provokes; but Mrs Oliphant lacks the courage to carry the theme through to its logical conclusion. Rosa, presumably, becomes the mistress of Tom Wodehouse, her real abductor, and in the end departs for a "life of sin" - which seems the inevitable outcome, although she insists that "them as has took charge of me has promised to make a lady of me, as he always said I was worthy of".⁸ But Mrs Oliphant entirely evades a close examination of this theme, remaining vague and ambiguous; ambiguous, not in a richly complex way, but in a way that diminishes our understanding of Rosa and of Wodehouse, and reduces them to puppets of the plot. Certainly, the novel is about Frank Wentworth, and the intention of the plot is to clear his name, not to illuminate the ethical confusion of the two people who almost bring about his disgrace; nevertheless the imprecision of detail must be regretted.

At the public enquiry to which Frank is subjected the whole professional world of Carlingford assembles, and Mrs Oliphant creates her first grand gathering of the articulate, educated members of the community - a mild anticipation of what she did so richly and with such high comedy in Miss Marjoribanks. At this enquiry meet Dr Marjoribanks, Mr Centum the banker, the two lawyers Mr Waters and Mr Brown (the latter surviving from The Executor), the retired Indian officer Colonel

8. P.C. III, 258

Chiley, and the clergy, Mr Morgan, and Mr Proctor. The whole episode functions very effectively as a challenge to, and a focus for, the conscience of the community. At first:

Not one of the witnesses had the smallest doubt as to the statement he or she was about to make; they were entirely convinced of the righteousness of their own cause, and the justice of the accusation, which naturally gave a wonderful moral force to their testimony.

But the indictment breaks down in view of the entire circumstantiality of the evidence and of Frank's openness and unmistakable innocence:

"I have lived among you for five years, and you ought to have known me by this time. I have never been asked for an explanation, neither could any explanation which it was possible for me to make have convinced a mind prejudiced against me."

 "I could not believe it possible that I, being tolerably well known in Carlingford as I have always supposed, could be suspected by any rational being of such an insane piece of wickedness as has been laid to my charge; and consequently it did not occur to me to vindicate myself, as I perhaps ought to have done, at the beginning. I have been careless all along of vindicating myself. I had an idea," said the young man, with involuntary disdain, "that I might trust, if not to the regard, at least to the common sense of my friends --" 9

The words "rational" and "common sense" highlight the irony of the situation: the power of prejudice to produce a monomania and a sustained self-delusion effectively neutralises people's capacity to make rational and sensible judgments on the evidence before their eyes.

After this (in the rest of Book III) Mrs Oliphant reverts to more private and personal matters, and to the Church themes which I discussed in the last chapter; and it was left to Miss Marjoribanks to bring the community forward to centre stage.

Miss Marjoribanks is the natural climax of the Carlingford series and the richest and most complex of them. It can withstand attention in the closest detail. In it Mrs Oliphant achieves an irony which can be compared with Jane Austen's (from whom it is largely derived) without diminishing Mrs Oliphant's status. Mrs Leavis has said that it "has claims to be considered the wisest and wittiest of Victorian novels".¹⁰ She also places the book firmly within the tradition of Emma, and sees it as a precursor of Middlemarch in the analysis of an urban community and of the tragic, ironic predicament of exceptionally gifted people in such an environment. In particular Mrs Leavis compares Lucilla with Dorothea Brooke and - in this respect - praises Mrs Oliphant at the expense of George Eliot. This surely is exaggerated praise; yet time is certainly overdue for giving Miss Marjoribanks its rightful place in the history of the English novel. Mr and Mrs Colby damn it with faint praise and entirely fail to recognise its unique qualities, complaining, quite unreasonably, of "chilling satire", insisting that "for the most part the satire is bitter and the feeling cold" and that "there is very little 'charm' in the novel and almost none in the heroine".¹¹ (The use of inverted commas for "charm" suggests that Mr and Mrs Colby are uneasy at adopting a criterion which is largely inapplicable to Miss Marjoribanks.) Yet on close analysis the book proves to be altogether richer and more complex than Mr and Mrs Colby allow.

The irony declares itself on the first page as the heroine, Lucilla

10. Introduction to the reprint of A. & L. (Leicester University Press, 1974), p.<22>

11. Colby, pp.63, 65.

Marjoribanks, here only 15, aims to comfort her widowed father. But the reader is not invited to identify with Lucilla's motivation. Like Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey, Lucilla is conceived, in this chapter, in relation to the stereotypes of a heroine in the contemporary novel. But whereas Jane Austen's technique is to make Catherine everything that the good heroine of Regency fiction was supposed not to be, Mrs Oliphant's is to use the youthful Lucilla as a parody of the conventional ideal of a Victorian heroine. She had "floods of tears at her command" and her mind "was considerably enlightened by novels and popular philosophy".

Miss Marjoribanks sketched to herself, as she lay back in the corner of the railway carriage, with her veil down, how she would wind herself up to the duty of presiding at her papa's dinner parties, and charming everybody by her good humour, and brightness, and devotion to his comfort; and how, when it was all over, she would withdraw and cry her eyes out in her own room, and be found in the morning languid and worn-out, but always heroical, ready to go downstairs and assist at dear papa's breakfast, and keep up her smiles for him till he had gone out to his patients. 12

This of course is the self-indulgent fantasy of an adolescent, but it is also a fairly accurate parody of the role of so many idealised, "lovable" but essentially ineffectual, Victorian heroines, especially the self-effacing ones who subordinate themselves to their menfolk. (One thinks of those Dickensian heroines who are celebrated as devoted housewives.) And Mrs Oliphant's ironic vision of Lucilla scarcely ever falters throughout the book - or at least through Volumes One and Two. She lacks self-knowledge and as is rapidly evident she lacks

12. M.M. I, 2,3.

knowledge of other people. Her obsession with the stereotypes of grief and the conduct of a loving daughter is never allowed to conflict with her concern for her appearance and for the achievement of power (always an important motive with her through her life). For two thirds of the book she never examines her own motives sufficiently closely to recognise their true nature; and what she is at 15 she still is at 19 and at 29. Her catchphrase "My only ambition is to be a comfort to poor Papa" echoes through the book and each time it recurs its ironic effect subtly shifts; she uses the phrase more and more mechanically to blind herself to her own egotistical motives, to "rationalise" her single-minded pursuit of her own glorification as a leading figure of Carlingford society. She uses her father's forlorn widowed condition as a blatant excuse to establish herself as mistress of his house and as a chief organiser of the social and cultural life of the town; and owing to her lack of introspection, and to her driving energy, she never defines her own motives to herself.

It is easy to miss this consistent ironic tone and this mistake has lately been made by Patricia Stubbs. Miss Stubbs, supposing wrongly that Miss Marjoribanks is written from a largely anti-feminist point of view, accuses Mrs Oliphant of a naively sympathetic view of Lucilla and of using irony merely as a sort of grace note to intensify our love for a charming heroine. We do inevitably identify with Lucilla, since the book is consistently written through her consciousness and the main action is carried by her dynamic energies; but identification is in no way inconsistent with ironic detachment, as is evident in Emma, no doubt a major influence on Miss Marjoribanks. Miss Stubbs's view is that:

Miss Marjoribanks is trivial in a way that Emma is not, and it is so because of the author's attitude, endorsing as she does Lucilla's exploitation of her traditional female role.¹³

On the contrary, Mrs Oliphant, far from endorsing "Lucilla's exploitation of her traditional female role", is consistently using irony to call it in question, and this is dramatically revealed - as I shall later show - when Lucilla's self-image is abruptly changed after her father's death. The events of Volumes One and Two must be seen in the light of the developments of Volume Three. In reading Miss Marjoribanks we must take the trouble to see what is really there, not preconceived by what we expect to find.

Lucilla's inflated image of herself is stressed throughout the first two volumes. There is a mock-heroic note; she is consistently compared with a queen entering her kingdom and a general in command of his troops and the intention is always deflating, inviting us to take a detached view of her ambitions. "Before she presented herself to the rejoicing public" she has plans to make. She is "sustained by that sublime confidence in herself which is the first necessity of a woman with a mission". (It is merely the ironic hyperboles "sublime" and "mission" which direct our response, but they do make all the difference between uncritical identification with Lucilla's self-regarding attitude and a detached view of it.) She always feels "that consciousness of superior endowments which gives amiability and expansion even to the countenance". (She does in fact possess "superior

13. Patricia Stubbs, Women and Fiction (Harvester Press, 1979) p.41. The whole examination of Miss Marjoribanks is pp.39-44.

endowments", but this enriches the irony, suggesting, not merely Lucilla's self-dramatising egotism, but the waste of talents in an uncongenial environment which obliges her to over-compensate by this public display of egotism.) We hear of "the sacred sense of duty and the high aims of genius which is ... attractive to a well-regulated mind." And yet on one occasion Lucilla says "I don't think I am vain to speak of" and this when she has just "remembered at moments of discouragement how seldom one's most disinterested exertions are appreciated to the end".¹⁴

This tone is consistently maintained, until Volume Three (Chapters XXXVI to LII), where there is a considerable shift of the focus of the book, especially after the death of Lucilla's father (Chapter XLIII). But at all times until this stage in the book Lucilla's self-obsessed concern for her "mission" is viewed objectively by means of vocabulary which draws attention to her exaggeration, her vanity, her unashamed manipulation of other people. This is clearly seen when she is involved in "love", or rather when she takes an interest in men who may perhaps further her ambitions (two of them future MPs, one a future bishop). Troubled by the temptation of her neurotic protégée Barbara Lake to outstay her welcome as a pianist at her Thursday entertainments, Lucilla decides to let Barbara become involved with Mr Cavendish, the man who has hitherto been paying court to herself:

Thus 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

14. M.M. I, 44, 60-1, 93, 206; III, 78-9.

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.... This Miss Marjoribanks did, not in ignorance, but with a perfect sense of what she was about. It was the only way of preventing her Evening from losing its distinctive character. It was the Lamp of sacrifice which Lucilla had now to employ, and she proved herself capable of the exertion. 15

The startling Ruskinian language of the last sentence¹⁶ adds the final touch of comedy to a mock-heroic passage. We are ironically invited to admire Lucilla for her heroism when in fact she is not the least in love with Mr Cavendish and is so far from sacrificing herself that she is furthering the artistic perfection of her Thursday evenings - and thus her own glory as a cultural provider for Carlingford society. The capital E of Evening indicates the self-important attitude she adopts towards this new Carlingford institution initiated entirely by herself. The irony is enriched by a challenge to the stereotypes of female behaviour. Mrs Oliphant rejects the view that women are always victimised by their "personal sentiments", but she does it without polemic because Lucilla cannot justly claim the credit of transcending the stereotype since her personal sentiments (that is, her love) are never in question at all. She deceives herself - but she cannot deceive the reader. Indeed here, as elsewhere, she is able to profit by "that beautiful self-adjusting balance of compensations which keeps everything right in the world".

15. M.M. I, 176-7

16. Mrs Oliphant was always sceptical of Ruskin "The Latest Lawgiver" as she called him in an article in Blackwood's Magazine in June 1868 (CIII, 675-91). This is an extremely unsympathetic view of Time and Tide by Weare and Tyne, whose answers to England's social problems seemed to her ludicrously impractical and over-idealistic.

These words are used on another occasion when Lucilla finds she is going to lose an admirer to another woman. She had been upset to find Mrs Mortimer, an absurdly pathetic widow, a rival claimant for Archdeacon Beverley, and she was obliged to recover her equilibrium by ingenious wishful thinking:

She began to have a kind of conviction ... either that Carlingford would not be raised into a bishopric, or that the Archdeacon at least would not be the first bishop. It was difficult to give any ground for the idea, but it came into her mind with a kind of quiet certainty; and with this conviction, in which she recognised that beautiful self-adjusting balance of compensations which keeps everything right in the world, Lucilla, quite recovered from her shock, had on the whole a pleasant walk home.

As for the two who were shut up together in Mrs Mortimer's parlour, their state of mind was far from partaking of the virtuous peace and serenity which filled Miss Marjoribanks' bosom. 17

Thus Lucilla has restored her complacency and self-approval to their old throne in her heart; easily enough, since she had not been in love with the Archdeacon any more than she had been with Mr Cavendish. It is merely her ambition that has been disappointed. By the use of hyperbole ("virtuous peace and serenity") we are enabled to view Lucilla with detachment. And yet she is not entirely restored to complacency; she had "on the whole a pleasant walk home". Nevertheless, it is worth noting that she is now willing to promote the happiness of the very downtrodden Mrs Mortimer (who is the kind of feebly self-effacing woman of whom Mrs Oliphant always disapproved. Her finest study of such a woman is Mrs John in Hester.) Thus Lucilla does possess altruistic motives; the basic ironic technique is, not

so much that of giving Lucilla credit for virtues she does not possess, but - much more subtly - to suggest a narcissistic self-approval which the facts in their full complexity do not warrant, and by the use of hyperbolic language to imply that she gives herself more credit than she can justly claim for admirable motivation.

Lucilla is notably invulnerable and thus (until the death of her father) she is not capable of those searching moments of self-questioning which disturb Emma Woodhouse's tranquillity. But Mrs Oliphant effectively avoids creating strongly unfavourable views of Lucilla by offsetting Lucilla against the meanness and pettiness of Carlingford society, revealed in character after character, notably the insecure and malicious Mrs Woodburn and even more startlingly Barbara Lake. Barbara is a gifted pianist and, as such, is chosen by Lucilla to provide regular entertainment at her Thursday evenings, those weekly occasions intended for the social and artistic regeneration of Carlingford. But she sees herself, quite unreasonably, as the victim of Lucilla's arrogant patronage. Barbara falls into a perverse and paradoxical state of mind:

... she could not but feel that anyone who was kind to her was taking an unwarrantable liberty. What right had Lucilla Marjoribanks to be kind to her? as if she was not as good as Lucilla any day! and though it might be worth her while to take advantage of it for the moment, it was still an insult, in its way, to be avenged if an opportunity should ever arise.

And the opportunity does arise; she "steals" Lucilla's lover Cavendish, unaware of Lucilla's lack of genuine interest in him.

Barbara had never as yet had a lover, but she had read an unlimited number of novels, which came to nearly the same thing, and she saw at a glance that this was somebody who resembled the indispensable hero. She looked at him with a certain fierce

interest, and remembered at that instant how often
in books it is the humble heroine, behind backs,
whom all the young ladies snub, who wins the hero
at the last. 18

Thus Barbara follows blindly the stereotypes of Victorian novels, as Lucilla did in Chapter I, only much more blatantly, and is entirely uncritical of the role a young woman was obliged to play in courtship. Beside this neurotic, self-tormenting personality Lucilla really does seem to be the highly admirable and perceptive character she believes herself to be. Carlingford does benefit by her presence in the town; Barbara achieves nothing but obsessive misery for herself. Although Barbara in no way resembles Jane Eyre, the reference to "the humble heroine, behind backs" suggests that Mrs Oliphant is here challenging the convention on which Charlotte Bronte's heroine is based. And Barbara for a while does become a governess before finally winning Mr Cavendish. But it is she who sees herself as Jane Eyre, not Mrs Oliphant.

Slowly Mrs Oliphant has modified our response to Lucilla, who in any case, like Tozer in Salem Chapel and Phoebe Junior, has the power of most comic characters to evoke a paradoxical admiration for her irresistible energy and self-confidence. And then in Volume Three, in Chapter XLIII, there is a drastic change in tone and mood, at first sight with scarcely any warning at all. Dr Marjoribanks, Lucilla's father, dies very suddenly. The change is anticipated in Chapter XLII by a foreboding conversation between Lucilla and her father; but the new mood of pathos and emotional crisis is very surprising. The death itself is treated with quiet objectivity; but

18. M.M. I, 144-5, 149-50. I have retained the curious punctuation of the earlier passage.

Lucilla is now seen in an entirely new way - and becomes altogether a more sympathetic character, as if Mrs Oliphant's ironic detachment has at last broken down. Now Lucilla's heroism and superiority are taken almost at face value, and tenderness creeps in, thus resulting in a slight lack of balance in the book, or so it seems at first sight. It is as if Mrs Oliphant had found an unyielding irony very hard to maintain; and indeed on many occasions in Volume Three when we expect irony humour takes its place. No doubt her concept of the character and of what she wanted to "say" had changed fairly drastically.

Yet, if we examine Miss Marjoribanks more closely, this change of tone is not unprepared. There are deeper notes earlier in the book. For example, near the end of Book Two in Chapter XXXIX, Lucilla finally decides to renounce Mr Cavendish, having wondered whether perhaps after all she does love him:

She had made a sacrifice, and nobody appreciated it. Instead of choosing a position which pleased her imagination, and suited her energies, and did not go against her heart, Lucilla, moved by the wisest discretion, had decided, not without regret to give him up. She had sacrificed her own inclination, and a sphere in which her abilities would have had the fullest scope, to what she believed to be the general good; and instead of having the heroism acknowledged, she was misunderstood and rewarded with ingratitude. 19

There is still irony here. The references to "the wisest discretion" and "heroism" do not carry unqualified authorial endorsement; and Lucilla's feeling of being "misunderstood and rewarded with ingratitude" is not in keeping with the true facts. Yet her "regret" is genuine and her sense of loss contributes a sober, judicious tone that tends to neutralise the irony. Indeed there is a new kind of

irony that invites us to sympathise with the illogicality of Lucilla's frustrating position. How different is the high comedy of the earlier passage about her renunciation of Cavendish, which I quote above on pages 283-4! Without a doubt Mrs Oliphant's view of her heroine had developed and deepened.

In the above quotation a very significant word is "sphere". What Lucilla needs, not only in chapter XXXIV, but throughout the book, is "a sphere in which her abilities would have had the fullest scope." (This sphere she finds for a while in the community of Carlingford, which she serves and dominates.) The feminism implied in this passage becomes more explicit in Volume Three, where again the word "sphere" is used, more than once. For example:

... 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". And Lucilla, though she said nothing about a sphere, was still more or less in that condition of mind which has been so often and so fully described to the British public - when the ripe female intelligence, not having the natural resources of a nursery and a husband to manage, turns inwards, and begins to "make a protest" against the existing order of society, and to call the world to account for giving it no due occupation - and to consume itself. 20

And in the next paragraph it is stressed that "for a woman who feels that she is a Power, there are so few other outlets" than parish work. (In spite of the ironic use of "Power" with its capital letter, the intention is still entirely sympathetic.) She cannot inherit her father's practice; and single women go in for "worsted work and tea parties",²¹ which have no attractions for Lucilla. She has made the discovery that most of Mrs Oliphant's heroines make in the end,

20. M.M. III, 106-7.

21. M.M. III, 116.

that she needs to be "of use to her fellow creatures". And exercising the role of the queen of society in a provincial town by means of artificially contrived Thursday evening entertainments has lost its savour for her.

At this point, before and after the sudden death of Lucilla's father, the latent feminism of Miss Marjoribanks comes unequivocally to the surface. Deeply disturbed her father's death, and the discovery that owing to some indiscreet financial speculations on his part she had unexpectedly been reduced to poverty, she is forced - for the first time in her life - to take stock of her situation. She acquires - perhaps rather implausibly - self-knowledge at last and bitterly recognises the frustrations of a woman's position in Victorian society, especially a woman with talent. There are two or three prolonged passages analysing Lucilla's complex state of mind; poverty gives urgency to the self-questioning that had begun in Chapter XLII. And the high comedy of the first 41 chapters is suddenly "placed", put in perspective, though at some cost to credibility, since the Lucilla who weeps, meditates and reads sermons is hard to reconcile with the earlier heroine. (However she does need a bookmark to keep her place in the sermons.)

If we now look back through the earlier chapters of Miss Marjoribanks in the light of these passages we will have a much clearer indication of the feminism that underlies the book. Mrs Woodburn, the comedienne of Carlingford, for ever producing laughter by mimicry of other people, is shown to be suffering from acute insecurity, both social and marital. Mrs Mortimer, the mild ineffectual governess who eventually escapes into marriage with Archdeacon Beverley, seems

to be the victim of a society which allows no obvious role to a woman. On the other hand, Rose Lake, Barbara's sister, is an artist, intensely proud of the social autonomy granted by the artistic profession ('We have a rank of our own', she frequently points out);²² she has found her "sphere" and need feel no frustration or humiliation as a woman. But later, when Barbara deserts her family, Rose has to give up her career to look after her father. "It is as good as putting an end to my Career", she complains bitterly; "and just after my design has been so successful." Lucilla is in sympathy with her need for a career (the capital C is repeated), but cannot help her; she must submit:

... there would be nobody else to do it - a consideration which continually filters out the people who are good for anything out of the muddy current of the ordinary world. 23

The metaphor is rather overstrained, but the tone of bitter protest is unmistakable. It is part of the deepening of tone at the end of Book Two which prepares us for the darker, more challenging mood of Book Three. Certainly the capital C of Career has a mildly ironic effect, as does the capital E of Evening quoted on page 284 above. Yet it does little to weaken the forcefulness of tone.

In the earlier chapters of Book Three there are many signs of the feminism that comes to the surface of Chapters XLII and XLIII.

22.M.M. I, 169, 262 etc. Mrs Oliphant, being Scottish, could view the English class system with ironic amusement and, being an artist's widow, would be able to judge the extent to which the artistic world did transcend class barriers. Mr Lake, father of Barbara and Rose, says "I am not able to give my children the same advantages, but I have always brought them up not to have any false pride. We have no wealth; but we have some things which cannot be purchased by wealth". (II, 165-6)

23.M.M. II, 288, 290.

Ten years have passed between Books Two and Three, and now, at 29, Lucilla is involved in a campaign for a parliamentary election and, even though she possesses talent enough for an MP, has no choice but to play a futile role as canvasser and adviser. It is in the midst of this campaign that her father dies. But the ground is being prepared for her crisis of self-knowledge after this event, by her involvement in the election. In one scene she smooths down the hostilities of the two candidates, Mr Ashburton and Mr Cavendish, and she ironically sees herself as:

Woman the Reconciler, by the side of those other characters of Inspirer and Consoler, of which the world has heard. 24

The irony is here entirely with Lucilla, not against her, and represents a very sharp protest against male stereotypes of a woman's role. Note the understated power of "of which the world has heard". The passage comes from Chapter XL, only a short period before the self-examinations that precede the death of her father.

Lucilla's dilemma is resolved - in the conventional way of the Victorian novel, but with a characteristically Oliphant bias - by marriage to the man she realises she has always loved, her cousin Tom, whose proposal she evaded much earlier in the book in a scene of high, almost farcical, comedy. We cannot quite believe in a Lucilla capable of warm love; and the sudden return home of Tom at a dramatic moment, in the nick of time to forestall another lover's declaration, is perhaps the one really false note in Miss Marjoribanks. Yet Mrs Oliphant does treat the episode lightly and unsentimentally, and we have in fact been prepared for a greater depth in Lucilla by the

crisis provoked by her father's death. Moreover, she marries Tom not merely as a conventionally romantic love ending, since we are allowed to see him as a rather dull, even stupid, man; and, very significantly, Lucilla is enabled by his means to involve herself in the organisation of a country estate. Thus she can at last use her particular talents in a more profitable field than the sterile provision of weekly entertainments for Carlingford - and the issue of work for women, for her at least, is solved. Lucilla has found her "sphere" and is able to be "of use to her fellow creatures", even if she must do it in effect vicariously through her husband.

Then there rose up before her a vision of a parish saved, a village reformed, a county reorganised, and a triumphant election at the end [i.e. for Tom], the recompense and crown of all, which should put the government of the country itself, to a certain extent, into competent hands. This was the celestial vision which floated into Miss Marjoribanks' eyes as she ... recollected, notwithstanding occasional moments of discouragement, the successful work she had done, and the good she had achieved in her native town. It was but the natural culmination of her career that transferred her from the town to the country, and held out to her the glorious task of serving her generation in a twofold way, among the poor and among the rich. 25

The mock-heroic note and the hyperbole have reappeared; Lucilla is as ready to surrender to wishful-thinking daydreams as ever and to give herself more credit than she is entitled to do. Yet by this stage she has a better claim on our admiration than she had had in Book One or even in Book Two. For now there is some substance in her fantasies; she will be capable of doing good to the poor, always a very important activity to Mrs Oliphant.

There is one striking piece of evidence that after starting to write Miss Marjoribanks Mrs Oliphant's view of her heroine changed. Between the completion of the serial and the publication in three volumes she revised the book, and there was a particularly drastic rewriting in Episode V, published in Blackwood's Magazine in June 1865, and corresponding to Chapters XVII and XVIII of Volume One. But Episode V consisted of three chapters and the original Chapters XVIII and XIX were condensed into one chapter.²⁶ The episode concerns the revelation that Mr Cavendish is an impostor, in imminent danger of exposure and disgrace. Lucilla decides that she will conceal his shameful secret because the revelation would bring discredit to herself as the hostess who had introduced him to Carlingford society. But, with unmistakable irony, she proclaims to her friend Mrs Chiley "I always stand by my friends". And at precisely this point comes the major rewriting of which I am speaking. A comic episode involving Rose Lake and Archdeacon Beverley was omitted, allowing more stress to fall on Cavendish's absence from a Thursday (to Barbara's mortification). Although Lucilla's subsequent "triumph" over Barbara is presented with Mrs Oliphant's usual irony, the whole effect of the irony was (to some extent at least) neutralised in advance by a long paragraph of which there is no suggestion in Blackwood's. It follows the words "I always stand by my friends" and insists that this is the major motive of Lucilla's life. And these are the words which disconcertingly contradict the earlier passage emphasising the selfishness of her motives in shielding Cavendish:

It was at once her settled resolution, and a peculiarity of her character, to stand by her friends; and whatever might be the thoughts in

26. For further details see Appendix A.

her own mind, her immediate decision was to shut her ears to every indication of the culprit's personality, and to be blind to every suggestion that could identify him. People who like to discover the alloy which blends with all human motives, may suppose that Lucilla felt her own credit as the leader of society at stake, and would not admit that she had been duped. But this had in reality but a very small share in the matter. Her instinct, even when reason suggested that she should be doubtful of them, was always to side with her own friends...

This passage, written after the end of the serial (that is after May 1866) directly contradicts the statement made in this passage written before June 1865:

... the judgment which might overtake the careless shepherds [i.e. Lucilla] who had admitted the wolf into the fold was much more in Miss Marjoribanks's mind than any question of abstract justice. 27

Thus Mrs Oliphant had been rather careless in her revision (unless we concede that the discrepancy adds pungency and ambiguity to the irony). But the thoughts of 1866 were more willing to recognise honourable motives in Lucilla than were those of 1865, when the ironic effect of "I always stand by my friends" was confirmed by these words:

If she meant anything by what she said there was no time to enlarge upon it, for they were just at the drawing-room door, where all the heavy people were waiting to be amused. 28

And what follows is an episode of broad social comedy in which there is no undertone of admiration for Lucilla.

In this analysis of Miss Marjoribanks I have concentrated on the complex presentation of the heroine, and the omnipresent ironies,

27. M.M. I, 274-5, 272.

28. Blackwood's Magazine XCVII, 685-6.

possibly to the seeming disadvantage of the theme of this chapter, the community of Carlingford. Yet the confrontation of Lucilla and the community is the direct source of most of the ironies; this is the most "public" of The Chronicles of Carlingford and it is thus at the farthest extreme from The Doctor's Family. There is a sustained exposure of the social world of Carlingford, its prejudices, its greed for gossip, its shallowness and triviality, its lack of genuinely based moral values (all played for comedy, rather than for satire). Attention is drawn to social inequality and class feeling; Archdeacon Beverley's democratic views, as I showed in the last chapter, are viewed with suspicion in Carlingford. The class feeling is stressed by the ambiguous position of Cavendish and his sister Mrs Woodburn, who are quite out of place in the rigidly stratified class structure of the town. Cavendish aims to be Carlingford's next MP, but the truth about his lowly social origin, if it were revealed, would ruin his chances. This highlights a theme of sustained deception which effectively echoes the self-deception of Lucilla and of Barbara Lake: the inability of the first to acknowledge her own motives with honesty, the irrational hatreds of the second, motivated by unacknowledged jealousy. The major comedy episodes of the book are crowded scenes where Lucilla manipulates people at her Thursdays and on other occasions, the most brilliant of all being the large dinner party where she staves off the exposure of Mr Cavendish by constant diversions of the conversation and by feigned misunderstandings of the Archdeacon, who is eager to denounce him.²⁹ It is a fine example of comedy of

29. M.M. II, Chapter XXXII.

situation. And the book is built around a series of comedy set pieces, turning on Lucilla's skill in manipulating people, by quick action, by surprise moves, by creating a sense of alarm and insecurity, by an inexhaustible flow of talk. There are few intimate scenes (apart from the quiet duologue between Lucilla and her father which conveys his foreboding of death, an episode not in keeping with the tone of the rest of the book); events take place with Carlingford, literally or metaphorically, looking on and judging according to its prejudices and its limited points of view. I have illustrated in the previous chapter the Archdeacon's contempt for "the false and tyrannical conventionalism called society", which partly (after discounting the Archdeacon's overwrought state of mind) represents Mrs Oliphant's view.³⁰ One sentence from this same paragraph, stressing the Archdeacon's frustration, effectively epitomises the central theme of Miss Marjoribanks:

Yet such are the beneficial restraints of society, that he dared not follow his natural impulses, nor even do what he felt to be his duty, for fear of Miss Marjoribanks, which was about the highest testimony to the value of social influences that could be given. 31

The irony is fairly complex. The restraints of society are without a doubt "beneficial" - but not always; natural impulses often need to be followed, especially if they are a "duty". However, just as society exerts unfair pressure on Lucilla, cramping her talents, so she in her turn exerts unfair pressure on other people to satisfy

30. If we define "society" as the fashionable world of high life, dinner parties and social occasions, Mrs Oliphant gives a sharply satirical picture of it in many novels, notably Squire Arden (1871) and its sequel For Love and Life (1874), and It Was a Lover and His Lass (1883).

31. M.M. II, 247.

her own purposes. For example she exploits the talents, not merely of Barbara, for whom little sympathy is possible, but of Rose, who on one occasion is invited to bring her portfolio of sketches merely as a public amusement and not at all for Rose's benefit, so that Rose "who had a proud little spirit, was anything but satisfied with the evening's entertainment", though later Lucilla "even succeeded in convincing little Rose Lake of the perfect reasonableness, and indeed necessity, of sacrificing herself to the public interests of the community".³² But Carlingford is not an environment where it is easy to be one's natural self. And later in the crucial inner debates that precede and follow Dr Marjoribanks's death, Lucilla becomes aware of this herself:

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.... [S]he had come to an age at which she might have gone into Parliament ... had there been no disqualification of sex, and when it was almost a necessity for her to make some use of her social influence.... To be sure, there were still the dinners to attend to, a branch of human affairs worthy of the weightiest consideration, and she had a house of her own, as much as if she had been half a dozen times married; but still there are instincts which go even beyond dinners, and 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 Power³³ unless it can be made use of for some worthy end.

Miss Marjoribanks is remarkable not only for unity of mood and tone, but for unity of theme combined with a neatly effective structure. Until this book Mrs Oliphant had never been entirely successful in

32. M.M. I, 282, 285.

33. M.M. III, 105-7.

the integration of form and content. Plot devices were demonstrably used to further her themes, or an over-theatrical mystery theme (as in Salem Chapel) detracted from the closely observed but often under-plotted sequences which helped to create mood and character. Within the general pattern of Lucilla's developing "career" as organiser of Carlingford's social life, the structure begins to declare itself, designed to define for the reader - and eventually for Lucilla herself - the exact nature of her image of herself as a woman with ambitions, talents and at first no clearly formulated sense of purpose. A succession of supposed lovers (mainly Cavendish, Archdeacon Beverley and Ashburton, with one or two others briefly intervening), each of whom she loses to another woman, quietly develops her understanding of her position. She wants these men not for love but for social advancement; and much the same is true of Tom, since there is clearly not much depth in her love for him. And her father's death forces her at last to take stock of herself. There may perhaps be an undue proliferation of episodes designed to illustrate Lucilla's power of manipulating people; and the pattern of the Cavendish/Lucilla/Barbara triangle (with Cavendish being drawn away, now by one, now by the other woman) is too repetitive. Yet these repetitions do serve a purpose; they emphasise the futility and sterility of a life that cannot make any meaningful progress towards self-definition, the life, that is, both of Lucilla and of Carlingford. And once this theme has moved from the implicit to the explicit, in Chapter XLII and then in Chapter XLIV and its successors, the rest of the book logically fulfils Lucilla's newly-found sense of her identity and of the needs of her personality. The last chapter sets Lucilla's marriage and her departure from Carlingford against the wide-ranging

reactions of the town, sustaining the choric comment which has been richly used throughout the book for much more than mere decoration, indeed to fill out the picture of town life that has consistently served as a foil to Lucilla.

Ten years intervened between Miss Marjoribanks and Phoebe Junior, and in the later novel the imaginative energy and ironic insight into a small community have largely evaporated. Phoebe Beecham is another young woman seeking a role in life and single-mindedly devoting herself to this purpose (again by achieving a vicarious career through marriage), but Phoebe when compared with Lucilla is a more self-indulgent, more self-conscious study. Spontaneity and exuberance of creativity have been replaced by deliberate calculation. Carlingford plays a much vaguer, less challenging role in Phoebe Junior, which lacks the unmistakable Chronicles trademarks which I have analysed in these two chapters: the single-minded concentration on a community, the consistent ironic vision, the thematic unity, the interlocking of characters. The book is fairly rich in ironies, involving minor characters, but unfortunately Phoebe herself is largely viewed unironically. Her determined pursuit of the awkward, callow vulgarian Clarence Copperhead, son of a grotesquely caricatured philistine millionaire, is strangely insensitive and (as Meredith Townsend complained in The Spectator in an otherwise enthusiastic review)³⁴ ought to have been treated with ironic detachment. The marriage of Lucilla and Tom is acceptable, since there is mutual affection and Tom is not

34. The Spectator, 17 June 1876; XLIX, 769-70.

presented as grotesquely stupid. But the ludicrous vulgarity of Clarence, who is offered almost entirely for the reader's contempt, makes it unacceptable that Phoebe, whose intelligence, sophistication, resourcefulness and wide-ranging education we are consistently invited to admire, would ever conceive of marrying him, even if her reward is to be the chance of writing his Parliamentary speeches for him. Certainly, Phoebe is a striking heroine, a challenge to the stereotypes of the demure, submissive heroines without any opinions of their own favoured by many nineteenth-century novelists. Yet she is too much of a paragon, too much of the heroine-come-to-the-rescue in Volume Three as she intervenes to save Mr May, the clergyman whose forgery of Tozer's signature is about to be revealed.

The finest aspect of Phoebe Junior is the character-study of Mr May, a tragic victim of self-delusion under the most acute financial pressure. Money was not a central theme of The Chronicles of Carlingford, and briefly appears only in the parasitic and financially dishonest Tom Wodehouse in The Perpetual Curate, and in the dramatic moment in Miss Marjoribanks when Lucilla discovers that she has been impoverished by her father's rash financial speculations. But by the 1870's it had become something of an obsession with Mrs Oliphant. In Phoebe Junior the money theme is very slow to develop but when it does it entirely displaces the church theme which I examined in the previous chapter. (As a result the book suffers from severe structural disjointedness.) Mr May, driven by constant financial anxiety and yet irrationally compelled to extravagances he knows he can ill afford, harassed by constant emotional crises and the frustrations and self-delusions to which they drive him, is a remarkable example

of Mrs Oliphant's delight in perverse and complex states of mind. His impulsive decision to forge Tozer's signature follows an acute crisis of despair and of guilt on behalf of a Carlingford tradesman whom he had involved in debt; this dulls his judgment and leads him to the wishful-thinking argument that the forgery will be "no harm done to anyone", since "Why people should entertain the prejudices they did on the subject it was difficult to see".³⁵ In due course he loses all sense of reality, and undergoes strange delusions. When finally threatened by exposure and disgrace, he becomes monomaniacal in his despair ("Rot in prison! with hard labour; it would kill me! And it used to be hanging!")³⁶ and in effect insane.

The money theme involves the community much more significantly than any other theme of Phoebe Junior, and at the end of the book they make their last appearance in the Chronicles, yet even so with little of the effect of Miss Marjoribanks and even of The Perpetual Curate. The final climax is a confrontation of most of the characters in the story, interweaving the money theme and Phoebe's marital ambitions (but not the church theme). The book suffers from slovenly construction (the conventional love stories occupy a disproportionately large space) and, apart from Phoebe, Tozer and Mr May, unremarkable characterisation. A sign of the weakness of the book is the exasperating crudity with which the millionaire Copperhead is presented, making remarks such as that old people should not "burden the community" - instead "let 'em die out naturally" - or the bizarre philistinism of :

35. Phoebe Junior II, 140, 141-2.

36. Phoebe Junior III, 281.

"A country-town's a mistake in my opinion. If I had it in my power I'd raze them all to the ground, and have one London and the rest green fields.... Now you don't produce anything here, what's the good of you? All unproductive communities, sir, ought to be swept off the face of the earth." 37

In a very different context this might very well make effective satire, but in what is intended as sober-toned domestic realism it is grotesquely out of place, and is symptomatic of the loss of control in Phoebe Junior. To say, as Mr and Mrs Colby do, that "Technically it is by far the best of the Carlingford novels"³⁸ makes no sort of sense; it is a novel in which the part is very much more than the whole. Nevertheless those parts that are successful make an effective conclusion to the Carlingford series.

37. Phoebe Junior III, 112-3, 87.

38. Colby, p.67

CHAPTER NINE

STUDIES OF INHERITANCE, CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS

[T]he new sense of alarm and apprehension with which the idea of breaking up his present life, and disclosing to those who knew him under one name another identity, filled his spirit. It appeared to him that, if he gave up his present standing ground by revealing another, his whole life, so happy, so sweet, so full of natural duty, work, and recompense, would break up and disappear from him.... It had become almost dear to him, the name which he had picked up in bitter ridicule, and adopted with a perverse laugh, as he might have stuck a feather in his hat. The sound was familiar now to his ears, he liked it.... He liked it, and had a certain pride in it, as a name that was honest and without stain, and which should never suffer in his hands; and if he cut himself off from it, what would become of him? his identity would be gone.

(Harry Joscelyn, 1881; III, 168-9)

After a decade of experiment and a decade devoted to the exploration of the social patterns of a community, Mrs Oliphant had developed her mature style, and for the rest of her career (some 30 years) she was potentially capable of handling the type of novel that she had made her own. I say "potentially" because she was always capable of writing in a sterile and conventional manner with insipid love stories and over-ingenious mystery themes designed to evoke stock responses. But her status as a professional writer was now established, and the pattern of her life was set: one of constant writing, "over-production", if we must call it that, in order to provide an education for her sons and a tolerable income for them and her other dependants.

What she wrote always had that professionalism that inevitably results from regular, consistent methods of work - even if that professionalism was sometimes (but not nearly as frequently as her critics have said) tempted to cut corners by relying on formulas and stereotypes.

It is not possible to sustain the chronological approach I have been following in the first three chapters of Part Two. The patterns of a characteristic Oliphant novel, as I have described them in Part One, were established by the Chronicles of Carlingford, and there is little significant change or development in the last three decades of Mrs Oliphant's career. She did in fact constantly modify her approach, though only to a limited extent, in accordance with the changing literary climate of the passing years; but the effect on her particular type of novel is not marked enough to be worth recording in detail. Consequently my approach in the chapters that remain will be thematic.

In Appendix B I attempt a classification of Mrs Oliphant's fiction in the manner of Michael Sadleir's classification of Trollope's. There is no need to devote a separate chapter to each of my categories, since those which deal with topics central to Mrs Oliphant's work (notably her studies of marriage) have already been examined in detail in Part One; and those in which Mrs Oliphant was working with less than consistent imaginative power (her love stories, and her mystery novels) do not warrant detailed treatment. But three categories of novel do call for close attention: those which Mr and Mrs Colby describe as "novels dealing with problems of estates and their inheritance";¹ those which deal with money; and Scottish novels. I must also devote

1. Colby, p.136

a little space to her stories of the supernatural, the Stories of the Seen and Unseen, not for their intrinsic merit but because they were very highly regarded in her lifetime and subsequently.

