

“We who have been bred upon Sir Walter”: Margaret Oliphant, Sir Walter Scott, and Women’s Literary History

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AS A LITERARY CRITIC, Margaret Oliphant was not easily impressed, even by the greatest of her contemporaries. Her publisher John Blackwood gently advised bringing a little more warmth to an evaluation of Dickens’ fiction published shortly after his death; her praise of George Eliot, a writer whom in general she admired highly, was also often qualified by doubts and reservations.¹ If there was an author who came near to escaping such ambivalence it was not any of the great Victorians, but Oliphant’s countryman and predecessor, Sir Walter Scott. Even though she was not entirely uncritical when writing about him—she found his poetry rather facile and regretfully admitted that such late works as *Count Robert* and *Castle Dangerous* might have been better left unwritten²—Scott and his fiction seemed to exemplify, for Oliphant, the highest qualities that could be demanded of a writer. Indeed, in her three-volume *Literary History of England 1790–1825* she identified Scott as one of the most significant con-

1 For John Blackwood’s letter about Dickens and a discussion of it, see Haythornthwaite 81–82. Peterson and D’Albertis both discuss Oliphant’s responses to Eliot, their different emphases highlighting Oliphant’s ambivalence.

2 On the subject of Scott’s poetry, see *The Literary History of England, 1790–1825*, 2: 113–118; on the late novels, see “Two Ladies” 209.

tributors to what she saw as the dramatic transformation of literature that took place over those thirty-five years, a judgment implicitly reinforced in her later history of Blackwood's publishing house. Nor was Scott's influence merely a matter of historical interest to Oliphant; he is as central to her imaginative writing as he is to her work as a literary historian. While her early Scottish tales arguably owe as much to such figures as John Galt and John Wilson as to Scott, and her most famous mature work is about English provincial life, her children's books on Scottish history are steeped in *Tales of a Grandfather* and her 1890 novel *Kirsteen* recalls Scott on a number of levels. There is, of course, nothing less surprising than that a Scot of Oliphant's generation would admire and be influenced by Sir Walter Scott. Yet given the way in which Scott was praised in his own lifetime and immediately afterwards for what was supposedly his powerfully masculine influence on fiction, Oliphant's intense and continuing interest in his work is noteworthy. As a writer of both history and fiction, Oliphant demonstrates in her responses to Scott how women writers were able to make a place for themselves in a literary tradition in which even they saw men as the pre-eminent figures.

In some ways, Scott poses obvious problems for a nineteenth-century woman attempting to write a literary history that makes room for her own work. While it is important not to oversimplify Scott's reception, which has recently attracted detailed and sophisticated analysis, and while Scott himself freely and frequently admitted the influence of his women predecessors and contemporaries, his novels were often sharply distinguished from the work of the mainly female novelists of the generation before and contemporary with him. The idea that with Scott "[t]he novel gained a new authority and prestige" as "it was no longer in danger of becoming the preserve of the woman writer and the woman reader" has a fairly long history. While the phrases just quoted appear in the introduction to the Penguin edition of *Waverley* (first published in 1972), the sentiment is similar to views expressed by Scott's first reviewers. As Ina Ferris has shown in her influential *Achievement of Literary Authority* (1991), early nineteenth-century writing about Scott tended to present him as a "manly genius," appealing to "readers as precisely *not* female readers (whatever their biological gender may be)" (81, 83).³ Similarly, Ian Duncan states bluntly that Scott was the "personification of a new patriarchal dignity of authorship" and even points out that "[t]he use of male pseudonyms by women authors

3 In the comments on readers, Ferris is referring to the implied readers of Scott's reviewers, but of course those readers are also the presumed audience for Scott's fiction.

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... can be dated with some precision from the time of Scott's death" (17). More recently and more generally, Clifford Siskin has argued that not just Scott but the wider literary society of early nineteenth-century Edinburgh contributed to what he sees as a "remasculinization" of literature (see, for example, 224–5). As *Blackwood's* and *The Edinburgh Review* established a professional and explicitly *gentlemanly* model of literary authorship, Siskin suggests that they led to a decreasing range of opportunities for women writers. While he is careful not to fall into the trap of representing what he considers the more open world of the eighteenth century as any sort of golden age for women's writing, he nonetheless sees the literary debates that were waged so vociferously in early nineteenth-century Edinburgh as temporarily shutting down at least some options for public literary voices for women (218–224).

