TEXTUAL SEDUCTIONS:
WOMEN’S READING AND WRITING
IN MARGARET OLIPHANT’S
“THE LIBRARY WINDOW”

By Tamar Heller

MARGARET OLIPHANT’S GHOST STORY “The Library Window” (1896) — one of the last works of its author’s prolific career — is haunted by images of reading and writing. Visiting her aunt, the young narrator (never named) reads obsessively, perched in the window seat where she witnesses another scene of textuality. Some claim that a window in the college library across the street is only “fictitious panes marked on the wall” (296), yet in a series of increasingly vivid tableaux the girl sees through those panes a young man seated in a study “writing, writing always” (305). So entranced is she by this vision of scholarship, so convinced of its reality, that she is devastated to learn the window is indeed a fake and the young man a ghost who appears to her because of a curse on the female members of her family: he was killed by the brothers of another young girl — the narrator’s ancestor — when they mistakenly assumed he was responding to her flirtatious overtures as she waved to him across the street.

This melodramatic revelation aside, however, the frisson of this brilliantly eerie tale is produced by its intense interiority. Caught inside the young girl’s thoughts much as she is bounded by the confines of her window seat, we become with her rapt spectators of the act of authorship: “There was a faint turn of his head as he went from one side to another of the page he was writing; but it appeared to be a long long page which never wanted turning” (306). Perhaps it is so enigmatically and elaborately fetishized an emphasis on writing that causes Merryn Williams to label “The Library Window” the “strangest of all Margaret Oliphant’s ghost stories” and to claim that it cannot be explained (Introduction xix). Yet those familiar with feminist criticism of Victorian texts may find the story of a young girl stranded in Tantalus-like yearning for a scholarly world she cannot enter one of the period’s crisper, if hitherto neglected, allegories of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have so famously called the nineteenth-century woman writer’s “anxiety of authorship” (49). Especially since the narrator loses her ability to see the scholar once his ghostly nature is revealed, the “narrative of female exclusion” that Diana Basham identifies in Oliphant’s supernatural fiction (163) encodes in this case Victorian women’s
marginal relation to literary authority, an outcast status poignantly evoked by the aunt’s
description of the curse on the family’s women: “It is a longing all your life after — it is a
looking — for what never comes” (326).

In this sense, the female uncanny translates into fiction the overwhelming sense of
secondariness that haunts Oliphant’s Autobiography, where, despite her prodigious liter-
ary output and aspirations, she stresses her exclusion from the realm of “high art” which,
as historians and critics have noted, was in the late nineteenth century newly profession-
ized and increasingly masculinized (see Brodhead, esp. 69–106; Tuchman; Swindells
13–113). Distinguished from the popular marketplace to which Oliphant felt enslaved,
this newly-sanctified hermetic zone of culture recalls the study in “The Library Window”
where the scholar — a “great learned man” (327) — writes without interruption, a
privileged status unlike Oliphant’s:

[U]p to this date (1888), I have never been shut up in a separate room, or hedged off with any
observances. My study, all the study I have ever attained to, is the little second drawing-room
where all the (feminine) life of the house goes on; and I don’t think I have ever had two hours
undisturbed (except at night, when everybody is in bed) in my whole literary life. (Autobiog-
raphy 24)

Like “The Library Window,” where the aunt’s house and the college library are on
“opposite sides” of the street (289), the Autobiography thus apparently segregates the
male realm of literary authority from the feminine sphere (that Oliphant, needing to
support her children, writes within and for domesticity explains her lack of a study). Yet,
despite their brooding atmosphere of literary exile, both works contain important images
of boundary crossing and the dissolution of categories. The guiding images of “The
Library Window” are windows and their frames, spaces that permit access between
spheres — a permeability emphasized by the female gaze of the narrator, whose voyeu-
rism connects the domesticity of the aunt’s house and the male learning of the college
library. Analogously, in the Autobiography Oliphant’s main figure for the world of male
culture is a woman writer, George Eliot, seen as a hybrid plant nurtured in the privileged
enclave of the new literary culture: “How I have been handicapped in life! Should I have
done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?” (5).