Although Mrs Oliphant was consistently scornful of the kind of novel associated with Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Braddon, Mrs Henry Wood and many others (as for example in her article on "Sensation Novels" in Blackwood's Magazine in May 1862)² she was always very strongly tempted to make use of the familiar characteristics of this type of novel: the coincidences, the unexpected revelations, the plottings and counterplottings, the highly emotional confrontations and denunciations, and the impenetrable mysteries, endlessly discussed without any progress to a solution until all is dramatically revealed by the discovery of a long-missing document or by a death-bed confession. All this machinery (as I have already indicated on several occasions, notably when discussing Salem Chapel) was freely used in some of her novels, usually with a disastrous effect on her natural feeling for reality and observed detail. But there are certain novels, ostensibly studies of inheritance, in which powerfully ironic comments on contemporary English society prove to be far more important than the top dressing of forced plot contrivances and overwrought theatricality. Starting with the very unsatisfactory Zaidee (1856), she wrote some fifteen novels on this theme. Each novel concerns itself with a great estate or manor house, concentrating on the family in possession,

2. Blackwood's Magazine XCI, 564-84. This article has been frequently used by twentieth-century commentators on the "sensation novel".

and on the members of another family who cast covetous eyes on the estate, longing to inherit, considering it often a gross injustice to have been passed over by a disinheriting will, or by the unexpected birth of a new heir, or by many other methods. Alternatively, a new heir turns up unexpectedly, successfully kept secret until just the right moment for revealing the appalling truth; or as yet another alternative, the supposed true heir proves to be fraudulent or in some other way unacceptable. Yet on examination of the most interesting of these novels it seems that inheritance is merely the ostensible theme, being used as a kind of metaphor for something else, notably an examination of social status, or our "role" in society, with a very remarkable stress on our sense of identity within our environment. And accordingly these novels make a very sharp comment on contemporary life.

Mr and Mrs Colby give a list of these books, a shorter list than my own, and claim that The Story of Valentine and His Brother (3 volumes, Blackwood, 1875) is "by far the best".³ They stress its romantic tenderness and its pathos; and indeed this is one of the most lyrical and romantic of Mrs Oliphant's novels. But there is less scope for Mrs Oliphant's characteristic strengths, and more interesting are Squire Arden (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett, 1871) and its sequel For Love and Life (1874), particularly the second; and the final novel in the series, The Prodigals and Their Inheritance (1894), is also of particular interest.

The Story of Valentine and His Brother deals with heredity and environment. Val and Dick are twin brothers, sons of Lord Eskside's

3. Colby, p.136

heir and a gipsy woman. Val is brought up in comfort and luxury by his grandparents; Dick is retained by his mother and lives a life of hard work and poverty, totally unaware of his father's family. From the first Mrs Oliphant stresses the influence of heredity. This is inevitable since it was not until the theories of Naturalism first made their impact on England in the 1880's that the importance of environment was understood. Val in the middle of his genteel world is aware of a second personality in conflict with his "respectable" nature. This is explained when he discovers who his mother was:

If this woman was his mother, might she not meet him somewhere, claim him, take him back again? This thought filled him with a confused and indescribable horror.... This had given a curious inarticulate duality to his life. There were two of him. One Valentine Ross, whom he could identify boldly, who was happy and free and beloved - the other, something he did not know.

And later:

The feeling in Valentine's heart was all chaotic, undeveloped. He had found out what was the meaning of the contradiction of two natures in him, the jar of which he had been dimly conscious, without knowing what it was. The struggle itself had been going on within him for years, since the time when, a mere child, he had suffered and conquered that natural thirst for the out-of-door life to which he had been born. 4

Unfortunately Mrs Oliphant was unable to do very much with Valentine's duality. He goes to Eton and learns to master his undisciplined nature - and then he becomes more or less a conventional hero figure.

A similar conflict between heredity and environment is shown in Dick, who appears first as a working man living in pauper accommodation with his mother. But he is refined and good natured, and his gift

for wood carving leads him to fill his room with artistic odds-and-ends, thus unconsciously revealing his cultured, gentlemanly ancestry. Indeed, once again, the stress is laid almost entirely upon heredity, not upon environment. Mrs Oliphant wants Dick to be virtuous and respectable, as a hero ought to be; and so that is what he is. She shows a generalised knowledge of how he and his mother live, but there is little detail, nor any certain understanding of how they talk and think.

Far more interesting is the consequence of Dick's eventual discovery of who he really is. He experiences an acute crisis of identity:

Instead of being a nobody, Dick Brown, Styles's head man, he was Richard Ross, Lord Eskside's grandson.... But Dick was not glad at first.... He had found a family, a name, a position in the world; but he seemed to have lost himself.... Here, in his natural sphere, he was respected, thought well of, and everybody was aware how well he fulfilled his duties, bearing himself like a man, whatever he had to do. But this new world was all dark to him, a place in which he would have no guidance of experience, in which he would be judged according to another standard, and looked down upon.... If it was to be that he was not Dick Brown, how much better it would have been that he had never been Dick Brown. 5

By examining the psychological effect of Dick's transformation Mrs Oliphant is challenging the preconceived idea that a great rise in social and financial status is inevitably pure gratification. There is a need to adjust, to discover the new "self" that must experience the new circumstances. And through his introspection we are made aware that he is liable to be found unfit for his new position. He will be "looked down upon"; he "would have no guidance of experience".

On the other hand the quotation typifies the inadequacy of Mrs Oliphant's approach in this novel. Her imagination fails in the attempt to create a sense of the realities of Dick's working life. "How well he fulfilled his duties, bearing himself like a man" is altogether too vague and optimistic, just at the point where we need an objective, detailed view of the familiar world from which Dick is so startlingly removed. And, as I previously indicated, Mrs Oliphant has weakened the impact of the crisis-of-identity theme by showing that Dick is unmistakably a gentleman's son from the first; and he behaves impeccably from first to last.

In Valentine and His Brother Mrs Oliphant had set herself a very difficult task, to describe a change of status up the social ladder, and a long way up it. But in Squire Arden and For Love and Life, written slightly earlier, she shows a similar change of status, followed by a much more elaborately studied crisis of identity, and here the move is down the social ladder, not up. But before I examine these two novels, I must isolate for special treatment the crisis-of-identity theme, which is peculiar to the "inheritance" novels and to a group of novels, which I call psychological environmental novels, or studies of self-discovery. (See Appendix B.) In the most interesting of these novels Mrs Oliphant makes a more illuminating study of environment than she does in Valentine and His Brother, though never to the extent that a naturalist novelist would.

Crisis of identity is sometimes considered to be a peculiarly twentieth-century theme. But Mrs Oliphant took a very specific interest in it. When reviewing Lord Lytton's posthumous novel Kenelm Chillingley in May 1873, in between the writing of Squire Arden and For Love and Life, she singled out what she saw as the treatment of this theme

by Lytton, whose hero tries to submerge his true identity in the assumed role of a farm-worker.⁶ Her interest in the theme derives from her interest in "the veil of individuality", which I described in detail in Chapter Four: the isolation of each person in his own self-coherent, self-isolating world. It is a necessity for each person to feel confident and secure within the world that he has created or has been created for him. If this world is challenged then we experience an inability to decide exactly who we are or to discover the dimensions of our own personality. And the experience of being taken out of one class into another, when continuity is abruptly broken and the sufferer finds himself having to adjust to a completely unfamiliar and alienating world, was compulsively fascinating to Mrs Oliphant, since she recurred to it with great frequency in the 1870's and 1880's. In Harry Joscelyn (1881) the hero adopts the name of Isaac Oliver, a farm servant on his uncle's estates (there is evidently a slight echo of Kenelm Chillingley here), and later he seems to have identified with the new persona he has created for himself, especially when he uproots himself from his English background and creates a new life for himself in Italy, retaining the name Isaac Oliver. And an acute crisis of identity is precipitated when members of his family wish to claim him by his true name of Harry Joscelyn. The heroine of Joyce (1888) has been brought up in humble life, the foster daughter of a ploughman, and is then claimed by her true father and is taken into upper middle-class life, where she is greatly at a loss; and eventually the clash between her two incompatible worlds,

6. "Kenelm Chillingley", Blackwood's Magazine CXIII, 615-30.

their values in direct conflict with each other, produces tragedy. The treatment of this theme in Joyce is much more effective than in Valentine and His Brother.

The central character of Squire Arden and For Love and Life is Edgar Arden, supposedly heir to the Arden estate in South Lancashire. But in due course (precisely three quarters of the way through the first novel) Edgar discovers that he is only the adopted son of Squire Arden, and is really the grandson of an old Scottish peasant woman who is living in a cottage on the estate. As a result of this he chooses to identify himself with his grandmother, and to renounce all claim on the Arden estate. For Love and Life is a sustained - and a very remarkable - study of his subsequent attempt to make a new life for himself and adjust to a new set of circumstances, and of the resultant unhappiness, disorientation, purposelessness and loss of status. And since in this second book Edgar's predicament is seen against an ironic picture of an acutely class-conscious English society (where Edgar's loss of status really will be a misfortune) there is an adequate context and a solid sense of fully-imagined reality. Most of the scenes in For Love and Life are set in London, to which Edgar, unable to go on living with his new-found family, transfers himself, in the unavailing hope of finding a role there; and in her picture of London Mrs Oliphant concentrates on the class-consciousness of English society.

Edgar's social ambiguity baffles almost everybody he meets who wishes to place him according to a preconceived social scheme, and

cannot easily do so. This problem is reflected most strikingly in the character of Lord Newmarch, who appears in both novels. He is represented as an enthusiast for a surprising range of democratic ideals: for compulsory education,⁷ for work for women, for internationalism, for a sort of welfare state, and for the educative value of the real theatre. But he is presented in this way mainly in Squire Arden; when he reappears in For Love and Life (three years later both in publication and time of action) he seems less of an idealist and just as much obsessed with matters of class and social status as if he had never had those views, although he is still anxious to be Edgar's friend and find work for him. Yet he finds it difficult to relate to Edgar, because he cannot see in him any frame of reference. And Lord Newmarch's democratic sympathies are seen with ironic detachment, which is enriched by his embarrassment with Edgar:

Lord Newmarch had been very democratic in his day; he had taken workmen in their working clothes to dine with him at his club in his hot youth, and had made them very uncomfortable, and acquired a delightful reputation himself for advanced ideas; which was a very great thing for a new lord, whose grandfather had been a small shopkeeper, to do. But somehow he was a great deal more at his ease with the working man than with his former friend and equal, now reduced to a perfectly incredible destitution of those circumstances which form the very clothing and skin of most men. Edgar was in soul and being, no doubt, exactly the same as ever; he had the same face, the same voice, the same thought and feelings. Had he lost only his money Lord Newmarch would not have felt the difficulty half so great, for indeed a great many people do (whatever the world may say) lose their money, without being dropped or discredited by society. But something a great deal more dreadful had happened in Edgar's case. He had lost, so to speak, himself; and how to behave towards a man who a little while ago had been his equal, nay his superior, and now was not his equal, nor anybody's, yet the same man, puzzled the young statesman beyond expression.

7. Squire Arden was published just after the Education Act of 1870.

This is a very different sort of thing from entertaining a couple of working men to the much astonishment (delightful homage to one's own peculiarities) of one's club. The doctrine that all men are brothers comes in with charming piquancy in the one case, but is very much less easy to deal with in the other. 8

The irony here highlights the personal vanity which invalidates Lord Newmarch's democratic affectations. (He had "acquired a delightful reputation", his club's reaction was a "delightful homage to one's own peculiarities"; his views have a "charming piquancy." In each case the adjective is particularly illuminating.) Thus Edgar's "perfectly incredible" loss of status - perfectly incredible, not only because of the insecurity from which Edgar suffers, but because Lord Newmarch cannot admit the possibility that a man may be treated as an individual with no reference to his role in society - demonstrates the emptiness of Lord Newmarch's liberal ideas, how little thought-out they are. A little later he is called a "profound blockhead" by a character who carries most of Mrs Oliphant's sympathies.⁹

In For Love and Life Lord Newmarch's role as spokesman of liberal ideas is taken over by Lady Mary Tottenham and her husband, who is the head of the department store Tottenham's. (It is Mr Tottenham who called Lord Newmarch a "profound blockhead".) Until cured of his snobbery by Lady Mary, Mr Tottenham had been ashamed of his connection with a shop. Now he runs Tottenham's with a concern for the welfare of his employees: a library, a chapel, sitting rooms, and above all

8. For Love and Life I, 188-90

9. For Love and Life I, 249

regular evening entertainments.¹⁰ The atmosphere is uncomfortably paternalistic, and Mrs Oliphant seems unaware of this; yet Tottenham's does offer a striking - and not too condescending - alternative to the arrogant pride of class and obsession with social status which affects so many characters in the book. (For example Clare Arden, the "sister", that is foster-sister, of Edgar, is a powerful study of fierce uncompromising pride of class, especially in Squire Arden; however the theme is neglected in the latter part of the book, and thus Mrs Oliphant throws away an opportunity for a searching analysis of this family pride and the humbling of it.)

Lady Mary is not only a democrat but also a passionate believer in education, especially for women; and For Love and Life is among other things a study of education as an antidote for social injustice and inequality, especially for women:

"I thought most ladies were terribly well-educated."

"Ah, I know what you mean!" said Lady Mary, "educated in nothings, taught to display all their little bits of superficial information. It is not only that women get no education, Mr Earnshaw, (11) but how are we to get it for them? Of course an effort may be made for a girl in Molly's position, with parents who fully appreciate the difficulties of the matter; but for girls of the middle classes, for instance? They get a little very bad music, and worse French, and this is considered education...."

10. Mrs Oliphant, as so often, was very topical. The 1870's was the great period of expansion of department stores, such as Debenhams & Freebody, and John Barker and Seaman, Little & Co., of Kensington. And Derry & Toms "had about two hundred living-in assistants, for whom they provided a fine library and other advantages, the result of a special study made by the proprietors for the comfort and social advancement of their little array of busy and efficient employees" (Alison Adburgham, Shops and Shopping 1800-1914, Allen & Unwin, 1964, p.164.)

11. That is, Edgar, who has reverted to the surname with which he was born.

"Lady Mary Tottenham would learn from any man who had anything to teach her.... Mr Earnshaw, ... why should you laugh at one's endeavour to help one's fellow-creatures to a little instruction, and one's self -- ?" 12

And yet Lady Mary is at times viewed as ironically as Lord Newmarch.

In a later chapter we are forced to ask ourselves whether her fervent love of education has perhaps made her something of a prig, patronising the very girls she wishes to help:

"Oh, my dear girls", she said, "how are you ever to be thoroughly educated if you go on thinking only of what's useful, and to speak a little German when you go abroad? What is wanted is to make you think - to train your minds into good methods of work - to improve you altogether mentally, and give you the exactness of properly cultivated intellects; just the thing that we women never have".

Myra was the only one who had courage enough to reply, which she did with such a good hearty ringing peal of laughter as betrayed Edgar out of the gravity becoming to the situation. Myra thought Lady Mary's address the best joke in the world. 13

Here Mrs Oliphant's sympathies are equally balanced between Lady Mary (whose views are not unreasonable and entirely consistent with those sympathetically presented in the previous quotation) and Myra, the voice of mockery and irreverence in the book. And like so many reformers Lady Mary is less impressive when she moves from protest to practical proposals. She plans a course of village lectures - on Euclid, botany, German and other unrelated subjects.

Lady Mary is even more keenly exposed when her theoretical egalitarianism is put to a practical test, and by Edgar himself. The question arises of a marriage between Edgar and Lady Mary's niece Augusta Thornleigh. She surprises her nephew Harry by wishing Edgar would marry within his own rank:

12. For Love and Life II, 6-10

13. For Love and Life II, 110-11. The passage is given emphasis by being made the last words of the chapter.

"Why, I thought you were a democrat, and cared nothing about rank; I thought you were of the opinion that all men are equal, not to speak of women --"

"Don't talk nonsense, Harry; an abstract belief, one way or other, has nothing to do with one's family arrangements. I like Mr Earnshaw very much; he is more than my equal, for he is an educated man, and knows much more than I do, which is my standard of position; but still, at the same time, I should not like him - in his present circumstances - to enter my family --"

However, as the subsequent dialogue makes clear, Lady Mary's point of view is interestingly complex. When Harry, with painful crudity, echoes her views she is embarrassed at the parody of her pride of class and would have risen to the defence of Edgar, whom she much admires for his renunciation of his falsely acquired rank; "but she was subdued by the consciousness that, much as she liked Edgar, any sort of man would appear to her a preferable husband for Gussy. This sense of weakness cowed her, for Harry, although he was stupid intellectually, was more than a match for his aunt in the calm certainty of his sentiments on this point."¹⁴ And indeed in an earlier chapter she had shown considerable sympathy for Edgar's love:

"Oh, Mr Earnshaw! how I fret at such restrictions - how I wish we could put aside mercenary considerations, and acknowledge ourselves all to be equal, as I am sure we are by nature".

It is because she has found this idea unattainable that she adopts the attitude of "class exclusivism" (her own words)¹⁵ which I have already quoted.

The true spokeswoman for democratic ideas is not Lady Mary, but Mrs Murray, Edgar's grandmother - who in both novels is used as the

14. For Love and Life II, 210,212.

15. For Love and Life II, 125-6; 272 ("Your class exclusivism is revolting, Harry".)

standard to judge other characters. She has the pride of the peasant and her values are the values of deep family love and independence of mind which Mrs Oliphant always considered to be peculiarly Scottish.

She was but a farmer's wife, a farmer herself, a lowly, homely woman; but many a princess was less proud. She sat and looked at the blue loch, and thought of the long succession of years in which she had reigned as queen in this humble house, a centre of beneficence, giving to all. She had never shut her heart against the cry of the poor, she who was poor herself; she had brought up children, she had entertained strangers, she had done all that reigning princesses could do. For forty years all who had any claim on her kindness had come to her unhesitatingly in every strait. Silver and gold she had little, but everything else she gave, the shelter of her house, her best efforts, her ready counsel, her unfailing help. 16

This is not Mrs Oliphant at her best; it generalises when it ought to particularise; it idealises too much, and needs a realistic anti-thesis; it over-insists on words like "lowly, homely" and "princess"; its Biblical echo ("Silver and gold she had little") is embarrassing in its obviousness of intention. Yet the ideal is worthy of respect, and Mrs Murray thus at the beginning of the novel functions as a silent reproach to the egotism, the class-ridden prejudices, the rationalised meanness and the insecurely based ideals which we find elsewhere in the book. Mrs Murray is exempt from her creator's irony; but her children (Edgar's uncles and aunts) are not. There is a sharp contrast between her and these people, mean, selfish, mutually jealous, constantly excusing their lack of warmth, incapable of generosity to Mrs Murray. These "absolutely commonplace people" are a bitter disappointment to her. One of them, very significantly, aims to be

called "genteel" and is anxious that the girl he loves should go to a school to refine herself, and get rid of her Scotticisms. The education theme thus puts in an early appearance in the book with a sharply ironic implication. Here is a very different sort of education for women from what Lady Mary Tottenham wants.

The exaggerated use of contrast, the conscientious heightening and isolation of the dignity and integrity of Edgar and his grandmother (and also one of his cousins) by emphasising the inadequacy of everybody else is artistically ill-advised (as indeed Mrs Oliphant well knew, since she criticised other novelists, including Jane Austen, for doing just this.)¹⁷ Mrs Murray is not strengthened by the technique, but weakened, transformed almost into a stereotype, idealised amidst glamorous Scottish scenery. However, she appears only at the beginning of the novel and at the end, thus providing an idyllic framework for the ironic, semi-realistic events of the central chapters.

As I have indicated, the central experience of For Love and Life, the theme into which almost all the other themes of the novel dovetail, is Edgar's experience of disorientation. The Scottish scenes at the beginning help to highlight this theme by emphasising his disillusion with the unworthy relatives with whom he had intended to identify himself. Thus he has lost his identity as Edgar Arden but cannot accommodate himself to that of Edgar Earnshaw. He has failed to discover

17. To give a very apt quotation: "It is generally improbable, if we could but get writers of fiction to believe it, that one member of a family, fathered and mothered, brothered and sistered by such disagreeable people, should be everything that is delightful. Such a freak of nature may occur occasionally, but it is rare" ("New Novels", Blackwood's Magazine July 1879; CXXVIII, 398).

a clearly defined image of himself, and finds himself unable to guard against depression, insecurity, mild paranoia and an acute psychological dislocation.

Although my concern is largely with For Love and Life I must here briefly return to Squire Arden, where near the end a question is asked concerning Edgar's decision to renounce the background in which he has been brought up, a question which epitomises the theme of For Love and Life:

Why should Edgar, why should anyone, thus resign their own happiness? Happiness was the better part of life, and ought there not to be a canon against its renunciation as well as against self-murder? Self-murder was nothing to it. To give up your identity, your real existence, all the service you could do God or man, was not that worse than simply taking your own life? So Clare asked herself. 18

"To give up your identity, your real existence": this is the central issue. Mrs Oliphant in these two novels examines that image of ourselves which, she indicates, is essentially the synthesis of our accumulated experiences (environment), of our conditioning by other people's values and preconceptions, and of our sense of our duties, responsibilities and "the service [we can] do God or man". But Edgar prefers to commit himself to the peasant family to which his heredity attaches him. Earlier he had experienced an acute sense of loss, which the above passage echoes:

"Sure", he said with a smile; "am I sure of my own existence? No, I don't mean of my own identity, for at present I have none." 19

It is this bewilderment that causes him to commit himself so irrevocably to Mrs Murray.

18. Squire Arden III, 279-80

19. Squire Arden III, 171

Edgar's choice is not naively simplified or sentimentalised.

His feelings towards his grandmother are far from simple:

She had a hold on him which nobody else in the world had. And yet - to be very kind, tender-hearted, and generous to your conventional inferiors is not easy; but to take a family among them into your very heart and acknowledge them as your own! - Edgar shivered with a pang that ran through every nerve; and yet it had to be done! 20

Here by the use of the phrase "conventional inferiors" Mrs Oliphant avoids complete identification with Edgar's point of view. In certain ways - by her dignity, her independence, her "honest poverty" - Mrs Murray proves her superiority to the Ardens, and it is only according to stereotyped ideas of class that she is inferior. Yet Edgar is the direct product of the conditioning of his adoptive class and his conflict of loyalties is sympathetically understood.

It is worth analysing in detail one episode in Squire Arden to illustrate Mrs Oliphant's approach to this theme. Mr Fielding the rector invites Edgar and his "sister" Clare along with Mrs Murray to visit him. Clare's unmitigated family pride and her uncompromising attitude are contrasted on the one hand with Mr Fielding's scrupulous generosity and on the other hand with Edgar's anxious self-induced process of self-identification with his new class. Mr Fielding is very friendly and hospitable to Mrs Murray when he knows who she is.

"My dear Edgar, stop a little", cried Mr Fielding, in much agitation.... "If this - lady is your - your grandmother, my dear boy. Pardon me, but it is so hard to realise it - to imagine; but she cannot be left in that poor little cottage - it is impossible. I am amazed that I could have overlooked - that I did not see. The Rectory is small, and Clare perhaps

might not think - or I should beg you to come here - but some other place, some better place."

Mrs Murray's face beamed with a sudden smile. Edgar looked on with terror, fearing he could not tell what. Was she about to seize this social elevation with vulgar eagerness? Was she about to make it impossible for him even to respect her? "Sir", she said, holding out her hand to the rector, "I thank you for my lad's sake. Every time I see or hear how he's respected, how he's thought of, my heart leaps like the hart, and my tongue is ready to sing. It's like forgiveness from the Lord for the harm I've done - but we're lodged as well as we wish for the moment, and I desire nothing of any man. We're no rich, and we're no grand, but we're proud folk."

"I beg your pardon, Madam", said Mr Fielding, bowing over her hand as if she had been a duchess. And Edgar drew the other through his arm. "Folks that none need think shame of", he said in his heart, and for the first time since this misery began, that heart rose with a sensation which was not pain.

In this passage Mrs Oliphant captures with neat precision the social embarrassment experienced by the two men. Mr Fielding's hesitations ("This - lady") and his uneasy acknowledgement of Clare's prejudices, with which he half seems to identify, are highlighted by Mrs Murray's dignity, and his incoherent syntax by her Biblical language (which comes naturally to a Scotswoman). Edgar is far less secure in his democratic, independent views than his grandmother; so he lays exaggerated stress on one isolated point of principle, the obligation to maintain the "pride of poverty" at all costs. The exaggeration of "Was she about to make it impossible for him even to respect her?" is largely Edgar's, not Mrs Oliphant's; though indeed she does not question the underlying assumption and she heartily endorses his words (so curiously uncolloquial) "Folks that none need think shame of."

After this Mrs Oliphant brings Clare forward into the light,

with a sustained, rather heavy, note of irony. Mrs Murray offers her "an old woman's blessing", although Clare is immediately shown to be "ashamed, humbled and mortified, and cast down" with contempt for Edgar's grandmother. She surrenders to her fiercely arrogant pride of class and to confused and illogical thoughts about Edgar's loss of status and to unjust assumptions that "because [Edgar] was of common flesh and blood, he had not felt it".

The chapter ends with a stress, partly on Edgar's slow adaptation to his new circumstances, partly on the high emotions of Mrs Murray which give the direct lie to Clare's prejudices.

As for Edgar, he walked down again to Sally Timms' cottage, with his old mother (21) on his arm. "Lean on me", he said to her as they went along in the dark. He could not be fond of her all at once, stranger as she was; but he was - could it be possible? - proud of her, and it was a pleasure to him to feel that he supported her, and did a son's natural duty so far. And then it went to his heart when he saw all at once in the light of a cottage window which gleamed on her as they passed, that she was weeping, silently putting up her hand to wipe tears from her face. "It's no trouble, it's for gladness", she said, when he looked up at her anxiously. "I canna think but my repentance is accepted and the Lord has covered over my sin". 22

The words "could it be possible?" subtly convey a moment of astonished self-discovery as Edgar examines his own state of mind; the sentence-rhythm re-enacts the shock of recognition. The last words with their conventional note of piety are less impressive, being intended to end the chapter on a mood of fulfilment and acceptance.

For Love and Life starts from this basic situation, almost as if no time had intervened. Edgar Arden is now Edgar Earnshaw and,

21. "Mother", not "grandmother". The error may be an oversight, or a deliberate indication of Edgar's feeling.

22. Squire Arden III, 304-7

as I have already indicated, he has been deeply mortified by the meanness and pettiness of his relations, apart from Mrs Murray and one cousin. This disillusion is seen in the context of his continuing difficulty in adjusting to his changed status:

Had he retained his original position, so little affected was he really by external circumstances, that I believe he would have found the life at the Castle Farm infinitely more reasonable, sensible, and natural than that which, as a man of fortune and fashion, he would himself have been compelled to lead. The simple fare, the plain rooms, the absence of luxuries, and even some of those everyday luxuries which we call comforts, did not really distress him; it was the sense of missing them, the quick and vivid consciousness of this and that a-wanting, which made the young man sore, and bitter, and ashamed of himself. 23

(There is some carelessness of expression here, unfortunately not untypical of Mrs Oliphant. "Missing them" refers, not to "the simple fare, the plain rooms, the absence of luxuries", but to the luxuries. And "even some" ought to be "even of some".) This is a genuinely complex and paradoxical state of mind: the life of austerity and plain living is both acceptable, for ethical reasons, and unacceptable, by its disturbance to the preconditioned habits of the mind; and it is the awareness of this conflict which disturbs Edgar. Shortly after this there is a very striking passage of sustained irony in which Mrs Oliphant intervenes as narrator, but not as Thackeray or Charlotte Bronte would have done. She has pointed out that Edgar is at pains to conceal his conflict of motives from his family:

I believe my good Edgar had thus something in his character of what is commonly called humbug. He deceived people as to his own feelings by very consideration for their feelings. It was so absolutely indispensable to his being to set his companions at their ease, and make them comfortable so far as he could, that he took them in habitually, to use another vulgar

expression, and was believed by everybody to be as happy as the day was long at Loch Arroch, while all the while he was secretly longing to get away. I believe that in some respects this kind of nature (not a common one) is less good, being less honest, than that more general disposition which, when uncomfortable or dissatisfied itself, loses no opportunity of making others so, and states its sentiments frankly, whether they are likely to please its companions or not. I allow that Edgar's special peculiarities had their disadvantages. I do not attempt to excuse him, I only state what they were. 24

This is very much the "unreliable narrator". Mrs Oliphant admires Edgar unreservedly for an entirely altruistic deception, an honourable mastery of egotistical motives out of consideration for others. It is not she who calls him a "humbug" or who cannot "attempt to excuse him". The irony pivots on the word "honest", which is here ironically used in the sense of "frank, plain-spoken"; but the value of this concept is immediately called in question by the point that such "honesty" "loses no opportunity of making others" uncomfortable and pays no regard to the gratification or otherwise of friends. Thus an apparent deference to a fashionable prejudice is exploded by the unemphasised exposure of the truth of such behaviour.

The scenes at Loch Arroch, the Murray home, are merely a prologue to For Love and Life and the main action of the book takes place in London. Here Edgar experiences an intensified disorientation, not the release from frustration he had hoped for when leaving Loch Arroch. His identity crisis develops, in the context of the elaborately status-conscious, class-conscious world I have already described. He is betrayed into expense by sophistries and self-deceptions, he is subject to abrupt changes of mood, he experiences loneliness,

purposelessness, rootlessness, the loss of the sense of his own value. This phase of drifting and unhappiness is marvellously understood and beautifully described. The familiar grows strange, and the strange grows unpleasantly familiar. He grows morbidly sensitive, resenting even signs of friendliness as patronising behaviour, yet taking himself to task for this. All this directly reflects his loss of a sense of purpose, his inability to find a completely acceptable new identity for himself. He waits day after day for some kind of employment which might suit his particular tastes and his social ambiguity; but nothing materialises:

Poor Edgar! it was a kind of intoxication that had seized him, an intoxication caused by idleness, loneliness, and the separation of his life from everyone else around him.... Of course the appointment would come some day, most likely tomorrow. He was not going to worry Newmarch to death by going to him every day. He could wait till tomorrow. And so things went on till it ran very hard with the solitary young man. It occurred to him one day that his clothes were getting shabby. To be sure he had unlimited credit with his tailor, having just paid a large bill without inquiry or question; but the fact of feeling yourself shabby when you have very little money is painful and startling, and gives the imagination a shock. After this his mind lost the strange ease which it had possessed up to this moment, and he grew troubled and restless. 25

The immediate context of this passage is an increasing tendency on the part of Edgar to make inroads into his pitifully inadequate income for specious reasons, partly morbidly, self-pityingly masochistic reasons. It was his surrender to these perverse motives that had produced the "strange ease".

With the entry of Mr Tottenham into the story Edgar's predicament plays a minor role, mainly because it is cured by Mr Tottenham who

employs him as tutor to his son. But this entails another loss of status; he is now unequivocally a dependant.

He could not get free of the physical sensation of having fallen. He seemed to himself to be bruised and shaken; he could do nothing with his mind but realise and identify his state; he could not discuss it with himself.

(The word "identify" strikingly echoes the word "identity", the key theme of the book.)

It did not seem to him even that he knew what he had been thinking of, what he had been hoping; he knew only that he had fallen from some strange height, and lay at the bottom somewhere, aching and broken in heart and strength, stunned by the fall, and so confused that he did not know what had happened to him, or what he must do next.... He went home, back to his room, the room which surely, he thought to himself, was too good for Mr Tottenham's tutor, which was the post he had been asked to occupy. Mr Tottenham's boy's tutor, that was the phrase.

It was his own repetition of these words which roused him a little; the tutor in the house; the handy man who was made to do everything; the one individual among the gentlemen of the house whom it was possible to order about; who was an equal and yet no equal. No, Edgar said to himself, with a generous swelling of his heart, it was not thus that a dependent would be treated in Mr Tottenham's house; but the very idea of being a dependent struck him with such poignancy of surprise, as well as pain, that he could not calm himself down or make the best of it. 26

There is some exaggeration of language here, especially in the earlier paragraph; but the exaggeration is largely Edgar's, not Mrs Oliphant's. Edgar's change of feeling is shown beginning, though slowly, in the second sentence of the second paragraph. There is a fair assessment of the ambiguous role of the tutor in a rich household ("an equal and yet no equal") and this is not exaggerated. But Edgar's recognition

that not all employers treat their employees in this way eventually leads him to an acceptance of his position. He has discovered a role and a sense of purpose, although he is still subject to mood-swings.

Very much later the identity crisis very abruptly recurs, when Edgar - suddenly involved in a crisis in the Arden affairs - returns to the manor house that once was home to him.

Notwithstanding all the alterations of time, circumstances, and being, he was at this moment not Edgar Earnshaw at all, but the Edgar Arden of three years ago, caught back into the old sphere, surrounded by the old thoughts. Such curious indications of the unchangeableness of character, the identity of being, which suddenly seize upon a man, and whirl him back in a moment, defying all external changes, into his old, his unalterable self, are among the strangest things in humanity. Dizzy with the shock he had received, harassed by anxiety, worn out by unsuccessful effort, Edgar felt the world swing round with him, and scarcely could answer to himself who he was. 27

The imagery here is rather imprecise and the tone verges dangerously on the over-rhetorical; yet unmistakably a very specific state of mind is communicated.

The end of For Love and Life is a disappointment, since it is largely an evasion of the implications of the theme. Edgar's marriage to Lady Augusta, despite her mother's resistance, in effect restores him to the "gentleman" status from which he had withdrawn; but this is merely a novelistic device. And his departure for the Continent with a Consulship, which will enable him to achieve an unassailable status away from all British associations of any kind, is really an entire abandonment of the problem.

The status theme, treated so powerfully and seriously in the

main plot, is ironically and almsot farcically echoed in Dr Murray, the snobbish grandson of Mrs Murray, and Edgar's cousin. It is he whom I have already described as wishing to be considered "genteel" and to "refine" the girl he loves. He curries favour with the English aristocracy, but he is ill-informed about correct etiquette:

Dr Murray entered the drawing room, looking at the lady who had preceded him, to see what she thought of him, with furtive, suspicious looks.

(The clumsy sentence structure is unfortunately typical of Mrs Oliphant.)

He was very anxious to please Lady Mary, and still more anxious to show himself an accomplished man of the world; but he could not so much as enter a room without this subtle sense of inferiority betraying itself.... He hesitated between the most luxurious chair he could find, and the hardest, not feeling sure whether it was better to show confidence or humility. When he did decide at last, he looked round with what seemed a defiant look. "Who can say I have no right to be here?" poor fellow, was written all over his face....

At this moment some one came in to announce the carriage, which Lady Mary had ordered to take her visitor home; and here there arose another conflict in Dr Murray's mind. Which was the best, most like what a man of the world would do? to drive down with his sister or to walk? He was tired, and the drive would certainly be easier; but what if they should think it odd? 28

The comedy here exposes social insecurity and the presumption that one can ape the manners of another social class than one's own; it does not question the belief that a certain degree of etiquette is necessary in aristocratic circles. There is no egalitarian message in For Love and Life; those who seem to have such an ideal are defeated or made sterile by the impossibility of its attainment. The really attainable ideal seems to be a full recognition, and unreserved acceptance, of one's true role in society, whether "high" or "low", leading

to a full involvement in the duties which it entails. There are people in the novel, notably Lady Mary Tottenham, who aim at drastic reform of the injustices and inequalities of English society. But Mrs Oliphant was deeply sceptical of such an approach:

Edgar, I fear, was not of the stuff of which social reformers are made. The concerns of the individual were more important to him at all times than those of the mass; and one human shadow crossing his way, interested his heart and mind far beyond a mere crowd, though the crowd, no doubt, as being more multitudinous, must have been more important. 29

This passage directly reflects Mrs Oliphant's preference for individual charity, motivated by love and compassion for particular individuals, as against "public" philanthropy. Mr Tottenham's conscientious concern for the welfare of his employees is far more valuable than any attempt to revolutionise society. In this context the status/identity theme implies, not that distinction of status resulting from social inequality is an injustice, but that we must identify what our true status is and then live it with all our might, for the benefit of as many people within our range of influence as possible: parity of esteem, but not equality of status.

One of the ironies of Squire Arden and For Love and Life is that the inheritor of the Arden estates as a result of Edgar's renunciation is a mean and selfish man interested only in his acquired glory. Edgar by temperament would have made far better use of the estate, with his sense of responsibility to his dependants. In other inheritance novels Mrs Oliphant made great play with this irony; though none of them is as rich as For Love and Life. Unfortunately most of the

successors to this novel are disfigured by the conventional material of the "sensation novel"; ingenious mysteries, contrived surprise effects, exaggerated emotionalism and stagy language, and above all the manipulation of situations to produce the maximum effect with the minimum concern for plausibility. Yet the very last of the series, The Prodigals and Their Inheritance, though not as deeply felt as For Love and Life, is one of the most accomplished and does on the whole avoid forced theatricality. In this novel the ironic contrast between the true heir and the one with no direct claim is studied with considerable subtlety and complexity.

The Prodigals is a remarkably concentrated novel with scarcely a wasted page. It has one single interlocking sequence of events and a cast of nine plus one child. It is indeed much shorter than the traditional three-volume novel, having originally appeared as a magazine story.³⁰ The prodigals who will inherit are both spend-thrifts and have accordingly been cast off by their father. The heroine Winifred is pursued by a lover who would be glad of the estate for himself; and he is anxious for Winifred to manipulate her father's sympathies for her own benefit so that it is she alone who will inherit. Yet he is not the fortune-hunter stereotype, since he would use the estate for the benefit of the poor tenants rather than for his glory - which neither George nor Tom, the "prodigals", Winifred's brothers, would ever do. But there are sharper ironies in the book. Winifred, in no way a feminist, has no wish to inherit at the expense of her brothers, and wishes to renounce the sole right given her by her father.

30. See above, page 90, fn.41

Yet the brothers for whom she renounces are intolerable and her sister-in-law, who will be lady of Bedloe Manor, is vulgar, stupid and entirely selfish. And suddenly Winifred is aware of this:

There was perhaps in her heart too an echo of Tom's rage and sense of wrong. This woman, the reverse of all that her father's ambition (vulgar ambition, yet so strong) had hoped for, to be mistress of the house! And Bedloe, which Winnie loved, to pass away to a family which had rubbed off and forgotten even the little gloss of artificial polish which Mr Chester had procured for his sons. She would have given it to them had the power been in her hands, she had always intended it, never from the first moment meant anything else. And yet when all was thus arranged according to her wish, above her hopes, Winifred felt, to the bottom of her heart, that to give up her home to Mrs George was a thing not to be accomplished without a thrill of indignation, a sense of wrong.

And these are the more complex reflections of Winifred's lover:

Disappointment, and the sharper self-shame with which he could not help remembering his own imaginations on the matter, joined with the sense of angry scorn with which he beheld the place which he had meant to fill so well, filled so badly by another. 31

(This sentence is disfigured by the ambiguity of "joined" - which is a verb, the main verb of the sentence.)

The ironies against George and Tom are abundant. Each supposes that his father's will is in his favour until the truth is revealed. Each is so possessed by egotism and greed as to be capable of only one idea at a time:

George was ... startled and overwhelmed by information which entered but slowly into an intelligence confused by ill-fortune.

Or he shows "that admirable force of passive resistance and blunted understanding which is beyond all argument". Tom, on the other hand, though equally stupid, is malicious:

"George, for instance: I would be very careful of what I gave him, if I were you.... And don't give them too much money: enough to buy a bit of land is quite enough for them..." This prudent advice Tom delivered as he strolled.... [H]e had a sort of conviction, which was not without reason, that it was sensible advice.

(And, ironically, so it was; George is not fit to be entrusted with Bedloe. Here insight is an accidental by-product of stupidity and self-obsession.)

"If you don't sell Bedloe, how are you to pay me?" he cried, with an honest conviction that in saying this righteous indignation had reached its climax, and there was nothing more to add. 32

Beside these two Edward, Winifred's lover, seems entirely admirable, in spite of his paternalistic attitude to women; but he learns by experience, not so much to show more respect for a woman's point of view as to act independently and not to look to a woman for his financial security, since a man "ought to be indebted to his own exertions and not look for advancement in so humiliating a way". I have said that Winifred is no feminist; but Mrs Oliphant makes a feminist point on her behalf. She refuses Edward the right to share in her decisions, even though he is her fiance. After she has made this decision - and temporarily alienated him - "She could not think how she could have done it and yet she would have done it over again."³³ And he has to modify his attitudes (as I have indicated) before he is ready to be reconciled to her:

She had deserted him, he said to himself. She had brought insult upon him, and an atrocious accusation, and she had not resented it, showed no indignation, rejected his help, prepared to smooth over and conciliate the miserable cad who had permitted himself to do this thing. Beneath all this blaze of passion, there

32. The Prodigals II, 343, 286, 297-8, 300.

33. The Prodigals II, 350, 376.

was no doubt also the bitterness of disappointment with which he saw the destruction of those hopes which he had been foolishly entertaining, allowing himself to cherish, although he knew all the difficulties in the way. He saw and felt that, right or wrong, she would give all away, that Bedloe was farther from him than ever it had been. He loved Winifred, it was not for Bedloe he had sought her; but everything surged up together at this moment in a passion of mortification, resentment, and shame. She had not maintained his cause, she had refused his intervention, she had allowed these intruders to regard him as taking more upon him than she would permit, claiming an authority she would not grant....