Admittedly, this bleak picture of the sidelining of women writers is complicated by what recent critics have argued is the "dialectical relationship between the spheres of male and female authorship" (Trumpener 132) in the early nineteenth-century genre of the national tale. As readers such as Katie Trumpener, Anne Mellor, and Liz Bellamy have argued, the era's burgeoning fascination with traditional national cultures and folkways gave women novelists the opportunity to play "a key role in the construction of a new political ideology" (Mellor 104). Since Scott's historical fiction both grows out of and is intimately connected with the feminized genre of the national tale,⁴ it is possible to imagine a literary history of the period covered by Oliphant that is attentive to the place and influence of female writers despite being built around the stereotypically "masculine" fiction of Scott. Yet that, perhaps not surprisingly, is not quite what Oliphant offers; her assumption is not that Scott gives a masculine twist to what was becoming a peculiarly feminized genre, but rather that Scott wrote such "women's" fiction even better than women could themselves. The result is that even as Oliphant anticipates recent studies of women's literary history in her matter-of-fact acceptance of the presence, even the pervasiveness, of women writers, she does so in a way that makes those women irrelevant to their own literary history. Far from proclaiming that she is rediscovering or championing overlooked women forerunners, or—like Virginia Woolf, the most influential student of women's literary history of the following generation—mourning their absence from the

4 For readings of Scott's work in connection with this genre, see Trumpener and Ferris; Liz Bellamy provides a detailed analysis of the links between Scott and Edgeworth's version of the national tale.

historical record, Oliphant takes for granted not only that “[f]emale writers have never been wanting” (*History* 3: 306), but also that they take on new importance and public visibility in the early years of the nineteenth century. While she does note a certain reluctance among some women to acknowledge authorship, commenting for example on the “horrified femininity” with which Susan Ferrier “shrank” from publicity (*Annals* 1: 43), she makes it clear that she finds such modesty amusingly unnecessary in a world in which Scott had made novel writing respectable. She has no doubt that Scott brought a new voice to fiction, but she sees that novelty as lying in a movement away from what she considers the excessive *masculinity* of much eighteenth-century fiction. In Oliphant’s literary history, Scott is not the figure who single-handedly saves fiction from sinking into feminine irrelevance, but is rather the first among a group of great writers—many of whom were women—who made the novel fit for female domestic consumption and production.

Oliphant might thus be surprisingly attentive to the women writers of this period, many of whom were overlooked by literary history until fairly recently, but precisely because she sees the fact of women’s writing as unremarkable, her own history subordinates the accomplishments of most female authors, dismissing their work as either weakly languid or pretty but fragile. After recognizing that women were indeed actively publishing throughout the eighteenth century, Oliphant then has relatively little positive to say about them. She describes the voices of women writers working before 1800 as “a mild, often a feeble soprano,” one quite overbalanced by the “deeper tenor of the concert” of literary production (3: 206). The rhetoric she uses to describe the writing of most women, both eighteenth-century and Romantic, reinforces her implicit assumption that the feminine voice in literature tends to be little more than weakly decorative. Her comment on the “pretty creature” Felicia Hemans is a case in point: Oliphant sees Hemans’s poems as being “like [a] description of herself. They are always sweet, liquid, and melodious: they mean as much as so soft and beautiful nature ever requires to mean” (2: 380). Likewise, she describes Elizabeth Inchbald’s *Simple Story* as having “a pretty air, if not of the Dresden shepherdess, at least of the imitations of Chelsea and Bow” (3: 248–9). Such ephemeral, second-rate delicacy hardly stands up well against—for example—the “exuberance of tender thought and winning words” that Oliphant finds in Burns’s poetry (1: 112) or the “glow of character and human life” that she sees in the Waverley novels (2: 138).