That a woman might inhabit a “mental greenhouse” like the ghostly scholar’s reminds
us that “The Library Window,” though set in the earlier part of the century (the period of
Oliphant’s own girlhood), was published in 1896, as women were gaining unprecedented
opportunities to enter the worlds of literature and culture. Such a movement, however,
was both complicated and contested, since in the literary sphere women were increasingly
relegated to less prestigious fields, like children’s literature; moreover, the entry of women
into higher education at all was hotly debated. In light of late nineteenth-century attacks
on an evolving feminist discourse, indeed, it is ironic that Oliphant’s “The Library Win-
dow,” with its moving theme of women’s exile from knowledge, should have appeared in
the same issue of Blackwood’s Magazine where she published “The Anti-Marriage
League,” her famous diatribe against Hardy’s Jude the Obscure and other portrayals of
the New Woman. Like her vigorous critique of sensation fiction earlier in the century,
“The Anti-Marriage League” is animated by Oliphant’s objections to the threat to domes-
tic ideology represented by the emphasis on female sexuality, especially extra-marital
sexuality, in New Woman novels by male authors. Yet domesticity, the site of an embattled nostalgia in the essay, is, as I will argue, the obstacle to the narrator’s creative yearning in “The Library Window,” pointing to the ideological and intertextual richness of the dialogue on gender represented by Oliphant’s essays — her voluminous writing on writing — and her fiction. In fact, Oliphant’s portrayal of women’s reading and writing in “The Library Window” engages the issue central to “The Anti-Marriage League,” female sexuality.

For this supernatural story about texts also manages to be a tale about sex through a crucial generic slippage: the epistemological romance — the narrator’s quest for learning — begs to be read as romance fiction, since she is apparently as attracted to the handsome young scholar as she is to his books. Through a narrative about female adolescence that contains coded references to menarche, Oliphant’s portrait of the failed artist as a young woman charts her initiation into Victorian womanhood, a process which renders her love of knowledge an insubstantial “dream” (300). This conflation of a Kunstlerroman and a plot about female biology and socialization recalls the cluster of late nineteenth-century discourses — scientific, medical, and literary — that argued that women’s bodies inextricably imprisoned their minds and that they could not develop one without damaging the other, a gynecological imperative in which menstruation is antithetical to mind. By enmeshing her female narrator in such a narrative, Oliphant may seem more reactionary than the woman writer she envied, George Eliot, who, as Elsie Michie has recently argued, challenges in Middlemarch those late nineteenth-century discourses which denied women access to culture by limiting them to their reproductive functions (142–71). Yet Gail Twersky Reimer claims that Oliphant, through her revisions of the meaning of “labor” in the Autobiography, also reveals her “discomfort” with the “dualist mode of thought” that claimed mothers could not be intellectual women (204). Given the complex nature of Oliphant’s ambivalent conservatism, we might see in “The Library Window,” her valedictory Kunstlerroman, not simply acquiescence to the discourses that censored intellectual women but rather a distrust of the literary and cultural scripts that define the woman artist rather than allowing her to write her own story.

Textual Transgressions

FOCUSING THESE LARGER DEBATES on the relation between women’s minds and bodies, the thematics of reading in “The Library Window” addresses cultural anxieties about literature and female purity. Plots about the dangers of reading for young women, a common theme in literature, are a staple of eighteenth-century fiction, yet nineteenth-century versions of this ideologeme — witness Madame Bovary — are even more insistently informed than their predecessors by a fear of what Kate Flint calls the “proximity of textuality and sexuality” for the female reader (4). This concern, that reading provides access to “forbidden knowledge” for otherwise genteel young women, is one Oliphant frequently expresses in her reviews of sensation fiction and New Woman novels (see “Novels” 257–59, 275; “Anti-Marriage League” 135, 137). The narrator’s obsession with the ghostly scholar suggests a Madame Bovary for teen-age girls who read too much: entranced with a handsome male figure who seems the product of her love of reading, she apparently loses her senses when confronted with the evidence of his fictionality. Yet the narrator is not just the passive victim of textual seduction, moving from the passive and
“feminine” activity of reading to the more active and autonomous act of writing. Not only does she attempt to “read,” or interpret, the visions she sees in the window’s frame, but, if we see the ghost as her own creation, she writes on the “opaque” space of the library wall — its “blank page,” as Susan Gubar would say. (And what better place to represent the imaginative projection inspired by reading than the wall of a library?) Thus, Oliphant’s plot about “the proximity of textuality and sexuality” addresses not only the erotic temptations of women’s reading, but the transgressiveness of women’s entry through reading into the related hermeneutic practices of writing and interpretation. In this sense reading is not only associated with but analogous to sexual fall.