Winifred, standing, following with her eyes, with consternation unspeakable, his departing figure, felt the strength ebb out of her as he disappeared. But yet there was relief in his departure, too. A woman has often many pangs to bear between her husband and her family. She has to endure and maintain often the authority which she does not acknowledge, which in her right he assumes over them, which is still a greater offence to her than to them; and an instinctive sense that her lover should not have any power over her brothers was strong in her notwithstanding her love. 34

Winifred, thus, without understanding what she is doing, claims the right to an independent and individual judgment; and later Edward implicitly concedes this and learns in his turn to be independent in his own judgment, not relying on preconceived financial motives. The loss of Bedloe is an astringent influence, leading towards self-discovery, just as the loss of Arden (though in a very different way) is to Edgar Arden/Earnshaw. So in the more interesting of the inheritance novels the question of inheritance, or the loss of it, resolves itself into a question of self-discovery.

CHAPTER TEN

HESTER

He himself knew ways of doubling every pound, and building up the great Rainy fortune into proportions colossal and magnificent.... A fortune does not appeal to the eye like a statue or a picture; but sometimes it appeals to the mind in a still more superlative way. Old Trevor's executor felt himself capable of working at it with an enthusiasm which Phidias, which Michael Angelo could not have surpassed.

(The Greatest Heiress in England II, 268-9)

"Women - when they do take to business - are sometimes better than men", said the clerk, with an accent almost of awe.

(Hester, 1883, I, 133)

One of the most interesting groups of Mrs Oliphant's novels, though only a small one, deals with money. In the sense that wealth or the lack of it is an important influence on people's social status, their appropriateness as marriage partners, or their standing among family and friends, money plays an important role in most of her novels as it does in those of most other nineteenth-century novelists. The vulgar nouveaux-riches who have risen to wealth by commerce or industry appear fairly frequently in her work. And in The Greatest Heiress in England there is a sustained ironic study of the hypnotic power of wealth over people's minds, and of the rather ambiguous status with which it endows its possessor. But a theme which makes no appearance in that book exerted a powerful fascination upon Mrs Oliphant: the almost daemonic obsession with financial speculation

which tempts men to risk ruin for themselves, their family and friends, and their clients, in the hope of achieving great wealth. Examples of rash speculators are Mr Meredith in A Son of the Soil (1866), where the theme is not central, Mr Goulburn in The Fugitives (1879)¹ and Mr Burton in Sons and Daughters (1889). The last book, only a novella,² contains a particularly effective study of an obsessively over-scrupulous conscience, that of Mr Burton's son, who carries his obsession with paying off his father's debts to a fanatical and ludicrous excess. Of all Mrs Oliphant's very short novels it is probably the best, although its title is misleading, since it does not deal with the parent-and-child theme, and there is only one son and one daughter.

The two novels in which money really does play a central role, with special stress on its power to exert hypnotic, obsessive influence on people and ruin lives, are At His Gates (3 volumes, Tinsley, 1872) and Hester (3 volumes, Macmillan, 1883). In At His Gates financial speculation reaches the point of criminality and one man, financially naive, is reduced to absolute ruin and apparent suicide as a result of speculations into which he has been tempted by the "villain", another Mr Burton. It is somewhat marred by Mrs Oliphant's taste for theatricality, mystery and plot contrivance, but not to a very disastrous extent; and it is one of her most remarkable novels, containing one of her finest studies of perverse and complex motivation,

1. The date of publication in Good Cheer, the Christmas number of Good Words. It was published along with The Duke's Daughter, two stories in three volumes, in 1890.
2. Published in one volume by Blackwood, after serialisation in March and April 1890 in Blackwood's Magazine.

Mrs Burton, who, in over-reaction to her husband's financial irresponsibility, remains cool, unaffectionate and unemotional, and professes total ignorance of his affairs in spite of warnings of coming disaster; she adopts a permanent pose of cynical non-involvement and even when it is clear that ruin is imminent she calmly persists in giving extravagant parties, possessed as it were by a financial death-wish. The sensational bank-crash³ which finally inflicts punishment on Mr Burton (and temporarily rouses a degree of human feeling in his wife) was Mrs Oliphant's first attempt at a theme which is repeated more powerfully in Hester; and accordingly I shall choose Hester for detailed analysis, since in addition it is a much more thematically integrated book than At His Gates.

Hester (subtitle A Story of Contemporary Life) is remarkable for its concentration and unity, not only because it behaves like a neo-classic play, obeying the Unity of Place (all scenes being set in the Home Counties town of Redborough and the adjacent Common with a community of middle-class houses bordering it), but because virtually all the characters are members, direct or collateral, of one family, the Vernons of Vernon's Bank, the principal bank of the town. Many of the characters are directors or partners in the bank; and thus money inevitably is central to the plot. The story is symmetrically framed between two identical crises, when a bank director (one of them the heroine's father John Vernon, the other the man with whom she is emotionally involved, her distant cousin Edward

3. According to the Spectator review (author unknown) this was based on a recent bank crash, involving the Overend and Gurney Bank: The Spectator, 16 November 1872; XLV, 1461.

Vernon) absconds after irresponsible speculation and the Bank is threatened with total break-down. In each case the very rich Catherine Vernon steps in and tides the Bank over by her money. This has made her a leading figure of Redborough society and a valued director of the Bank. After the first disaster she sets up a shelter for impoverished members of the family in a house of hers which is divided into flats and is called the Heronry (mockingly nicknamed the Vernonry).

All the characters can be classified according to the role that money plays in their lives. First there are the wealthy, whether like Catherine they consider that money gives them responsibilities, or like Ellen Vernon, the most heartless and frivolous character in the book, they use it for their own glorification and the condescending patronage of the less fortunate. Then at the other extremes are those who are forced into dependence by the lack of money, in particular Catherine's tenants at the Vernonry, some of whom are eaten up with jealousy and humiliation at their financial dependence and return her generosity with covert mockery and contempt or with hypocritical praise, behaving as if Catherine's motives are identical with those I have attributed to Ellen. At the heart of the book are those who look after money in the Bank, in particular Harry Vernon, brother of Ellen, earnestly and rather unimaginatively concerned with the responsibilities of his position, Roland Ashton, more inclined to irresponsibility but saved by inbuilt caution, and Edward Vernon, who is eventually carried away by the daemon of money-madness.

There is one very striking choric character, the retired sea-captain Captain Morgan, who stands outside the action and observes,

providing sad and ironic comments which, directly or indirectly, represent Mrs Oliphant's own point of view - or at least the views in which she is deeply interested. There is no unsubtlety or naive didacticism in the use of Captain Morgan since he is shown to be disillusioned almost to the point of cynicism and he makes use of irony, even against himself. This, as I shall show, is particularly striking when he comments on parenthood; his views on money are obvious enough, but they are natural, unrheterical expressions of the point of view of a man in his position, and they succinctly summarise the ethic of the book: speculation "is a devilish trade" in which "somebody must always lose in order that you should gain"; and "Money ... can do so much and yet so little".⁴ Other characters discuss such topics as the Stock Exchange, the City ("the fairy tales of commerce"),⁵ the circulation of money, running the market and such topics. Being deeply involved with money problems none of them apart from Captain Morgan is capable of sufficient objectivity to see the theme in perspective.

Hester starts quietly and the tone appears light and humorous; but in due course there is a drift towards tragedy, concentrating on the emotional life of the two women who are most closely involved with Edward: Catherine, his cousin but in effect his adoptive mother, and Hester, daughter of the defaulting John Vernon and now one of Catherine's tenants. The action of the story develops through the growing friendship of Edward and Hester, which is quite unlike the traditional love story, since it is closely entangled with the money

4. Hester (subsequently H.) II, 64, 226.

5. H. II, 36.

theme. There is no passion of romantic love on either side, and the emotional climax to which the book leads involves Catherine's maternal love for Edward, pushing Hester's love for him into a subordinate place.

Edward is Mrs Oliphant's anticipatory version of Ibsen's John Gabriel Borkman; he is drawn into ever more and more dangerous speculation, risking not only his own money and that of his partners but also that of clients of the Bank, led on by a perversely imaginative vision of money not unlike Borkman's. Like Mrs Burton in At His Gates he has a financial death-wish, but whereas hers is cold, cynical and passionless, his is motivated by a strange and complex tangle of impassioned feelings, in particular a masochistic desire to ruin his Bank and thus to spite Catherine, since like her other dependants he deeply, neurotically resents his subordinate position, without fully externalising this motive. He is carried away by a passion for financial speculation which soon corrupts his whole imaginative life; he goes through the successive stages of wild excitement, a "chill reaction", self-doubt and then the recovery of confidence and of self-deception. He experiences "the headlong poetry of the money market"⁶ and grows more and more self-obsessed and secretive, saying nothing to his colleagues, not even to his fellow speculator Roland Ashton, not even to Hester (who comes more and more to resent her exclusion from his private anxieties). His monomania erodes his capacity for meaningful human relationships; he was long ago alienated from Catherine, although she never suspected it, and in due course his love for Hester grows more and more impossible as he withdraws

6. H. II, 159. The phrase is quoted in context later.

into his neurotic fantasy world.

There are many long passages analysing Edward's complex state of mind, once his mania takes possession of him. Mrs Oliphant stresses early the moral and psychological danger of his rigid repression of his rebellious instincts, which he never directly reveals to Catherine and consequently diverts into a craving for rash, even criminal, activity. When his Bank colleagues begin to discuss the stock market he is possessed by bitter contempt for them, the more intense for being hidden:

He could not stop in the drab-coloured calm of the office where these two young idiots were congratulating each other, and trying to talk as if they knew all about it. His scorn of them was unspeakable. If they gained a hundred pounds their elation would be boundless. They were like boys sending out a little toy frigate and enchanted when it reached in safety the opposite side of the puddle. But Ashton meant business. It was not for this sort of trifling work that he had set himself to watch those fluctuations, which are more delicate than anything in nature they could be compared to. The blowing of the winds and their changes were prose compared to the headlong poetry of the money-market. Edward felt so many new pulses waking in him, such a hurrying fever in his veins, that he could not control himself.

The "two young idiots" of this passage are Harry Vernon and his brother-in-law Algernon Merridew; in rejecting them Edward does not yet reject Roland Ashton. But inevitably a move into total isolation is his next step.

In the passage quoted Mrs Oliphant is led to the extensive use of imagery to give adequate expression to Edward's internal crisis. Her touch is rather uncertain; but she picks up the image of winds a little later, much more forcefully:

He thought, with an excitement that gradually overmastered him, of the rush of gain coming in like a river, and the exhilaration and new force it would

bring. This idea caught him up as a strong wind might have caught him, and carried him beyond his own control. He walked faster and faster, skimming along the road that led into the country, into the quiet, where no one could note his altered aspect or the excitement that devoured him, taking off his hat as he got out of sight of the houses, to let the air blow upon his forehead and clear his senses.

After this Mrs Oliphant moves away from imagery to a more specific statement of Edward's conflicting motives - and a highly ironic indication of his failure in self-knowledge:

Getting familiarised with the subject [i.e. Ashton's offer of a dangerous new area of speculation] made him more impartial, he said to himself. The first mention of it had raised a cowardly host of apprehensions and doubts, but now that the throbbing of excitement began to die away, he saw the matter as it was - a question of calculation, a delicate operation, a good coup, but all within the legitimate limits of business. He had recovered, he felt, the use of his reason.... 7

Needless to say, he had not recovered the use of his reason, nor did he see the matter as it was, although earlier in this very long paragraph he is sufficiently honest with himself to admit that "the expedient was to use the money and the securities of the Bank, not for the aggrandisement of Vernon's, but for his own. This would leave the responsibility of the action entirely upon his own shoulders if anything went wrong". But after this he deceives himself with the notion that the hoped-for influx of money will be for the benefit of the Bank, a direct reversal of the admission he had just made.

It would be like pouring in new blood to stagnant veins; it would be new life coming in, new energy, something that would stir the old fabric through and through, and stimulate its steady-going, old-fashioned existence. It would be the something he had longed for - the liberating influence, new possibilities, more extended work. 8

7. H. II, 158-9, 162-3.

8. H. II, 161-2.

And this passage is immediately followed by the words already quoted about the "excitement that gradually overmastered him". The chapter from which these passages come (Volume II, Chapter IX) is significantly entitled "A Double Mind".

Subsequently events move more slowly until quite suddenly "The Crisis" (the title of Book III, Chapter VIII) strikes and the tragic ending is precipitated. In another analytic passage in the preceding chapter Mrs Oliphant emphasises how events have quietly gone beyond Edward's conscious control:

The course of events went on in that leisurely current which is far more deadly in its sweep than any sudden cataract. He did not lose or gain anything in a moment, his ventures either did not turn out so vast as he imagined, or they were partial failures, partial successes. Step by step he went on, sacrificing, jeopardising, gradually, slowly, without being himself aware of what he was doing, the funds he had under his control. He had been ready in the first passion of his desire for wealth to risk everything and finish the matter at one swoop; but that passed over, and he was not really aware how one by one his counters were being swept out of his hands. It went on through all the awakening time of the year, as it might have gone for half a life time, and he was impatient of the delay. 9

Although the imagery here is rather banal and slightly confused (with "counters ... being swept out of his hands") the strength of the passage lies in its precise enactment of a particular state of mind, echoed in the jerky rhythms, alternating with smoothly flowing sequences of interconnected phrases.

Subordinate to money are two other themes, embodied respectively in Catherine and Hester: parenthood and feminism. If Edward's two

9. H. III, 137-8.

interlocking passions are a craving for freedom from what he considers a degrading dependence and a lust for financial speculation, Catherine's single-minded passion is a maternal one; the central tragic irony of Hester is her unquestioning faith in Edward and her confidence that her love is returned and that she can safely entrust him with the affairs of the Bank. She is never aware that his attitude to her is one of hostility and resentment. What few doubts she has of him are quickly suppressed. She congratulates herself on his reliability - in which she is entirely deceived. Eventually she does begin to renew her doubts, only to fall back on an ingenious process of self-deception, giving rationalising explanations for his behaviour. Inevitably the climax of the book is a very bitter moment of disillusion: Edward, "the one delusion of [her] soul"¹⁰ is shown to be as false as everybody, and the blow is too much for her to endure.

If Catherine is betrayed into attributing the best motives to the "son" she loves, she is also led into the converse error. In her devotion to Edward she is inclined by contrast to take a derogatory view of the rest of the family. In particular she dislikes Harry (whose image subtly improves as the book progresses, just as Edward's deteriorates). He once offends her and she is subsequently unwilling to see any good in him. This prejudice leads her to unjustified disapproval of the motives of those (Hester, Hester's mother) whom she supposes - only partly justly - to be in league with Harry.

Thus Catherine Vernon, though she was a clever woman, misconceived and misunderstood them all. 11

This is striking evidence of Mrs Oliphant's maturity as an artist,

10. H. III, 185.

11. H. I, 209.

since Catherine is meant on the whole to arouse love and admiration, and yet here we are invited to recognise how very badly she can be misled. In effect her tragic misreading of Edward's character totally blunts her power to interpret anybody else's motives with any accuracy.

A very fine example of the complex balance of sympathies with which Mrs Oliphant views Catherine comes early in Book II, when she talks of "the boys" (Edward and Harry) and is wrong in almost everything she says, without in any way forfeiting the reader's sympathy:

"For my part, speculation in this wild way is my horror.... The boys are well indoctrinated in my opinions on that subject. They know better, I hope, than to snatch at a high percentage; and love the substance, the good honest capital, which I love.... Edward and Harry are as steady as two churches; that is", she added with a complacency which they all recollected afterwards, "Edward is the head; the other fortunately has the good sense not to attempt to think for himself.... Edward is the heart and soul of everything", she said. 'How fortunate it was for me that my choice fell upon that boy. I should say he had an old head on young shoulders, but that I don't like the conjunction. He is young enough. He has always been accustomed to family life, and loves his home". 12

Perhaps the irony is slightly overstressed (especially in the authorial comment); yet it derives naturally from Catherine's character and the idealistic, over-protected attitude which has never yet met anything to challenge it. She is quite wrong in what she says about Edward (who has no belief in financial stability nor any love for his home) and about Harry (who does, rather shallowly, think for himself and at the end of the book shows the loyalty for which Catherine in vain looked to Edward). Yet basically she shows good sense on money matters ("Good honest capital" is better than "a high percentage") and in her innocence she cannot realise that others do not share her view. The quotation very clearly illustrates the skill with which

the emotional and financial themes of Hester are interlocked.

Parental love is one of the basic values or norms which Hester is intended to celebrate, and - as usual with Mrs Oliphant - carries far more weight than sexual love; yet by the use of Captain Morgan Mrs Oliphant achieves one of her finest strokes of ironic ambiguity, or ambivalence. Captain Morgan is deeply moved by paternal (and grand-paternal) feelings; and yet also he is sharply disillusioned. Troubled by the irresponsibility of his grandson, Roland Ashton, he is inclined to repudiate the commitments of parenthood:

"Why should my life be overshadowed permanently by the action of another? ... Why should I be responsible for one who is not me, nor of my mind?"

Similarly when Edward's disgraceful conduct is revealed he challenges a notion that was precious to Mrs Oliphant, the obligation to forgive those loved relatives who have grievously wronged us:

"I am not for pardon: I am for every soul bearing its own burden.... Forgiveness does not save his honour or his life." 13

These opinions are not in the final verdict Mrs Oliphant's; yet they have a certain validity; a sensitive, intelligent man expresses them. In the interests of detachment she makes use of Captain Morgan's partly disillusioned view to distance herself from undue involvement in the emotions of parenthood and forgiveness. The basic effect of the irony is to set up tensions between two views, both valid (at least to a degree), yet both seen as oversimplifications of a complex reality. Mrs Oliphant promotes a detached view of matters about which she felt deeply, not in order to challenge their validity, but simply to enable their value to be assessed with greater objectivity.

The tone of Hester dramatically changes in the last chapters; it ceases to be ironic and becomes tragic. When Catherine discovers how completely Edward has betrayed her love, her basic human affections are so deeply wounded that she never recovers. She acquires some little comfort when her bitter disenchantment is balanced by her recognition of the love and loyalty of Harry and Hester. But this cannot save her:

The thought of searching for [Edward] through the world, of holding out succour to him when he came to need, of forgiving, that last prerogative of love, was scarcely in her nature. It was hers rather to feel that deep impossibility of re-beginning, the misery and pain of any struggle to make the base seem noble, which is as true a sentiment as the other. She could not have done it. To many women it is the highest form of self-abnegation as it is the bitterest lot that can be borne on earth; but to Catherine it would not have been possible. The blow to her was final. 14

Since for Mrs Oliphant a woman's obligation to forgive (in spite of Captain Morgan's view) was absolute, a categorical imperative, Catherine's inability to forgive is a fault, a "fatal flaw" which reflects the rather arrogant egotism that had been lightly stressed in the earlier chapters. The loss of faith in humanity (except Harry and Hester) and of the will to live reduces her to melancholia, quietly and underemphatically described, and thus to death.

It is evidence of Mrs Oliphant's confidence in her tragic ending that she ventures to risk discordance of effect by the use of what in The Wizard's Son she calls "the derision of tragedy".¹⁵ In Catherine's supreme moment of tragedy there is a grotesque incident when Edward,

14. H. III, 232.

15. The Wizard's Son III, 228. (Mrs Forrester, supposing Oona to have been killed in an accident, screams out her name to very little purpose and is no help to the rescuers.)

rejected by Hester, impulsively offers marriage to Emma Ashton, in whom previously he has shown not the slightest interest, nor she in him, and she accepts him. When Catherine hears of this she comments:

"Lord in Heaven! what a world, what a world this is! - all mockery and delusion, all farce except when it is tragic".

And almost the last words of the chapter, almost the last words of Hester, after Catherine's death, are:

Derision such as she had delighted in in other circumstances, had overtaken the last tragic occurrence of her life. Catherine had not been able to bear the grim mockery, the light of a farce upon that tragedy of her own. 16

By such distancing devices Mrs Oliphant keeps rhetoric and melodrama at bay in Hester.

If Catherine centres her emotional life on Edward, yet she is not conceived entirely in terms of private and personal feeling. She is one of Mrs Oliphant's most considered studies of an independent woman, with a head for business ("Women - when they do take to business - are sometimes better than men", says Mr Rule, head clerk at the Bank),¹⁷ and a zest for work. In the two Bank crises which respectively open and close the book she is shown to be resourceful, intelligent and astute in the handling of money. Consequently she is respected by the otherwise entirely masculine world of the Bank, and can compete on equal terms in a man's world. Nevertheless, since she takes her position largely for granted, it is not she but Hester who is the focus for the feminist views in the book.

Hester is one of Mrs Oliphant's most individualised heroines,

16. H. III, 261, 264

17. H. I, 133.

with a strong will and over-sensitive rather egotistical passions. Her distaste for her dependent status eventually leads her in the direction of almost explicit feminism. She wishes to work to achieve independence for herself and her mother. But her mother is horrified at this: "We are not fallen so far as that". And, ironically, Catherine says "Women have never worked for their living in our family", to which Hester very pointedly answers "You did yourself, Cousin Catherine".¹⁸ But it is in her relations with Edward, as I shall show, that Hester is driven to define her attitudes to the role of women in Victorian life.

A sharp contrast with Hester and Catherine is supplied by Hester's mother, who is always called simply Mrs John - as if her whole individuality was, and is, submerged in her husband. She is a sharply ironic, almost caricatured, portrait of the kind of woman Mrs Oliphant rejects. "Mrs John had been brought up in the age when girls were supposed to be charming and delightful in proportion as they were helpless"¹⁹ and it never occurs to her that she should take any interest in her husband's work or in the Vernon Bank at all. She disapproves of women who work and insists that Hester must be chaperoned wherever she goes, although Hester insists that she is perfectly capable of looking after herself. In short Mrs John is useless, entirely conformist, and helplessly content with her state of dependence and ignorance.

Another woman who represents single-minded conformity to a preset pattern is Emma Ashton, one of Mrs Oliphant's most brilliant comic characters. Her single-mindedness reaches the point of monomania, the one purpose of her life being to find a rich husband, never

18. H. I, 108, 118.

19. H. I, 236.

mind whether she loves him or not. Indeed she is the reductio ad absurdum of the adventuress. She ruthlessly gets herself invited to parties, totally impervious to all snubs, with the one purpose in mind. "A girl's chance is in making - friends", she says; and elsewhere "I am not one to go on about love and so forth". Her answer to Hester's reproach "How can you talk as if it is a matter of business?" is "But, of course, it is a matter of business.... What can be so important for a girl as settling?"²⁰ She makes herself agreeable to as many young men as possible - without success; and when she finally gets her offer from Edward (on a sudden impulse in a railway train), she accepts him instantly, assuming, quite untruly, that he has loved her all along.

If we are in any doubt about the significance of Mrs John and Emma, Mrs Oliphant eventually makes it clear. They are two female stereotypes of the kind that men accept because they provide no challenge to their preconceived views of women. Emma in particular is a "practical and cynical commentary" on traditional beliefs that a woman's role is to find a husband at all costs or be for ever disgraced, since man "is the natural provider of a woman's comfort". Men, Hester says, don't like "women who step out of their sphere, ... but then women do".²¹ (The word "sphere" echoes Lucilla Marjoribanks's use of the word; but between 1866 and 1883 Mrs Oliphant's views had hardened.) And in pursuit of the ideal of complete submission to this view of a woman's role Emma's life is made futile, obsessive and in the end meaningless.

20. H. II, 130, 206; III, 2.

21. H. III, 9, 8.

In reaction to her mother Hester grows increasingly impatient of the restrictions of her position. And her uneasy relations with Edward provoke an increasing hostility to the conventional views of a woman's role. Edward does not choose to confide in Hester about his financial speculations, although she longs to know the cause of his great anxiety. She had already been rather irritated by Roland, also a claimant for her love, who does not approve of work for women, but prefers that they should "inspire ... and reward". Similarly, Edward wants nothing from her but sympathy and refuses to explain things rationally to a woman. "Sympathy that is ignorant cannot be as good as sympathy that knows", Hester complains, and later, more forcefully, she protests against "the complacent injustice of it... that such blind obedience was all that was to be looked for from a woman".

She was bewildered - dazzled by the lavish outpouring of his love; but all that did not blind her to the strange injustice of this treatment, the cruelty of her helpless position.... Hester knew that she could confront any danger with him or for him - but what was it? A dilemma so terrible had never presented itself to her imagination. There was a cruelty in it, a depreciation of all the nobler parts of her, as if only in ignorance could she be trusted. 22

And in the end she refuses to be a support and standby to him (by elopement) purely on his terms.

Three pages after the above quotation Hester's feminist views now become overt:

Was it natural, then, a thing she could accept as just, that it was enough for her to sympathise, to share the consequences, to stand by the chief actor whatever happened, but never to share in the initiative or have any moral concern in the motive or the means of what was done? A sense of helplessness began to take the

place of indignation in her mind. Was that what they called the natural lot of women? to suffer perhaps, to share the blame, but have no share in the plan, to sympathise, but not to know; to move on blindly according to some rule of loyalty and obedience, which to any other creature in the world would be folly and guilt? 23

And she finds herself in the absurd position of keeping Edward's secret without knowing what the secret is that she is keeping; but no longer so much interested in the mystery as ashamed that she is deceiving everybody.

This consciousness made Hester disagreeable to live with, an angry, resentful, impatient woman, absorbed in her own affairs, little accessible to the world.... It seemed to her that her distaste for everything that was going on was more than her love could balance, that she so hated the expedients he drove her to, that he himself took another aspect in her eyes. Sometimes she felt that she must make the crisis which he had so often anticipated, and instead of consenting to fly with him must fly by herself, and cut the tie between them with a sharp stroke. It was all pain, trouble, misery - and what was worse, falsehood, wherever she turned. 24

This is one of several analyses of Hester's tormented state of mind which balance similar analyses of Edward's complex feelings during the same period.

Captain Morgan makes his contribution to the feminist themes of Hester, just as he does to the themes of money and parenthood. Catherine complains to him:

"It almost looks as if - but that is impossible - you did not understand a woman yet".
The old captain laughed and shook his white head.
"Persuade yourself that!" he said; "make yourself think that: that will chime in with the general opinion, Catherine. If I were an old man on the stage, I would say, there's no understanding women.

23. H. III, 124-5.

24. H. III, 138-9.

If I don't understand her and all her ways, I
am a sillier old blockhead than you think". 25

(In the last sentence "her" refers to Mrs Morgan.) There is an interesting ambiguity here: "not understanding women" carries two distinct connotations, the smug masculine cliché, a device to avoid taking women seriously (but to which Captain Morgan never resorts); and man's real failure to see woman's point of view, a weakness of far too many men in Hester.

Hester's subtitle, A Story of Contemporary Life,²⁶ perhaps suggests that it was intended as a comment on "the way we live now", although it has no resemblance to Trollope's novel of that title, except that both show a society corrupted by money. The particular satirical point that Mrs Oliphant is making, underlying and sharpening the themes of money, parenthood and the role of women, is, as so often in her best work, a comment on the rigidly stratified class-structure of English life, of which the Vernonry is a miniature version. In this house live various relations of Catherine, carefully graded, from the Vernon-Ridgways who consider themselves virtual aristocracy, but aristocracy in reduced circumstances:

They were not in the direct line, and they felt that they were treated accordingly, the best of everything being appropriated to those whom Catherine Vernon, who was so proud of her name, considered nearest to the family stock.

- to the Morgans, who are considered social inferiors, being very distant relations:

25. H. III, 89.

26. In spite of this subtitle there are some nine references to what happened "in those days". So powerful is habit; it was the practice of Victorian novelists to set the time of action about a generation back. There is on the other hand a reference to "the modern pace of living" (III, 108), which makes it clear that there was an intention to be contemporary.

The utmost they [the Vernon-Ridgways] had done had been to give the old captain a nod, as they did to the tradesmen, when he took off his hat to them.

They had felt it their duty to draw the line at the Morgans long ago, and it was all they could do to behave with propriety at Catherine's table when they were seated beside the descendant of the old people on whom Catherine spent her money in what they felt to be an entirely unjustifiable way. 27

And between the extremes, their status clearly defined, are Hester and her mother, and another Vernon who is merely the widow of an officer. (Her role is Hester is minimal, and she may originally have been intended to be more important.) The side of the Vernons on which people live is considered a status symbol; the roadside is plebeian, the gardenside is "aristocratic".

This rigid social structure is an intolerable curb to the characters with the strongest sense of their own individuality, Hester and Edward, who however much they are sharply contrasted in other ways are alike in this. This is the real meaning of the fierce hostility that they both feel for Catherine; though at the end Hester and Catherine are reconciled, having recognised their great mutual affinity. Hester proclaims her sense of herself in conversation with Captain Morgan: "Once I was not, but now I am: and somebody quite distinct from other people". (He himself had said something similar to her in an earlier chapter, but with a more feminist bias: "But you must remember that a woman is not a woman in the abstract, but Catherine or Hester as the case may be, and liable to everything that humanity is liable to".)²⁸

27. H. I, 83, 126; II, 23.

28. H. II, 229-30; I, 140-1.

In a conversation between Hester and Edward roughly midway through the book the class theme is discussed. Hester takes an exaggerated pride in her mother's kinship with Sir John Westwood and a duke's daughter, and Edward rebukes her for her snobbery. She feels herself shamed; her mother should be valued for herself, not for her aristocratic background. Edward, who has himself appeared to be a snob, insists that "You think I am a natural snob, when I am only a snob by circumstances". But later he refutes her suggestion that he is a Radical: "I am all for decorum and established order and church and state". Of Hester Mrs Oliphant says "She knew nothing about Radicals, though instinctively in her heart she agreed with them", a statement which one feels is too glibly made and not well thought out since the effect is unintentionally ironic. Nevertheless, the whole episode²⁹ effectively epitomises Mrs Oliphant's cautiously liberal view of English society, sympathetic towards flexibility and mobility but suspicious of extreme egalitarianism. ("That is all a fallacy about men being equal", says Edward on one occasion.)³⁰

Strikingly, Edward, even if he is intended as the 'villain' of Hester and ends the book carrying the heaviest weight of his creator's judgment, expresses views with which Mrs Oliphant basically agrees; and she allows her heroine to be convicted of inconsistency and muddled values. Here, as always in her mature work, she is concerned to achieve balanced sympathies and to avoid black-and-white characterisation.

29. H. II, 121-3.

30. H. I, 78.

Hester, along with Miss Marjoribanks, may reasonably claim to be Mrs Oliphant's most remarkable novel, with an entirely admirable harmony of form and content. The coolness of tone, the all-pervasive irony, the subordination of plot (let alone plot-contrivance) to character and theme, all provide a unity and concentration that we frequently find in Mrs Oliphant's best work but not usually so unchallengeably as in Hester. It is perhaps only as the climax approaches that a certain amount of forced theatricality appears; for example Catherine obtains her fatal information about Edward's treachery to the Bank and to her by eavesdropping behind a hedge while he and Hester talk. This seems very contrived and grotesquely out of character; but possibly Mrs Oliphant recognised that Catherine's self-deception had gone so far that nothing short of such incontrovertible evidence could ever have convinced her of Edward's true nature; nevertheless Mrs Oliphant is unreasonably cutting corners by such a device and cheating the reader of an expected climax, specifically a confrontation between Catherine and Edward, in which he drops his mask. Such confrontations (essential to the sensation novel, if not to the domestic novel), where concealed information is at last made public, are fairly frequent in Mrs Oliphant's work, for example in Squire Arden (1871), in Carita (1877), in The Marriage of Elinor (1892) and in The Sorceress (1893). However, in these novels the effect is often rather stagy and over-rhetorical, and perhaps Mrs Oliphant was well advised to retain the element of ironic ambiguity in Edward to the last and to avoid the over-explicit effect of a confrontation scene.

There is some evidence of a change of intentions after the first volume, in particular a change in the intentions for Harry and Roland.

Harry first appears as a figure of intolerable male complacency, entirely convinced that his claim on Hester's love must inevitably produce a favourable response. His stupidity and his lack of imagination highlight the depth, complexity and passion of Edward. Yet by the end of the book Mrs Oliphant's sympathies have changed; Harry's selfless loyalty to Catherine and to the Bank (not quite compatible with his character as presented in Volume I) provide a contrast with Edward of a very different kind. Significantly, in early chapters, he is made to use the sort of slang which suggests immaturity; such slang is scarcely ever used afterwards, though this might be only because Mrs Oliphant found it difficult to sustain.

Much more unmistakable is a change of intention towards Roland. He is first introduced at the end of Volume I, in a striking firelight scene where he meets Hester in the home of his grandparents, Captain and Mrs Morgan. The chapter, and the first volume, end as follows:

"Neither Catherine nor Hester, neither the young nor the old", [Captain Morgan] said to himself. In his earnestness he repeated the words half aloud. "Neither Catherine nor Hester, neither money nor love". And then there came something of scorn into the old man's voice. "If his father's son is capable of love", he said.

Captain Morgan fears that Roland has inherited the irresponsibility of his father, and that he will have designs on Catherine's money and on Hester's heart. To place these words at the very end of the first volume is an unambiguous statement of intent, a foreshadowing of events to come in the next two volumes: Roland is to be the source of financial and emotional injury to the two heroines of the book. And in Chapter IV of Volume II this is followed up by implications that Roland is a philanderer who has deceived many girls ("It was

not, to be sure, his fault, if they thought that was his meaning.... He had ~~made~~^{made} himself agreeable, but then, that was his way");³¹ and that his major interest in coming to Redborough is Catherine's wealth. He does indeed set out to charm Hester, and he encourages Edward in his speculations with Bank money. Yet with Hester he does not after all show the accomplished technique of the experienced philanderer, and he arouses no very passionate feelings in her; she is no more than moderately attracted to him, on her journey towards Edward. And in due course he ceases to be in league with Edward, ceases to be the coolly calculating figure that he appears at first to be, and anxiously tries, in vain, to curb Edward's speculations. What is more he is now shown to be kind-hearted towards his sister Emma, willing if he can to give a purpose to her empty life. The forebodings of the last words of the first volume have unmistakably now been contradicted; Edward takes over both roles, emotional and financial. Presumably when Mrs Oliphant set out to involve Roland in the action of the novel it must have become clear to her (probably not overtly) that he could not be allowed to duplicate the behaviour of Edward.

If Mrs Oliphant's change of intention towards Roland can be pinpointed (but surely it was a slow process of modification) it must be at the beginning of the second chapter of Volume III, when Roland makes an urgent journey to Redborough to try to stop Edward's speculations; his honourable intentions are strongly stressed. After this he is viewed largely with sympathy; and on one occasion his grandfather says "we think the boy does us credit".³²

31. H. II, 55.

32. H. III, 86.

(He is speaking to Catherine who has noted his change of attitude to Roland. This suggests that Mrs Oliphant had grown uneasily aware of her own change of attitude and wished to justify it to herself.)

Such uncertainties of touch, if we may call them this, do no great harm to Hester. It would have been better if she had revised the novel to clarify her intentions in detail; but the overall intention of the book, conveyed through the triangle of Edward, Hester and Catherine, is never in doubt. There is a remarkable consistency of tone, seen in the use of natural dialogue and the accompanying inner life of the main characters.

In its treatment of money - and of moral degradation - Hester cannot be compared with Our Mutual Friend; Dickens's gift for imaginative prose and richly complex symbolism was outside Mrs Oliphant's range. What imagery she does use is quite commonplace, or an obvious enough extension of observed detail, notably the use of the Vernonry as a microcosm of English society. But this is only to say that Mrs Oliphant's talent was a very different one from Dickens's; Hester's strengths are the strengths of domestic realism. The book deserves to be far better known than it ever has been; critics have never seemed to take note of it.³³ Meredith Townsend's review in The Spectator is disappointing. He admired Catherine and justly singles out for praise her complexity, the ironic presentation of her, and the true tragedy of her frustrated mother-love. And he is just in his admiration for Captain Morgan, Emma ("a really wonderful sketch") and other characters. Yet he undervalues

33. In 1969/70 the publication of Hester was announced in the Gollancz Classics, with a preface by James Reeves. But the series was discontinued and Hester did not appear.

Hester, and he complains at the beginning of his review:

Hester is hardly one of the best of Mrs Oliphant's novels. It wants more compression, especially in the first volume, more incident, a little more of what art critics used to call "pyramidal form". The story is too level, too like actual life, with its trivial incidents which are yet so important, and its person-ages who have so little that is dramatic in them, yet are always making up scenes, and its catastrophes so cruel yet so ordinary, and so easily foreseen.

Strikingly, the adverse criticism of the third sentence can with a slight, a very slight, change of emphasis be converted into praise: "trivial incidents which are yet so important" and "catastrophes so cruel yet so ordinary" are clearly enough to be found in Hester - and they are the source of the best in domestic realism, and not signs of weakness at all. The lack of "compression" was standard criticism of Mrs Oliphant on account of her notorious over-production; but the slow movement, the comparative dearth of incident in the first half of Hester are essential for the creation of mood and feeling, and to give time for the development of Edward's obsession and of Hester's awareness of herself and her world. Many, perhaps most, of Mrs Oliphant's novels would benefit from compression; but not Hester. And "pyramidal form" it does possess; or rather the form of a gentle, sustained uphill slope to a hilltop followed by a steep scarp slope on the other side. However, Townsend follows up the passage I have quoted with much more positive approval: "And yet the narrative is far superior in interest to the ordinary run of novels". And the review ends:

We cannot consider Mrs Oliphant from the point of view of the story-teller. She has risen far beyond that, though she has not reached her true level yet, and never will till she determines to put all the wealth of imagination at her disposal into some one book....

[Her work is]not good enough for her own reputation,
if she is ever to be recognised for what she is -
at least the second female novelist of our time. 34

If Townsend had considered Hester rather more carefully he would surely
have realised that here she had "reached her true level", she had
"put all the wealth of imagination at her disposal into ... one book",
and she had produced a book that was "good enough for her own reputation".

34. The Spectator 22 December 1883; LVI, 1660-2.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SCOTTISH NOVELS: VERSIONS OF PASTORAL

Let us suppose that stranger who conveniently dropped from the skies or appeared from the wilderness in the eighteenth century, whenever a fresh observer was needed, to descend to our assistance now. Let us show him this much-abused and much-lauded country, with all her defects of climate and soil.... If the stranger is of literary tastes, let us go back a little, and show him Edinburgh half a century since; let us bring him to wit of the greatest novelist ever known in any country, and of the crowd of brilliant critics who have made that modern branch of art. Let us make him acquainted with songs unrivalled at least in the common language of this island, and ballads that have welled for ages spontaneously out of the national heart. If he is musical, let us open to him the tender melodies, and quicken his limbs with the strathspeys that are native to our soil.

("Scotland and Her Accusers", Blackwood's Magazine, September 1861; XC, 277.)

Mrs Oliphant left Scotland at the age of 10 to move to Liverpool with her parents. Only once again did she call Scotland her home, during the winter of 1860-1861, when, newly widowed, she lived briefly in Fettes Row, Edinburgh. Apart from this her knowledge of Scotland was derived from the descriptions of her friends and family (above all her mother, an inexhaustible source of stories and folklore), and from her reading, reinforced by frequent visits to Scottish friends. However, the expatriate community of Scots who worshipped at St. Peter's Presbyterian church, Scotland Road, Liverpool, enabled her as a girl and young woman to experience at firsthand a life probably not so very different from what she would have experienced in Edinburgh or

Glasgow: the fervent religious faith of the Kirk (plain living and high thinking nourished by eager theological discussion), the proud democratic, almost egalitarian, spirit of the community, the kind of mutual loyalties that have been rather unkindly dismissed as "clannish", a mixture of an imaginative delight in folklore and legend and a "dour" concern for duty and ethical imperatives, and indeed for hard work. It was Scotland Road in name, and Scotland-over-the-Borders it must have been in atmosphere. When, at the Disruption of May 1843, the Free Kirk, proud of its total democratic independence, broke away from the orthodox Church of Scotland, the crisis was watched as eagerly in Scotland Road as in Edinburgh; the Wilsons (Mrs Oliphant, her parents and her brothers) chose to follow the Free Kirk "out into the wilderness" and, as I have already shown in Chapter Six, something of this fervour was echoed in Margaret Maitland in 1849. But in the very year that Margaret Maitland was published the Wilsons crossed the Mersey to Birkenhead, and no doubt the feeling of a close-knit community was a little broken. And when, in 1852, Mrs Oliphant married and settled in London, inevitably she lost direct contact with Scottish life. And hereafter she wrote of Scotland in a more nostalgic, more romantic, manner than she did of England.