Nor does Oliphant have many kind things to say about men who, prior to Scott, seemed to be reaching out to a mixed or predominantly female

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readership. For example, she dismisses the *Lounger* essays of the so-called Man of Feeling Henry Mackenzie as mere “Addison-and-water,” deservedly all but forgotten (1: 158). Even Richardson has his limitations: Oliphant doubts whether “men can ever have been said sincerely and generally to care for” him, any more than she thinks “women [care] for Fielding” (2: 133). What Oliphant sees, in the literature of the age before Scott, is a weak strain of feminine writing—by both women and men such as Mackenzie—drowned out by what she considers the louder, stronger voices of canonical men. Indeed, with rather cavalier disregard for her parallel claims about the continuing presence of women in the literary world, she insists that at the end of the eighteenth century, most “books were not meant for the women” and, because of their robust outspokenness, “could [not] have been considered suitable for domestic reading” (3: 203–4). At least part of what makes the early years of the nineteenth century such a literary turning point, according to her, is that it “open[s] ... an entirely feminine strain of the highest character and importance” (3: 206) for the first time in literary history. She attributes this dramatic change mainly to four novelists: Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Susan Ferrier, and, inevitably if rather surprisingly, given all of the earlier nineteenth-century claims about the masculine qualities of his prose, Sir Walter Scott.

Given the balance here—three women to one man—one might be tempted to think that, despite the dismissiveness towards writers such as Hemans and Inchbald, Oliphant’s literary history is surprisingly far from being tilted towards a male tradition. Scott, however, outweighs the other three in her estimation, so much so that the highest praise Oliphant can give Ferrier is to assure readers that “she kept her place and reputation” despite being “cast into shade” by the proximity of “the greatest of novelists” (3: 203). Unsurprisingly to anyone familiar with the history of the reception of women’s writing, Oliphant also praises the women novelists for very different qualities than those for which she celebrates Scott. Ferrier—like Austen and Edgeworth, according to Oliphant—is a transcriber of the social scene around her. While Oliphant does not downplay the skill involved in making art of the mundane, neither does she make any secret of her belief that still higher artistry is necessary to make the past live, as does Scott. Strikingly, when she praises him for a “genius [that] went back upon ages more picturesque” (3: 244) than his own, she is implying that Scott’s excellence lies precisely in his ability to transfuse his work with that stereotypically feminine quality, romance, a quality missing from the closely observed social worlds of his female contemporaries. This point might explain how Oliphant sees Scott, whom she describes as being

simultaneously “manly” and “pure,” as being able, unlike most of his predecessors, to appeal equally to both men and women readers (2: 133). His great gift, she suggests, is not merely that he is able to make sentimental love stories appeal to a male reader but, just as importantly, that he is able to bring “feminine” delicacy to such stereotypically masculine subjects as war and politics. Bizarrely enough, considering the critical celebration of him as a peculiarly manly writer, in Oliphant’s hands Scott becomes something like an anticipation of Virginia Woolf’s androgynous mind. In this respect, he even surpasses Burns, whom Oliphant suggests has very much the same ability to write literature that unites strength and delicacy. Burns, however, has a strain of poetry that Oliphant doubts women will ever be able to enjoy, as there is, she thinks, “a certain inability on the part of a woman to appreciate the more riotous forms of mirth, and that robust freedom in morals which bolder minds admire” (1: 160). This is not a situation for which she feels any need to apologize and, indeed, despite a polite invitation for the (presumably male) reader to make up his mind about the value of that freedom, Oliphant implies clearly enough that any failure of taste is Burns’s, not hers. Scott, in contrast, avoids excessive daintiness while never slipping into anything resembling riotously unseemly mirth, thereby offering what is clearly, in Oliphant’s view, an ideal combination of stereotypically masculine and feminine literary styles.

Oliphant’s literary history thus precisely reverses the argument that Siskin and others have made about the literature of early nineteenth-century Edinburgh: according to her, the great contribution of Scott and his culture was that they provided a literature that escaped the masculine indelicacy that she finds in much eighteenth-century writing. Yet even as she makes that argument, she downplays the significance of the women authors whom one might think would be at least the major beneficiaries, if not the actual instigators, of this change. Highly as Oliphant praises the three women novelists, she establishes clear limitations on both them and their influence: they are part of a canon of specifically female writing, and, significantly, the later authors against whom she measures them are George Eliot and George Sand. Scott, on the other hand, sets the stage not only for the male novelists who follow him but influences a school of women writers as well, including the three that Oliphant singles out for special praise. Even where the influence might seem—in terms of chronology and in terms of Scott’s own acknowledgements—to run the other way, from women to Scott, Oliphant is surprisingly reluctant to admit the point. When reporting, for example, Scott’s claim that it was Maria Edgeworth’s work that made him a novelist, Oliphant praises Edgeworth