“The Library Window” suggests this analogy between women’s textual and sexual transgressiveness by representing a slippage between public and private spheres, the boundary crossing that was a locus of cultural anxiety in the Woman Question debate. By reading in the window seat, the narrator gains access to the street, in Victorian sexual geography the realm either of men or of prostitutes. As Deborah Nord and Judith Walkowitz have argued, the Victorian female spectator or flaneur (unlike her male counterpart) risked being mistaken for a streetwalker, a possibility that problematized women’s entry into public space in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Nord; Walkowitz 46–59, 68–80). Written in 1896 but set in the middle of the nineteenth century (around the time that Oliphant launched her career in the public domain), “The Library Window” somewhat evades these issues of women and the public sphere by positioning its female narrator, who calls herself “a spectator of all the varied story out of doors” (289), not in the street but in a zone of liminality. Perched on the boundary between the “large old-fashioned drawing-room of the house” and the “broad High Street of St Rule’s” (289), the narrator can see outside without being seen, preserving, though in proximity to public display, the appearance of feminine modesty. The narrator’s maiden aunt, whose life, a “routine never broken” (289), embodies the dullness of domesticity in “St Rule,” nonetheless acts as go-between between these male and female worlds, for, as the narrator says of her aunt’s allowing her to sit reading for hours, “My mother would not have let me do it” (290).

The narrator appreciates this tacit encouragement of her reading all the more because she has been made to feel uncomfortable about her relation to language:

Everybody had said, since ever I learned to speak, that I was fantastic and fanciful and dreamy, and all the other words with which a girl who may happen to like poetry, and to be fond of thinking, is so often made uncomfortable. People don’t know what they mean when they say fantastic. It sounds like Madge Wildfire or something of that sort. My mother thought I should always be busy, to keep nonsense out of my head. (290)

Although the allusion to Scott’s seduced maiden, Madge Wildfire, again raises the specter of sexual fall, the narrator’s marginal, implicitly-mad position as female intellectual allows her to poach on traditionally male territory. During a vigil to discern some movement in the window (which she describes as “a country . . . one had discovered” [306]), she becomes so preoccupied by her book that she enters its world, “a South American forest[,] . . . treading softly lest I should put my foot on a scorpion or a dangerous snake” (304). For all that this lurking phallic threat imbues reading with sexual terror, books nonetheless place the narrator in the typically male role of explorer.
Margaret Oliphant’s “The Library Window”

Female Seeing And Seers

Yet it is in the female appropriation of the “male gaze” — the vantage point of mastery more usually associated with men — that the story’s most significant gender-bending occurs. The story’s many images of vision feminize the period’s “sage-discourse” which compensates the artist (usually male) for his social marginality by endowing him with the seer’s gift of cultural prophecy. In its self-consciously minor way, “The Library Window” transforms the female Bildung into a story of the Victorian sage, a generic project that by its very fall from epic suggests how difficult it is for Victorian women to attain this cultural status.7 Significantly, however, Oliphant’s use of sage-discourse gives women’s reading a meaning beyond the didactic burden of the Victorian “female quixote” narrative, with its anxiety about sexual and textual transgression. Rather than suggesting deviance and fall, female sage-discourse authorizes women’s vision, transforming reading from romantic transgression into Romantic linguistic authority. The narrator, who early in the story describes herself as having a “sort of second sight” (291), emphasizes the special power of her vision: “I rather wanted, I believe, to think that there was some particular insight in me which gave clearness to my sight” (302). This language of blindness and insight resonates as she dismisses the arguments of the elderly visitors to her aunt’s house about whether the window is real or not: “It did indeed bring tears to my eyes to think that all those clever people, solely by reason of being no longer young as I was, should have the simplest things shut out from them; and for all their wisdom and their knowledge be unable to see what a girl like me could see so easily” (306).