I call Mrs Oliphant's Scottish novels "versions of pastoral" because, in spite of their trappings of realistic fiction, they are largely intended as idyllic pictures of a certain kind of idealised Scottish life in small rural communities, even though this life had already begun to change under the influence of urbanisation and industrialisation (at which she glances only very briefly). One version of pastoral has been described as "any work which concerns itself with the contrast

between simple and complicated ways of living; its method is to exalt the naturalness and virtue of the simple man at the expense of the complicated one, whether the former be a shepherd, or a child, or a working-man".¹ Though formal pastoral was killed by the nineteenth-century concern for the realities of country life, its values, as rediscovered above all by Wordsworth, remained a powerful influence. Mrs Oliphant would certainly have agreed that in Scotland in "humble and rustic life ... the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended and more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature".² Although she does have scenes set in Glasgow (in the early and unsatisfactory Harry Muir, 1853, in A Son of the Soil, 1866, in Kirsteen, 1890, and in The Railwaymen and His Children, 1891), there is virtually no stress on urban life and industry; a small sector of Glasgow is selected and the setting might just as well have been a small town.

She usually chooses for her setting a deeply rural area, a small town

1. Frank Kermode, Introduction to English Pastoral Poetry, from the Beginnings to Marvell (Harrap, Life, Literature and Thought Library, 1952), p.13
2. Wordsworth, Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads, 1801; quoted from Poetical Works (Oxford 1904 etc), p.935.

or village set in splendid rural scenery, which tempts her to lavish poetic description in the tradition of Sir Walter Scott, but also perhaps of Charlotte and Emily Bronte. She had a special love for lakes, rivers and the sea, and for the picturesque countryside of Fife overlooking the Firth of Forth with a distant view of Edinburgh.

Before I take a detailed look at three of the Scottish novels, from the beginning, middle and end of Mrs Oliphant's career, I shall make a brief summary of Scottish life as reflected in her novels. Community life in Scotland is coloured above all by the presence and influence of the Kirk - a church which is on the one hand sternly authoritarian and puritanical and on the other hand proudly democratic and independent. Conduct in the Scottish parish is even more than the "three fourths of human life" which Matthew Arnold stressed.³ The Kirk of Scotland repudiates ritual and ceremony in favour of preaching, an unyielding enquiry into personal behaviour, and an austere plainness of worship, perhaps the chief aesthetic pleasure, if such an expression is permissible, being the singing of hymns and psalms in the beautiful Scottish version. But every parishioner, however humble his status, has a right to a say in parish affairs, and to influence the behaviour and even the position of his minister. The Scots take a pride in their ministers, who may very well spring from impoverished farming or crofting stock. A magazine story, "Annie Orme", published in 1852,⁴ turns on

3. "[Religion] extends to rightness in the whole range of what we call conduct; in three-fourths, therefore, at the very lowest computation of human life": Matthew Arnold, Literature and Dogma, 1873, p.15

4. Sharpe's London Magazine, edited by Mrs S.C.Hall; XVI(I n.s.), 129-39, 198-210 (September and October 1852). Mrs Hall was a friend of Mrs Oliphant's.

this theme. A young girl brought up by her aunts has fallen in love with a young man who appears no more than a farm labourer. Her aunts are appalled - until they discover on a visit to Edinburgh that the young man has been training as a minister in the Kirk, and is living in poverty to pay the expenses of his training. Even the more arrogant of the aunts totally withdraws her disapproval of the marriage, although the man comes from a poor background, for Scotland's pride in her ministers transcends class feeling. The story, slight though it is, is much more interesting than anything else Mrs Oliphant was writing in 1852.

The Kirk of Scotland is a Calvinist sect, and Calvinism has long been notorious for its illiberalism and fanaticism. But Mrs Oliphant was always eager to defend her church and its ministers against such imputations, long after she had grown familiar with the very different atmosphere of the Church of England. Here is an example from 1896:

It has pleased the literary class in all times to stigmatise the Calvinistic creed as the origin of all evil. I, for one, am bound to say that I have not found it to be so, perhaps because dogmatical tenets hold, after all, but a small place in human hearts, and that the milk of human kindness flows independent of all the formal rules of theology. Mr Buchanan was no doubt a Calvinist, and set to his hand unhesitatingly to all the standards. But he was a man who was for ever finding out the image of God in his fellow-men, and cursing was neither on his lips nor in his heart. He did not religiously doubt his fellow-creature or condemn him.⁵

It was not often, so late in her career, that Mrs Oliphant chose to intervene directly, with the first person singular, into her novels in this way.

5. The Unjust Steward; or, The Minister's Debt (W.& R. Chambers), pp.19-20. "Set to his hand" is presumably a misprint, but I have let it stand.

Scottish independence and democratic feeling are often stressed by Mrs Oliphant; but so also is Scottish pride in aristocratic traditions, in submissive loyalty to one's "laird" or the head of one's clan. This is strongly emphasised in The Wizard's Son (1884); and in Kirsteen (1890) she specifically refers to "that mingling of aristocratic predilections and democratic impulses which belongs to" the Scots.⁶ She seems to share this ambivalent attitude - and to retain it when writing about England, so that she can write with detached, ironic amusement, and yet without hostility, of the English class system. (This, effectively, is the tone of much of Hester.) But when she writes of Scotland she shows enthusiasm and affection for the peasantry (the cottager, the farmer, the crofter) as did her predecessors Sir Walter Scott and John Galt. Her approach is described in her own words on John Galt:

His works ... have been the model of all those successive works ... which have expounded so often, and notably in our own day, the life from within of the Scottish peasant, with its humours and sagacities and roughnesses. 7

She goes on to stress that Galt's real subject was "the middle class, the smaller order of lairds, the rural clergy, the country writers⁸ and civic dignitaries" to be found in a small town. This is not Mrs Oliphant's territory; but the last part of the quotation seems very precisely to sum up her own approach. She does aim to communicate "the life from within of the Scottish peasant", though at times she idealises and creates a stereotype (partly implied by the words "humours and sagacities and roughnesses"). Eloquent and irrepressible villagers

6. Kirsteen II, 173.

7. Annals of a Publishing House: William Blackwood & Sons, Their Magazine and Friends (2 volumes, Blackwood, 1897), I, 446.

8. This means Writers to the Signet, that is, lawyers.

appear, often as choric characters, in her Scottish novels; and too often their homespun wit and peasant wisdom is intrusive, irrelevant and self-indulgent. The Minister's Wife (1869) is a notable example; it contains much expendable, episodic matter including gossip among village "characters" in the alehouse and the blacksmith's shop.

Mrs Oliphant's interest in Scottish democratic feeling is shown in many ways, great and small. For example she stresses on several occasions that Scottish servants are less deferential, more familiar than English servants. In The House on the Moor (1861) a Scottish maid speaks "with perhaps less apparent deference than such a maid would have had on the other side of the border". Two passages in The Wizard's Son (1884) clarify this attitude. A new laird arrives on his estate and is greeted by a servant "with a courtesy, which was polite, rather than humble".

Walter felt that she would have offered him her hand, on the smallest encouragement, with a kindly familiarity which conveyed no disrespect.

"You should say my lord, Mysie", her mistress remarked.

"Deed, mem, and so I should; but when you're no much in the way o't, ye get confused".

In a later chapter the explanation of Mysie's lack of deference is given. It is attributed to "that serene certainty that her mistress's affairs were her own, which distinguishes an old Scotch family retainer".⁹ In other words her attitude goes back to the traditions of total loyalty to one's laird, one's clan, one's family, in which all members of a community passionately identify with one another, sharing the same loyalties, the same convictions, the same imaginative involvement with a background, however superficially different the social ranks are.

9. The House on the Moor II, 133; The Wizard's Son I, 201-2, 266.

The same feeling is to be found in Sir Walter Scott's best work (clearly a direct influence on Mrs Oliphant), and lingers (strangely transformed) into R.L.Stevenson's The Master of Ballantrae.

The most celebrated characteristic of Scottish democratic-mindedness, of which it both an effect and a cause, is a Scotsman's pride in his education. In It Was a Lover and His Lass (1883) a lady says, speaking of church music:

"You see, we have not Handel in every church like you. England is better off in some things. But, if you speak of education in general, it is far behind - oh, far behind! Every common person has a chance with the best!"

"And do you like that?" Lewis said.

"Do I like it? Do I like democracy, and the levelling down of all we were brought up to believe in? Oh, no. But, on the other hand, I like very well that a clever lad should have the means of bettering himself".

The curious mixture here of a belief in the egalitarianism of education and a distaste for the levelling down of classes is very typical of Mrs Oliphant, and may be compared with the views on class matters of Edward Vernon, as quoted on page 355 of the previous chapter.

Another passage from It was a Lover confirms the importance of education in Scotland: the innkeeper Adam speaks broad Scots and yet quotes Locke and Bacon:

'Maybe you're one of them that thinks with Locke there are nae innate ideas? But I'm of the Scotch school, sir; I'm no demanding daata daata for ever, like your Baconian lads". 10

The novel which, as I shall show later, throws the greatest emphasis on the education theme in relation to Scotland is A Son of the Soil.

There is one peculiarity of Scotsmen that Mrs Oliphant frequently

10. It Was a Lover I, 140-1, 119.

stresses: their great emotional reserve. A Scotsman, she frequently tells us, finds great difficulty in showing his feelings, in particular his affection. Demonstrations of affection between members of a family are very rare and will be compelled only by exceptional circumstances and even then will embarrass the participants. An illuminating passage on this theme comes in an obscure story, "Isabell Carr", published in St James's Magazine in 1861. Mrs Oliphant is writing of an alienated father and daughter:

Conversation, which is always scant in their class, was next to unknown, except in moments of passion or elevated feelings, in the silent house of the Dumfriesshire farmer. This peculiarity, the result in the present as in many other cases of a higher tone of mind than usual, and a fastidious reserve in the expression of sentiment which is almost peculiar to the Scotch character, made it more difficult to enter upon subjects of interest beyond the everyday routine, and was an absolute protection to Bell in her loneliness. 11

This suggests an unhealthy inhibition of the natural feelings - which is not a criticism Mrs Oliphant always seems ready to make. But no doubt the feelings thus inhibited in the Scot break out in other directions, in passionate devotion for example, to the Kirk, or to family traditions. And Mrs Oliphant's Scottish characters show very little reserve when surrendering to the grief caused by bereavement.

Stylistically, Mrs Oliphant's Scottish novels are in no way different from her others - except for the use of Scottish dialect. Her Scottish dialogue is exuberant; the richness of the language and the individualising "flavour" are unmistakable - as is her temptation to excessive use of such dialogue. It obeys by anticipation J.M.Synge's advice

11. St James's Magazine, November 1861; II, 401.

that speech " should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple",¹² and shows the instinct for speech rhythms that all Scottish writers seem to inherit as their birthright. If at times she indulges in long speeches in broad Scots not always fully integrated into the context, she makes one very interesting use of Scottish idiom, sparingly and with delicacy, in free indirect speech. Into her third-person narrative when she describes a Scotsman talking she inserts as part of her own syntax examples of the very idiom which the man would use. The prose begins, so to speak, to "think" like the character - a miniature anticipation of the stream-of-consciousness technique of twentieth-century novelists. No doubt she adapted this technique from John Galt, who in Annals of the Parish (1821) and The Provost (1822) used a first-person narrator who was not merely idiomatic but idiosyncratic and consequently wrote and thought in the dialect of Southern Scotland. Mrs Oliphant made little use of the first-person narrative in her mature work, but Margaret Maitland, especially in the earlier chapters, echoes the vocal tones of Margaret the narrator. More interesting, because much subtler, is the use of the technique as I describe it above, as a gentle modification of a passage otherwise in standard English. A very fine example is from The Wizard's Son. Hamish, a Highland servant, is puzzled by the strange behaviour of two lovers who employ him, but pleased to observe that the man has not lost his skill in rowing:

12. Preface to The Playboy of the Western World (Dublin, 1907). Edition used, Everyman edition of Synge's Plays, Poems and Prose (Dent 1946), p.108. Synge was speaking of dramatic dialogue but what he says is just as applicable to novels.

This solaced him beyond telling, for though he had not said a word to any one, not even to Mysie, it had lain heavily upon his heart that Miss Oona might be about to link her life to that of a daft man. She that was good enough for any king! and what were the Erradeens to make so muckle work about, but just a mad race that nobody could understand. And the late lord had been one that could not hold an oar to save his life, nor yet yon Underwood-man that was his chosen crony. But this lad was different! Oh! there was no doubt that there was a great difference; just one easy touch and he was clear of the stanes yonder, that made so little show under the water - and there was that shallow bit where he would get aground if he didna mind; but again a touch and that difficulty too was cleared. It was so well done that the heart of Hamish melted altogether into softness. 13

The transition from a sophisticated, observer-orientated interpretation of Hamish's thoughts ("solaced", "lain heavily upon his heart") is made by the idiomatic word "daft", and the cliché "good enough for any king" is distanced by becoming part of the framework of his thoughts. The transition is from the external observation of the content, rather than the detail, of what he is thinking to an internalised re-enactment of it, coloured unavoidably by his own idioms, his illogical prejudices being presented without any intrusive irony. The idiom is used with such delicacy that no reader will be led into seeing Hamish as just a "quaint rustic".

In Joyce (1888) Peter Matheson, a ploughman, and his wife Janet play a very important role. They have brought up the heroine when it was not known who she was and eventually have to hand her over to her father. In describing their feelings when this occurs Mrs Oliphant makes frequent use of free indirect speech, thus drawing the reader into direct experience of their point of view almost as they might express it themselves. A butler embarrasses Janet by inviting

her to sit on an easy chair. 'He didna seem to think that was ower good for the like of her'. Joyce returns from her new-found father and Janet briefly supposes 'that she had discovered already that all these fine folk were not to be lippeden to'. Years later Joyce pays her foster-father a visit: 'Whatfor should she be changed? Whatfor should she be otherwise than happy? She had come to see them in the moment she had in the middle of her journey, alone, as was natural - for anybody with her would have made a different thing of it altogether, and weel did Joyce ken that'.¹⁴ The third of these passages is particularly felicitous. The idiom 'whatfor', used twice, indicates that the point of view is that of Janet Matheson, but the thoughts of her mind are communicated by standard English, simple but in no way condescending, until suddenly with the words 'weel did Joyce ken that' the prose takes on the very form of Janet's thought processes - and we have no choice but to identify with her. The method is economical, since no narrator intrudes to direct our responses.

In speaking of the use of Scots dialect in novels David Craig complains that frequently (in Scott and others) 'we have, not a rendering of shades of real speech, consistently carried out, but a literary habit in which Scots may be taken up for favourite effects but is not felt to be feasible as the language of the hero or moral centre of a book', and, speaking of Hogg's Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner he says that "we can sense that the thickest Scots in the book is grafted on as a kind of purple patch".¹⁵ Such

14. Joyce I, 221, 304; III, 283-4.

15. David Craig, Scottish Literature and the Scottish People, 1680-1835 (Chatto 1961) p.258.

a criticism may very justly be made of Mrs Oliphant. (Certainly her key characters almost always speak standard English.) But her intermingling of free indirect speech and objective narrative, of standard English and Scots, is the very reverse of a "purple passage" or a "literary habit".

The three novels I shall examine in detail are The Laird of Norlaw (3 volumes, Hurst & Blackett 1858), an early and unsatisfactory novel: A Son of the Soil (1866), written when The Chronicles of Carlingford had enabled Mrs Oliphant to discover her true gifts; and Kirsteen (1890), one of her last Scottish novels and the one which was considered by J.M.Barrie and W.E.Henley to be the finest of them.

The Laird of Norlaw, although written at the very end of Mrs Oliphant's apprentice decade, is very unsatisfactory; but it contains much of interest that points the way to much more successful treatments of the same themes in later novels. It begins well, with the death of a father whose character is typical of an Oliphant novel:

Huntley ... knew there was weakness in his father's character, beautiful, lovable, tender weakness, for which, somehow, people only seemed to like him better. He had not permitted himself to see yet what harm and selfish unconsciousness of others that graceful temperament had hidden. 16

But this shrewd piece of insight is thrown away since the father (Mr Livingstone, the laird of Norlaw) dies at the beginning of the book. Mrs Oliphant developed her understanding of such sweet-natured moral inadequacy in later books (notably in A Rose in June, 1874, where another father, a clergyman, also dies, but not before his self-

16. The Laird of Norlaw I, 48. I have emended "seem" in the original, clearly an error, to "seemed". The passage should be compared with the description of Mr May in The Son of His Father. (See in particular page 119 above).

indulgent indolence has been developed and its effect on his wife and daughter studied) - but not in a Scottish setting. The laird leaves behind him a debt-ridden estate and what follows is the most startling incident in the book: his corpse is arrested for debt, to the bitter humiliation of his three sons. Afterwards, to honour the Scottish traditions about proper respect for the dead, the three sons take the corpse out at dead of night and bury it in Dryburgh Abbey.

Many commentators have pointed out that Mrs Oliphant's novels tend to begin splendidly and then to lose impetus, abandoning themselves to over-complicated plots and spreading out thin content to fill the obligatory three volumes. As a generalisation this is entirely misleading; but it is true of The Laird of Norlaw. Nothing in the rest of the book ever begins to match the vigour and imaginative power of the opening chapters. The real theme of the book soon reveals itself, one of Mrs Oliphant's favourite plot-themes, the search for a missing heir or, in this case, heiress. The heiress is Mary of Melmar, the next estate to Norlaw, and the search is unreasonably prolonged, complicated by deceits and villainy, and erodes what interest the story might have had. Mary had long ago eloped abroad with a lover and disappeared. In due course a young French girl is introduced to us. She had, we learn, a Scottish mother - and the reader is ready to identify her at once as the daughter of the missing heiress. Yet none of the characters make this discovery, not even Cosmo Livingstone, the romance of whose life is to look for the missing Mary of Melmar, and who ought surely to have seized eagerly upon this clue. After

this it is impossible to take any interest in Cosmo's prolonged searches for Mary through Europe.

A half-hearted attempt was made by Mrs Oliphant to give the story a socially significant setting. The time of the events is during the period leading up to the great Reform Bill of 1832 and, on one occasion, there is a riot during which a Reform mob breaks windows. Possibly here she was echoing Charlotte Bronte's Shirley, although there the riots were concerned with Luddism, not with Parliamentary Reform. We hear also of the early railways. (There is talk of "that man they ca' Stephenson".)¹⁷ Mrs Oliphant called herself a Radical in her younger years, and she describes in her autobiography how, at the age of about 14, she took part in petitions against the Corn Laws.¹⁸ And her sympathy with Reform is brought out in passages like this:

But the occasion was a remarkable occasion in the national history; the excitement was such - so general and overpowering - as no subsequent agitation has been able to equal. The real force of popular emotion in it covered its own mock-heroics, which is no small thing to say, and there was something solemn in the unanimity of so many persons who were not under the immediate sway and leadership of any demagogue, nor could be supposed to look for personal advantages, and whose extreme fervour and excitement at the same time was not revolutionary, but simply political. 19

This passage is untypical of The Laird of Norlaw; the sympathy with Reform and progress is not integrated in any way into the missing-heiress theme, and it seems merely to decorate a muddled book, whose energies lose direction in sentimentality, self-conscious writing

17. The Laird of Norlaw I, 125.

18. A. & L., pp.17-18.

19. Norlaw II, 67-8.

and themes whose implications are never fully examined. It is significant that when the story reaches its dramatic climaxes (for example when one of the heroines discovers that she has been deceived by a false love and rushes out distraught into the January cold) the style collapses into hysterical melodramatics. There are some moments of effective irony, but they seem merely tentative. For example a rhetorical death scene is sharpened by a comment on "old people ... speaking of it with that strange calm curiosity of age, which always seems to congratulate itself that some one else is the present sufferer, yet is never without the consciousness that itself may be the next".²⁰ This is a foretaste of how death would be treated in later novels, but at this moment in The Laird of Norlaw it is an isolated detail.

Nevertheless the Reform-Bill movement did enable Mrs Oliphant to create perhaps the most attractive of the choric characters in her Scottish novels. This is Bowed Jaacob, the hunchbacked (that is "bowed") brother of the village blacksmith, an eloquent, irrepressible democrat who calls himself a philosopher and seeker after truth. He "knew Pope's Homer very tolerably"²¹ and says:

"Free institutions dinna agree with the like of primogeniture and thae inventions of the deevil. Let's but hae a reformed parliament, and we'll learn them better manners.... I tell you, a docken on the roadside is mair guid to a country than the like of Me'mar's son".

And later:

"I ken human nature gey well; and I canna say I ever limited my ain faith to men that pay rent and taxes at so muckle a year.... A man's just the same man ... though you do gie him a vote.... There's a certain slave-class in ilka community - that's my

20. Norlaw II, 293.

21. Norlaw II, 19-20.

conviction - and I wouldna say but we've just had the good fortune to light upon them in thae ten-pund householders.... Catch them [the aristocrats] extending the suffrage to the real men, the backbone of the country". 22

The details of Scottish life are lovingly portrayed in The Laird of Norlaw, but here they seem no more than "local colour". Mrs Oliphant stresses the "formal and unalterable customs of the countryside",²³ (especially in the funeral ceremonies at the beginning of the book) and by implication contrasts them with the social changes represented by railways and the Reform movement. Bowed Jaacob is both a representative of a traditional Scottish type, going back perhaps to the Covenanters of the Seventeenth Century, and a spokesman for the new spirit of the age. Patrick Livingstone, brother of the hero Cosmo, goes to work in a foundry in Glasgow, and this again emphasises that times are changing. but little enough is made of this. No scenes are set in Glasgow: Mrs Oliphant did not risk describing an industrial community, of which she knew nothing.

More interesting is an account of life in a Scottish University. Cosmo becomes a student at Edinburgh University which, at one point, is ironically contrasted with Oxford. The atmosphere of a Scottish University is brought out by the character of the Highlander Cameron, nearly 30 and yet Cosmo's fellow student, proud of his education, hard-working, poor, not academically brilliant, and with a pride to hide his poverty, which comes from a background of manual labour. ("He could not acknowledge his poverty, and take his stand upon it boldly",²⁴ unlike the hero of "Annie Orme".) The stress once

22. Norlaw II, 111, 112; III, 141-2.

23. Norlaw I, 62.

24. Norlaw II, 180.

again is laid on a Scotsman's devotion to education, and his single-minded pursuit of it. I shall have more to say of Cameron when I deal with the university episode in A Son of the Soil.

Only eight years separate The Laird of Norlaw and A Son of the Soil, but between the two books the greater part of The Chronicles of Carlingford had been written²⁵ and the improvement in literary sophistication and assured handling of a theme was immense. The book shows great unity and is single-mindedly built round themes of education and religion, specifically Scottish education and religion, and the contrast with England that had been implied in Norlaw by the contrast between Edinburgh and Oxford is here taken further. This contrast is established in the very first chapter, where an arrogant young Englishman, an Etonian on holiday among the mountains north of Glasgow, meets the hero Colin Campbell, son of a farmer, but soon to go to Glasgow University - at 15, the age at which many Scotsmen went to the university.

"I hear there's some grand schools in England", said Mrs Campbell; "no' that they're to compare wi' Edinburgh, I suppose?... You'll be at ane o' the great schools, I suppose? I aye like to learn what I can when there's any opportunity. I would like my Colin to get a' the advantages, for he's well worthy o' a good education, though we're rather out of the way of it here".

"I am at Eton", said the English boy who could scarcely refrain from a little ridicule at the idea of sharing "a' the advantages" of that distinguished foundation with a colt like Colin; "but I should

25. A Son of the Soil was serialised in Macmillan's Magazine from November 1863 to April 1865. During this period The Perpetual Curate completed its progress through Blackwood's Magazine; and Miss Marjoribanks started in that magazine in February 1865.

think you would find it too far off to send
your son there..."

Mrs Campbell is not daunted by the reference to Eton and she comments:

"They tell me there's schules in Edinburgh far afore anything that's
kent in England" and adds "our Colin's done with his schuling. Educ-
ation takes longer wi' the like of you".²⁶

A Son of the Soil follows Colin's education through Glasgow Univ-
ersity, where he wins a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford (as
many Scotsmen did). Eventually he becomes a minister in the Church
of Scotland; and the development of his religious opinions subsequently
takes priority over the education theme.

Colin's experience both of the Church of England and of Catholicism
(in Italy where he goes for the benefit of his health) enables him
to see the religion of his own church in perspective. He develops
a personal religious philosophy, a poetic, imaginative belief in
the rebirth of reverence: much needed in the Kirk, with its fiercely
uncharitable dogmatic Calvinism, concerned more with sermons than
with prayer. Although, as I have already indicated, Mrs Oliphant
was ready to spring to the defence of Calvinism (or rather of Calvinists)
against its detractors, its brand of religion did lay it open to
justifiable criticism, and A Son of the Soil is devoted to this criti-
cism. Colin writes two Tracts for the Times to express his views,
and Mrs Oliphant thus invites a comparison with the leaders of the
Oxford Movement, who returned the Church of England in the direction
of rituals, vestments and ceremony, just as Colin wishes to return
the Church of Scotland to a tenderer religion more in tune with the
traditions of European Christianity.

26. A Son of the Soil I, 5-6.

The dogmatic Old Scotland, which loved to bind, and limit, and make confessions, and sign the same, belonged to the past centuries. As for Colin's set, they were "viewy" as the young men at Oxford used to be in the days of Froude and Newman. Colin's own "views" were of a vague description enough, but of the most revolutionary tendency. He did not believe in Presbytery, nor in that rule of Church government which in Scotland is known as Lord Aberdeen's Act; and his ideas respecting extempore worship and common prayer were much unsettled.

Like other fervent young men, an eager discontent with everything he saw lay at the bottom of his imaginations; and it was the development of Christianity - "more chivalrous, more magnanimous, than that of modern times" - that he thought of. 27

Mrs Oliphant's readiness of response to contemporary events is demonstrated by the timing of A Son of the Soil. In the years when it was being serialised in Macmillan's Magazine (1863 to 1865) a great reform of the Church of Scotland was taking place, associated with John Tulloch, a personal friend of Mrs Oliphant's who, as principal of St Mary's College, St Andrews, aimed to liberalise Scottish theology and take it back into the traditions of European Christianity; with Dr Robert Lee of Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh, who aimed to introduce more rituals (partly adopted from Anglicanism) into church services; and with Norman Macleod, who opposed the rigid sabbatarianism of Scotland. Mrs Oliphant later described these reforms in Chapter VIII ("The Renaissance of the Scotch Church") of her Memoir of the Life of John Tulloch (Blackwood 1888).

But A Son of the Soil is not itself a tract for the times, disguised as fiction. It has the balance, the complexity, the avoidance of didacticism, which we expect from a work of imaginative literature. Colin, though viewed with full sympathy, is also treated ironically

and he ends the book disillusioned: he is mortified by the harsh criticism of his parishioners (near "St Rules" in Fife, Mrs Oliphant's version of St Andrews) and he must reconcile himself to the recognition that they will never respond to his ideals. So in the end he sadly settles down to the ordinary life of a Scottish minister, giving his parishioners mostly what they expected. His disillusion closely resembles that of Arthur Vincent, minister of Salem Chapel in Carlingford, his almost exact contemporary. But whereas Vincent troubles us by the evidence of his arrogant egotism and his religious idealism is never really convincing, Colin's disillusion is seen as the outcome of a lifetime's experience and serious thought, and of a genuine love both of religion and of the people whom he wishes to teach.

Colin's religious experience essentially represents Mrs Oliphant's own. She too moved away from the stern Calvinism of her youth and the fanaticism of the Free Kirk after the Disruption of 1843. Her sympathies, influenced by John Tulloch, now lay with the "residuary" Church of Scotland, in the process of reforming herself, and with the traditions of the Church of England, even if these tended to be complacent, undemocratic and over-dependent on the Prayer Book and on authority. And like Colin she had acquired by her travels on the Continent a great love for the beauty of Roman Catholicism. In A Son of the Soil she gives a fair and balanced picture of these three versions of Christianity (Scottish Calvinism, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism), allowing us to see the strengths and weaknesses of each. To heighten the contrast she introduces a fourth version of Christianity, evangelicalism, in the person of Arthur Meredith, an unpleasant egotist who accompanies Colin to Italy where he dies of consumption. Meredith is an obsessive religious fanatic, demanding

conversion from everybody, envisaging life in the next world, preparing his message to the survivors in a fiercely death-obsessed book called A Voice from the Grave. He is a narrow, uncharitable man who never recognises his own selfishness and cruelty in dragging his docile sister Alice along with him, with no regard for her feelings at all. Meredith "was disposed to think that anything natural was more or less wicked"; he "had a spirit which insisted on being first and best beloved"; and he is accused by Lauderdale, the spokesman for many of the values of the book, of "using the sword o' the Spirit to give stabs in the dark" (by smuggling tracts into people's hands under false pretences).²⁸

"I frighten and horrify many", said the invalid, not without a gleam of satisfaction; "but there are so few, so miserably few, with whom it is possible to have true communion. Let me share your experiences - there must be instruction in them".... Lauderdale submitted to be swept on in the strange wind of haste and anxiety and eagerness which surrounded the dying youth, to whom a world lying in wickedness and "I, I alone" left to maintain the knowledge of God among men, was the one great truth. 29

Beside this illiberal egotism Colin's sensitive progress towards idealism, and then towards disillusion, is seen as the complex expression of a rich personality deeply engaged with fundamental questions. His personal, deeply felt religious beliefs avoid the aggressive dogmatism of the Kirk, the complacent authoritarianism of Anglicanism, the superstitions of Roman Catholicism and the life-denying uncharitableness of evangelicalism, but distils from the Kirk its democracy, from the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches the beauty of their

28. A Son of the Soil II, 21, 38, 40.

29. A Son of the Soil II, 5.

church services, and possibly from evangelicalism its passion and fervour, thus creating a synthesis of his own (largely derived no doubt from the views of Principal John Tulloch.)

A Son of the Soil is admirably concentrated, in no way disfigured by the kind of over-elaborated plot-contrivances and multiplying mystifications of which elsewhere Mrs Oliphant was so fond. The obligatory love theme is carefully integrated into the central themes of the book and ends with a splendid irony which balances the irony of Colin's disillusion with his religious message: he is trapped into marriage with a girl (Alice Meredith) whom he no longer loves but who is breaking her heart for him. But just as Colin will make a reasonable success of his duties as a minister in spite of the draining away of his idealism so he will make a success of his marriage, although it can never be the ideal marriage which he had once looked forward to.

However, I have reserved one curious detail for final treatment, I have already referred to Lauderdale, the raisonneur of the book, the spokesman for the values which it is meant to express (apart from the purely theological ones). He is ten years older than Colin, but he enters the story as his fellow-student at Glasgow University. He intervenes to protect Colin from a mob of rowdy students, and in due course the two become firm friends and travel together throughout the story. Lauderdale closely resembles Cameron in The Laird of Norlaw and the friendship of Cameron and Cosmo Livingstone is a close anticipation of the friendship of Lauderdale and Colin. The older man in each book is shown to be lonely, denying himself intimate companionship and - almost - resigned to the permanent isolation that is his doom.

Cameron is best forgotten because in an attempt to convey rough masculine affection Mrs Oliphant fails disastrously and very embarrassingly.

Lauderdale is never as bad as that; she makes more attempt to understand him, presumably without ever really recognising the implications of such a close friendship between two men of different ages. Lauderdale's affection for Colin, so it seems, is a form of compensation for the loss of a girl he loved long ago. When Colin is gravely ill Lauderdale faithfully attends "the young companion who now represented almost all that he loved in the world". He later tells him "I've put more hope on your head than any man's justified in putting on another man. You were the ransom of my soul, callant". And he keeps a fatherly eye on Colin's love affairs, anxious only for Colin's good. Near the end of the book this comment is made:

Such love as had been possible to Lauderdale had been given early in his life - given once and done with; and Colin had filled up the place in his heart which might have been vacant as a prey to vagrant affections. 30

The treatment is trite, though not sentimental; but perhaps one's embarrassment is caused by a recognition that never again can we be so entirely innocent about masculine friendships

Lauderdale speaks broad Scots and represents a kind of traditional Scottish wisdom, coloured by the ironic disillusion of a disappointed man. It is through his eyes that we are invited to condemn the arrogant evangelical Meredith; and Colin's idealism is always quietly challenged by Lauderdale's disillusion, which paves the way for Colin's own disillusion with which the book ends. What weakens his impact is that there is far too much of him. Mrs Oliphant is so indulgent to him that she cannot see that he is something of a bore, and that

he is dishonestly rationalising his own disappointments by an escapist cynicism. Though Lauderdale uses irony at times to deflate Colin and others Mrs Oliphant fails to use irony to deflate Lauderdale. Still, he does on occasion speak for Mrs Oliphant as her experiences were beginning to affect her:

"To have a good theory - or, if ye like, a grand ideal - o' existence, is about as much as a man can attain to in this world. To put it into full practice is reserved, let us aye hope, for the life to come". 31

And this precisely anticipates the ending of the book. But Mrs Oliphant made a much more interesting use of such disillusion in later novels.

Writing to her publisher Mrs Oliphant said "I think the Son of the Soil is worth something. It is honest work, I know - and of my best". Clearly it meant a very great deal to her, and was probably intended as a considered picture of what seemed most of value in the life of Scotland, which, now she had settled in Windsor, could never again be considered her home. In another letter she says "The church question is one which interests me greatly, and I think the intellectual and religious life of Scotland is very much bound up in it". (If this is not a mere statement of the obvious, the "church question" must refer, either to the Disruption or to the reforms taking place in the Kirk in the 1860's.) It was published with no name at all on the title page, a practice adopted by Mrs Oliphant when a book meant a great deal to her. "You understand, I am sure", she said to Macmillan, "that I have not changed my opinion about putting any name to it. In this case however the want of name can do no possible harm. Since people have decided it to be mine let

them have their own way but we need not give them any definite information on the subject".³² Anonymity, even if it was an open secret, seemed to satisfy some need of her personality, a need perhaps to keep some part of herself intensely private in the midst of the public persona that she was beginning to construct for herself in the 1860's. The year 1866, in which not only A Son of the Soil, but also Miss Marjoribanks and Agnes,³³ were published, was a high peak in her career and it was not for many years that she produced anything as remarkable as these three novels.

By the time Mrs Oliphant wrote Kirsteen the literary world had drastically changed. Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot and Trollope had died and novelists of a very different kind (Hardy, Meredith, Gissing, Henry James) were showing a far greater concern for the art of the novel, or for extending its range beyond the area favoured by their great predecessors. Yet one of the younger men, J.M.Barrie, described Kirsteen as "the best, far the best, story of its kind that has come out of Scotland for the last score of years". However, he added, secure in the literary sophistication of the 1890's, that it "could have been improved by the comparative duffer".³⁴

But Henry James himself gave close attention to Kirsteen; and I must first examine his views. We find them in two places. First A.C.Benson in his diary reports how W.E.Henley urged James to read the book, aware of his scepticism about Mrs Oliphant and anxious

32. British Library, Macmillan Correspondence; ADD MS 54,919, 8 February n.d.[1866],f.321; 14 March n.d.[1865],f.322-3; 10 January n.d.[1866], f.328-9.

33. Strictly Agnes, though dated 1866, was published late in 1865.

34. Introductory note to A Widow's Tale and other Stories(1898), p.vii.

to share his enthusiasm for a book that he admired. But James's reaction was devastating:

I ... was at once confirmed, after twenty pages, in my belief - I laboured through the book - that the poor soul has a simply feminine conception of literature; such slipshod, imperfect, halting, faltering, peeping down-at-heel work - buffeting along like a ragged creature in a high wind, and just struggling to the goal, and falling in a quivering mass of faintness and fatuity. Yes, no doubt she was a gallant woman - though with no species of wisdom - but an artist, an artist - ! 35

This extraordinary onslaught may be excused as the spontaneous uncensored reaction of the high aesthete of the English novel; it has no significance as criticism. The words were spoken in 1900; but earlier, in his obituary notice, James had been much less scathing, and yet more disconcerting to those who wish to admire Kirsteen. I have quoted the earlier part of the obituary notice in Chapter One. Its last two paragraphs are as follows:

Reading since her death Kirsteen ... I was, though beguiled, not too much beguiled to be struck afresh with that elusive fact on which I just touched, the mixture in the whole thing. Such a product as Kirsteen has life - is full of life; but the critic is infinitely baffled. It may of course be said to him that he has nothing to do with compositions of this order - with such wares altogether as Mrs Oliphant dealt in. But he can accept that retort only with a renunciation of his liveliest anxieties. Let him take some early day for getting behind, as it were, the complexion of a talent that could care to handle a thing to the tune of so many pages and yet could not care more to "do" it.

Mrs Oliphant was never lost, but she often saved herself at the expense of the subject. I have no space to insist, but so much of the essence of the situation in Kirsteen strikes me as missed, dropped out without a thought, that the wonder is all the greater of the fact that in spite of it the book does in a manner scramble over its course and throw up a fresh strong air. This was certainly the most that the author could have pretended, and from her scorn of precautions springs a gleam of impertinence quite in place in her sharp and handsome physiognomy, that of a person whose eggs are not all

35. Diary of A.C.Benson, ed.Percy Lubbock (Hutchinson 1926),p.47. Entry dated 17 January 1900. Benson visits James at Rye. James himself describes Henley's recommendation to read Kirsteen.

in one basket, nor all her imagination in service at once. There is scant enough question of "art" in the matter, but there is a friendly way for us to feel about so much cleverness, courage and humanity. We meet the case in wishing that the timid talents were a little more like her and the bold ones a little less.³⁶

Could one venture to admire Kirsteen after this? One 's first reaction, however, is to complain that James's prose style is unsatisfactory. Surely he means "not too much beguiled not to be struck"? What precisely does "to 'do' it" mean? How can anybody throw up an air, especially a "fresh, strong" one? How does one "get behind the complexion", and does the use of the diffident expression "as it were" adequately compensate for such a muddled idea? In this context what exactly does "impertinence" mean? How very clumsily James manages his transition ("We meet the case") to his final, concessionary praise! And what is the meaning of that glib final antithesis? (Why should the "bold talents" be less like Mrs Oliphant, and is this meant as praise or blame of Mrs Oliphant?) If James expects artistic perfection, ought he not to be above reproach himself?

But what in fact do James's criticisms of Kirsteen amount to? Simply a complaint that Mrs Oliphant has not come to terms with the real theme of the book, has not fully embodied it and made the whole book work to that one end. Failing this, James implies, the book collapses into a mere narrative of events. She "saved herself at the expense of the subject", presumably by concentrating on picturesque incident and character, and on old-fashioned thrills and mysteries. If this is what he meant then we can look at the book with greater assurance to see how far he was justified, although as James never

36. "London Notes 1897" in Notes on Novelists, pp.359-60.

defines what he believes the theme to be this must be speculative. However, if we examine Kirsteen with this in mind we may have to admit that the book does seem to lack the central unifying principle that A Son of the Soil possesses.