for being sufficiently “subtle” not to “take the graceful compliment *au pied de la lettre*” (1: 139)—that is, to assume with modest self-deprecation that Scott was merely engaging in a little polite hyperbole. Even more strikingly, Oliphant goes so far as to praise Scott for his influence upon the novels of Jane Porter, undaunted by the fact that Porter’s historical romances were published first. As she observes, Porter and her sister had been entertained by stories that Scott told them when they were children; evidently, she concludes, this was “contact sufficient to awaken the powers of fancy which lurked in them” (2: 273).

The problems with this version of literary history are obvious; in it, women writers remain little more than footnotes or supplements to Scott and his tradition. As long as influence goes only one way, the entirely new “feminine strain” of literature that Oliphant celebrates is doomed to remain subordinate, however powerful it might be. Oliphant, ironically enough, is writing a history of women and literature that seems to leave no room for her own work. This point is perhaps best illustrated by her historical writing, in which she attempts not merely to analyse Scott’s cultural and artistic importance but also, and ineffectually, to make a place for herself in the tradition that she constructs in her literary histories. The project indeed seems doomed from the start, as Oliphant depends so heavily upon Scott and writes so warmly of his contributions to the genre in which she is working that one inevitably begins to wonder why she is writing at all. In *Royal Edinburgh* (1890), for example, a history of Scotland for young readers, Oliphant comments that “it would be vain to attempt to add” anything to Scott’s picture of the fate of David, Duke of Rothesay (46), and she concludes the book with a chapter celebrating “The Shakespeare of Scotland.” A more striking example of the difficulties she has to confront comes in her *Child’s History of Scotland*, published in 1895, which she opens with a rather plaintive request to “the gentle reader, even the critic, whose part it is not to be gentle but just” (ix), not to read the book against *Tales of a Grandfather*. The request would probably have been useless even had Oliphant not made it impossible to avoid comparisons by—barely twenty pages into the book—deprecatingly suggesting that the feudal system might be “too great a subject for you or me” and referring her young female reader not only to *Tales of a Grandfather* but also to *Quentin Durward* (21). A dozen pages later, she recommends *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* to readers interested in pursuing the subject of Richard I, and she continues the process throughout the book, illuminating her account of the successive Stuart monarchies through references to *The Fair Maid of Perth*, *The Abbot*, and, of course, *Waverley*. Especially in the

later book, Oliphant presents her work as little more than a footnote to Scott's; the references to him are so frequent and so admiring that one is left wondering for what purpose Oliphant's book was written—other than, perhaps, to whet the appetite of her implied readership of little girls for the presumably headier charms awaiting them in Scott's work.

For a writer as prolific and as resolutely professional as Oliphant, this apparent inability to escape Scott's shadow is striking. The new "feminine strain" that she identifies as being established in the fiction of the early nineteenth century begins to sound, in her own books of history, as little more than pallid mimicry of her predecessor. If Scott, as she claims, made literary endeavour safe for women, she also suggests in her own historical writing that he made their work unnecessary. Celebrating Scott for his ability to outdo women at their own literary game, Oliphant might seem, at first glance, to be constructing a literary history that admits and indeed emphasizes feminocentric writing, but only at the cost of making actual women writers, herself included, irrelevant to the main strand of literary achievement.