One's first impression of Kirsteen is that it is a study of a parent - and-child theme, specifically father-and-daughter, within a very Scottish setting. Neil Douglas of Drumcarro (or Drumcarro, as he is usually called, simply naming him after his estate in Scottish style) is intensely proud of his family tradition, going back centuries; beside the Douglasses the Duke of the nearby castle, though a Campbell, is a mere upstart. Yet his home is no more than a superior farmhouse, and he has only one servant, an all-purpose housekeeper. This is a peculiarly Scottish tradition, almost that of a "bonnet laird"³⁷ though perhaps it somewhat resembles the proud independence of Cumberland "statesmen" as described by Wordsworth. Drumcarro's fierce pride of family seems an unconscious over-compensation for the real humbleness of his status - and this pride is reflected in the brutally authoritarian tone he adopts in his family, especially with his wife and daughters. Inevitably Kirsteen, the most forceful and energetic of his daughters, cannot for long submit to such a situation, and when a confrontation occurs and her father proves inflexible Kirsteen walks out and travels to London where in due course she adopts the career of a "mantua-maker" (dressmaker), first the employee and afterwards the partner of another Soctswoman, Miss Jean Brown. To some extent the father-and-daughter theme is now neglected; but two of Kirsteen's sisters, Mary and Jeanie, have remained at home, and the

37. A very small landowner, in effect no more than a peasant who owns a little property.

story of these two and their relations with their father (from whom each seeks escape by marriage - the escape route already chosen by another sister, Anne) are followed through in episodes that alternate with the progress of Kirsteen's career in London.

If we now look back on Kirsteen from the end of Book II, we can discern another theme, a feminist protest against the exploitation of women and the denial of their right to self-fulfilment. In Drumcarro's house women "did not count for much". He himself says that "lasses are a drug in the market" and he thinks "any woman dear at the price" offered by a husband. He had been a West Indian slaveowner and this fact is specifically linked with his treatment of women; "on his return from Jamaica" he was "a fierce, high-tempered, arbitrary man, by no means unworthy of the title 'auld slave-driver', so unanimously bestowed upon him by his neighbours". His daughters are left without any education or any chance to develop their personalities. Kirsteen is driven to protest "I'm not just a machine for darning stockings", and of her degraded and humiliated mother it is pointed out that "A wife cannot throw up her situation with the certainty of finding another as a good housekeeper can do".³⁸ And when Kirsteen seeks work in London - or "to make my fortune", as she puts it - she is consciously reacting against the conventional notion of fulfilment for a woman (through a possibly wealthy marriage); and this arouses the dismay of Jean Brown who says "that's all very well in a lad ... but not women, my dear, let alone young lassies like you".³⁹

38. Kirsteen I, 16, 173, 208, 79-80, 60, 6.

39. Kirsteen II, 115-6.

Yet by the end of the book Kirsteen has found fulfilment in her career and is thus contrasted with her sisters, warped and diminished by constant contact with their father, achieving marriage but not fully developed characters. In this respect Kirsteen charts the heroine's progress towards self-discovery, stimulated by rebellion against her father and by the largely negative example of her sisters.

Kirsteen's rebellion becomes explicit midway through Book I when it becomes clear to the girls and their mother that Drumcarro will block the planned escape-route of marriage by refusing them the chance to meet men. Kirsteen's inner conflict is stressed:

There was a pause after this - indignation was strong in Kirsteen's heart, but there was also a natural piety which arrested her speech. The injustice, the humiliation and hard bondage of the iron rule under which she had been brought up, but which she had only now begun to look upon as anything more than the rule of nature, was what was uppermost in her thoughts.

Mrs Douglas comments:

'Many is the thought I take about it when ye think I have nothing in my head but my own trouble. He would never put up with your lads about the house'.

'Mother!' cried Kirsteen, with indignation, 'we are not servant lasses with men coming courting. Who would dare to speak like that of us?' 40

And this prepares us for the now inevitable conflict between Kirsteen and her father.

Yet if this summary suggests a searching, ironic realism Kirsteen is only intermittently a novel of this kind. Much of the book is lyrical, romantic, nostalgic. In true Victorian style it is set back seventy years (starting very precisely in 1815; there is a reference to Napoleon at Elba) perhaps to enable Mrs Oliphant to see the story

in perspective; but this frees her from the obligation to authenticate her details. Reference to contemporary events (Waterloo, Catholic Emancipation in 1829) is perfunctory and a little self-conscious; Mrs Oliphant may have intended to show that Drumcarro represents a kind of brutal, masculine and paternal authoritarianism which a changing society must inevitably supersede; but if so this is scarcely made clear. The high-romantic tone of the book (it can be no coincidence that Kirsteen and her father are exact contemporaries of the Waverley novels, the first of which indeed is eagerly read at the beginning of Volume III) seems on many occasions to contradict the logic of the bitter parent-and-child theme, as does the plot. The impetus of the narrative pulls in one direction; the needs of the theme in another. The "closed plot" moves the heroine from place to place as in a picaresque novel. But the father-and-daughter and feminist themes seem to need more concentration, more intensification. The high-dramatic peak of the book occurs when Kirsteen rushes from London to Scotland to claim from the sister of her dead lover the handkerchief which she once gave him, embroidered (using her own hair) with his initials, and now stained with his blood. The tone is highly romantic and rhetorical; it is done with the skill and power of which Mrs Oliphant was capable in 1890, avoiding the melodramatic tone which might have appeared in her earlier books; but it does not seem to belong to the same book as the grim picture of a male-dominated household with which Kirsteen opens. The episode lays stress upon personal, private emotions, and the handkerchief is a poetic, semi-sentimental symbol of the supremacy of the passions of love and grief. There is no question of ironic detachment or of judicious balance - or

of psychological and social realism. For example, it would be pointless to ask how in the early nineteenth century Kirsteen was able to make such a long journey so rapidly. (After all the rapidity of the journey is an effective symbol for the urgency of her feelings.) And there is self-conscious symbolism of moonlight:

The moon shone in through the small window, throwing upon Kirsteen's figure the reflection of the solid wooden framework, so that she looked as if she were in a prison looking out upon the outside world through black iron bars. She stood quite still for some time with her white face turned to it looking through those bars to the light. And she never forgot that moment when she stood gazing up into the white orb in the clear summer sky which had looked down upon him lying silent upon the field [of battle]. It seemed to Kirsteen in the fever of her weariness and exhaustion that she could see that scene, the awful silence, the other dead lying about in dark muffled heaps, and the moon shining upon the handkerchief in his hands. 41

It is relevant to point out that a single-minded devotion to an ideal, the sacrifice of everything to one's loyalties, one's private emotions of love and grief, is very Scottish. One thinks of the Covenanter traditions or the single-mindedness of the Jacobites, and of the stress on these themes in Scott's novels.

Thematically what drives Kirsteen from home is the intolerable strain of living in a house where women are treated as merely useless objects, disregarded, despised, insulted. But in terms of the plot she is driven from home to escape the elderly husband her father insists on forcing upon her. And this is typical of the facing-both-ways pattern of the book. Similarly, Kirsteen's sister Jeanie is wooed by Major Gordon in a tone almost sentimental, shyly indicating his love for Jeanie by means of a quotation from Wordsworth's Lucy:

41. Kirsteen III, 38-9.

She listened to the lines which Gordon stammered forth somewhat shamefacedly, finding himself embarked in a kind of recitation which he had not intended.

"Who said it? - they are very bonnie words. I am much beholden to him, whoever he is, for such a bonnie picture of my little sister - if it is not yourself?"

"I", cried the major. "Oh, be not profane! It is one Wordsworth that lives on the Borders - but she is like that". 42

In spite of a touch of humour ("a kind of recitation which he had not intended") the stress here is on high-romantic feeling, not on realism. One notes, for example, the formal language: "beholden", the curious inversion "be not profane". This episode belongs to the plot. Yet Jeanie herself, as described in detail, belongs to the theme; she is a sharply-observed study in self-indulgent egotism, cast in the same mould as Rose Mountford in In Trust. Her one interest in life is the pursuit of pleasure; she wishes to marry Major Gordon not for love but merely to escape to a supposed life of luxury from the humiliations of her home; and if she cannot have Major Gordon she may consent to be the mistress of Lord John Campbell (though she has not fully recognised that Lord John wants her only on these terms). Mrs Oliphant's analysis of Jeanie's motivation is quite merciless. Her "passionate superficial nature eager to live and enjoy, unable to support the tedium and languor of life" is capable only of self-pity and self-indulgence.

She did not understand obstacles except as things to be eluded, pushed aside, thrust out of the way, arbitrarily, imperiously, whether they were just or even necessary or not. She could not understand that she had been born for anything but to be paramount, to be loved and admired, and happy. Her lover [Major Gordon] and heaven itself had wronged her by holding back that happiness that was her due. And when there seemed a prospect that it was to come back to her [as Lord John's mistress] Jeanie's heart rushed at the hope with a

fervour which was largely made up of fury and indignation. The thought of a future more brilliant than any she could have had with Gordon filled her with fierce delight, principally from the hope that he would hear of it, perhaps see it and recognise her superior bliss and his loss. 43

Mrs Oliphant is equally unsympathetic to Kirsteen's other sisters:

Anne is a cowardly weak-minded neurotic who takes refuge in her maternal role to avoid facing up to her other responsibilities: Mary is a cool young egotist incapable of seeing anybody else's point of view. (However the magnificent self-assurance with which she successfully pursues her own ends makes her a more enjoyable character than the other two.) Mrs Oliphant seems as ruthless as Jane Austen - one thinks of the three sisters of Elizabeth and Jane Bennet and the two sisters of Anne Elliott.⁴⁴ Kirsteen's sisters have been made what they are by years of living with their father, but this scarcely seems to modify Mrs Oliphant's contempt. Evidently the only way to react to a father like Drumcarro is Kirsteen's way: to maintain your independence and personal integrity while in no way surrendering to self-obsession. However Kirsteen is inclined to be self-centred and sometimes Mrs Oliphant sees it (as when Kirsteen blames Anne for having defied their father - which is precisely what she herself is doing) and sometimes she does not (as when Kirsteen shows no sympathy for the grief of her dead lover's mother and sister).

But, as I have said, there is no consistency of tone. The climax of the Jeanie/Lord John theme is a spectacular episode when Drumcarro throws Jeanie's would-be seducer to his death in a mountain stream.

43. Kirsteen III, 190, 213.

44. By this extreme use of contrast Mrs Oliphant was writing in a way of which she was very critical when reviewing novels by other writers. See above, page 319.

The tone is one of high poetic rhetoric - and after this Drumcarro is seen as a lonely tragic figure. Nobody identifies him as the murderer; but he surrenders to deep melancholia and declines to his death. He is reconciled to Kirsteen when she makes use of her income from dressmaking to help him buy back an alienated family estate; and the emotional excitement kills him. He is now a romantic figure representing the sort of family pride that is growing old-fashioned in a changing world, a specifically Scottish loyalty to his traditions and his clan. In this context his intolerable authoritarianism, even his hostility to women, almost seem natural and inevitable.

In Chapter Three I quoted the ironic moment when Mrs Douglas, on her deathbed, says 'Neil, ye've been a good man to me'. But her husband's brutality and contempt for women had long ago reduced her to a weak-minded invalid; and, appropriately, 'He started a little, evidently not expecting this praise'. Yet this is not the savage feminist irony that we expect. The episode is written in the high-rhetorical tone which was untypical of Mrs Oliphant's usual way of handling death scenes; Mrs Douglas speaks her dying blessing and Drumcarro is moved:

Drumcarro said no more, his rugged countenance lowered like a thunder cloud, yet there were workings in the muscles of his weather-beaten cheeks and throat half covered with grizzled hair. He drew his hand out of hers, and looked for a moment at the marks of the weak fingers which had so closed upon it, leaving an impress which died out as he gazed, like the fingers themselves disappearing out of sight. 45

The conventional emotive language ("rugged", "weather-beaten"), the implied stress on emotions half concealed but ready to break out, the deliberate lingering on the emotionality, are characteristic

of an aspect of Mrs Oliphant that remained unchanged while her style elsewhere had developed towards irony, complexity and psychological truth.

I have made this analysis of Kirsteen with Henry James's strictures in mind and to some extent I have been speaking as devil's advocate; James, I think, would have complained, if he had had space to go into detail, of an inconsistency in tone and in point of view, of a surrender to mere plot-mechanics and romantic story-telling, and would have insisted that it is precisely here that she "saved herself at the expense of her subject" (saved herself by indulgence of her fatal fluency) with the result that "the essence of the situation [is] ... missed, dropped out without a thought". But we no longer insist upon such Jamesian purism. We have learned to appreciate the "closed form" of the Victorian novel and to discover within it an aesthetic logic of its own. With James's help we can discover what kind of novel Kirsteen is, but we must reject his dismissive tone as quite unacceptable; although it is not unreasonable to complain, with more reserve, of Mrs Oliphant's emotional self-indulgence and of the disconcerting way in which her irony comes and goes, her right hand never seeming to know what her left hand is doing. As so often in her Scottish novels her idealising tenderness for Scotland progressively neutralises her ironic vision.

And yet the romantic, specifically Scottish, aspects of the book are often very moving. The lyricism is unforced, based on evocative descriptions of Scottish scenery which frequently mirror the state of mind of the characters. Imagery of light and darkness, moonlight nights and winter mornings, communicate mood with no sense of strain.

When Kirsteen escapes from home on a winter morning she appears as:

a gliding shadow going straight up the hills and over the moors, at the same measured pace, not so much quick as steady, with a wonderful still intensity of progress. The road was more than dewy, it was glistening wet with the heavy damps of the night, every crevice of the rocks green and sodden, every stone glistening. The traveller did not keep exactly to the road, was not afraid of the wet hillside turf, nor even of a gray dyke to climb if it shortened the way. She passed lightly over bits of moss among the rustling, faded heather, and spots of suspicious greenness which meant bog, choosing her footing on the black roots of the wild myrtle, and the knolls of blackberries, like one to the manner born. She gave a soul to the wild and green landscape, so lonely, so washed with morning dews. She was going - where? From the impossible to the possible - from the solitudes of the hills into the world. 46

This does not have the resonance of Emily Bronte (or even of Charlotte), nor Hardy's sense of the interpenetration of character and environment, but it is very evocative and it leads economically to the concluding question and its answer. Kirsteen's environment is thus stressed at the moment it ceases to be her home.

David Craig has pointed out that "as the country grew into a modern town-centred nation, Scottish fiction ... recoiled, immersing itself in the country ways which the sensitive soul ... could use to gratify his nostalgia for that homely rural past".⁴⁷ And Mrs Oliphant's Scotland tends to be a nostalgic Scotland, remembered from childhood, created through legend and tradition; not through the direct experience with which she wrote about England. Hence it was entirely logical to set Kirsteen "seventy years ago". Her preference for a deeply rural setting with mere forays into Glasgow or Edinburgh effectively prevents her from the systematic analysis of society which is the

46. Kirsteen II, 2-3.

47. Craig, as in fn.15, page 373 above.

particular strength of her English novels. Indeed she usually takes her Scottish characters to London in order to make use of her more recent experience and take advantage of an environment with which she was familiar. There are however some novels (notably The Railway-man and His Children 1891) which are set in Scotland and deal with the central themes of Mrs Oliphant's work. But in these novels Scotland is used merely as background, and the setting might just as well have been in England. (Accordingly in Appendix B I do not include them under the heading of Scottish novels.) Yet no generalisation about Mrs Oliphant can be completely infallible, and she is not consistently a writer of romance as a Scottish novelist. In particular A Son of the Soil, as I have shown, is sharply observant of the dramatic changes within the Kirk. She can at times be aware, though vaguely, of the changes, industrial and others, that Scotland was undergoing. Yet, on the whole, in writing about Scotland she was writing from nostalgia; in writing about England she was writing from experience.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE STORIES OF THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

The difficulties of framing a paradise which shall respond to the highest aspirations of the mind has been very largely acknowledged.

(The Victorian Age of English Literature,
2 vols, Percival & Co, 1892; II, 145.)

To give separate and detailed treatment to the Stories of the Seen and Unseen would be unnecessary if it were not that they were very popular during Mrs Oliphant's lifetime, and two or three of them would automatically be listed by any commentator on her work at the end of her life and in the Edwardian period, often with very high praise, especially for the longest of them, A Beleaguered City. These stories, about either the adventures in the Afterlife of souls newly dead or the bewildered return of these souls to the world in unavailing attempts to communicate with the living, belong almost entirely to the 1880's and 1890's, when Mrs Oliphant was becoming obsessed with two problems: the pain of bereavement; the misery inflicted on us when those we love behave immorally or cruelly. She describes these preoccupations in an article of 1895:

We are moved alike by these two things: they are, one the impossibility of securing that those whom we love should choose, as we hope we have done, the worthier way; and the other, and to some extent the more terrible, as more evidently beyond their power to affect one way or other - the impossibility of securing the lives of those we love, or of saving them from being suddenly seized and hurried away from us by the irrecoverable and incurable separation of death. 1

1. "The Fancies of a Believer", Blackwood's Magazine, February 1895; CLVII, 244.

Mrs Oliphant wrote from personal experience, both of frequent bereavement and of bitter disillusion with those she loved, and was far too deeply involved with the resultant emotions to attempt the ironic detachment of her finest novels. The stories were really written as private therapy for herself, to relieve her overstrained feelings, and would perhaps have been better written as meditative poetry - if she had had any talent for it.² In the absence of such a talent the result is a prose mainly leaden-footed, humourless and earnestly monotonous in tone.

As early as A Son of the Soil (1866) characters speculate in detail about the nature of life after death; Colin, fearing he is dying, anxiously pictures his possible subsequent experiences; Lauderdale, at characteristically great length, talks to the dying Meredith about what Heaven may be like. A much clearer anticipation of the theme of the Stories of the Seen and Unseen comes in 1877 in Carità. Early in this novel the heroine's mother, suffering from cancer, dies suddenly as the result of an overdose of drugs. Carità, only 14 years old, discusses with a kind-hearted aunt the mystery of death. "What sort of place is heaven?" she asks and the aunt answers "I think, Cara, I think that our Lord must be always about there. That people may go and stand on the roadside and see Him pass, and talk to Him, and be satisfied about everything".³ This precisely anticipates an incident in A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen, published

2. She did in fact attempt meditative poetry, very occasionally, in Blackwood's Magazine, mainly in the 1860's. It clearly proves her lack of talent for poetry.

3. Carità I, 148.

five years later, where the heroine does indeed stand on the roadside in Heaven and see Christ pass. (The naivety of the theology, suitable enough when addressed to a fourteen-year-old, remained unchanged in a work addressed presumably to adults.) And after Carità many novels include speculations on what happens to souls after death and whether they return to haunt the living, though perhaps unseen.

Extremely popular in Mrs Oliphant's lifetime was the Little Pilgrim series, consisting of two books: A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen (Macmillan 1882), collecting two stories previously published in Macmillan's Magazine; and The Land of Darkness, along with Some Further Chapters in the Experiences of the Little Pilgrim (Macmillan 1888), which collected three stories from various periodicals.⁴ It is not necessary to give much detail of these narratives of a lovable and innocent soul in Heaven, since they require a great effort of historical imagination to appreciate them, and they must be seen largely in the context of that obsessive Victorian preoccupation, the pursuit of such reliable and comforting religious truths as would be secure against the disturbing ideologies of a changing society. Mr and Mrs Colby justly say "These super~~ter~~terrestrial travels evoke not so much the poems of Dante as the hymns of Adelaide Procter and the stained glass of the Gothic Revival".⁵ Most of the theology was in fact derived from several books that Mrs Oliphant had reviewed during the 1870's: two American books, Gates Ajar by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Hitherto: A Story of Yesterday by Mrs Adeline Whitney;⁶ and two English books, Enigmas of Life by William Rathbone Greg (1809-1881) and Post Mortem, published

4. For fuller details see Appendix C.

5. Colby, p.103.

6. Reviewed in "American Books", Blackwood's Magazine CX (October 1871), 422-42.

anonymously but in fact by Arthur Montagu Brookfield (1853-1940).⁷

Greg devotes one chapter to his idea that Heaven is a peaceful place of domestic scenes where we are reunited with our loved ones and carry on with our earthly occupations; and that Hell is a place where the real torturer is our own conscience. Post Mortem creates an extravagant image of Hell in terms of grotesque events and images. All these suggestions were followed up in the Little Pilgrim series, and although the landscapes of Mrs Oliphant's Hell are very dramatic, apparently inspired by the paintings of John Martin, little else in the series warrants close examination; Mrs Oliphant's intentions are made didactically explicit, and there is no irony, no balance, no detachment from the facile emotionalism of her themes.

Much more interesting than the Little Pilgrim series is the short book "Dies Irae", the Story of a Spirit in Prison, published (anonymously like the Little Pilgrim series) in 1895 by Blackwood. Mrs Coghill did not list it in the bibliography of Mrs Oliphant's work at the end of Autobiography and Letters; but it was credited to her in Halket and Laing's Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous English Literature (1926-34), and accordingly it appears under her name in the British Library catalogue. It is undoubtedly by her. The narrative is of a journey from a deathbed into the Afterlife, though the heroine, who is also the narrator, ends the story by returning to life in the hospital bed where she had been lying. Her guide through the next world in Rossetti's Blessed Damozel, transformed from the sensual

7. Reviewed respectively in "New Books", Blackwood's Magazine CXIII (February 1873), 206-21 ; and in "Post Mortem", The Spectator LIV, (13 August 1881), 1053-4.

worldliness of Rossetti's heroine into a figure altogether more ethereal and spiritual. Mrs Oliphant had twice expressed her contempt for the Blessed Damozel: in an article in Blackwood's Magazine in August 1870, and in The Victorian Age of English Literature in 1892. Rossetti's "fleshly imagination" she says, "is ... the most strangely prosaic conception we have ever met with in poetry".

The difficulties of framing a paradise which shall respond to the highest aspirations of the mind have been very largely acknowledged. To depict it as a sort of celestial land of the Decameron, where youths and maidens can wander forever through fragrant bosquets and solitude not too secluded where other youths and maidens are within reach and one way of living and enjoying is enough for the simple mind, is at least an easy and primitive method of putting aside more difficult problems. 8

Thus to some extent "Dies Irae" is a corrective to the earthiness and sensuality of Rossetti's vision.

The tone of "Dies Irae" is much cooler and more objective than that of the Little Pilgrim series, and the story is far more concerned with the realities of nineteenth-century life. Even more important, the heroine, quite unlike the Little Pilgrim, is less than perfect and in need of a road to understanding, which at last she finds. The lesson she eventually learns after much pain and distress is that self-sacrificing love and person-to-person charity are the only ways to spiritual development - which is not unlike the lessons learned by the heroines of some of Mrs Oliphant's orthodox novels (notably Agnes, Hester and the heroine of Mrs Arthur, 1877).

Guided by the Blessed Damozel, the narrator finds herself in Hell, which closely resembles the East End of London:

8. Blackwood's Magazine CVIII, 179; The Victorian Age of English Literature II, 145.

Straining my gaze into [the] depths, I could distinguish blacker shadows of massive buildings rising higher and higher on every hand; buildings on buildings, dark, gloomy, with endless passages winding in and out among them - passages narrow, foul and overshadowed with such darkness as lay on my very soul; for surely it was not the darkness of Nature alone that brooded over that ghostly city.... Could those be human beings that crowded storey after storey of the towering masses of stone, and swarmed in swaying multitudes in every darkened passage? Figures of old and young, sickly infants, and tottering old women, men and women of all ages, mixed in a motley crowd; and ever and anon, to my shrinking ear, from the whole came up a confused wailing of many voices, sounding, it seemed to me, every note of pain, from the feeble wail of infancy to that of torture unendurable, while loud-mouthed curses, that made my very flesh creep for fear, mingled from time to time with the sounds.

Here she witnesses scenes of degradation and misery, sordid avarice, cruelty to children, prostitution (virtually Mrs Oliphant's only handling of the subject, a direct though discreet reference: "She was a NANA,⁹ let loose as a scourge on the weaklings of the day") and the suicide of a woman driven to desperation by loss of wages. She is helpless to prevent the suicide, and this teaches her the need for a one-to-one love and sisterly charity: "What we want is not money but ... Love". Mrs Oliphant's constant preoccupation with the worthlessness of institutionalised charity is thus given supernatural endorsement. But it is not vague sentiment that she calls for; she makes use of the ironic detachment so notably absent from the Little Pilgrim series:

"Beautiful dreamer of fair sentiments!" reviled another voice. "Imaginative sympathy is so fine a thing. And so easy".

9. This, of course, refers to Emile Zola's novel Nana, published in 1880.

The narrator still has a long way to go before she discovers true Love, and later in an admirably concise summary of the theme of the book she discovers that "pity as an emotion was swallowed up in pity as a motive". And institutionalised charity is satirised in these terms:

She suddenly laughed a horrible laugh. "Four coffins finding their way to one man's deathbed, sent by four different societies! - one will be enough for me.....Ah! I am sick, sick, weary of it all. The scramble for the falling coins, the 'crumbs from the rich man's table', and those who have no heart or too much pride for the scramble dying". 10

It may justly be said that "Dies Irae", using the allegorical method, is Mrs Oliphant's sharpest verdict on Victorian society.

A Beleaguered City, the first and longest in the Seen and Unseen series,¹¹ belongs directly to a tradition of ghost stories where, ordinary domestic, sometimes urban, life is affected by the uncanny or by mysterious "presences". It was, from the first, extremely popular and was extravagantly admired. Its most recent admirers are Mr and Mrs Colby, who reserve their highest praise for this book of all Mrs Oliphant's vast output. Certainly it is a very accomplished book, but to give it such very high praise ("In this, her finest story, in which she was able to distill so much of her experience - from life as well as from literature - her emotions, mind and imagination

10. "Dies Irae", pp.36-8, 72, 68, 52, 75, 67-8. The dots in the final quotation are not signs of omission; they are there in the original.

11. Published in January 1879 in New Quarterly Magazine, afterwards in one volume by Macmillan (dated 1880, but in fact published late in 1879).

were all for once fully engaged")¹² effectively obscures the true nature of Mrs Oliphant's achievement as a novelist. What Mr and Mrs Colby say was said in 1899 by Stephen Gwynn, writing in The Edinburgh Review. Gwynn, speaking of all the Stories of the Seen and Unseen, insisted that only here does Mrs Oliphant achieve greatness because only here did she give full expression to her imaginative powers, her deep religious faith and her passionate motherhood, which to Gwynn was "the soul of her life" and "the hindrance ... to high achievement" as a novelist.¹³ Elsewhere Gwynn gives high praise to Miss Marjoribanks, and yet he does not see that there Mrs Oliphant did give full expression to her imaginative powers; his whole argument is tailored to fit a theory. It is true enough, as Gwynn and Mr and Mrs Colby recognise, that in the Stories of the Seen and Unseen Mrs Oliphant was writing from intensely felt personal conviction; but this precludes objectivity and frequently results in a lack of balance. It would be much truer to say that in A Beleaguered City and its successors one small sector of Mrs Oliphant's imagination was fully engaged while the rest of it was underemployed.

Unlike most of Mrs Oliphant's other novels, A Beleaguered City was worked over for many months before its publication. Mr and Mrs Colby, quoting the Blackwood correspondence at the National Library of Scotland, show that the first draft was submitted to John Blackwood in January 1878; and she worked on it for the rest of the year so

12. Vineta and Robert A. Colby, "A Beleaguered City": a Fable for the Victorian Age", Nineteenth Century Fiction XVI(1962), 301. See also The Equivocal Virtue, pp.86, 95.

13. Review of A. & L. and other works by Mrs Oliphant, Edinburgh Review CXC (July 1899), 31, 47.

that in December it was "very much enlarged and altered".¹⁴ In consequence the book is carefully (indeed, self-consciously) crafted, especially in its use of multiple narrators, imitated from Wilkie Collins and from Browning's The Ring and the Book, a device which is handled with some sophistication and produces an interesting ironic ambivalence, of which for once Mrs Oliphant is clearly entirely conscious. But this careful crafting results in a loss of spontaneity and in a carefully wrought earnestness of tone which is scarcely ever lightened, except by the ironic handling of Martin Dupin, the principal narrator of the book. (He narrates six of the book's ten chapters, The other four narrators have one chapter each.) The earnestness of tone results from the theme of religious regeneration which was so deeply important to Mrs Oliphant and from the craving for reunion with their dead that motivates most of the characters.

A Beleaguered City is the story of the intervention by the spirits of the dead in the affairs of the city of Semur, where materialism and lust for money have lowered the moral standards. People say "It is enough to make the dead rise out of their graves!"; and this is just what happens. A psychological force impels the whole population of Semur, except for one mystic, out into the surrounding countryside. They had previously been warned by illuminated signs that came and went on the great door of the cathedral that they must leave the city "to us who know the true signification of life".¹⁵ (The effect is extremely incongruous, but of course it is not Mrs Oliphant's

14. Colby, p.256, n.14; A. & L. p.276.

15. A Beleaguered City pp.6, 11, 54-5.

fault that the modern reader is reminded of Piccadilly Circus and Times Square, rather than of her message.) Afterwards Paul Lecamus, the one living man allowed to remain in Semur, is sent out by the spirits of the dead to negotiate a sort of peace treaty. This suggests that Mrs Oliphant intends a confrontation between the leading citizen of Semur and the representatives of true religion, with a consequent stress on didactic moralising. But this does not happen; there is no confrontation and no moral is drawn. It is almost as if at the very last moment Mrs Oliphant lost the courage of her own didacticism and replaced the scene to which surely she must have intended to build with an episode when the Mayor (Martin Dupin) and the Curé walk through the deserted streets of the city, aware of "the unseen multitude" but making no other contact with them. The result, however, is the most evocative scene of the book, conveyed through heightened sense impressions:

All was calm, the houses on either side of the way were open, all but the office of the octroi which was black as night with its closed door.... Just within the gate a lamp was burning, hanging to its rope over our heads; and the lights were in the houses as if some one had left them there; they threw a strange glimmer into the darkness, flickering in the wind. By and by as we went on the gloom lessened, and by the time we had reached the Grande Rue, there was a clear steady pale twilight by which we saw everything, as by the light of day.

Not a soul, not a shadow; all vacant in this soft twilight; nothing moving, nothing visible. The great doors of the Cathedral were wide open, and every little entry. How spacious the city looked, how silent, how wonderful! There was room for a squadron to wheel in the great square, but not so much as a bird, not a dog; all pale and empty. We stood for a long time (or it seemed a long time) at the corner, looking right and left. We were afraid to make a step further. We knew not what to do. Nor could I speak; there was much I wished to say, but something stopped my voice. 16

The most positive achievement of A Beleaguered City is its ironic detachment from some of its characters, notably Martin Dupin. This is not consistently maintained, especially when the characters grieve for their dead or are reunited with them in the mysterious invasion of the city; but the Mayor is represented as self-important, complacent, and perversely bourgeois in that he supports the Church only because "the prejudices of respectable persons ought to be respected".¹⁷

As a result of the supernatural assault on the city he initiates a religious revival and is greatly chastened - until in due course his complacency and his condescending attitude to the Curé revive. Throughout most of the book the Mayor is greatly admired by everybody (especially by his wife and his mother) and he plumes himself in this admiration, saying "They were impressed, as was only natural, by the sight of my perfect self-possession" in face of the overpowering supernatural atmosphere; noting in himself "an organisation more finely tempered than that of the crowd"; and later insisting "I have endeavoured not to be egotistical". His patronising attitude to the mystic Lecamus, whom Mrs Oliphant views as the one truly saintly figure in Semur, is as follows:

... we were accosted by Paul Lecamus, a man whom I have always considered as something of a visionary, though his conduct is irreproachable, and his life honourable and industrious. He entertains religious convictions of a curious kind; but, as the man is quite free from revolutionary sentiments, I have

17. A Beleaguered City, pp.9, 17, 25. This should be compared with Lucilla Marjoribanks' opinion: "I always make it a point to give in to the prejudices of society" (M.M. I, 89); and with that of Waring in A House Divided Against Itself: "It is always better for one to put one's self in harmony with received notions and the prejudices of society" (I, 45-6).

never considered it to be my duty to interfere with him, or to investigate his creed. Indeed, he has been treated generally in Semur as a dreamer of dreams - one who holds a great many impracticable and foolish opinions - though the respect I always exact for those whose lives are respectable and worthy has been a protection to him. 18

This illogical antithesis ("something of a visionary, though his conduct is irreproachable"), the condescending praise mixed with polite scepticism, the self-congratulation, the admission let slip as it were that the Mayor has never troubled "to investigate his creed"; they all effectively dissociate Mrs Oliphant from the point of view expressed without in any way making a malicious caricature of the speaker.

The most effective stroke of irony is found at the end. The citizens of Semur in the midst of their religious revival are beset by superstition. A sick man who had been left in hospital unable to escape is supposed quite untruly to have had a mystical experience and is treated as a saint.¹⁹ It is supposed that the cessation of the services in the hospital chapel had caused the supernatural visitation. The Mayor (this time with much of Mrs Oliphant's sympathy) protests in vain against the vulgarity and triviality of people's ideas when even the Curé does not object. And in the end the citizens of Semur revert to their normal habits of materialism and neglect of religion, except for the Mayor's wife and mother.

Yet perhaps in the final verdict this ironic ending, though very effective, does A Beleaguered City no good. If the book is meant

18. A Beleaguered City, pp.35-6, 45, 89, 24-5.

19. There is a contradiction here. Mrs Oliphant had insisted that only Becamus was saintly enough to remain in Semur; and yet the hospital patient, very unsaintly, had also remained.

to prove the need for a spiritual revival and for the rediscovery of high ideals then Mrs Oliphant neutralises the whole effect of what she is saying by showing, or seeming to show, that human nature is bound to trivialise or debase whatever attempts are made at such a conclusion. The message survives only if the emphasis falls, not on the trivialisation of the religious revival, but on the need to maintain true spiritual insight and wisdom in face of the human difficulties of retaining one's vision. The last two paragraphs of the novel do seem to be saying just this: the Mayor and his wife pay their tribute to their dead, their faith undebased by any trivialisation. But the effect of this moment is naive and perfunctory in comparison with the sustained irony of the preceding ten pages.

Apart from these ironies the earnestness of tone of A Beleaguered City is scarcely ever lightened. The language is a little too carefully contrived and worked over; and in particular the use of gallicisms and expressions in French in order to communicate the "flavour" of France is very ill-judged. For example the expression "figure to yourself" is frequently used, a literal translation of figurez-vous; but the only reasonable way to translate this would be with an equivalent English idiom. And passages such as this seem distractingly macaronic:

"The bon Dieu be praised that Madame also is here, who has sense and will regulate everything". "These are no canaille", I said: "be silent, ma bonne Leontine, here is something which you cannot understand". 20

They are like the fumbling attempts of a Frenchman to speak English. And similar complaints might be made of the consciously elevated

language which conveys religious experience, especially in the narrative of Lecamus.

There remain seven Stories of the Seen and Unseen. Following the lead of A Beleaguered City, they all deal with communion between the earthly world and the spiritual world, and two main themes develop: the representative of Wisdom and Truth (more articulate than the spirits in A Beleaguered City) returning to warn, guide and reconcile: The Lady's Walk (1882-3), "The Portrait" (1885), and "A Visitor and His Opinions" (1893);²¹ and, more interestingly, the flawed soul unable to rest and returning to seek communion with survivors: "Earth-bound" (1880), "The Open Door" (1882) and "Old Lady Mary" (1884).²² These are often very sensitive, imaginative ghost stories, but the only two which are of interest in relation to the themes of this thesis are "The Portrait" which contains a moving study of loneliness in a great house, where a son, estranged from his father, becomes incapable of forming close bonds with other people; and "Old Lady Mary", whose heroine is morally flawed and driven to extensive remorseful self-examination, and in which (as nowhere else in the Stories of the Seen and Unseen) the ghost theme is treated at times with a coolly ironic detachment.

There remains just one story which warrants close treatment, the finest of them, "The Library Window" (January 1896 in Blackwood's Magazine), which has no marked resemblance to any of the others.

21. The dates are of publication in periodicals. The Lady's Walk, serialised in Longman's Magazine in December 1882 and January 1883, was afterwards extended and republished in book form in 1897 by Methuen. The other two stories were published in Blackwood's Magazine.

22. These dates are of publication in periodicals, the first in Fraser's Magazine, the other two in Blackwood's Magazine.

It uses its ghost as a form of psychological symbol; but there is no "message", and no banal plot. A consistent and unified atmosphere is achieved by using the point of view of a rather self-absorbed and indolent invalid heroine who is also the narrator. The setting is the Scottish town of St Rules (St Andrews) and the library window of the title is the window of the college library. The narrator is haunted, both literally and metaphorically, by the vision of a mysterious man who frequently appears behind the window, which directly faces the drawing room where she spends all day. Later she discovers that there is in fact no window, and that the room behind where the window appears to be was long ago removed.

The only detail of "The Library Window" which disappoints is the inevitable explanation: the man is a ghost of a scholar murdered by ancestors of the narrator and returning regularly to haunt the women of the family. But in the context of a beautiful, poetic story this seems a very conventional explanation; the story affects us as a study of a subtle evanescent state of mind, "a longing all your life after ... a looking - for what never comes".²³ The narrator is in a condition of hyperaesthesia, and the vision of a man at his desk behind the window is a mental phenomenon, which comes to have more objective reality than any physical fact. Nobody but she can see the man, although on one occasion a small boy sees the non-existent window opening, for children are always credited with a psychic insight denied to adults corrupted by experience. Thus the narrator's vision is partly the hallucinatory effect of a morbid, introspective mind, partly a mystical communion with the world of spirit.

23. Stories of the Seen and Unseen (Blackwood 1902) p.309. This collects together "The Open Door", "Old Lady Mary", "The Portrait" and "The Library Window".

I have spoken in Chapter Four of Mrs Oliphant's interest in the flow of thoughts in the mind, the surrender to chance associations of imagery or sudden bursts of feeling which we erroneously call "thinking". 'The Library Window' contains Mrs Oliphant's most beautiful and poetic treatment of this theme, built around imagery of wind and of light. The thoughts of the narrator flow and mingle or seem to "blow in" to the mind and fill up her whole experience as does her obsession with the man at the window. And on one occasion she recognises an affinity between herself and the man:

[Papa] says things blow through his mind as if the doors were open, and he has no responsibility. What sort of things were blowing through this man's mind? or was he thinking, still thinking, of what he had been writing and going on with it still?

The story is saturated with exquisitely beautiful imagery of light, clear, mysterious, serene, a phenomenon which Mrs Oliphant frequently noticed as one of the glories of June evenings in Scotland: "that daylight out of which the sun has been long gone, and which has no longer any rose reflections, but all has sunk into a pearly neutral tint - a light which is daylight yet is not day". This light acts as a symbol of the narrator's heightened sensibilities, and when at the climax of the story she is taken on a visit to the college library only to discover to her distress that the mysterious room does not exist, then she experiences the college hall like a visual illusion while still the only reality seems to be her mysterious visitant. And the image of "the strange light without any shadow, that was all round about this lighted hall, holding it like a bubble that would burst",²⁴ helps to intensify our understanding of her

²⁴. Stories of the Seen and Unseen, pp.282-3, 259, 298.

hallucinatory state of mind. Mrs Oliphant made much use of imagery in her work, some of it intended as symbolism. Sometimes this imagery is banal, sometimes it is of value; but nowhere is it used with such complete success and entire confidence as in "The Library Window".

Mrs Leavis's view of the Stories of the Seen and Unseen is that "Though Mrs Oliphant valued them highly herself and some have Dantean overtones, they represent a self-indulgence, the complement of her hard-headed professional self which required some non-dogmatic vaguely religious sustenance".²⁵ This is a reasonable view; they are a "self-indulgence" since they largely represent a surrender to a craving for religious certainties in a life much plagued by disillusion and suffering. They are thus of great biographical interest and contain direct echoes of her own family troubles much more than her orthodox novels; but the complex literary personality which I have been analysing in the other chapters of this thesis is scarcely ever brought into play at all - except in "Dies Irae", "The Portrait" and "Old Lady Mary", and in a very different way in "The Library Window". However, one feature of the stories is worth special examination. This is the frequency of the first-person narrator (A Beleaguered City, The Lady's Walk, "The Open Door", "The Portrait", "The Land of Darkness",²⁶ "Dies Irae", "The Library Window"). In the unsatisfactory novels of the 1850's she several times attempted the first-person narrator, but rarely in later books: The Last of the Mortimers (1862), Neighbours on the Green (1889, but originally serialised between 1868 and 1880),

25. Introduction to A. & L. (Leicester University Press), p.<22>.

26. The first story in the volume of that title.

and The Two Marys (1896). But in the *Stories of the Seen and Unseen* it seemed to her, no doubt, a necessity to use the voice of a narrator to give the full subjectivity that these very personal stories require. The narrators are not necessarily self-portraits, though some of them do express Mrs Oliphant's preoccupation with bereavement and with the suffering inflicted upon sensitive people by the misconduct of those they love, and they reflect her need to reconcile herself to a painful, bewildering world. Such feelings are directly expressed in "Dies Irae" (though the narrator is aged 25, while Mrs Oliphant was 67 when the book was published); and the male narrators of "The Portrait" and "The Open Door" are sensitively anxious about the sufferings which they encounter around them. The narrator of "The Library Window" bears no resemblance whatever to Mrs Oliphant, but the experience of this story is so essentially subjective that the use of the first person seems virtually inevitable.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FINAL VERDICT

I might have done better work. I should in all probability have earned nearly as much for half the production had I done less.

[T]he ... kind of self-denial which should have made a truer artist than myself pursue the higher objects of art, instead of the mere necessities of living, was wanting.... I pay the penalty in that I shall not leave anything behind me that will live.

I don't always think such small beer of myself as I say.

I was reading of Charlotte Bronte the other day, and could not help comparing myself with the picture more or less as I read. I don't suppose my powers are equal to hers - my work to myself looks perfectly pale and colourless beside hers - but yet I have had far more experience and, I think, a fuller conception of life.

(A. & L., pp.6, 130, 131, 67.)

"I shall not leave anything behind me that will live". But in saying this Mrs Oliphant was consciously on the defensive, trying to reconcile herself to literary eclipse by the wholesome discipline of self-disparagement, adopting in effect a policy of hubris in reverse; yet when speaking of A Beleaguered City she said "I don't always think such small beer of myself as I say". She was as severe on herself as any hostile critic; yet in her comparison between herself and Charlotte Bronte she did emphasise what is indeed her true strength, her wide experience and her "fuller conception of life".

To accuse Mrs Oliphant, as some critics have done, of undervaluing her art, on the strength of highly selective quotations, is entirely misleading.¹ She maintained very high standards in her extensive work as critic of the novel, whether in articles in Blackwood's Magazine and elsewhere, or in her volumes of literary criticism. Her aesthetic views were formulated early (1855)² and were maintained throughout her life, and were based on one basic preoccupation of Victorian critics,³ that modified version of realism which laid stress on the priority of "truth" over "fact" ("the belief that art penetrated to a new transcendental order of reality");⁴ and upon a preference for balance, proportion and restraint. Apart from her scepticism about the primacy of love in the novel,⁵ she offers no challenging new approaches to the art of the novel; she is a workmanlike critic, who often offered very perceptive comments on the work of her contemporaries, both major and ephemeral, and on that of her great predecessors.

Of course it by no means follows that a perceptive critic retains his gifts when he turns to creative work. Theory and practice do not always correspond; the imagination does not necessarily work

1. See for example Valentine Cunningham (see above, p.17), pp.232-4.
2. "Mr Thackeray and His Novels", Blackwood's Magazine LXXVII (January 1855), 86-96; "Bulwer", Blackwood's Magazine LXXVII (February 1855), 221-33; "Charles Dickens", Blackwood's Magazine LXXVII (April 1855) 451-66. "Bulwer" is particularly important for its expression of aesthetic theory, e.g. pp.229-30. A full list of her literary articles is in my Bibliography, section 3.
3. See Richard Stang, The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870 (Routledge, 1959) and Kenneth Graham, English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900 (Oxford 1965).
4. Kenneth Graham, p.18.
5. See above pp.78, 105.

on the same lines as the intelligence. For example, Mrs Oliphant was ready enough to condemn novelists for the use of contrived devices and over-complicated plotting to achieve a desired effect; yet many of her novels, above all the mystery novels, are disfigured by such devices, as I have already shown at great length. At times it seems as if Mrs Oliphant was not aware when she was writing with lifeless conventionality and when with intelligence and originality. But Valentine Cunningham's view is altogether too dismissive and grossly oversimplified:

There is a distinct gap between her cheaply melodramatic novels and the critical voice which deplores Bulwer's "sham and cheap melodrama" and Charles Reade's theatricality and melodrama.... As anonymous critic Mrs Oliphant scorns precisely those strategies she deploys as a novelist....

To attempt a popular success she crosses to the side of popular taste, and her fiction quite knowingly exploits the vices of Charles Reade and Mrs Henry Wood that she attacks in Maga. 6

This is based on an extremely selective reading of Mrs Oliphant's work and on the unwarranted assumption that what is typical of the part is typical of the whole. And since the imaginative energy that drives a novelist to write a novel and the intellectual powers that are needed for critical analysis are distinct faculties of the mind that do not often operate concurrently (indeed cannot do so if a satisfactory work of art is to result), it is quite inadmissible that Mrs Oliphant "quite knowingly" used the "strategies" and "vices" which she isolated for rejection.

It would be futile to give further attention to Mrs Oliphant's grosser weaknesses; we do not generalise on Dickens from an exclusive concentration on the worst lapses of The Pickwick Papers and Oliver

Twist or on Charlotte Bronte by dealing only with The Professor and the more overstrained passages of Shirley. Viewing Mrs Oliphant's work as a whole the passages that are entirely unsatisfactory form only a very small sector, and if we ignore the novels of the 1850's the proportion is smaller still. Mrs Leavis, quoting Howard Sturgis writing in September 1899, offers a markedly different point of view from Mr Cunningham's:

"She never pandered to the public by consciously bad work, in exchange for popularity or wealth. She never wrote a word she did not believe to be 'true' in the best sense, nor gave her readers anything but honest work for their money, and as good of its kind as she could spare the time to make it". There is something of interest and much worth reading in most of her works of fiction, and nothing to apologise for. 7

Both Sturgis and Mrs Leavis exaggerate a little; Mrs Oliphant's work was not always as good as she could spare the time to make it, and there are things to apologise for. Yet they are much nearer the mark than Mr Cunningham.

It we approach Mrs Oliphant's finest work unprejudiced by false assumptions of what we will find, in particular such exaggerated generalisations as that over-production must of necessity result in a lowering of quality, then it becomes clear that her practice does measure up to her theory, and that she can be aesthetically as satisfying as, say, the finest novels of Mrs Gaskell, Trollope and Charlotte Bronte. We may select a short list of her novels - The Perpetual Curate, Miss Marjoribanks, For Love and Life, The Curate in Charge, Harry Joscelyn, Hester, A Country Gentleman and His Family, The Sorceress - and by the detailed examination that I have already

7. Introduction to A. & L. (Leicester), pp.<26-7>. The quotation is from "A Sketch From Memory", Temple Bar CXVIII (1899), 234.

given them prove how seriously she took her art, how careful she was to construct a novel, aiming at unity of tone and at a "self-restrained closeness of ... construction",⁸ developing an ironic vision of her characters and an insight into the complexity of their motives, and frequently achieving the "truth" in which she believed. Of the novels that I have named (and the list could be extended) Mrs Oliphant had no need to say "I might have done better work" or that she was not a true enough artist to "pursue the higher objects of art".

I am not implying that Mrs Oliphant's is a self-conscious art, worked-over with deliberate, formulated intention. On those occasions when we are aware of a conscious effort to achieve an effect (in Margaret Maitland, in A Beleaguered City, in The Wizard's Son) there is a loss of spontaneity, a mechanically artificial quality which effectively diminishes their value, or as in The Wizard's Son produces grotesque absurdities that are the direct consequence of an over-earnestness of purpose. Mrs Oliphant's aesthetic preference was for spontaneity; she makes her point in several places, notably in a review of Romola by George Eliot and Consuelo by George Sand, where she contrasts two ways of writing:

The one all sweetness, spontaneous movement, soft repose, unconscious grace; the other, conscious to the very finger-tips, full of thought, self-contemplation - noble effort indeed, a majestic strain of mind and muscles - but still a strain.

The deliberate selection of a theme or purpose in writing a novel was to her fatally destructive, as she makes clear when reviewing the career of Charles Kingsley, whose talent was gravely flawed

8. A review of Emily Lawless's Hurriah, The Spectator LIX(1886), 148.

by "the fact that he did nothing without a purpose, a thing which sadly interferes with the spontaneousness of art".

It was never his subject that took possession of Kingsley, but Kingsley that took possession of his subject. His human personages were made expressly to illustrate his position, whatever it was - to demonstrate a principle or theory; and this is what imagination will never brook, the usage which is most resisted by the poetic faculty. 9

What Mrs Oliphant says of Kingsley can just as well be said of A Beleaguered City and of The Wizard's Son, but not of Miss Marjoribanks or of Hester or of most of the other books to which I have been devoting my attention. The spontaneity that is characteristic of Mrs Oliphant's finest work bears no resemblance to the kind of uncritical self-indulgent automatic writing which the word can so easily imply, inspiration without craftsmanship, undisciplined surrender to a private vision. With Mrs Oliphant spontaneity draws its strength from a truly professional concern for shape, texture, movement and ironic detachment. This is where her much deplored over-production stood her in good stead; it gave her an assured technique.

The "identifiable Oliphant manner and attitude and tone"¹⁰ has been the central theme of this thesis. It has a very special flavour of its own, rather like Trollope at times, with echoes of Jane Austen and something of the force and insight of George Eliot (and if Mrs Leavis is right Miss Marjoribanks was a direct influence on Middlemarch,¹¹

9. "Two Cities - Two Books", Blackwood's Magazine CXVI (1874), 74; "New Books", Blackwood's Magazine CXXI (1877), 190.

10. Mrs Leavis, Introduction to A. & L. (Leicester), p.<27>. See above, page 19.

11. Introduction to Zodiac Press edition of Miss Marjoribanks (Chatto & Windus 1969), pp.11-14.

Mrs Oliphant was content to practise the form of the Victorian novel as she inherited it, without making any attempt to take it in new directions. (The experiments in form of the 1850's were merely ways of exploring the medium to discover what was fittest for her.) Her last considerable novel, Old Mr Tredgold (1896), is very much the same sort of novel as The Greatest Heiress in England (1879) and as all the novels from The Chronicles of Carlingford onwards. And yet in her hands the Victorian novel takes the very marked colouring of her deeply ironic view of English society. The form of the novel is unchanged but is subtly transformed from within, though without any reformist zeal.

APPENDIX A

MRS OLIPHANT'S REVISIONS

Much of the adverse criticism directed against Mrs Oliphant concerns itself with her productivity and its supposed consequence that she could not revise her work and attain artistic perfection or precision of detail. To some extent this is true; there is much carelessness of detail. Nevertheless she did revise some of her novels, in spite of her productivity. In this appendix I wish to give a rather more extended account of those revisions which I have examined than was convenient in the main body of the thesis.

Two early novels, Margaret Maitland and Merkland, were republished in 1855 in the Parlour Library (published by Thomas Hodgson.) Margaret Maitland was reduced from 25 to 23 chapters largely by the cutting of a long, entirely self-contained, episode in which Margaret Maitland befriends an impoverished poet suffering from illness both of mind and body. Francis Jeffrey in his letter about Margaret Maitland had complained that this episode was "out of place and de trop"¹ and without doubt Mrs Oliphant had heeded this criticism. As in so many of the instances I examine in this appendix it is not absolutely certain that the abridgement was by Mrs Oliphant and not by the publisher; nevertheless to cover the omission a short passage was inserted to coalesce into one paragraph two separate passages from Chapter VII of Volume II. (This became Chapter XIV in the Parlour Library. The two omitted chapters were Chapters V and VI of Volume II.) Rewriting would surely have to be done with the author's consent, even if it

1. A. & L., p.154.

had not originated in her.²

Merkland was fairly drastically trimmed. Much incidental detail and comedy were omitted, all episodic and irrelevant to the main narrative. Since in this instance it is impossible to know whether these omissions were done with authorial approval, and since Merkland is of very little interest, I shall merely mention one very interesting omission. At the end of Chapter I of Volume III (which became Chapter XXIV in the Parlour Library) the heroine rebukes the feminist Marjory Falconer in the words I have quoted on page 34. In 1855 the insistence on "strength and honour", on "household strength, and loftiness, and purity - better things than any imaginary rights that clamour themselves into mere words" were the last words of the chapter. But in 1851 Marjory persisted in her feminist views, though admitting finally "I acknowledge myself outdone. I give up my poor little innovations". Yet it is on Marjory's ironic tones that the chapter ended,³ and the anti-feminist note was less emphatic than it became in 1855. Mrs Oliphant had a long way to go before she developed the more openly feminist views of the 1880's and if this omission was made with her approval this confirms that in the 1850's she remained (consciously at least) firmly anti-feminist.

If there is some doubt whether abridgements made in the 1850's were entirely by Mrs Oliphant, there is no doubt at all about revisions to two books of the 1860's, Miss Marjoribanks and Agnes. In giving in Chapter Eight details of the rewriting of Episode V of Miss Marjoribanks

2. Bernhard Tauchnitz of Leipzig published in 1862 a "Copyright edition" of Margaret Maitland. This was unabridged; but Tauchnitz would have been unaware of the Parlour Library edition and would automatically have returned to the original text of 1849.

3. Merkland III, 34-5.

when the book was published in three volumes, I concentrated almost entirely on the modification of Mrs Oliphant's concept of Lucilla. I shall now give some further details of the rewriting of this episode. One complete incident was removed, a broadly comic episode when Rose Lake tries in vain to convince Archdeacon Beverley that the drawing he was admiring was not by herself but by her brother Willy. It is irrelevant, though amusing, and Mrs Oliphant was right in her instinct to remove it. Now in the rewritten chapter (based on the original Chapters XVIII and XIX) the stress falls (ironically) on Lucilla's "triumph" over Barbara, while it is made clear that people have had to suffer for her triumph, especially Rose. Although Mrs Oliphant added the generalising paragraph about the genuineness of Lucilla's desire to stand by her friends, yet the use of irony to distance us from her is thus still maintained.

One striking instance of verbal improvement demands to be quoted. As Rose departs from the ^hTuesday evening reception she meditates rather bitterly upon Lucilla's motives for inviting her. In Blackwood's Magazine this is indicated as follows:

Her mind was overflowing with mortification and wounded pride.

In the three-volume form and subsequently this became:

What was passing through her own mind was, that it was not for herself, but for her portfolio and the talk that arose over it, that Lucilla had asked her.⁴

In place of vague abstract language we now have precise and specific detail, identifying the exact source of Rose's "mortification and wounded pride".

4. Blackwood's Magazine XCVII, 696; M.M. II, 247.

The revision of Agnes is the most interesting revision of all. The first edition, published in 1865 (but dated 1866), had 63 chapters. A one-volume edition followed in Hurst and Blackett's Standard Library in 1867 or 1868.⁵ This had been reduced to 59 chapters. Two chapters from Volume I and two from Volume III were removed entirely, and much other material had disappeared. What was removed concerned itself largely with the sensational plotting that badly disfigures the novel. Agnes's stepmother, Mrs Stanfield, is one of the weakest characters in all Mrs Oliphant's work, a crude "villainess", a wicked-stepmother stereotype involved in some very contrived plotting with Sir Roger Trevelyan (whose mistress, it is eventually revealed, she had once been). Evidently Mrs Oliphant had grown very uneasy with the crudity, vulgarity and irrelevance (and perhaps the indelicacy) of this element. An anonymous letter, a bizarre drunken-orgy scene, an episode in which Mrs Stanfield tries to induce Roger to seduce Agnes rather than marry her: all these were entirely cut, along with much else. Thus Mrs Oliphant was able to concentrate on Agnes's progress through love to a disillusioned marriage and finally to her tragic loss of her little son. It is significant that Book II, describing Agnes's marriage, and much the finest portion of Agnes, was largely uncut. Unfortunately the mere truncation of the roles of Mrs Stanfield and Sir Roger does not really remedy the weakness of Agnes; the two "villains" remain uninteresting stereotypes and the events leading to the kidnapping and eventual death of Agnes's son now seem perfunctory and incoherent.

5. The book is not dated, but the British Library's copy is date-stamped 19 February 1868. The English Catalogue of Books, however, lists a new edition of 1867.

A drastic replotting of the novel and rethinking of Mrs Stanfield and Sir Roger would have been the only way to achieve a completely satisfactory book; but it is unlikely that any Victorian novelist would have been willing to recast in such a root-and-branch manner. Nevertheless, Mrs Oliphant's instinct was very sound.

After 1868 there was a long delay before there is any clear evidence (that I have examined) of revision by Mrs Oliphant. But two short novels, Oliver's Bride and The Lady's Walk, serialised during the 1880's, were drastically rewritten and extended before publication in book form. Neither book is of major interest and the revisions are not very impressive; so I must be brief. Oliver's Bride was serialised in four episodes (18 April to 9 May 1885) in the Bolton Weekly Journal. In 1886 it was republished by Ward and Downey as a small book of 154 pages, with its original eight chapters extended to nine, largely by a very drastic rewriting of the fourth episode. Oliver's Bride is a bizarre story of a man engaged to marry who is induced to marry another woman, supposedly dying, in order to comfort her last moments. Her subsequent failure to die plunges Oliver into a painful predicament and he contemplates suicide. From 1885 to 1886 many tiny changes of detail were made in the early episodes, not worth recording here. But in the later episodes the "sensation" or "thriller" elements of the story were played down, and a strong suggestion to the reader and to the woman he really loves that Oliver's suicide has succeeded is eliminated. A very striking sequence was added (in the entirely new Chapter IX), describing Oliver's complex and tormented state of mind as he wanders the street after the suicide attempt; here Mrs Oliphant makes use of her special interest in, and gift for, describing mental turmoil. And Oliver's relationship with Trix, the

girl he loves, is developed. However, it cannot be denied that Oliver's Bride remains only a clumsy sketch for a story.

The Lady's Walk was serialised in Longman's Magazine in December 1882 and January 1883. In it a ghost warns a Scottish family of moral danger to their son living in London. The scene in London, scarcely more than one long paragraph, is entirely unsatisfactory, failing to justify the build-up during the long lyrical scenes in Scotland. When The Lady's Walk was republished in 1897, the third chapter was expanded into three chapters and full details of the London episode were supplied. But this only served to make the inadequacy of the whole episode more obvious; the prodigal son and his disgraceful wife are the merest of shadowy stereotypes using theatrical language and communicating no feeling of reality at all. However, much more interesting was some small rewriting of the ghost scenes to communicate a greater sense of mystery and delicate ambiguity.

In conclusion I must glance at some abridged editions published in 1912; since the abridgements, so long after Mrs Oliphant's death, were undoubtedly editorial, it would be pointless to give detail, unless it could be proved that they represent Mrs Oliphant's intentions. Two novels of the 1890's, Janet (1891) and The Cuckoo in the Nest (1892) were published in Hurst and Blackett's 7d Copyright Library.⁶ Both novels were shorn of repetitive detail and incidental decoration but also of many valuable moments of irony and humour (particularly needed in the melodramatic Janet). Mrs Oliphant had a close relationship

6. There was also an edition of Agnes, even more severely abridged than it had been in 1868, and damaged in the process.

with Hurst and Blackett (though much less so after the death of Henry Blackett in 1871) and at the end of her life she might have expressed a wish for such abridgements, a wish that the publishers finally respected in 1912. But nothing can be proved. (The files of Hurst and Blackett were destroyed during the Second World War.) It is at least worthy of notice that in 1894 the "Sixth and popular Edition" of The Cuckoo in the Nest was published (by Hutchinson, not by Hurst and Blackett) and this edition was not abridged.

APPENDIX B

CLASSIFICATION OF MRS OLIPHANT'S NOVELS

Any attempt to classify Mrs Oliphant's novels can only be tentative and imperfect. It is unlikely that she consciously saw her work in distinct categories, and many of her novels may be seen in more than one way. Nevertheless, in view of the vast range of her work, it is desirable to make some attempt at a chart of this ocean, to distinguish separate tendencies in the novels, to group together those which do have characteristics of their own. I include all the novels and collected short stories and those short novels which appeared in Blackwood's Magazine and other periodicals but were not republished. Where a novel seems genuinely classifiable in more than one category I have included it twice, enclosing the title in brackets under the less important heading. Where there was a very long gap between serialisation in periodicals and publication in volume form I supply both dates.

SCOTTISH NOVELS

I include only those novels which deal with specifically Scottish themes. Many other novels set wholly or partly in Scotland concern central themes of Mrs Oliphant's work.

<u>Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside,</u> <u>Written by Herself</u>	1849
<u>Merkland, A Story of Scottish Life</u>	1851
<u>Memoirs and Resolutions of Adam Graeme of Mossgray</u>	1852
<u>John Rintoul, or, The Fragment of the Wreck</u>	1853 ¹
<u>Harry Muir, A Story of Scottish Life</u>	1853

1. In Blackwood's Magazine

<u>Lilliesleaf, Being a concluding Series of Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland</u>	1856
<u>The Laird of Norlaw, A Scottish Story</u>	1858
<u>A Son of the Soil</u>	1866
<u>The Minister's Wife</u>	1869
<u>(The Primrose Path, A Chapter in the Annals of the Kingdom of Fife</u>	1878)
<u>Effie Ogilvie, the Story of a Young Life</u>	1886
<u>Kirsteen, A Story of a Scottish Family Seventy Years Ago</u>	1890
<u>The Unjust Steward, or, The Minister's Debt</u>	1896

HISTORICAL NOVELS

<u>Caleb Field, A Tale of the Puritans</u>	1851
<u>Katie Stewart, A True Story</u>	1853
<u>Magdalen Hepburn, A Story of the Scottish Reformation</u>	1854

SOCIAL NOVELS

<u>John Drayton: Being a History of the Early Life and Development of a Liverpool Engineer</u>	1851
<u>The Melvilles</u>	1852

STUDIES OF COMMUNITY LIFE

<u>(including The Chronicles of Carlingford: Chr.)</u>	
<u>Aillieford, A Family History</u>	1853
<u>(The Athelings: or, The Three Gifts</u>	1857)
<u>Orphans, A Chapter in Life</u>	1858
<u>Lucy Crofton</u>	1860
<u>The Rector, and The Doctor's Family (Chr.)</u>	1863
<u>Salem Chapel (Chr.)</u>	1863
<u>Heart and Cross</u>	1863
<u>The Perpetual Curate (Chr.)</u>	1864
<u>Miss Marjoribanks (Chr.)</u>	1866
<u>The Curate in Charge</u>	1876
<u>Phoebe Junior, A Last Chronicle of Carlingford (Chr.)</u>	1876
<u>Within the Precincts</u>	1879
<u>The Fugitives</u>	1879, 1890

<u>Sir Tom</u>	1884
<u>Neighbours on the Green</u>	1889
<u>A Poor Gentleman</u>	1889
<u>The Cuckoo in the Nest</u>	1892
<u>(A House in Bloomsbury</u>	1894)

MYSTERY NOVELS

<u>(Merkland: A Story of Scottish Life</u>	1851)
<u>The Athelings: or, the Three Gifts</u>	1857
<u>The Days of My Life: An Autobiography</u>	1857
<u>The House on the Moor</u>	1861
<u>The Last of the Mortimers, A Story in Two Voices</u>	1862
<u>(The Minister's Wife</u>	1869)
<u>Young Musgrave</u>	1877
<u>Madam</u>	1885
<u>The Son of His Father</u>	1887
<u>The Mystery of Mrs Blencarrow</u>	1890
<u>Janet</u>	1891
<u>Lady William</u>	1893
<u>(Who Was Lost and Is Found</u>	1894)

STUDIES OF INHERITANCE, CLASS AND SOCIAL STATUS

<u>Zaidee: A Romance</u>	1856
<u>The Romance of Agostini</u>	1860 ²
<u>Brownlows</u>	1868
<u>Squire Arden</u>	1871
<u>The Two Mrs Scudamores</u>	1871-1872 ²
<u>May</u>	1873
<u>For Love and Life</u>	1874
<u>The Story of Valentine and His Brother</u>	1875
<u>Whiteladies</u>	1875
<u>He That Will not When he May</u>	1880
<u>Grove Road, Hampstead</u>	1880, 1896

2. In Blackwood's Magazine.

<u>The Ladies Lindores</u>	1883
<u>The Second Son</u>	1888
<u>The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent</u>	1892
<u>The Prodigals and their Inheritance</u>	1884, 1894

LOVE STORIES

<u>Felicita</u>	1859 ³
<u>John; A Love Story</u>	1870
<u>Ombra</u>	1872
<u>A Rose in June</u>	1874
<u>Carità</u>	1877
<u>The Duke's Daughter</u>	1882, 1890
<u>It Was a Lover and His Lass</u>	1883
<u>(Effie Ogilvie</u>	1886)
<u>Diana Trelawney. The History of a Great Mistake</u>	1892

STUDIES OF MARRIAGE

<u>Mrs Clifford's Marriage</u>	1863 ³
<u>Agnes</u>	1866
<u>An Odd Couple</u>	1875 ⁴
<u>Mrs Arthur</u>	1877
<u>(The Ladies Lindores</u>	1883)
<u>A Country Gentleman and His Family</u>	1886
<u>A House Divided Against Itself</u>	1886
<u>Lady Car, The Sequel of a Life</u>	1889
<u>The Marriage of Elinor</u>	1892
<u>Sir Robert's Fortune: The Story of a Scotch Moor</u>	1895

STUDIES OF PARENT AND CHILD

<u>(Agnes</u>	1866)
<u>(Madonna Mary</u>	1866)
<u>The Two Marys</u>	1872-1873, 1896
<u>(The Duke's Daughter</u>	1882, 1890)
<u>(Joyce</u>	1888)

3. In Blackwood's Magazine

4. In The Graphic Christmas number.

<u>The Railwayman and His Children</u>	1891
<u>A House in Bloomsbury</u>	1894
<u>Who Was Lost and Is Found</u>	1894
<u>Old Mr Tredgold</u>	1896

STUDIES OF MONEY

<u>At His Gates</u>	1872
<u>The Greatest Heiress in England</u>	1879
<u>(The Fugitives)</u>	1879, 1890)
<u>Hester, A Story of Contemporary Life</u>	1883
<u>Sons and Daughters</u>	1890
<u>(Old Mr Tredgold)</u>	1896)

PSYCHOLOGICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL NOVELS (Basically studies of self-discovery)

<u>The Quiet Heart</u>	1854
<u>(The Days of My Life: An Autobiography)</u>	1857)
<u>Madonna Mary</u>	1866
<u>The Three Brothers</u>	1870
<u>Innocent: A Tale of Modern Life</u>	1873
<u>(Carita)</u>	1877)
<u>The Primrose Path, A Chapter in the Annals of the Kingdom of Fife</u>	1878
<u>Harry Joscelyn</u>	1881
<u>In Trust, The Story of a Lady and Her Lover</u>	1882
<u>Joyce</u>	1888
<u>The Sorceress</u>	1893

A "SYMPHONIC" NOVEL

<u>The Wizard's Son</u>	1884
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NOVELLAS BUILT ROUND A SINGLE THEME

<u>(The Two Marys)</u>	1872-1873, 1896)
<u>Oliver's Bride: A True Story</u>	1886
<u>(Sons and Daughters)</u>	1890)

<u>(The Mystery of Mrs Blencarrow</u>	1890)
<u>Two Strangers</u>	1895
<u>The Ways of Life: Two Stories</u>	1897

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

<u>Christian Melville</u>	1856
<u>Agnes Hopetoun's Schools and Holidays</u>	1895
<u>Cousin Mary</u>	1888
<u>(The Unjust Steward, or, The Minister's Debt</u>	1896)

Two of these books are included in this category for rather forced reasons. Christian Melville was written by Mrs Oliphant when a child, and in its second appearance in 1873 the publisher, Routledge, to judge by the advertisement supplement, was offering it among children's books. The Unjust Steward is partly seen from the point of view of two children, and it also has an advertisement of children's books bound in at the end.

STORIES OF THE SEEN AND UNSEEN

<u>A Beleaguered City</u>	1879
<u>A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen</u>	1882
<u>The Lady's Walk</u>	1882, 1897
<u>Stories of the Seen and Unseen</u>	1885, 1902 ⁵
<u>The Land of Darkness, Along with Some Further <u>Chapters in the Experiences of The Little Pilgrim</u></u>	1888
<u>"Dies Irae", The Story of a Spirit in Prison</u>	1895

SHORT STORIES

<u>A Widow's Tale and other Stories</u>	1898
<u>That Little Cutty (and other stories)</u>	1898

5. These dates are of the publication of Two Stories of the Seen and Unseen ("Old Lady Mary", "The Open Door") and Stories of the Seen and Unseen (the same two plus "The Portrait" and "The Library Window").

APPENDIX C

CHRONOLOGY OF MRS OLIPHANT'S NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

I have aimed to make this list as complete as possible, including every work of fiction, however trivial, to indicate in what ways great and small Mrs Oliphant was pursuing her career as a novelist from year to year. There are, however, gaps. Prolonged and tedious research has failed to unearth the periodicals or newspapers in which one novel (The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent) was serialised and one short story ("A Story of a Wedding Tour") was first published.

As far as possible the novels and short stories appear in precise chronological order; but it is not always possible to identify the exact month of publication of novels until about 1890, when The English Catalogue of Books starts to provide this information. In earlier years where exact months of publication of novels are not available, these novels are mentioned without reference to exact chronology, retaining the sequence given by Mrs Coghill in her bibliography attached to Autobiography and Letters, correcting, however, the inaccuracies of this bibliography when these are provable.

I have included selected dates for American publication, but only where American publishers or periodicals secured publication before those in England, or simultaneously.

1844/45

The writing of Christian Melville

1849

Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside, Written by Herself, 3 vols. London: Colburn.

1851

Caleb Field, A Tale of the Puritans. London: Colburn.

Merkland, A Story of Scottish Life, 3 vols. London: Colburn.¹

John Drayton, Being a History of the Early Life and Development of a Liverpool Engineer, 2 vols. London: Bentley.

1852

Memoirs and Resolutions of Adam Graeme of Mossgray, including some Chronicles of the Borough of Fendie, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

The Melvilles, 3 vols. London: Bentley

Katie Stewart, A True Story in Blackwood's Magazine, July-November.

'How Annie Orme was Settled in Life, and What We Did to Help it on. By her Aunt, Miss Rachel Sinclair, Mantua-Maker, Lasswade', in Sharpe's London Magazine, September, October.

1853

Harry Muir, A Story of Scottish life. 3 vols. London Hurst & Blackett.

Katie Stewart, A True Story. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

John Rintoul; or The Fragment of the Wreck in Blackwood's Magazine, March, April.

Ailieford, A Family History. 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

The Quiet Heart in Blackwood's Magazine, December 1853 to May 1854.

1. There is some doubt about the order of these two novels. Caleb Field is described as "By the author of Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland, Merkland &c", and reviews of Merkland were quoted in the advertisement supplement. What is more The English Catalogue of Books states that Merkland was published in 1850. Although Mrs Oliphant says in her autobiography that she started Caleb Field "the very night I had finished Margaret Maitland" (A. & L., p.23) the bibliographical evidence seems to suggest that Merkland was in fact the second of her novels to appear. Even though Caleb Field is very short, and even though she started it immediately after Margaret Maitland, she may have found it more difficult to complete a historical novel on English themes (complete with preface) than a contemporary novel on familiar Scottish themes. Nevertheless the datestamps on the copies of the two novels in the British Library (Caleb Field: 7 May 1851; Merkland: 16 August 1851) seem to confirm the order that I show above. It by no means follows that the novels reached the British Library immediately after publication. However, I retain the order of the novels as they appear in Mrs Coghill's bibliography (A. & L., 1899) and in that of Mr and Mrs Colby.

1854

The Quiet Heart. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

Magdalen Hepburn, A Story of the Scottish Reformation. London: Hurst & Blackett.

Zaidee, A Romance in Blackwood's magazine, December 1854-December 1855.

1855

Lilliesleaf, Being a concluding Series of Passages in the Life of Mrs Margaret Maitland of Sunnyside, Written by Herself. 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

1856

Zaidee, A Romance. 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

Christian Melville. London: David Bogue.

The Athelings; or The Three Gifts in Blackwood's Magazine, June 1856 to June 1857.

1857

"A Christmas Tale" in Blackwood's Magazine, January.

The Athelings; or The Three gifts. 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

The Days of My Life, An Autobiography. 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

"Eben, A True Story" in The National Magazine, November, December.

1858

The Laird of Norlaw, A Scottish Story, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

Orphans, A Chapter in Life. London: Hurst & Blackett.

1859

Agnes Hopetoun's Schools and Holidays, the Experiences of a Little Girl. London: Macmillan.

Felicita in Blackwood's Magazine, August, September.

Lucy Crofton. London: Hurst & Blackett. (Published 1859, but dated 1860)

1860

John Rintoul; or The Fragment of The Wreck in Tales from Blackwood, Vol. XI, no. 32.

The Romance of Agostini in Blackwood's Magazine, September to December.

1861

The House on the Moor, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

"The Executor" in Blackwood's Magazine, May.

"The Rector" in Blackwood's Magazine, September.

"Isabell Carr" in St James's Magazine, October, November.

The Doctor's Family in Blackwood's Magazine, October 1861 to January 1862,

1862

Salem Chapel in Blackwood's Magazine, February 1862 to January 1863.

The Last of the Mortimers, A Story in Two Voices, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

1863

The Rector, and The Doctor's Family. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

Salem Chapel, 2 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

Mrs Clifford's Marriage in Blackwood's Magazine, March, April.

The Perpetual Curate in Blackwood's Magazine, June 1863 to September 1864.

Heart and Cross. London: Chapman & Hall.

"A Story of a Voice" in The Victoria Magazine, August, September.

A Son of the Soil in Macmillan's Magazine, November 1863 to April 1865.

1864

The Perpetual Curate, 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

1865

Miss Marjoribanks in Blackwood's Magazine, February 1865 to May 1866.

Agnes. 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett. (Published 1865, but dated 1866).

1866

Madonna Mary in Good Words, January to December. Published December. 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett. (Published 1866, but dated 1867).

Miss Marjoribanks, 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

A Son of the Soil, 2 vols. London: Macmillan.

1867

Brownlows in Blackwood's Magazine, January 1867 to February 1868.

"Madam Saint-Ange" in Good Cheer, the Christmas number of Good Words.

1868

'My Neighbour Nelly', in The Cornhill Magazine, February.

Brownlows, 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

'The Ship's Doctor' in Good Words, April.

'Lady Denzil' in The Cornhill Magazine, April.

'The Stockbroker at Dinglewood' in The Cornhill Magazine, September.

1869

The Minister's Wife, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

The Three Brothers in St Paul's (afterwards St Paul's Magazine), June 1869 to September 1870; and in Appleton's Journal (New York), 12 June 1869 to 24 September 1870.

'Mrs Merridew's Fortune' in The Cornhill Magazine, September.

John, A Love Story. in Blackwood's Magazine, November 1869 to July 1870.

1870

John, A Love Story, 2 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

The Three Brothers, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett; also New York: D.Appleton & Co.

Squire Arden in The Star (Glasgow Evening Post), 13 June to 26 September.

1871

Squire Arden. 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

'Lady Isabella' in The Cornhill Magazine, March-April.

'Norah, the Story of a Wild Irish Girl', in Scribner's Monthly, (New York), May, June. (2)

The Two Mrs Scudamores in Scribner's Monthly (New York), November, December 1871, January 1872; and in Blackwood's Magazine, December 1871, January 1872.

1872

At His Gates in Good Words, January to December; also in Scribner's Monthly (New York). Afterwards published in 3 vols. London: Tinsley Brothers.

The Two Marys in Macmillan's Magazine, September, November, December 1872, January 1873.

2. This story belongs to the series appearing in The Cornhill Magazine (including 'Lady Isabella') and afterwards collected in Neighbours on the Green (1889). But it was not republished in that edition. Evidently in 1889 Mrs Oliphant forgot that she had contributed the story to Scribner's Monthly.

1872 contd/...

Ombra, 3 vols. London: Chapman & Hall.

"The Scientific Gentleman" in The Cornhill Magazine, November, December.

Diana Trelawney written (?).

1873

May, 3 vols. London: Chapman & Hall

Innocent: A Tale of Modern Life in The Graphic, 4 January to 28 June. Afterwards published in 3 vols. London: Sampson Low.

"A Visit to Albion" in Blackwood's Magazine, August.

"A Railway Junction, or The Romance of Ladybank" in Blackwood's Magazine, October.

1874

The Story of Valentine and His Brother, in Blackwood's Magazine, January 1874 to February 1875.

A Rose in June in The Cornhill Magazine, March to August; afterwards published in 2 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

For Love and Life, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

"The Count's Daughters" in Good Cheer, the Christmas edition of Good Words

1875

The Story of Valentine and His Brother, 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

Whiteladies in Good Words, January to December; afterwards published in 3 vols. London: Tinsley Brothers.

The Curate in Charge in Macmillan's Magazine, August 1875 to January 1876.

"The Story of Anne Maturin" in Scribner's Monthly (New York), November.

An Odd Couple in The Graphic, Christmas.

1876

The Curate in Charge, 2 vols. London: Macmillan.

Phoebe Junior, A Last Chronicle of Carlingford, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

An Odd Couple. Philadelphia: Porter & Coates.

Carità in The Cornhill Magazine, June 1876 to August 1877.

"The Secret Chamber" in Blackwood's Magazine, December.

1877

Young Musgrave in Macmillan's Magazine, January to December; afterwards published in 3 vols. London: Macmillan

Mrs Arthur, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

Carita. 3 vols. London: Smith, Elder & Co.

"The Lily and the Thorn" in Good Cheer, the Christmas number of Good Words.

"The Barley Mow" in The Graphic, Christmas.

1878

Within the Precincts in The Cornhill Magazine, February 1878 to April 1879.

The Primrose Path, A Chapter in the Annals of the Kingdom of Fife, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

"The Secret Chamber" and "A Railway Journey, or the Romance of Ladybank" in Tales from Blackwood, Second Series, respectively Vol I, no II and Vol IV, no VII.

1879

A Beleaguered City in New Quarterly Magazine, January; afterwards published: London, Macmillan (published 1879 but dated 1880).

Within the Precincts, 3 vols. London: Smith, Elder & Co.

The Greatest Heiress in England, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett. (Published 1879 but dated 1880).

"A Party of Travellers" in Good Words, March, June, October.

"An Elderly Romance" in The Cornhill Magazine, November.

He That Will Not When He May in Macmillan's Magazine, November 1879 to November 1880.

The Two Mrs Scudamores and "Witcherley Ways" ("A Christmas Tale", Blackwood's Magazine, January 1857) in Tales from Blackwood, Second Series, respectively Vol VII, no XIV and Vol X, no XX.

The Fugitives in Good Cheer, the Christmas Number of Good Words.

1880

"Earthbound" in Fraser's Magazine, January.

He That Will Not When He May, 3 vols. London: Macmillan

"My Faithful Johnny" in The Cornhill Magazine, November, December.

No.3 Grove Road, Hampstead in Good Cheer, the Christmas number of Good Words.

"That Little Cutty" in Home (owned and edited by Mrs J.H.Riddell), Christmas. (3)

3. No copies of Home appear to have survived. But Mrs Oliphant refers to her contribution in letters to Lady Ritchie and Mrs Craik (A.& L., p.290). The magazine is not here named, but in a letter to William Blackwood dated 15 February 1890, Mrs Oliphant names both the magazine and her contribution. (National Library of Scotland, Blackwood MSS, 4558, ff.154-5).

1881

In Trust in Fraser's Magazine, February 1881 to January 1882.

Harry Joscelyn, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

1882

"The Open Door" in Blackwood's Magazine, January.

In Trust, the Story of a Lady and Her Lover, 3 vols. London: Longmans. January.

Lady Jane in Good Words, January to June.

"A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen" in Macmillan's Magazine, May.

"The Little Pilgrim Goes up Higher" in Macmillan's Magazine, September.

These two collected as A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen: London: Macmillan. October.

The Ladies Lindores in Blackwood's Magazine, April 1882 to May 1883.

The Wizard's Son in Macmillan's Magazine, November 1882 to March 1884.

The Lady's Walk in Longman's Magazine, December 1882, January 1883.

1883

Sir Tom in Bolton Weekly Journal and District News and the other Tillotson newspapers, (4) 20 January to 14 July.

Hester, A Story of Contemporary Life, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

It Was a Lover and His Lass, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

The Ladies Lindores, 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

1884

Madam in Longman's Magazine, January 1884 to January 1885. Also published 30 December: London: Longmans. (Published 1884 but dated 1885).

"Old Lady Mary" in Blackwood's Magazine, January.

Sir Tom, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

The Wizard's Son, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

The Prodigals and Their Inheritance in Good Cheer, the Christmas number of Good Words.