Yet such a conclusion is oversimplified: Oliphant does offer an original, innovative response to Scott in which she builds upon and transforms his work and the feminocentric tradition that she has built around him, but it appears in her own fiction, not in her historical writing. In particular, her late novel *Kirsteen*, first published in 1890, offers what can be read as perhaps her most sophisticated and complex response to Scott and literary history, one in which Oliphant attempts to find a way to reinterpret Scott's achievement, rather than merely offering a pallid imitation of it. *Kirsteen* is of course very far removed, in most ways, from Scott's grandly romantic version of historical fiction. Instead of offering us a young man stumbling into a war zone and finding himself torn by grand historical forces of which previously he has been at most dimly aware, Oliphant provides a far more matter-of-fact tale of a young woman who makes a life for herself by sewing. Yet it seems hard not to think of Scott on at least some levels when reading *Kirsteen*. Douglas Gifford, for example, finds elements of *Redgauntlet* in the picture of the grim patriarch Drumcarro (582), while Merryn Williams sees *Kirsteen*'s journey to London as reminiscent of that of Jeanie Deans, another quietly heroic Scotswoman with a beautiful, beloved, but feckless younger sister (286). Indeed, Oliphant ensures that readers cannot miss the connections she is drawing between her work and Scott's. If not as littered with references to him as was the children's history, *Kirsteen* nonetheless makes clear that it should be read against Scott's fiction, and, notwithstanding the affinities between Oliphant's novel

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and Scott's version of a female quest in *Heart of Midlothian*, it is perhaps *Waverley* that Oliphant evokes most fully.

It is, after all, the world into which *Waverley* burst with such impact that Oliphant takes as her setting, a world separated from Oliphant by only a few more years than came between Scott and the era of the Jacobite uprising. If the publication of *Waverley* itself is only of belated and minor significance to Oliphant's decidedly unliterary heroine, the novel nonetheless echoes the process by which Scott invited his original audience to lose themselves in the evocation of a world just beyond living memory, and in doing so it attempts a literary recreation of Scott's day in much the same way as Scott transformed the period of the Jacobite uprising in *Waverley*. Scott was notoriously unsuccessful in his books about his own period; in the Magnum Opus introduction to one of them, *St. Ronan's Well*, he looks back on the relatively hostile critical reception of the novel and notes somewhat ruefully that books catching the manners of the present day seem to be the province of women writers. In *Kirsteen*, which pointedly opens in 1814, Oliphant thus attempts to write the novel that Scott could not, catching the texture of lived daily experience in the early nineteenth century. That, of course, is what Oliphant—and Scott—praise female novelists of the time such as Austen and Edgeworth for doing, but precisely because she is writing historical fiction, Oliphant is attempting something very different than a belated imitation of their work. As the critic Ann Rigney has argued in a study of Scott's historical methodology, what the historical novel offers is “not just a new type of novel ... but also a new type of history involving alternative experiential and social domains” (36). According to Rigney, what gives Scott's historical novels their power and interest is the artistic and intellectual tension they create between their accounts of the grand movements of history and their imaginative representations of what Francis Jeffrey (in a review of Scott) called “the quiet undercurrent of life” (qtd. Rigney 37). It is this tension that is missing from Scott's depiction of his own society and that Oliphant provides in *Kirsteen*.

Such a claim might, initially, seem difficult to support, as in focusing on women's experience, Oliphant cuts out the major political events of the period. Napoleon barely rates a mention, and the Scottish contributions to early nineteenth-century empire building are reduced to occasional whispers about old Drumcarro's slave-driving days in the Caribbean, following the wreck of his fortunes in the Jacobite uprising,⁵

5 If Oliphant is, arguably, giving voice to historical subjects on which Scott re-

and to the sentimental device of the blood-stained handkerchief that is Kirsteen's sole memento of a lover lost in a minor skirmish in India. Yet it is in concentrating on how such events affect the women who have no direct stake in war and empire building, and who experience them only as the backdrop to their domestic lives, that Oliphant builds on Scott's historical methods to find a way of writing about women and society that offers more than simply a slice of contemporary culture. According to Rigney, as Scott provides lovingly detailed accounts of vanished social customs, he is not simply indulging in the creation of "local colour" but rather is offering "fragments of a *longue durée* cultural history that [he] integrates into the narrative of political/private events, exemplifying the 'normality' that has been disrupted by the civil conflict" (28). One might say very much the same of what Oliphant is doing in *Kirsteen*, and indeed, details such as the stilted, unpleasant, but lavishly described dinner party at the opening of the second chapter evoke precisely the sort of homely descriptions of meals that Rigney analyses in her reading of Scott. The difference is that for Kirsteen, "normality" is interrupted not by the drama and terror of the Covenanters' Wars or the Jacobite uprising but rather by the massive but relatively undramatic social transformations triggered by events outside her immediate experience and on the very edges of her perception. Where Scott shows public events bleeding into private life—at least until the happy endings transport the heroes from history into happy, ahistorical domesticity—Oliphant evokes a world in which the two realms are inextricable, even for women such as Kirsteen who are barely aware of what is happening in the wider public sphere. Recent critics such as Anne Mellor and Harriet Guest have argued convincingly that Scott's female contemporaries and predecessors were doing precisely the same thing in their writing,⁶ but given Oliphant's criticism of Ferrier and Edgeworth—that they cannot rise beyond reportage to evoke a compellingly imagined world that is different from their own—it is reasonable to argue that in writing historical fiction, Oliphant saw herself as moving beyond a