4. The firm of Tillotson & Son of Bolton (publishers of Bolton Evening News) pioneered the serialisation of novels and short stories in newspapers. (See Frank Singleton, Tillotsons 1850-1950, Bolton 1950). Sir Tom was the first of four of Mrs Oliphant's novels to be serialised in The Bolton Weekly Journal and Weekly News. (See also under 1890 for The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent.) It was also published in the other five Tillotson weeklies: Leigh Journal and Times, Tyldesley Weekly Journal and Atherton News, Eccles and Patricroft Journal, Farnworth Weekly Journal and Observer, and Swinton and Pendlebury Journal. Instalments were a week later than in the Bolton Weekly Journal.

1885

"The Portrait" in Blackwood's Magazine, January.

A House Divided Against Itself in Chambers's Journal, 3 January to 5 December.

A Country Gentleman in Atlantic Monthly (Boston), January 1885 to February 1886.

Two Stories of the Seen and Unseen ("Old Lady Mary" and "The Open Door"). London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

Oliver's Bride in Bolton Weekly Journal and District News, 18 April to 9 May. (5)

Effie Ogilvie in The Scottish Church, June 1885 to May 1886.

"The Little Pilgrim in the Seen and Unseen" in The Scottish Church, July.

"Dr Barrère" in The English Illustrated Magazine, December.

1886

"Queen Eleanor and Fair Rosamond" in The Cornhill Magazine, January, February.

A Poor Gentleman in The Leisure Hour, January to December.

Oliver's Bride, A True Story. London: Ward & Downey.

A Country Gentleman and His Family, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

Effie Ogilvie, The Story of a Young Life, 2 vols. Glasgow: Maclehose; and London: Macmillan.

A House divided Against Itself, 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

The Son of His Father in Bolton Weekly Journal and District News and the other Tillotson newspapers, (6) 17 April to 23 October.

"An Anxious Moment" in The New Amphion, Being the Book of the Edinburgh University Union Fancy Fair. Edinburgh University Press.

1887

"The Land of Darkness" in Blackwood's Magazine, January.

The Second Son in Atlantic Monthly (Boston), January 1887 to February 1888.

The Son of His Father, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

Joyce in Blackwood's Magazine, May 1887 to April 1888.

"The Story of an Anonymous Letter" in Court and Society Review⁷ 16 November to 14 December.

5. Not published in the other Tillotson newspapers.

6. See note 4 on page 446 above.

7. This is the periodical of which Mrs Oliphant's son, Cyril F. Oliphant, was part-owner. See Colby, pp.217-8.

1888

Joyce, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

The Second Son, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.⁸

Cousin Mary. London: S.W.Partridge.

'Mr Sandford' in The Cornhill Magazine, April, May.

'On the Dark Mountains' in Blackwood's Magazine, November

The Land of Darkness, along with Some Further Chapters in the Experience of the Little Pilgrim, London: Macmillan. ('The Land of Darkness', Blackwood's Magazine January 1887; 'The Little Pilgrim in the Seen and Unseen', The Scottish Church July 1885; 'On the Dark Mountains', Blackwood's Magazine November 1888.)

'The Little Dirty Angel' in Windsor Comet and Bazaar News,⁹ 6 November.

1889

Neighbours on the Green, 3 vols. London: Macmillan. ('My Neighbour Nelly', 'Lady Denzil', 'The Stockbroker at Dinglewood', 'The Scientific Gentleman', 'Lady Isabella', 'An Elderly Romance', 'Mrs Merridew's Fortune' from The Cornhill Magazine 1868, 1869, 1871, 1872, 1879; 'The Barley Mow' from The Graphic, Christmas 1877; 'My Faithful Johnny' from The Cornhill Magazine November, December 1880)

A Poor Gentleman, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

Lady Car, The Sequel of a Life in Longman's Magazine, March to July. Published June: London: Longmans.

Kirsteen, A Story of a Scottish Family Seventy Years Ago in Macmillan's Magazine, August 1889 to August 1890.

'Mademoiselle' in The Cornhill Magazine, November, December.

8. The name of T.F.Aldrich appears on the half-title as joint author. Aldrich was the editor of Atlantic Monthly in which the book was serialised. He made no more than a few changes in the text.
9. Windsor Comet and Bazaar News appears to be a single-issue newspaper, printed at Eton partly as a joke. It is a 4-page newspaper, with advertisements on pages 1 and 4, burlesque "news" items on page 2 and Mrs Oliphant's story on page 3. No copies survive at the British Newspaper Library or the central reference library of Windsor; but a copy was preserved among Mrs Oliphant's papers and is now the property of the National Library of Scotland.
10. This was not published in Bolton Weekly Journal and District News or the other newspapers circulating in Lancashire. Mrs Oliphant's correspondence with Macmillan, now at the British Library, refers to arrangements made with Tillotson & Son. Agreement for the serialisation of The Heir Presumptive was made in 1889. Tillotsons then asked to delay serialisation until March 1890. The receipt for the copyright is dated 18 July 1890. (Letters dated 31 July 1889, 11 August 1889, 6 November 1889, 8 November 1889, 'Wednesday' (March 1890?), Receipt 18 July 1890; BL Add MS 54919 ff. 213-20, 238, 239, 229.) It has not been possible to trace the newspaper in which the book appeared. (See p.450)

1890

March to July (?) The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent serialised by Tillotson & Son. (10).

March: The Duke's Daughter; and The Fugitives, 3 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood. (Lady Jane, Good Words January to June 1882; The Fugitives, Good Cheer, Christmas 1879.)

The Mystery of Mrs Blencarrow. London: Spencer Blackett.

Sons and Daughters in Blackwood's Magazine, March, April; published October: London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

September: Kirsteen, A Story of a Scottish Family Seventy Years Ago, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

1891

Lady William in The Lady's Pictorial, 3 January to 27 June.

The Marriage of Elinor in Good Words, January to December.

February: Janet, 3 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.

"The Golden Rule" in Black and White, 22 August.

December: The Railwayman and His Children, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

"A Chance Encounter" in Black and White, 12 December.

1892

"The Strange Story of Mr Robert Dalyell" in The Cornhill Magazine, January to March.

"A Girl of the Period" in The English Illustrated Magazine, February.

Diana, The History of a Great Mistake in Blackwood's Magazine, February to July. Published July as Diana Trelawney, The History of a Great Mistake, 2 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

March: The Marriage of Elinor, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.

September: The Cuckoo in the Nest, 3 vols. London: Hutchinson.

The Sorceress in Bolton Weekly Journal and District News and the other Tillotson newspapers, (11) 10 September 1892 to 4 March 1893.

September: Katie Stewart and other Tales (John Rintoul, "A Railway Junction, or The Romance of Ladybank"). London and Edinburgh: Blackwood. (12)

"Mary's Brother" in Atalanta, October.

10. For this note see preceding page.

11. See note 4 on page 447 above.

12. I have not recorded all editions of Mrs Oliphant's novels. But this edition is worth recording, since it prints John Rintoul and "A Railway Junction" in book form for the first time (apart from Tales from Blackwood, 1860 and 1878).

1893

"Isabel Dysart" in Chambers' Journal, 7 to 28 January.
 January: Lady William, 3 vols. London: Macmillan.
 January: The Sorceress, 3 vols. London: F.V.White.
 "The Member's Wife" in The National Observer, 4 and 11 March.
 "A Visitor and His Opinions" in Blackwood's Magazine, April.
 "A Widow's Tale" in The Cornhill Magazine, July to September.
 "The Whirl of Youth" in The National Observer, 7 to 28 October.
Sir Robert's Fortune in Atalanta, October 1893 to September 1894.
 "The Golden Rule" in Stories from Black and White. London: Chapman & Hall.

1894

A House in Bloomsbury, 2 vols. London: Hutchinson.
 "John" in Pall Mall Magazine, March.
 April: The Prodigals and Their Inheritance, 2 vols. London: Methuen.
Who Was Lost and Is Found in Blackwood's Magazine, June to November.
 Published October: London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.
 December: Two Strangers (Autonym Library, no.5.) London: Fisher Unwin.

1895

January: "Dies Irae", The Story of a Spirit in Prison. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.
 "The Mysterious Bridegroom" in Pall Mall Magazine, March.
 April: Sir Robert's Fortune, The Story of a Scotch Moor. London: Methuen.
Old Mr Tredgold, A Story of Two Sisters in Longman's Magazine, June 1895 to May 1896.
 "A Maiden's Mind" in Atalanta, December.

1896

"The Library Window" in Blackwood's Magazine, January.
 "The Heirs of Kellie , An Episode of Family History" in Blackwood's Magazine, March.
 March: Old Mr Tredgold. London: Longman.
 "The Strange Adventures of John Percival" in Chambers' Journal, 2 May to 30 May.
 May: The Two Marys (along with Grove Road, Hampstead). London: Methuen.
 October: The Unjust Steward; or, The Minister's Debt. London and Edinburgh: W & R Chambers.

1897

"The Land of Suspense" in Blackwood's Magazine, January.

May: The Ways of Life, Two Stories ("Mr Sandford", The Cornhill Magazine April and May 1888; "The Wonderful History of Mr Robert Dalyell", The Cornhill Magazine January to March 1892 as "The Strange Story of Mr Robert Dalyell"). London: Smith, Elder & Co.

(25 June: Death of Mrs Oliphant).

September: The Lady's Walk (along with "The Ship's Doctor" from Good Words April 1868). London: Methuen.

1898

May: A Widow's Tale and other Stories ("A Widow's Tale", The Cornhill Magazine, July to September 1893; "Queen Eleanor and Fair Rosamond", The Cornhill Magazine, January, February 1886; "Mademoiselle", The Cornhill Magazine November, December 1889; "The Lily and the Thorn", Good Cheer Christmas 1877; "The Strange Adventures of John Percival", Chambers' Journal, 2 to 30 May; "A Story of a Wedding Tour"; (13) "John" Pall Mall Magazine, March 1894; "The Whirl of Youth", The National Observer, October 1893; "The Heirs of Kellie, An Episode of Family History", Blackwood's Magazine March 1896). Preface by J.M.Barrie. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

September: That Little Cutty (including "Dr Barrere" and "Isabel Dysart"). ("That Little Cutty", Home, Christmas 1880; "Dr Barrere", English Illustrated Magazine, December 1885; "Isabel Dysart", Chambers' Journal 7 to 28 January). London: Macmillan.

1902

September: Stories of the Seen and Unseen ("The Open Door", "Old Lady Mary", "The Portrait", "The Library Window"). London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.

13. The periodical in which "A Story of a Wedding Tour" was originally published has not yet been discovered.

APPENDIX D

NON-FICTION BY MRS OLIPHANT

1. Biographical and Historical Works

- 1861 Translation of Montalembert (Count Charles Forbes Rene de).
The Monks of the West from St. Benedict to St. Bernard,
7 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.
- 1862 The Life of Edward Irving, Minister of the National Scotch
Church, London. Illustrated by his Journals and Correspondence,
2 vols. London: Hurst & Blackett.
- 1869 Historical Sketches of the Reign of George Second, 2 vols.
London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.
- 1870 Francis of Assisi (the Sunday Library for Household Reading
XI). London: Macmillan.
- 1872 Memoirs of the Count de Montalembert. A Chapter of Recent French
History, 2 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.
- 1888 Memoir of the Life of John Tulloch. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.
- 1891 A Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant, and of Alice Oliphant,
His wife, 2 vols. London and Edinburgh: Blackwood.
- 1893 Thomas Chalmers, Preacher, Philosopher, and Statesman (English
Leaders of Religion). London: Methuen.
- 1894 Historical Sketches of the Reign of Queen Anne. London: Macmillan.
- 1895 A Child's History of Scotland. London: Fisher Unwin.
- 1896 Jeanne d'Arc: Her Life and Death (Heroes of the Nations Series).
London: Putnam.
- 1897 Annals of a Publishing House; William Blackwood and his Sons,
their Magazine and Friends, Vols I, II. London and Edinburgh:
Blackwood.
- 1900 Queen Victoria, A Personal Sketch. London: Cassell.

2. Autobiography

- 1899 The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M.O.W.Oliphant.
Arranged and Edited by Mrs Harry Coghill. London and Edinburgh:
Blackwood.

3. Travel

- 1876 The Makers of Florence: Dante, Giotto, Savonarola, and their City. London: Macmillan.
- 1887 The Makers of Venice: Doges, Conquerors, Painters and Men of Letters. London: Macmillan
- 1890 Royal Edinburgh: Her Saints, Kings, Prophets, and Poets
London: Macmillan
- 1891 Jerusalem, Its History and Hope. London: Macmillan
- 1895 The Makers of Modern Rome. London: Macmillan

4. Literary Criticism

Foreign Classics for English Readers. London and Edinburgh:
Blackwood:

- 1877 I Dante.
- 1879 VI Moliere (with Francis B.C.Tarver)
- 1880 XI Cervantes.

- 1882 The Literary History of England in the end of the Eighteenth and Beginning of the Nineteenth Century. 3 vols. London: Macmillan
- 1883 Sheridan (English Men of Letters). London: Macmillan
- 1892 The Victorian Age of English Literature (with Francis Romano Oliphant). 2 vols. London: Percival & Co.
- 1897 "The Sisters Bronte" in Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign. London: Hurst & Blackett.

5. Miscellaneous

- 1858 Sundays. London and Edinburgh: Nisbet.
- 1876 Dress (Art at Home Series). London: Macmillan
- 1890 A House of Peace. London: Printed at the Office of The Art Journal, City Road.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. The works of Mrs Oliphant

As listed in Appendices C and D. Editions used of Mrs Oliphant's novels were not initially the first editions; but in every case the text of later editions has been compared with the first editions, as available at the British Library, the Bodleian Library and Cambridge University Library. Where significant differences in text were noted this has been indicated in Appendix A. Editions of Salem Chapel, Miss Marjoribanks and Autobiography and Letters published in the twentieth century are listed in section 7 of the bibliography under the names of the editors, W. Robertson Nicoll and Mrs Q. D. Leavis.

2. Manuscripts

Most of the surviving manuscripts of Mrs Oliphant are letters to publishers, along with a number of personal letters recently acquired by the National Library of Scotland and one or two others scattered through the national libraries. For the sake of completeness all manuscripts have been listed, though some are of no interest. (Some minor letters at the National Library of Scotland are not listed, as they have not been examined.)

Berkshire Record Office, Reading

D/EBYf. 48. Letter, n.d., to Lady Barker.

The British Library

ADD MS 46,616ff.26-40. Letters to Richard Bentley and signed agreements, included in the Bentley papers; covering the years 1851-52.

ADD MS 46,461. Includes copies of Richard Bentley's letters to Mrs Oliphant.

ADD MS 54,919. Letters to the publisher Macmillan & Co, included in the Macmillan correspondence. Also signed agreements.

ADD MS 42,576 f.300. Letter to 'Mr Bryce', 20 June 1894.

ADD MS 46,359A f.155. Letter, n.d., in Knightley MSS.

The Bodleian Library

MS Autogr.b4 p. 53a; MS Autogr.b11 no.1239; MS Autogr.c25 f.177-8;

MS Autogr. d33 f.114. Four minor letters.

Cambridge University Library

Add 7349/15/143, 144. Letters, n.d., to J.K.Stephen and Sir James Stephen.

Add 7649/102. Letter, n.d., to person unknown.

Dorset County Museum

Letter to Thomas Hardy, dated 20 July (1882).

John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

Letters, four in all, of the years 1883-1891, addressed to Tillotson & Son, included in the Tillotson Papers.

The National Library of Scotland

The Blackwood MSS: includes an extensive collection of letters from Mrs Oliphant to her publishers, William Blackwood & Sons, and other letters commenting on her work; also manuscripts of three early novels and some non-fiction.

Acc 5678 and Acc5793: recent acquisitions of letters by and to Mrs Oliphant, her sons and her nieces, along with certain diaries and personal papers.

Acc 5305: Correspondence concerning Mrs Oliphant's last hours.

Acc 6713/5/1: Letters to the publishers Smith, Elder & Co., included in the Smith, Elder archives.

3. Articles by Mrs Oliphant

This is not a complete list of Mrs Oliphant's articles. Those listed are the articles which have a direct bearing on this thesis,

dealing with literary criticism (especially the criticism of the novel), with feminism and with autobiography.

Atalanta

- "Things in General", VII (October 1893), 56-9.
- "Things in General", VII (November 1893), 122-3.
- "Things in General", VII (December 1893), 220-3.
- "Things in General", VII (January 1894), 286-8.
- "Things in General", VII (March 1894), 415-7.
- "Things in General", VII (April 1894), 478-81.
- "Things in General", VII (May 1894), 543-5.
- "Things in General", VII (June 1894), 603-5.
- "Things in General", VII (August 1894), 732-4.
- "Things in General", VII (September 1894), 800-1.

Blackwood's Magazine

- "Mary Russell Mitford", LXXV (June 1854), 658-70.
- "Mr Thackeray and His Novels", LXXVII (January 1855), 86-96.
- "Bulwer", LXXVII (February 1855), 221-33.
- "Charles Dickens", LXXVII (April 1855), 451-66.
- "Modern Novelists - Great and Small", LXXVII (May 1855), 554-68.
- "The Laws Concerning Women", LXXIX (April 1856), 379-87.
- "The Condition of Women", LXXXIII (February 1858), 139-54.
- "Social Science", LXXXVIII (December 1860), 698-715.
- "Scotland and her Accusers", XC (September 1861), 267-83.
- "Sensation Novels", XCI (May 1862) 564-84.
- "Novels", XCIV (August 1863), 168-83.
- "Life in an Island", XCVII (January 1865), 72-88.
- "The Great Unrepresented", C (September 1866), 367-79.
- "Victor Hugo", C (December 1866), 744-69.
- "Novels", CII (September 1867), 257-80
- "The Conversion of England", CII (December 1867), 702-24.
- "The Latest Lawgiver" (Ruskin), CIII (June 1868), 675-91.
- "Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II - Richardson: the Novelist", CV (March 1869), 253-76. (1)

1. This is the tenth of twelve articles on the theme: Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II, afterwards brought together in one volume by Blackwood in 1879.

- "Charles Reade's Novels", CVI (October 1869), 482-514.
- "Miss Austen and Miss Mitford", CVII (March 1870), 290-313.
- "New Books", CVII (May 1870), 628-51.
- "New Books", CVIII (August 1870), 166-88.
- "Piccadilly" (by Laurence Oliphant), CVIII (October 1870), 401-22.
- "New Books", CVIII (November 1870) 607-31.
- "New Books", CIX (January 1871), 22-47.
- "New Books", CIX (April 1871), 440-64.
- "Charles Dickens", CIX (June 1871), 673-95.
- "New Books", CX (July 1871), 62-80.
- "A Century of Great Poets II - Walter Scott", CX (August 1871) 229-56.²
- "American Books", CX (October 1871), 422-42.
- "New Books", CX (October 1871), 458-80.
- "New Books", CXI, (April 1872), 478-99.
- "New Books", CXI (June 1872), 735-56.
- "New Books", CXII (August 1872), 196-217.
- "New Books", CXII (December 1872), 746-65.
- "New Books", CXIII (February 1873), 206-21.
- "Lord Lytton", CXIII (March 1873), 356-78
- "Kenelm Chillingley", CXIII (May 1873), 615-30.
- "Alexandre Dumas", CXIV (July 1873), 111-30.
- "New Books", CXIV (September 1873), 368-90.
- "New Books", CXIV (November 1873), 596-617.
- "New Books", CXV (April 1874), 443-63.
- "New Books", CXV (June 1874), 750-69.
- "Two Cities: Two Books", CXVI (July 1874), 72-91.
- "New Books", CXVI (August 1874), 166-83.
- "New Books", CXVII (May 1875), 616-37.
- "New Books", CXVIII (July 1875), 82-99.
- "Mr Thackeray's Sketches", CXIX (February 1876), 232-43.
- "New Books", CXXI (February 1877), 175-95.
- "Harriet Martineau", CXXI (April 1877), 472-96.
- "New Books", CXXIII (March 1878), 305-27.

2. This is the second of a series of ten.

- "New Books", CXXIII (June 1878), 681-702.
- "The Novels of Alphonse Daudet", CXXV (January 1879), 93-111.
- "New Books", CXXVI (July 1879), 88-107.
- "The Reign of Queen Anne", CXXVII (February 1880), 139-62.
- "Russia and Nihilism in the Novels of M.Tourgenief", CXXVII (May 1880)
623-47.
- "New Novels", CXXVIII (September 1880), 378-404.
- "A Few French Novels", CXXX (December 1881), 703-23.
- "Recent Novels", CXXXI (March 1882), 365-91.
- "American Literature in England", CXXXIII (January 1883), 136-61.
- "Three Young Novelists", CXXXVI (September 1884), 296-316.
- "Novels, CXL (December 1886), 776-98.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLI (January 1887), 126-53.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLI (February 1887), 291-315.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLI (March 1887), 416-45.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLI (April 1887), 552-72.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLI (May 1887), 683-710.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLI (June 1887), 737-61.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLII (July 1887), 99-123.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLII (August 1887), 235-63.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLII (November 1887), 698-714.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLIII (January 1888), 104-27.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLIII (June 1888), 831-52. (With Alexander Allardyce.)
- "The Old Saloon", CXLIV (September 1888), 419-43.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLIV (December 1888), 874-99. (With Alexander Allardyce.)
- "The Old Saloon", CXLV (March 1889), 421-36. (With Alexander Allardyce.)
- "The Old Saloon", CXLV (April 1889), 561-72.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLV (June 1889), 809-34.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLVI (August 1889), 254-75.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLVI (November 1889), 696-723. (With Alexander Allardyce.)
- "The Old Saloon", CXLVI (December 1889), 857-78.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLVII (January 1890), 131-51.
- "The Old Saloon", CXLVII (March 1890), 408-28.
- "The Old Saloon", CL (August 1891), 273-98.
- "The Old Saloon", CL (November 1891), 712-35.
- "The Old Saloon", CLI (February 1892), 299-318.
- "The Old Saloon", CLI (March 1892), 455-74.

- "The Old Saloon", CLII (October 1892), 574-96.
 "The Old Saloon", CLII (December 1892), 852-73.
 "The Looker-On", CLVI (August 1894), 285-308.
 "The Looker-On", CLVII (January 1895), 148-70.
 "The Fancies of a Believer", CLVII (February 1895), 237-55.
 "Men and Women", CLVII (April 1895), 620-50.
 "The Looker-On", CLVII (June 1895), 902-29.
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 "The Anti-Marriage League", CLIX (January 1896), 135-49.
 "The Looker-On", CLIX (June 1896), 901-26.
 "The Looker-On", CLX (October 1896), 481-507.
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 "A Raid Among Books", CLX (December 1896), 822-46.
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The Contemporary Review

- "Victor Hugo", XLVIII (July 1885), 10-32.

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- "The Subjection of Women by John Stuart Mill; Women's Work and Women's Culture, A Series of Essays, Edited by Josephine G. Butler", CXXX (October 1869), 572-602.
 "Mr Browning's Balaustion", CXXXV (January 1872), 221-49.
 "Balzac". CXLVIII (October 1878), 528-58.
 "George Eliot", CLXI (April 1885), 514-53.

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- "Success in Fiction", VII (May 1889), 314-22.

Fraser's Magazine

- "The Grievances of Women", CI (n.s.XXI) (May 1880), 698-710.

Good Words

- "Anthony Trollope", XXIV (February 1883), 142-4.

Macmillan's Magazine

- "Mrs Craik", LVII (December 1887), 81-5.

The New Review

"A Noble Lady", XIV (March 1896), 241-7.

The Spectator

"Memorials of a Quiet Life", XLIX (8 July 1876), 866-7.

"Post Mortem" [by Arthur Montagu Brookfield], LTV, (13 August 1881), 1053-4.

"Hurrish" [by Emily Lawless], LIX (30 January 1886), 147-8.

"A Commentary from my Chair", LXIII (7 December 1889), 804-5.

"A Commentary from an Easy Chair", LXIII (14 December 1889), 842-3.

"A Commentary from an Easy Chair", LXIII (21 December 1889), 881-2.

"A Commentary from an Easy Chair", LXIII (28 December 1889), 921-2.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (4 January 1890), 13-14.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (11 January 1890), 49-50.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (18 January 1890), 84-5.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (25 January 1890), 116-7.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair". LXIV (1 February 1890), 164-5.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (8 February 1890), 199-200.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (15 February 1890), 233-4.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (1 March 1890), 302-3.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (8 March 1890), 336-7.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (15 March 1890), 371-2.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (29 March 1890), 438-9.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXIV (3 May 1890), 620-1.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (5 July 1890), 11-12.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (12 July 1890), 49-50.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (19 July 1890), 81-3.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (26 July 1890), 113-4.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (2 August 1890), 146-7.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (9 August 1890), 177-8.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (16 August 1890), 210-11.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (23 August 1890), 242-3.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (30 August 1890), 274-5.

"A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (6 September 1890), 307-8.

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- "A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (20 September 1890), 374-5.
 "A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (4 October 1890), 438-9.
 "A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (11 October 1890), 473-4.
 "A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (18 October 1890), 520-1.
 "A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (1 November 1890), 593-4.
 "A Commentary in an Easy Chair", LXV (8 November 1890), 644-5.
 "Aunt Anne" [by Mrs W.K.Clifford], LXIX (6 August 1892), 195-6.
 "The Apology of Age to Youth", [A Letter to the Editor], LXIX (24 December 1892), 923.

4. Nineteenth-century articles on Mrs Oliphant

The Academy

- "Hester", by W.E.Henley, XXV (5 January 1884), 5-6.
 "A Country Gentleman and His Family" by J.Ashcroft Noble, XXIX (24 April 1886), 286-7.
 "Joyce" by George Saintsbury, XXXIII (19 May 1888), 340.³
 "The Heir Presumptive and the Heir Apparent" by Edmund K.Chambers, XLIII (11 February 1893), 126.
 "Mrs Oliphant, By One Who Knew Her", LII (3 July 1897) 15-16.

The Athenaeum

- Obituary, CX (3 July 1897), 35-6.

The Atlantic Monthly (New York)

- "Mrs Oliphant" by Harriet Waters Preston, LV (June 1885) 733-44.
 "Mrs Oliphant" (obituary) by Harriet Waters Preston, LXXX (September 1897), 424-7.
 "The Autobiography of Mrs Oliphant" by Harriet Waters Preston, LXXXIV, (September 1899), 567-73.

Blackwood's Magazine

- "Mrs Oliphant's Novels" (by W.Lucas Collins), CXIII (June 1873), 722-39.
 "Contemporary Literature III: Magazine Writers" (by A.Innes Shand) CXXV (February 1879), 225-47.
 "Contemporary Literature IV: Novelists" (by A.Innes Shand), CXXV (March 1879), 322-44.
 "A Little Chat about Mrs Oliphant in a Letter from an Island" (by John Skelton), CXXXIII (January 1883), 73-91.

3. This is just one of several interesting reviews of Mrs Oliphant's novels by Saintsbury in The Academy.

"In Maga's Library" (by A.Innes Shand), CLVI (December 1894), 854-877.

"Mrs Oliphant" (by J.H.Lobban and William Blackwood III), CLXII (July 1897), 161-4.

"Mrs Oliphant as a Novelist" (by John H.Millar), CLXII (September 1897), 305-19.

"Mrs Oliphant as a Biographer" (by John H.Millar), CLXIII (April 1898) 501-12.

"The Record of a Life" (by John H.Millar), CLXV (May 1899), 895-904.

The Bookman

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J.C.Heywood, "A Gossiping Novelist", in How They Strike me, These Authors [Philadelphia 1877)], pp.113-25.

5. Nineteenth-Century Novels

An assessment, and even more a revaluation, of a writer's status entails consideration of his work in constant relationship to his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. I list here certain nineteenth-century novels specifically used in this thesis to sharpen the image of Mrs Oliphant's special gifts. The works of the major nineteenth-century novelists are not listed; this would be both ostentatious and superfluous. This list illustrates several themes: (a) the Scottish background to Mrs Oliphant's work; (b) novels by women; (c) supernatural stories as background to *The Stories of the Seen and Unseen*; (d) novels of ecclesiastical life that reflect *Chronicles of Carlingford*; (e) novels which Mrs Oliphant reviewed. (The appropriate letter is used to indicate the relevant novels.)

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English

Volume XXVIII

Number 131

Summer 1979

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John Needham on Geoffrey Hill

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Mrs. Oliphant: A Case for Reconsideration

JOHN STOCK CLARKE

Perhaps the most remarkable cultural phenomenon of the last thirty years has been the rediscovery and revaluation of the Victorians—and the process is not complete. In particular the Victorian novel is now receiving the sort of serious critical attention previously only given to the major poets from Chaucer to Hopkins: critical introductions, detailed explanatory and interpretative annotation, textual study. But there are still discoveries to be made—in particular, surely, the novelist Margaret Oliphant. There may be some excuse for the neglect of Mrs. Oliphant; she was probably the most prolific novelist of the nineteenth century, publishing about ninety-six works of fiction besides many uncollected shorter stories; and to make a serious study of such a writer must seem an act of mere masochism. Could anybody who wrote so much maintain any literary standards at all? In fact Mrs. Oliphant does fully warrant close study; she did maintain high standards throughout her career, and in spite of what critics have said of her she never degenerated into a hack writer. She is very much within the great tradition of the nineteenth-century novel, and when she is in the right vein she handles this tradition—in particular, the tradition of ironic social observation inherited from Jane Austen—with intelligence, accepting and yet modifying it, as important writers always do.

Mostly histories of the novel ignore her or dismiss her with contempt. But lately Lucy Stebbins and V. and R. A. Colby in America and Q. D. Leavis in this country have done some work on her; and her name has begun to appear in recent books on the novel. Lucy Stebbins has said of Mrs. Oliphant that she was 'the most inventive and the most versatile novelist of the century' and that 'her power of invention was probably greater than that of any other woman novelist of the century'. If these views are even partly true, then Mrs. Oliphant is grossly overdue for rediscovery; her place is not with Mrs. Henry Wood and Mrs. Craik and Charlotte Younge, but with Jane Austen, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot and the Brontës.

The only critic whose views of Mrs. Oliphant are worth taking seriously is Mrs. Q. D. Leavis. V. and R. A. Colby in their book *The Equivocal Virtue* (Archon Books, 1966) write with great enthusiasm, but not always about the right books, nor do they show much critical discrimination. They overpraise the eccentric fantasy *A Beleaguered City* and disparage most of the later books as potboilers and hackwork—quite unreasonably, as Mrs. Oliphant was too intelligent, too conscientious to fall back upon formulae and tricks-of-the-trade, though she could always supply an insipid love story (and, worse, an overstrained melodrama)—if nothing else came out of her imagination. An example of the inadequacy of their approach comes in their attempt at a classification of Mrs. Oliphant's later novels. One category is that of family or domestic novels, which they dismiss as 'merely banal'. The list includes *Cousin Mary* and *The Two Marys*, which are indeed among Mrs. Oliphant's feeblest books, but also *The Railway Man and his Children*, which Mrs. Leavis has rightly praised as a remarkable study of the position of women and their need to find a role (although this is never stressed until the end of the book). There are too many such failures of perception in the Colbys' book.

Mrs. Leavis has written introductions to two reprints of books by Mrs. Oliphant: *Miss Marjoribanks* (Chatto, 1969), and the *Autobiography and Letters* (Leicester University Press, 1973). She makes very high claims for *Miss Marjoribanks*—perhaps 'the wisest and wittiest of Victorian novels'—and compares it with *Emma* and *Middlemarch*, astonishingly saying that Lucilla Marjoribanks is 'more entertaining, more impressive and more likable than either' Emma or Dorothea. To use one writer as a stick to beat other writers with is always deplorable; but otherwise I find Mrs. Leavis's praise of *Miss Marjoribanks* and its ironic analysis of English society very convincing. And in the introduction to the *Autobiography and Letters* she makes what has so far been the only attempt to appraise Mrs. Oliphant's special distinction as a novelist—of which the Colbys are scarcely aware at all.

On a superficial survey Mrs. Oliphant may seem to be merely the stereotype of the Victorian lady novelist, with naive love scenes, overingenious mystery themes, harrowing vigils in the sick room, emotional death scenes, noble-hearted heroes and heroines and a ruthless stress on the most innocent domestic virtues. Under the stress of overproduction she often did write like that; but a closer examination of her novels—even the less successful ones—will show that her attitudes

to the conventions of Victorian fiction are always (or almost always) ambivalent. She accepts the conventions in one part of the book; but the pattern or plot-development of the book will suggest a very different view. For example, she accepts the convention that every novel must end in a marriage for the heroine (or at least the sub-heroine) and that a happy marriage solves all problems a heroine may meet. But in *The Curate in Charge* (1876), where the heroine, Cicely St. John, reduced to a humiliating loss of caste by accepting the position of parish schoolmistress, could be 'saved' by marrying Mr. Mildmay, Mrs. Oliphant protests:

To change all her circumstances at a stroke, making her noble intention unnecessary, and resolving this tremendous work of hers into a gentle domestic necessity, with the 'hey presto!' of the commonplace magician, by means of a marriage, is simply a contemptible expedient. But, alas! it is one which there can be no doubt is much preferred by most people to the more legitimate conclusion; and, what is more, he would be justified by knowing the accidental way is, perhaps, on the whole, the most likely one, since marriages occur every day which are perfectly improbable and out of character, mere tours de force, despicable as expedients, showing the poorest invention, a disgrace to any romancist or dramatist, if they were not absolute matters of fact and true.

The book ends with a discreetly ambiguous conversation which may or may not imply (according to the reader's wishes) that Cicely accepts Mr. Mildmay.

This quotation subtly illustrates Mrs. Oliphant's remarkable attitude to the role of women in Victorian life. Cicely St. John, she feels, would be better advised to refuse marriage and devote herself to work which would give her a sense of fulfilment; and indeed this is Cicely's own view. In many of Mrs. Oliphant's books there is a similar stress on the need for women to find work. And yet when she chose to express overt opinions she did not favour any change in the position of women. She contributed two articles on the Condition of Women to *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1856 and 1858 in which she firmly rejects all radical feminist views. Yet her experience of life (where first her father, then her two brothers and her husband, then both her sons, showed moral or physical weakness, leaving her to carry alone the task of supporting her family) led her to take a coolly ironic view of men, and of the uselessly decorative role of many women in middle class Victorian life. She knew all about

that pitiful endurance of the meanness of the men belonging to them, and the anxious endeavours to give it the best possible aspect to the world, which some women are obliged to bear. ('Miss Austen and Miss Mitford', *Blackwood's Magazine*, March 1870.)

In *Cousin Mary* (1888) she points out:

Women have a great deal to bear in this world. Their lot is in many respects harder than that of men, and neither higher education, nor the suffrage, nor anything else can mend it.

And when she chooses she can describe unhappy marriages in which a woman finds frustration and disillusion, a theme which she can handle as impressively as George Eliot and Trollope. Indeed she is far less likely to over-dramatize this theme than Trollope.

In *Harry Joscelyn* (1881) there is a wife constantly humiliated by a loud-mouthed, bullying husband whose rages are fuelled by the miserable silence into which he reduces her.

If there is one thing more exasperating than another to a violent temper, it is the silence of the natural antagonists who ought to furnish it with the means of prolonging its utterances.

Mrs. Joscelyn does not dare defy her husband, but her daughter Joan does:

'He knows well enough I'm the best servant he has in the house, and work for no wages, and stand bullying like ne'er another. . . . Come along upstairs with me,' [she says to her mother] 'and let him have his room to himself and his fire to himself. He should have his house to himself if it were not for you.'

Similarly the heroine of *Kirsteen* (1890), unable to endure any longer the role of a girl in a house entirely devoted to the interests of the men in the family, defies her bullying father and walks out.

But Mrs. Oliphant writes like this, not out of deliberate conviction, but out of her imagination and experience of life. It was not through any change in the law that she looked for any change in the position of women. Indeed, she had no belief in the sex war:

This idea, that the two portions of humankind are natural antagonists to each other, is, to our thinking, . . . a monstrous and unnatural idea. ('The Laws concerning Women', *Blackwood's Magazine*, April 1856).

And again from the same article:

It would be almost as wise to legislate for the race, on the supposition that every member of it had a broken leg, as on the more injurious hypothesis that tyranny, oppression, and injustice, rankled within the heart of every home.

And in 'The Condition of Women' (*Blackwood's Magazine*, April 1858) she comments:

It is a mere exploded piece of antique nonsense to assert that society flatters women into foolishness or permits them to be flattered.

(as Mary Wollstonecraft and afterwards John Stuart Mill suggested).

This demonstrates the ambivalence of which I have spoken. When Mrs. Oliphant chooses to voice an opinion she expresses orthodox Victorian views; but when we turn to the action and characterization of her novels she seems to express a far more ironic or disillusioned view. Her heroines constantly suffer from frustration or disillusion, or crave the chance to engage in satisfying work. If they cannot find paid work of their own, they will (like Phoebe Beecham, heroine of *Phoebe Junior*) marry a man of weak character by whose means they can, in all but name, find a career. Miss Marjoribanks, craving for an outlet for her superabundant energies, can find no other use for them than to become a sort of one-woman Arts Council for the provincial town of Carlingford; and like Phoebe Beecham she marries to find a vicarious career through her husband.

Equally remarkable is her treatment of Love. Like any good Victorian, she is in favour of it and can seem to be very severe on those who enter upon marriage without it. Yet she knows it often leads to disillusion. In *A Country Gentleman and His Family* she follows Dick Cavendish and Charlotte Warrender, characters in the sub-plot, through to an apparently idyllic conclusion; but we meet them again many years later in *A House Divided Against Itself* (both books were published in 1886) and Charlotte is now lonely and neglected. Even more unmistakable is the intention in *The Ladies Lindores* (1883) and its sequel *Lady Car* (1889). At the end of *The Ladies Lindores* Lady Car, happily widowed, marries the man she has always loved. But the book ends coolly on a note of doubt and the sequel traces Lady Car's progressive disillusionment with her indolent and self-indulgent husband. In the same way, although impecunious young men who pursue heiresses, and adventuresses who set out to 'catch' rich husbands, are viewed—in good Victorian style—with distaste, on closer examination we may feel that Mrs. Oliphant can be more than tolerant of adventuresses. The heroine—or villainess—of *The Sorceress* (1893) is exposed and ought to be disgraced, but her need for security is understood, and in a splendidly ironic ending she wins a husband after all, the very man who had just discovered her deceitful practices. The sub-heroine of *Sir Tom* (1884) prefers an arranged marriage to a marriage for love, which she neither understands nor likes. When offered love she is alarmed—and chooses to go open-eyed into marriage with an aristocratic nincompoop, of whose weaknesses she is fully aware:

Instead of being, as Lucy thought, a sacrifice, an unfortunate victim sold to a loveless marriage for the money and the advantages it would bring, Bice went on very gaily, her heart as unmoved as possible, to what she felt to be a most congenial fate.

There is a touch of cynicism in this—and Mrs. Oliphant was quite capable of understanding the type of cynicism that a woman writer will use. She recognized it in Jane Austen—who seemed in fact to Mrs. Oliphant to be too lacking in charity.

However it is more than cynicism, more even than irony. Elsewhere in *Sir Tom* it is made quite clear that Bice fully and maturely understands what she is doing; and it is implied that the marriage may very well be a successful one. We are a very long way from Jane Austen's angry disapproval of Charlotte Lucas's acceptance of Mr. Collins.

She had no prejudices. Those of whom she approved were those who had carried out their intentions, what ever they might be, as she should do by marrying an English Milord with a good title and much money. She meant, indeed, to spend his money, but legitimately. She meant to become a great lady by his means, but not to do him any harm. Bice had an almost savage purity of heart, and the thought that any of the stains she knew of should touch her was incredible, impossible; neither was it in her to be unkind, or unjust, or envious, or ungenerous. Nothing of all this was involved in the purely business operation in which she was engaged. According to her code no professions of attachment or pretence of feeling were necessary. She had indeed no theories in her mind about being a good wife; but she would not be a bad one. She would keep her part of the compact; there should be nothing to complain of, nothing to object to. She would do her best to amuse the man she had to live with and make his life agreeable to him, which is a thing not always taken into consideration in marriage-contracts much more ideal in character.

Apart from the characteristically Victorian vagueness of the word 'stains' this is a remarkable passage. It may remind us of some passages in Trollope, but it is in fact entirely typical of Mrs. Oliphant at her best, and is not particularly like any other writer. Certainly she does not always rise to this height: but the coolly ironic analysis of motive can be found in novel after novel—few of them even yet recognized for what they are.

Her treatment of the sexual code is much more predictable in a novelist whose career started in the 1850s. Very regrettably she joined the chorus of disapproval which greeted *Jude the Obscure* in 1896 (though earlier she had expressed much admiration for Hardy) and she is almost invariably stern upon any implied lapse from sexual

purity. In condemning *East Lynne* she objected—not, as one might have expected, to its sentimental vulgarity of theme and characterization—but to the impropriety of arousing sympathy for a woman who breaks her marriage vows. And yet even on this subject she can show signs of tolerance. The hero of *Sir Tom* has had an illegitimate child and now is a reformed character; we are not to feel that his previous lapse could do any harm to his present happy marriage. Even more remarkably she introduces a ‘fallen woman’ or courtesan in her love nest into *A Country Gentleman and His Family*; and although the treatment is somewhat hysterical and she predicts an awful ending for the woman, yet Mrs. Oliphant can partly understand her and see her as a tragic figure. Few writers of her generation would have been capable of this. Of course the book was published in 1884 when such a view was more possible than when Mrs. Oliphant began her career.

As a Scotswoman living for most of her creative life in England, Mrs. Oliphant took an ironically amused view of the class-obsessed world of the English. There is always a great affection in her view of English society, of which in her later books she shows a shrewd and accurate understanding; but the tone is usually that of an ironic observer, especially when she writes of the new aristocracy of money, trade and industry. Many of her books are set partly or wholly in Scotland and these are notable for their zest and their authenticity (especially in the dialogue); but they are not usually her best books, being too inclined to self-indulgence, full of descriptions of scenery aimed seemingly at the tourist market. Her series of novels set in English provincial life, starting with the Carlingford series (1863-1866 with a final book in 1876), constitute her main claim to fame—a fame which she has so far notably failed to achieve.

The best Oliphant novels have a distinctive pattern and ‘flavour’ of their own. She worked to no theory of the novel and made no conscious innovations, and when at the end of her life theories—such as those of Henry James—about the novel began to appear in print she was doubtful of their value, though very respectful. Yet in the Carlingford novels she used a method of interlocking the characters of the various books resembling Trollope’s method in the Barchester and Palliser novels; but much more sophisticated. Indeed in a rudimentary way she anticipated Bennett’s use of parallel actions in *Clayhanger* and *Hilda Lessways*. She experimented with the first-person narrator—and very strikingly in *The Days of My Life* (1857) she chose a narrator meant to seem insufferably arrogant and egotistical. But this

book is not a complete success, being written before she was ready for such ironic objectivity. She adopted the Victorian system of serializing novels in literary periodicals (*Blackwood's Magazine*, *Good Words*, *The Cornhill* and others) and this tended to favour the traditional 'strong' plot line with mysteries, coincidences, surprises and prolonged tension. Indeed her worst weakness was a disastrous taste for melodramatic characters and situations which she was unable to handle imaginatively. But elsewhere her tone is coolly ironic and her characterization remarkably free from stereotypes.

As early as *Orphans* (1858, nine years after the beginning of her career), she was organizing a novel round a theme and aiming at a unity of tone by studying it both in conversation and in the action of the story. *Orphans* deals with a favourite Oliphant theme: the need to be of some use in the world, both for men and women. The treatment is rather naive, but in her later career, in the '70s, '80s and '90s, she developed considerable skill in handling the thematic novel (never merely didactic), probably under the influence of George Eliot and Dickens (and yet she was quite incapable of understanding the true genius of Dickens). She learns to use the sub-plot for purposes of thematic parallelism or ironic echo. For example in *A Country Gentleman and His Family* the main plot studies the difficult relationship between Theo Warrender, an arrogant young man with the instinct to dominate a woman, and the intelligent warm-hearted widow Lady Markland, who has no wish to be dominated and humiliated again in her second marriage. The marriage ends in separation. The sub-plot, seemingly much more insipid, studies the maturing of Theo's sister Charlotte under the love of Dick Cavendish, in spite of the revelations about his past which so shock her family. Under the stress of the scandal Charlotte discovers a strength and self-reliance which by implication are a reproach to Theo's unyielding nature, just as Dick's warmth and sincerity (in spite of his moral weakness and cowardice) highlight Theo's failure to achieve such qualities. Underlying all this is a study of that favourite Victorian (and Oliphant) theme, the pride of class and family, seen particularly in a satirical study of the uncharitable Reverend and Honourable Eustace Thynne and his wife, formerly Minnie Warrender.

A similar study could be made of the pattern of many later Oliphant novels—for example *Hester* (1883), a very fine book, a study of money, of those who are obsessed with it, those who look after it in banks, those who try to use it for the benefit of their fellow men (and

earn no thanks by doing so), those who by the lack of it are forced to become dependants and loathe their position, and those who (like John Gabriel Borkman) are so seduced by its fascination that they are driven without quite knowing what they are doing to ruin other lives. But there is no room in a short article to go into the detail of many books.

Mrs. Oliphant has a particular gift for the analysis of motivation, often complex and ambivalent motivation. She understands the perverse thought-processes of the self-deceiver, and the dishonesty that may underlie the best of intentions. Though she does tend to sentimentalize the soft-hearted young and (a special weakness, this) the affectionate elderly spinster, she softens the impact of her characters (at least in her best work) far less often than Trollope, who is also noted for his analysis of self-deception. This is because in spite of her willingness to supply on occasion the obligatory 'happy ending' she was temperamentally inclined to an anti-romantic view of life, which led her to challenge orthodox views, for example, of romantic love, and the ideal hero. Consider this description of Bonny Prince Charlie from one of her few historical novels, *Katie Stewart*:

Ah! fair, high, royal face, in whose beauty lurks this look, like the doubtful marsh, under its mossy brilliant verdure—this look of wandering imbecile expression, like the passing shadow of an idiot's face over the face of a manful youth.

Her publishers, Blackwoods, wished her to modify her attitude to Scotland's beloved hero, but she refused, already at twenty-four quite confident in her ironic view of life. And yet, as always, Mrs. Oliphant is ambivalent. One of the characters in *Katie Stewart* sees the Prince without her creator's disenchanted eye and this encounter is to her the most glorious moment of her life, justifying it like the encounter with Shelley in Browning's 'Memorabilia'.

A telling indication of a Victorian novelist's approach to life will be found in his handling of Death. Generally it will be heralded by high rhetoric, accompanied by wailing and lamentation and noble-hearted impulses, and will lead to elevated moral sentiments both in the dying and in the survivors. Mrs. Oliphant had more than her fair share of deaths in her family—her mother, her brothers, her nephew, her daughter and her two sons—and she might have been excused for a desperate emotional treatment of the subject. Indeed in the series of stories she called 'Tales of the Seen and Unseen' she did write with a

piously moralistic tone about those who have died and gone to a better world from which they look back lovingly and more wisely on those who have survived. But in her more orthodox novels this is by no means her usual tone. Sometimes she views the onset of death with her usual ironic detachment, studying its effect, scarcely comprehended, on the victim:

An old man, by the time he has got to be seventy-five, has given over theorising about life; he has no longer courage enough to confront the unknown—quiet continuance without any break or interruption is the thing that seems best for him; but here was an ending about to come, a breaking off—and only the unknown beyond; and no escaping from it, no staving it off, no postponement. . . . He believed everything that a Christian should believe, not to say such primary principles as the immortality of the soul; but imagination was no longer lively, nor hope strong in the old man, and what he believed had not much to do with what he felt. This was not an elevated state of mind, but it was true enough. He himself felt guilty, that he could not realise something better, that he could not rise to some height of contemplation which would make him glad of his removal into realms above. This was how he ought to think of it, ought to realise it, he knew. But he could not be clear of anything except the stop which was coming. (*The Primrose Path*, 1878.)

And in *The Greatest Heiress in England* (1879) she derives a certain amount of ironic comedy from another old man's irrational desire to defeat death by his will and exert power from beyond the grave, by planning every future move of his heiress.

Apart from *Miss Marjoribanks* and the *Autobiography and Letters* and a couple of ghost stories, nothing by Mrs. Oliphant has survived into print in our times—though Hurst and Blackett did reprint *It Was a Lover and His Lass* in 1951, not one of her best books, but far better than the title would suggest. *Salem Chapel*, one of the Carlingford series, and *A Beleaguered City*, a 'Tale of the Seen and Unseen', have retained a sort of reputation. But her best work has remained utterly unknown, scarcely recognized in its own time for what it was, and in consequence not rediscovered until recently. Still the only book about her is *The Equivocal Virtue*, which as I have said above, in spite of its enthusiasm and occasional insights, is a very disappointing book. There is too much biography in it and too little critical analysis of the novels. It is interesting to discover how in novel after novel she reveals her disillusion with her husband and with her brother Willy and later with her elder son Cyril, but their biographical interest is irrelevant to their literary value. For example the earlier chapters of *The Wizard's Son* (1884) contain a very perceptive study of the tensions of the

mother-son relationship with a very fair balance of sympathies. We are never invited to identify exclusively with the mother's point of view—and this is impressive whether or not we know of Mrs. Oliphant's disappointment with her own son. The Colbys claim to have read everything Mrs. Oliphant wrote—a formidable undertaking; but they seem to have achieved little by doing this. So the whole work must be done again. Perhaps Mrs. Oliphant can be called the most neglected novelist of all time; certainly it is my belief that she warrants the closest examination, and to be given a place entirely out of reach of Mrs. Henry Wood, Mrs. Craik and all the other queens of the circulating libraries.

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with an introductory letter to Dr. Blumhardt from the Revd. Daniel Wilson, later Bishop of Calcutta.¹⁵ At Deddington, Richard Greaves was identified with John Hill, Vice-Principal of St. Edmund Hall, and the radical evangelicals who gathered around him at Oxford. He introduced Hill to his brother James who, as was to be expected, enthused about Pestalozzi's methods.¹⁶ It is not certain, but it seems very likely, for chronological reasons and because of his sister's stay in Switzerland, that Richard Greaves was the clergyman of that name who officiated at a single Anglican service in Lausanne in 1821, before moving to Deddington. In the Lausanne records he is described as 'late curate of Lutterworth'.¹⁷ It seems that Richard Greaves was something of an ecclesiastical radical because at Oxford he was in touch with men like G. V. Wigram and B. W. Newton, both of whom became Plymouth Brethren.¹⁸ That this was not just a momentary aberration is apparent from his later career. At Deddington, Greaves had attracted a large congregation, which included several undergraduates, by his Calvinistic preaching, but when in 1836, he resigned the living, he 'joined those who are said to hold Unitarian doctrines'.¹⁹

Three other brothers on this side of the family must be mentioned. The first two are hardly more than names. Alexander was a clergyman who in 1827 published a translation of the New Testament which used the word *Aionial* instead of *everlasting* or *eternal*; he later gave up his orders and went to America.²⁰ Another brother was George Greaves, not to be confused with his cousin of the same name. George wrote to the CMS in 1825 offering to serve the Society in N. Africa.

¹⁵ CMS Minutes, ix. 184; BMI Archives, Letters from R. Greaves and from D. Wilson; cf. John Pinnington, 'Church Principles in the Early Years of the Church Missionary Society: the problem of the 'German' missionaries', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS. xx. (1969), 530.

¹⁶ See T. C. F. Stunt, 'John Synge and the Early Brethren', *Journal of Christian Brethren Research Fellowship*, xxviii. 60 n.12.

¹⁷ M. Jéquier, op. cit., 64.

¹⁸ T. C. F. Stunt, 'John Henry Newman and the Evangelicals', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxi (1970), 69 ff.

¹⁹ Mary V. Turner, *Story of Deddington* (Brackley, 1953), 54-5.

²⁰ *Records*, 46.

The Committee cautiously decided to 'communicate confidentially with the Rev. Richard Greaves on the subject of his brother's letter'.²¹ It is of course, just possible that the committee were mistaken in thinking that this was Richard's brother, and that in fact this was the cousin George, who was in Archangel the year before.

The last of these brothers with whom we must concern ourselves is also very obscure, but paradoxically he was, for a short while the cause of no little public interest. Pierrepont Greaves, not to be confused with his brother James Pierrepont, prayed in 1830 for the recovery of Miss Elizabeth Fancourt of Hoxton Square, who had been a cripple for some time and who responded by rising to her feet and thenceforth leading a normal life. It was an event that was well attested and discussed at length in the journals of the day, but Pierrepont Greaves was always referred to, simply as Mr. G., or Mr. Greaves. Miss Fancourt described the circumstances of her recovery in a letter to the wife of Joseph Greaves (the cousin of her healer) who was in Basel at the time. Here she says that 'God's honoured instrument is one near and dear to you, that holy man Mr. Pierrepont Greaves' who, together with his brother George had supped with the Fancourts two months before the cure occurred.²² It has been suggested that this might have been James Pierrepont Greaves, but fortunately Cyril Greaves is precise on this point describing him as a brother of James, and noting that he 'had a Cotton Mill at Chorley, Lancs.' and 'was full of faith'.²³

The cure was a source of great interest to the members of Edward Irving's congregation with whom Pierrepont Greaves may well have been associated. In a solitary reference in his journal (2 November 1825), Irving describes 'Sarah Evans the wild girl' as 'one on whom our friend Greaves would work wonders by animal magnetism'.²⁴ If, as seems likely, this refers to Pierrepont Greaves, it is probable

²¹ CMS Minutes, viii. 69.

²² BMI Archives, Elizabeth Fancourt to Mrs. Joseph Greaves, 22 October 1830.

²³ *Records*, 46.

²⁴ Mrs. Oliphant, *Life of Edward Irving* (London, n.d. 6th ed.), 139.

that the cure of Elizabeth Fancourt was only the most dramatic in a number of treatments given by a man who was evidently a follower of Mesmer. There certainly were links between the 'medical' activities of Mesmer's disciples in England and the members of Irving's congregation.²⁵

In conclusion it seems that the brothers who fathered these two branches of the Greaves family were in all probability evangelicals, in view of the prevalence of such convictions among their children. On the other hand the more radical tendency in the religious outlook of the younger generation may reflect a continental influence as their contacts with ideas from abroad were evidently more extensive than in most families.

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²⁵ Jonathan Miller, *The Body in Question* (1978), 78. For the original version which gives slightly more detail, see 'Mesmerism' in *The Listener*, xc (22 November 1973), 689.

SOME UNIDENTIFIED VICTORIAN REVIEWERS

ONE reason for perusing private diaries of less important Victorian people is for the light such documents may throw on little-known facets of nineteenth-century life. Certainly the diaries of Eliza Bagehot, wife of Walter Bagehot and one of the six daughters of James Wilson, founder of *The Economist*, might first appear as a monument to triviality. But they also attest to the genuine efforts some women made to escape boredom by serious mental work. Particularly important are they in identifying some women contributors among the army of unsigned nineteenth-century reviewers. For Eliza, Julia, Zoé and Emilie Wilson all wrote for periodicals: *The Economist*, the *National Review*, the *Nineteenth Century* and the *Dublin Review*.

Eliza records the beginning of her and Julia's journalistic career in her diary entry for 27 September 1855: 'Mr. Greg [William Rathbone Greg (1809-81)] set Julia and me at reviewing books for *The Economist*.' Regularly thereafter appear the names of books she is

reading for review: Robert Tomes's 'Panama in 1855', Mansfield's 'Paraguay, Brazil and the Plate', Emerson's 'English Traits'. (These reviews appeared in *The Economist* for 20 October 1855, 1152-3; 16 August 1856, 898-900; 27 September 1856, 1066-7 respectively.)

Eliza also mentions two books on which Julia is reporting: Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* – reviews which appeared in their father's paper for 1 March 1856 (226-9) and 20 September 1856 (1039-40). Julia's essay 'Popular Legends and Fairy Tales' appeared in the *National Review* for October 1857 (396-410); it was unsigned, but Eliza's diary attests to Julia's authorship.

Eliza admitted that Mr. Greg berated her for the careless review she did of Robert von Mohl's *The History and Literature of Political Science*. This review appeared in the 1 November 1856 issue of *The Economist* (1205-6), after Eliza revised her hastily-written draft.

Zoé Wilson (Mrs. Orby Shipley) wrote the essay 'Tractarianism and Ritualism' for the *Dublin Review* as Eliza's diary for 11 January 1881 indicates. (*DR*, third series, January 1881, 76-97.) Eliza attributed two other articles to Zoe. On 8 November she discloses that Zoe's paper on Jane Austen was read to her; and on 16 October 1889 that Orby read her Zoe's article on Ward's Life from the *Dublin Review*. Again these articles are unsigned but appear in that periodical for July 1883 (103-29) and October 1889 (243-68).

Emilie Wilson (Mrs. Russell Barrington) left no doubt as to the authorship of anything she wrote.

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MRS. OLIPHANT'S UNACKNOWLEDGED SOCIAL NOVELS

In two articles in *N&Q*, Sara Keith (cc. 126-7) and Vineta Colby (ccxi. 60-66) discussed the possibility that nine novels, attributed in the British Library catalogue to William Wilson, Minister at Etal, are in fact by his sister Mrs. Margaret Oliphant. Of the nine novels four, Mrs. Colby decided, must be by Mrs. Oliphant, while the other five must be by Wilson (or in

one case by somebody unknown). These four novels are as follows:

John Drayton: Being a History of the Early Life and Development of a Liverpool Engineer, 2 vols., Bentley, 1851;

The Melvilles, By the Author of *John Drayton*, 3 vols., Bentley, 1852;

Ailieford, a Family History, By the Author of *John Drayton*, 3 vols., Hurst and Blackett, 1853;

Christian Melville, By the Author of *Mathew Paxton*, Bogue, 1856.

The novel which intervened between the third and fourth of these novels is

Mathew Paxton, Edited by the Author of *John Drayton*, *Ailieford* etc, 3 vols., Hurst and Blackett, 1854.

This is unquestionably by Wilson for reasons which Mrs. Colby stresses; and in this article I wish to consider mainly the four novels I have listed above, with special reference to two of them, *John Drayton* and *The Melvilles*, since it can now be proved from correspondence in the British Library and the National Library of Scotland that Mrs. Oliphant did indeed write these two.

The fourth novel in the list, *Christian Melville*, was in fact the first to be written, and it is clearly the work described in Mrs. Oliphant's *Autobiography*¹ as having been written by her at about sixteen and published by her brother on his account. I need not add anything to Mrs. Colby's comment (*N&Q*, ccxi. 64).

Mrs. Oliphant as Margaret Wilson began her career at the age of twenty-one with *Passages in the Life of Margaret Maitland*, 1849, a nostalgic, evocative story of Scottish provincial life. However she had long been living in Liverpool and about this time moved across the Mersey to Birkenhead. It would be natural for her to use her knowledge of Liverpool in one novel or more. Indeed it was her invariable practice to transfer her experience of new towns and districts straight into her fiction. So if it were not for *John Drayton* and *The Melvilles*, both set in

Liverpool, it would seem that Mrs. Oliphant had made no use of her knowledge of the scenes of her adolescence and young womanhood, for the city makes no significant appearance in the rest of her work.

John Drayton and *The Melvilles* were published by Bentley and are very similar in theme and style and not at all like Mrs. Oliphant's other books. Mrs. Colby reasonably considers them to be of very little merit. But of course Mrs. Oliphant was here finding her way as a novelist. What is more, it is evident that among many other experiments in the writing of novels at the beginning of her career she was now trying her hand at the social novel (or the 'condition of England' novel, as her contemporaries called it) which in the 1840s and 1850s represented the challenging new direction which the art of fiction was taking. Notable examples were *Sybil*, 1845, by Disraeli, *Mary Barton*, 1848, by Elizabeth Gaskell, and *Yeast*, 1848, and *Alton Locke*, 1850, both by Charles Kingsley. These novels introduced an unprecedented note of angry realism into literature, with scenes of terrible poverty and squalor. Mrs. Oliphant had certainly witnessed similar scenes for herself in Liverpool and would naturally wish as a novelist with serious ambitions to contribute to the new school of novelists. The unsatisfactory quality of the two books is evidence, not that she did not write them, but that her special gifts were not for this style and theme.

John Drayton and *The Melvilles* are similar stories of poverty, low wages, industrial unemployment, trades unionism and radicalism, harsh employers, employees driven to theft, and a 'fever' epidemic (presumably cholera). There is a high moralistic tone, untypical of Mrs. Oliphant's mature work; extreme rabble-rousing radicalism is sternly rejected, although Mrs. Oliphant is deeply sympathetic to the sufferings of the unemployed. This cautiously liberal anti-radical attitude is found throughout her career; and she evidently designed these two books as messages to working people to aim to improve their conditions without resorting to violence, or political extremism. Nine letters in the British Library²

¹ *Autobiography and Letters*, edited by Mrs. H. Coghill, 1899, 16-17.

² Add. MS 46, 616 f. 26-40. Copies of Bentley's letters to Mrs. Oliphant are in Add. MS 46, 641.

confirm both her authorship of these books and her motive in writing them. These letters are included in the Bentley Papers, which consist of letters addressed to the publisher Richard Bentley and signed agreements between Bentley and his authors. There are two agreements between Margaret Wilson and Richard Bentley, one for *John Drayton* dated 6 August 1851, the other for *The Melvilles* dated 3 April 1852.³ The contract for *The Melvilles* unequivocally refers to 'The said Miss Wilson, having written a work of fiction entitled *The Melvilles*. . .'. Copies of Bentley's letters to Mrs. Oliphant are included, some in answer to letters of hers that have not survived.

The nine letters are divided into four concerning *John Drayton*, written in November 1851, and five concerning *The Melvilles*, written in March and April 1852. The first edition of *John Drayton* had apparently been successful and in the first letter, dated 5 November 1851, Mrs. Oliphant enclosed a preface for the prospective second edition. Modestly she speaks of her inexperience in business, but in fact this series of letters is amazingly self-assured and businesslike for such a young author. She always knows just what price to ask for and what terms to negotiate. No copy of the second edition of *John Drayton* seems to have survived,⁴ so we can never know what she said in her preface. But letter 2 (dated 12 November 1851) gives some idea of her motives in writing the book. Even if the second edition sells as well as the first, she says, 'the book will still scarcely have begun to fulfil the end for which I have from the first designed it'. In due course she would like a very cheap edition 'to reach if possible the class of whom its story is'.⁵ And in

³ Add. MS 46, 616, respectively f. 24 and f. 114.

⁴ A copy of the book dated 1853 is on the catalogue of the central reference library of Liverpool. Unfortunately this copy appears to be lost, since assistants at the library after prolonged attempts to find it for me could not do so. This appears to be the *third* edition of the book – see the next note.

⁵ This very cheap edition was in fact published on 5 October 1853 – in spite of the failure of the second edition. It appeared as number 15 of Bentley's Railway Library and was priced at 2 shillings. Michael Sadleir records this edition in *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 2. The Bentley papers reveal that the book was republished without prior consultation of Mrs. Oliphant. But Bentley was unimpressed by her protest, pointing out that it was a publisher's privilege to publish a book just when he thought fit. (Add. MS 46, 641 f. 335).

letter 4 (dated 'Tuesday', probably late November 1851), returning the proof of the preface, she asks for a copy of the second edition 'to be sent to Mr Kingsley the author of *Alton Locke*, with the author's compliments.' Thus she acknowledges her debt to the most celebrated author of social novels and perhaps endorses Kingsley's protests at squalor and poverty combined with scepticism about extreme radicalism unsupported by Christian doctrine.

In letter 2 Mrs. Oliphant says:

I shall wish to write at least one other story of Liverpool life – probably more – but this I shall work at through the winter, and of course will have pleasure in sending it to you.

And in letter 3 (20 November 1851) she says she will probably have her manuscript ready by next April. She was better than her word: on 2 March 1852 she reopens the correspondence (letter 5), saying that she will be sending the manuscript later in the month. Letter 7 (25 March 1852) encloses the manuscript. Letter 5 explains why she has worked with such rapidity:

It is perhaps rather too soon to publish a successor [to *John Drayton*] but it being necessary that I should have my time at my own disposal during this summer without the encumbrance of such a work, I have hastened its completion now, and desire to have it off my hands – of course you must be best able to judge when it will be expedient to publish it.

In fact as she explains in letter 7 she is about to move to London. She was to be married to her cousin Francis Oliphant – this occurred on 4 May – and they were to live in London for the benefit of his career. A further problem was that her brother William had abandoned his career as a Presbyterian minister in Etal, Northumberland, after less than eighteen months; his obsessive vice of drink had finally defeated him and he joined his sister and their parents in Birkenhead at about this time. Shortly after this crisis in her life she decided to hand the profits of these two books over to William and consent to the fiction that he was the author of them, bolstered rather weakly by

allowing him to take the stories and transcribe them.

It struck us all as a fine idea that Willie might copy them for me, and retrieve a sort of fictitious independence by getting 10 per cent upon the price of them; and I really think he felt quite comfortable on this. Of course, the sole use of the copying was the little corrections and improvements I made in going over my work again.

(*Autobiography and Letters*, 1899, 27)

William had already written *Mathew Paxton*, perhaps before leaving Etal, and in due course it was published. In the meantime his menial task of transcribing *John Drayton*, *The Melvilles* and probably *Ailieford* could allow him the illusive belief that he was, like his sister, starting a career as a novelist.

In letter 8 (2 April 1852) Mrs. Oliphant insists on anonymity for *The Melvilles*, while admitting the disadvantage of this. She also admits the disadvantage of following one book closely with another on the same subject. 'This, however, many private circumstances have prompted me to'. Unfortunately the second edition of *John Drayton* had not succeeded and Mrs. Oliphant asks Bentley to be frank with her about this:

We shall perhaps understand each other more easily if you tell me that John Drayton has decidedly *failed*.

In fact *The Melvilles* was even more unsuccessful than *John Drayton*, and when in 1853 Mrs. Oliphant opened negotiations for the publication of a third novel Bentley refused to accept her terms until he had seen the manuscript (Letter, 30 March 1853).⁶ Mrs. Oliphant's letter has not survived and the novel is not named in Bentley's letter but it must be *Ailieford*. A further letter (20 April 1853)⁷ is extremely hostile; so clearly Mrs. Oliphant chose to have no further dealings with Bentley.

Further evidence for Mrs. Oliphant's authorship of *John Drayton* and *The Melvilles* is to be found among letters recently acquired by the National Library of Scotland. There are

three letters to her by her second cousin George Wilson living in Edinburgh.⁸ The first letter, dated 15 September 1851, makes many references to *John Drayton*; for example:

You are a poet. I always thought you were, but I am sure of it now, after reading J.D. and like all the other Poets you are irritable and impatient. . . . Ungenerous, suspicious and evil-speaking Maggie know, that I had not read one word of J.D. except what I hastily saw in the *Critic* when I last wrote you.

He goes on to say that he is writing a notice for an Edinburgh newspaper.

I dare not offer a notice to *The Scotsman*, or might betray the authorship, so I have selected the paper chiefly read by the working people, in which I reviewed *Alton Locke*.

In the next letter, dated 11 October 1851, George Wilson congratulates his cousin on her forthcoming marriage and says 'the people here are guessing at the authorship of John Drayton, and are all at fault'. And in 1852 on 21 May he wrote to congratulate her on *The Melvilles*:

I put them and John Drayton next to Margaret Maitland, writing mind as a reader not as a critic. I wish your name were at them; however, it must soon transpire, although I shall keep sacred silence.

(Of course he would be unaware of her intention to let William have the credit for them.) He continues with very enthusiastic praise of the book, complaining only of her inaccuracy over the financial position of a medical student. He praises her men characters and says he was deeply moved by

your visits to the fever patients; . . . they brought back to me experiences I never willingly recall. . . .

I think every one must be struck with the extreme naturalness, the genuine but delicate humour, and the unexaggerated air of the dialogue throughout. The picturesque descriptions of the streets and river, which delighted me so much in John Drayton,

⁶ Add. MS 46, 641, f. 318.

⁷ Add. MS 46, 641, f. 323.

⁸ National Library of Scotland, Acc. 5793/3.

delight me not less here. I especially love that crossing of the river in the fog. . . .

(Indeed the description of a foggy day on the Mersey is probably the best thing in the book.) He also lavishly praises her scenic description.⁹

I have quoted this letter at length because the praise – if it were applied to Mrs. Oliphant's work in general – is fully justified, though *John Drayton* and *The Melvilles* are in fact very poor books. But already so early George Wilson had recognized his cousin's true gifts under the lifeless, overstrained, over-written surface of these two books. In later novels, having found herself as a novelist and developed a mature and sophisticated approach to her work, she shows exactly the qualities George Wilson singles out for praise – an unusual gift for the understanding of male characters, 'extreme naturalness' of tone and treatment, rich and subtle humour and irony, naturalistic and convincing dialogue, and a considerable gift for scenic description (which in her best novels is always integrated into the narrative, not merely a decoration of it).

The successor to *The Melvilles* was *Ailieford*, in which the tone of social realism gives place to sentimental domesticity. It is narrated in the first person by one of three brothers Willie Mitchell, who had appeared as author of the Introduction to *John Drayton*. His experiences force him into loneliness and later he settles in Liverpool to teach, interests himself in working men and writes novels to express this interest. (Thus of course he is made the fictional author of *John Drayton*.) The earlier scenes of the book are set in Edinburgh and its neighbourhood, the childhood home of William and Margaret Wilson. By returning in *Ailieford* to John Drayton and Liverpool Mrs. Oliphant completed in effect a trilogy of novels – and could thus leave any subsequent books to be written entirely by her brother. Although *Ailieford* is very immature the atmosphere and point of view are unmistakably Mrs. Oliphant's as developed in later novels. For example, two of the female characters

express coolly disillusioned views of life and doubt the possibility of happiness, as many of her later heroines do:

I'm not expecting to be very happy – just to wear through every day, neither very ill nor very well: I'll not be disappointed, Mrs. Mitchell – I look for nothing more than that.

(Book II, chapter 2, 21)

And an ironic comment by one of these characters is entirely typical of her: 'What good is it letting our lives be blighted because in one thing we cannot have our will?'

Mathew Paxton is as incontestably by William Wilson as its three predecessors are by his sister. It is closely based upon his own experiences as a theological student and as Minister at Etal and is credited to him in *The Priests of Etal*, written by a later minister, George McGuffie (Chapter XI, 'The Rev. William Wilson or the Literary Priest'). Mrs. Oliphant briefly reviewed it in *Blackwood's Magazine* in May 1855 in an article called 'Modern Novelists – Great and Small'. She refers to the 'very good flying squadron of merely pleasant story-tellers, who do us service unobtrusively, without a great deal of either thanks or reward.' She continues:

Of the Dutch painting we have many considerable professors. In a book lately published *Mathew Paxton*, we find a very curious daguerrotype of a peculiar phase of manners. . . .

Mrs. Oliphant was writing anonymously, but it would have been quite out of character to write thus about her own book, though authors have occasionally done such a thing. Clearly she was simply doing what she could to recommend her brother's novel – though the praise is less than enthusiastic.

Mathew Paxton is described on the title page as 'Edited by the author of *John Drayton*, *The Melvilles* etc.', whereas its two predecessors are described as *by the author of John Drayton*. The change of style is no doubt significant. Certainly it is not unknown for a novelist to pose as merely the editor of a novel he has in fact written. (*The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* 'edited by his friend Reuben Shapcott' is in fact entirely by William Hale

⁹ This letter was on display in an exhibition devoted to Mrs. Oliphant at the National Library of Scotland in November and December 1978. The label commented on the evidence supplied by the letter for Mrs. Oliphant's authorship of *The Melvilles*.

White.) But in this case it may very well be true. Probably Mrs. Oliphant worked over the text of the book before sending it off to the publishers. Later novels are described as being 'By the author of *Mathew Paxton*' – and the author of *John Drayton* and the author of *Mathew Paxton* are two different people.

I shall say nothing of these later novels, since Mrs. Colby has convincingly argued for the authorship of William Wilson – and I refer the reader to her article. But it is worth notice that one of them, *A Good Time Coming* (1859), is referred to as being by William in a letter by Frank Wilson, brother of William and Margaret, in the National Library of Scotland (date 21 August 1859).¹⁰

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¹⁰ National Library of Scotland, Acc. 5793/3.

MATTHEW ARNOLD TO LADY EASTLAKE: A NEW ARNOLD LETTER

AMONG the manuscripts of the Langstaff collection, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University, there is preserved a solitary Arnold letter which has hitherto never been published in any edition of Arnold's letters, nor has it ever been mentioned in any of the several checklists of the author's scattered correspondence.¹ It is here published by kind permission of Mr. Rodney G. Dennis, Curator of Manuscripts of the Houghton Library.

March 23rd

Dear Lady Eastlake²

I have been away from home, but on returning I found your note and the lines you have so kindly copied for me. A thousand thanks for them; they have a great biographical interest, and bear witness in an

affecting way to Lockhart's³ feeling and tenderness, for which strangers gave him so little credit.

Ever sincerely yours,
Matthew Arnold

P.S. I am not in orders!

Neither the name of the addressee nor the mention of Lockhart offer any clue as to the date of the letter.⁴ As far as I know, Arnold never showed any marked interest in John Gibson Lockhart to whom he referred only once – as the author of an article on Wordsworth – in a dated letter to Arthur Hugh Clough.⁵ And Lady Eastlake does not appear to have known Matthew Arnold very well. In her journals and correspondence⁶ she never even mentions his name, and her erroneous assumption that Arnold was a member of the clergy merely confirms the fact that she knew him little. Her devotion to Lockhart, however, is unquestionable, witness her *Journals and Correspondence* in which she confesses, on 6 November 1854, shortly after Lockhart's death: 'indeed, I can never know such a friend again' (33-4). And on 29 November, she writes to her friend Miss Catherine Campbell of Kimmerghame:

My heart is much oppressed with the death of dear Mr. Lockhart, which I feel even more than I feared. But he deserves all my sorrow, for his kindness to me, and the real friendship he always showed me, leave a blank which will always be the same.

Thus one must necessarily resort to a hypothesis as regards the background to this Arnold letter. Perhaps Lady Eastlake, in an attempt to revive the faded memory of

³ Lockhart, John Gibson (1794-1854), Scott's biographer, was editor of the *Quarterly Review* at the time of Lady Eastlake's début, and one of her strongest supporters; Cf. *DNB*, vol. xii, 47-9.

⁴ We can only safely say that the letter was written after 1854, the year of Lockhart's death, and before 1888, the year Arnold died.

⁵ H. F. Lowry, *The Letters Of Matthew Arnold To Arthur Hugh Clough* (London & New York, 1932), 131: 'The article on Wordsworth, I hear, is Lockhart's very just though cold. Perhaps it does not sufficiently praise his diction: his manner was often bad, but his diction scarcely ever – and beyond Moore's etc. – constantly' (21 March 1853).

⁶ Ch. Eastlake Smith, *Journals And Correspondence Of Lady Eastlake* (London, 1895).

¹ Manuscripts presented to the library by Mr. B. Meredith Langstaff in July 1972; bMS.Eng.1292 section III(62). Checklists have been appearing ever since 1934 when T. H. Motter in his work 'A checklist of Matthew Arnold's letter' invited other Arnold students to make additions or corrections to his own list (Cf. *Studies in Philology*, 31, 1934).

² Eastlake, Elizabeth, née Rigby (1809-93), English authoress mainly known for her contributions to the *Quarterly Review*; Cf. *DNB*, vol. xxii, 598-600.

Lockhart, sent Arnold a short text either concerning or from Lockhart⁷ so as to lure Matthew Arnold into writing something on her dear friend. A simpler assumption would be that Arnold and Lady Eastlake had discussed Lockhart on a previous occasion and that as a result she afterwards procured him these 'lines' solely as an illustration of her opinion of Lockhart. But these, of course, are mere guesses, awaiting a more substantial answer which a complete edition of Matthew Arnold's correspondence might possibly supply.

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⁷ She might, for instance, have copied that most favourable description of Lockhart she gives in her *Journals And Correspondence*, 113-14.

A NOTE ON MATTHEW ARNOLD'S A PICTURE AT NEWSTEAD

THIS note is an attempt to throw light on the story underlying Matthew Arnold's poem *A picture at Newstead* (no. 95 in *The poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. K. Allott, second edn ed. M. Allott, in Longman Annotated English Poets).

The Longman Annotated English Poets edition refers to C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, *The poetry of Matthew Arnold: a commentary*, on the story underlying this poem. They say (137-8):

The picture here described represents the first Earl of Arundel (1585-1646) and one of his grandsons, *not* his son. The boy is either Thomas Howard, or Henry Howard, afterwards sixth Duke of Norfolk. But neither of these persons was mentally unsound. The great Earl, however, is said to have had a grandson who was so; but proof of this is not easily come at.

... The story referred to in the sonnet may very well have been a local tradition repeated by an attendant at the Abbey when Arnold visited it, and based on no more solid foundation than the fact that one of the Howard children was a lunatic. ...

Incidentally, Thomas Howard (1585-1646) was the second, not the first, earl of Arundel of the

Howard line. Tinker and Lowry refer to L. Cust, *Anthony Van Dyck*, where the picture is reproduced (illustration facing p. 134). The Newstead portrait was a version of the original that is at Arundel Castle. This is duly listed in R. Ormond and M. Rogers ed., *Dictionary of British portraiture*, vol. 1.

The picture is reproduced also in G. Brenan and E. P. Statham, *The house of Howard* (plate opposite p. 574 in vol. ii), where it is erroneously stated to show Henry Frederick, earl of Arundel (1608-52), with Thomas, his eldest son (afterwards fifth duke of Norfolk). No painter's name is stated.

Tinker and Lowry seem, oddly, not to have consulted G.E.C., *The Complete Peerage*, who gives what, it seems to me, is probably the true explanation of the story associated with the picture. He says of the fifth duke of Norfolk (Thomas, 1627-77), 'While with his grandfather [Thomas, earl of Arundel (1585-1646)] in 1645 at Padua, he had a brain fever from which his mental faculties never recovered'.

Thus Thomas, fifth duke of Norfolk, *was* a lunatic, contrary to what Tinker and Lowry say. We have seen that the boy in the picture is either he or his brother and heir, Henry, sixth duke (1628-84).

My conjecture, then, is that the story of the idiot child, recounted by Arnold, relates to Thomas Howard, the fifth duke; and that it grew up around the Newstead portrait (in which the boy was believed to be Thomas Howard), being inspired by the historical fact that Thomas Howard was insane. At the same time, the adult figure in the picture was erroneously said to be the boy's father; the even closer relationship would have made the story even more poignant. The statement in Brenan and Statham (and in *A Souvenir of Newstead Abbey* (1874), cited by Tinker and Lowry) suggests that the picture may long have been generally believed to portray Henry Frederick, earl of Arundel, the boy's father. The story itself is doubtless apocryphal, and *The Complete Peerage* no doubt gives the true explanation of Thomas Howard's insanity. Tinker and Lowry's explanation of the origin of the Newstead story, as a local legend, is highly plausible.

All the same, the story, even if apocryphal, is a romantic one, and truly poignant, and it is

THE NOVELS OF MARGARET OLIPHANT

BY

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ABSTRACT

Part One, after a consideration of Mrs Oliphant's failure to achieve a reputation commensurate with her talents, is devoted to an examination of her special qualities as a novelist. First, it is necessary to demonstrate, through examination of magazine articles and novels, that she developed strongly feminist views during the second half of her career. After this three major characteristics of an Oliphant novel are examined in detail: her treatment of the major Victorian themes of parenthood, death and love is markedly anti-romantic, supported by a rich play of irony; her very individual approach to character takes a special interest in complex states of mind and in the processes of thinking; she achieves thematic unity by structuring her mature novels upon parallels of plot and subplot and the patterning of characters.

Part Two, first chronologically and then thematically, examines Mrs Oliphant's career, which started with a decade of experiment, exploring her own potentialities with novels of little merit, but serving as a journey towards the remarkable self-discovery of The Chronicles of Carlingford. Two chapters are devoted to the Chronicles, concentrating respectively on the role of the clergy in Carlingford (and in England) and on the examination of a small town community, especially as the setting for Mrs Oliphant's most brilliant heroine, Lucilla Marjoribanks.

Three groups of novels deal with three themes: the English class structure, seen in relation to an inheritance theme, frequently combined with a study of the nature of identity; the obsessive power of money, studied above all in Hester; Scotland, viewed more lyrically and nostalgically than England. A chapter is devoted to Mrs Oliphant's once much admired ghost stories, the Stories of the Seen and Unseen (largely uncharacteristic of her special gifts); and the thesis ends, echoing Chapter One, with a final assessment of Mrs Oliphant's status.