mains silent, a recent historical novel, James Robertson's *Joseph Knight* (2003), addresses some of the silences in Oliphant's historical fiction, exploring the life of a Scottish landowner, who, like Drumcarro, rebuilds an estate lost in the Jacobite rebellion on the profits of the Jamaican slave economy.

6 Both Mellor, in *Mothers of the Nation*, and Guest, in *Small Change*, discuss women's poetry and non-fictional prose as well as novels, suggesting that such challenges to the concept of separate spheres are not limited to works that self-consciously explore the intersections of historical progress and individual lives.

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stereotypically feminine literary dependence on women's private worlds in a way that, in her view, her female predecessors did not. Oliphant's representation in *Kirsteen* of a recently-vanished past in a manner that conveys simultaneously the importance of a realistic representation of the details of individual daily life and the historical contingency of such details suggests that Oliphant is aiming not for Austenian social satire but rather for precisely the combination of large-scale historical analysis and closely focused social realism that she celebrates in Scott.

Kirsteen, like *Waverley*, thus explores a period of great social and cultural change from the perspective of seventy years' distance, but Oliphant inevitably twists Scott's approach by exemplifying the impact of those changes through the experiences of a young woman, not a young man. Indeed, it doesn't require too much of a stretch to see *Kirsteen* as an inversion rather than an imitation of the earlier novel. Where Scott features a young Englishman heading north to Scotland and discovering a modern British identity, Oliphant writes about a Scotswoman heading south to England to make a place for herself in a new commercial world. While Oliphant's London milliner's shop is a less dramatic site for the forging of cultural identity than is Scott's exoticized Highland world, it is no less a place where old ways confront the new. The confrontation between *Kirsteen* and a fictionalized Duke of Argyll, as he comes to her shop to order her to return to her family, dramatizes this point. He makes his case on the grounds of both older values and new: he is a clan chieftain, and she is a woman who should be living in a safely middle-class domestic world. She refuses to obey him from a similar mixture of traditional and modern values: he is not her clansman and so has no right of command, and she is able to earn her own way independently of the father who has cast her off. This is not quite the sort of dramatic confrontation in which—for example—Colonel Talbot pleads with *Waverley* to abandon his dabbling with treason and the glamorous past to return to good, modern Hanoverian loyalties, but the dynamics of a young person on the cusp of social change, torn between the old and the new, are similar. Moreover, while urban London might not automatically possess the romantic exoticism that is evoked by mention of the Highlands, by distancing London in time from her readers and by presenting it through the dazzled eyes of the provincial *Kirsteen* (for whom, in fact, the Highlands are the site of the mundane drudgery of daily life), Oliphant confers upon Regency London some of the same sort of glamour that Scott gives his Jacobite Highlands.⁷

7 I am indebted here to Arlene Young for this point: she has also discussed Oli-

The most significant difference between these two treatments of young people caught in a moment of historical transformation might in fact be that Kirsteen, reversing Waverley's position, rebels by adhering to the new and, unlike her predecessor, never totally abandons her rebellion.

Oliphant's decision to explore the cultural transformation at the beginning of the nineteenth century through a woman also suggests something important about what she sees as the nature of that change. Kirsteen makes her living as a dressmaker, a relatively conventional and feminine option, but Oliphant is careful throughout the novel to discuss millinery in terms of artistry, rather than simply treating it as an extension of domestic needlework. Early in the novel, Kirsteen is rebuked for treating lightly the work of a milliner who uses "something like a sculptor's art" in fitting her with a muslin gown (54–55), but when she arrives in London, she quickly learns to make her "pretty confections" with "the genuine enjoyment which attends an artist in all crafts" and to suit her "pretty materials" to their "pretty wearer, as a painter likes to arrange and study the more subtle harmonies of light and shade" (165). Yet this association with art is both nuanced and ambiguous, particularly as the focus on artistry is not, in any way, an attempt to place Kirsteen's work above or outside the hurly-burly commercialism of the public market. The emphasis on prettiness, ephemerality, and delicacy recalls Oliphant's treatment of women's writing, as does the narrator's loud scepticism about the aesthetic value of the work ("I do not myself think that dress was pretty in those days—but every fashion is beautiful to its time and I do not suppose that Kirsteen was before her time, or more enlightened than the rest of the world" [165]). As Oliphant makes entirely clear, if millinery is art, it is a very commercial one. Kirsteen succeeds not only on the strength of her designs but also through her shrewdness as a businesswoman. Refusing, in a fit of pride, to accept her sister's order for a dress on the invented pretext that she serves only the aristocracy, she quickly realizes the marketing value of such exclusivity and thus makes herself the most sought-after dressmaker in town among the socially aspiring as well as the socially secure. Yet despite both Oliphant's deprecating irony about fashion as art and her emphasis on business tactics, the main point remains—Kirsteen founds her career on her artistic talents, talents that, after a little initial hesitation, she is willing to exploit for money, and in doing so demonstrates that the new

phant's treatment of millinery and women's work in *Kirsteen* in her "Workers' Compensation: (Needle)Work and Ideals of Femininity in Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen*."

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commercial culture Oliphant is describing is new at least in part in the opportunities it opens for women.

What Oliphant represents in *Kirsteen* as a major historical and cultural turning point in the early nineteenth century is not simply the war and empire building that, very indirectly, drive Kirsteen from her family. Rather, she concentrates on the social processes by which art can become a trade, without necessarily being any less an art, and in which women can earn money and independence in a more or less respectable way precisely because of that. Admittedly, Oliphant might have been rather old-fashioned in celebrating (even by implication) literature as a trade in the 1890s. Leith Davis, building on Ferris's work, has argued that it was precisely Scott's commercialism that contributed to the decline in his reputation in the later nineteenth century, as writing for money became associated with being "in trade," as opposed to being a gentleman of leisure and taste (166). Somewhat ironically, the new world of literary professionalism that (according to Siskin) Scott and other Edinburgh writers helped to establish, ended up sidelining Scott as surely as it did the women writers of the period. Yet even if Scott was unable to maintain his status in the literary world that he created, the point remains that the cultural world in which Scott lived and that he helped to shape was one in which literature became both a commodity and a profession. Through her historical novel, Oliphant illuminates, for readers of a later generation, the challenges and pitfalls of that world, and in choosing as her central figure a woman artist—even if a very minor and highly commercial artist—Oliphant suggests in a much more far-reaching manner than in her literary history that women artists could have an active role to play in the changes then taking place. In that way, even while anticipating a literary historian such as Siskin in her ideas about the newly professionalized world of early nineteenth-century literature, Oliphant implicitly reverses his conclusions in her fiction, if not in her own literary history.

If in that literary history, Oliphant underplays the contributions of women, suggesting that Scott was more important than were any of his female contemporaries in establishing a literature that transcended the limitations of conventionally masculine or feminine subject matter, she nonetheless used, in her own fiction, a woman to represent the era's breakdown of what she sees as older versions of exaggeratedly gendered artistry. Needless to say, fiction and literary history should not be read as offering the same sorts of insights into the literary past, but reading Oliphant's historical fiction against her own more conventional literary histories suggests the complexity of her attitude towards the literary

tradition in which she was working. Most importantly, it suggests that a tendency to celebrate Scott's establishment of a new fictional voice did not necessarily imply, for a woman in the generation following his, that that voice was inescapably masculine. Both as a novelist and as a female literary historian, Oliphant shares with many critics today an awareness of the complexity of the concepts of gender and professionalism in the work of Scott and his female contemporaries. It is, however, only by reading both the novels and the histories together that we can get a full sense of how Oliphant's admiration for a powerful male writer such as Scott shaped her own understanding of and participation in the literary tradition that she saw him as inaugurating.

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