This special vision, which allows the female sage to dispute the collective wisdom of the older generation, also enables her to enter the male preserve of the scholar’s study, which, in the story’s family romance as in the larger narrative of Victorian culture, is the realm of the father. That the narrator’s father is a “great writer” (307), in fact, seems overdetermined — the more so because this family narrative inscribes the signature of the Scottish Oliphant’s major male predecessor, Sir Walter Scott. One inspiration for “The Library Window” is a famous anecdote in Lockhart’s canonizing Memoirs of Scott in which passersby are mesmerized by the sight of the “Author of Waverley” sitting near the window tirelessly writing (338), a story to which the narrator also refers: “I trembled with impatience to see him turn the page, or perhaps throw down his finished sheet on the floor, as somebody looking into a window like me once saw Sir Walter do, sheet after sheet” (307). Although such a vision of the male precursor’s productivity could be disabling for the woman who can only view this process from an outsider’s position, the daughter in “The Library Window” uses her voyeurism to gain access to the father’s world:

I saw quite plainly the room opposite, far more clear than before. I saw dimly that it must be a large room, and that the big piece of furniture against the wall was a writing-desk. That in a moment, when first my eyes rested upon it, was quite clear: a large old-fashioned escritoire, standing out into the room: and I knew by the shape of it that it had a great many pigeon-holes and little drawers in the back, and a large table for writing. There was one just like it in my father’s library at home. (298–99)

Discussing a ghost story of Edith Wharton’s, “Pomegranate Seed,” Carol Singley and Susan Sweeney argue that Wharton’s ambivalence about “appropriating the forbidden
power of language” may be traced to her recollections of secretly reading in the “kingdom” of her father’s study the books which her mother had banned (198–99). Such a theory is useful for understanding the narrator’s strategy in “The Library Window” of conjuring up the writing desk that signifies the father’s authority, a vision particularly important since her mother, like Wharton’s, has blocked access to language by calling her daughter’s fantasies “nonsense” (290).

Yet it is striking that the daughter in “The Library Window” can assume the father’s authority to the extent she does. Usually when the father is a writer in Victorian literature, the daughter’s situation is that of “Milton’s daughter,” or amanuensis (Gilbert and Gubar 187–212). For Margaret Homans, this role is emblematized by Eliot’s Romola, the scribe to her scholar-father who bears the word but is herself firmly linked to the realm of the literal (Homans 197–98, 202, 212–13). Homans’s argument in Bearing the Word is useful for delineating the Victorian daughter’s relation to language: barred from the realm of figuration and the symbolic, women are locked in the world of the literal, of maternity and the body. In “The Library Window,” the daughter’s attempt to breach the gap between literal and figurative is through the female gaze: enacting the meaning of metaphor, “to cross over,” the narrator’s gaze “across the way” (296) allows her to make the male scholar a figure for herself. Indeed she speaks of watching him not just with curiosity but with a “breathless watch, an absorption” (305) that suggests the merging of her identity with his, as she puts it at one point, “almost seeing things through his eyes” (314).

The Female Body and the Fall from Knowledge

TO READ THE SCHOLAR as the narrator’s male muse recalls Adrienne Rich’s point that the nineteenth-century woman writer envisions the creative side of herself as male (173–74). In this regard it is instructive to contrast Oliphant’s psychomachia of the female artist with another, now more canonical, female Kunstlerroman published only a few years previously: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). In both tales of the female uncanny, figures for the female artist bring apparently blank and inanimate surfaces to a kind of textual life, becoming highly possessive about their special ability to see what others cannot. Both narrators are haunted by figurative versions of themselves, yet whereas the Doppelganger of Gilman’s narrator embodies her literal clausuration — a madwoman clawing at the bars that confine her — the double of Oliphant’s narrator, an Enlightenment man of reason, is an idealized form of her escape from domesticity. What finally excludes Oliphant’s narrator from this male, rational world, however, defines the position of the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper”: the discourses about sexuality and maternity that situate the female body in Victorian culture. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” attempts to censor the narrator’s writing stem from the belief that she must be a mother instead; as an apparently-inadequate mother, she is diagnosed as a hysteric in need of medical and marital regulation. “The Library Window” similarly draws on Victorian discourses about the female body and women’s reproductive destiny, though by depicting, not motherhood, but adolescence and menarche, an appropriately transitional period in a story obsessed with liminality. This narrative of female adolescence is linked to a plot about female embodiment that, like “The Yellow Wallpaper,” invokes discourses about female invalidism and hysteria. To allude to these discourses, however, causes the emphasis finally to fall on the plot of love rather than on that of artistic quest, a bifurcation which
Rachel Blau DuPlessis has identified as a characteristic of nineteenth-century women's Kunstlerromans (3-4). This shift in generic focus in “The Library Window” rewrites the subversive connection made earlier in the story between linguistic authority and sexuality: rather than signifying transgressive female artistry, textual seduction becomes the catalyst for a script about romance that excludes art.

Ironically, the plot about female artistry collapses into a plot about female sexuality in the scene in which the narrator seems most fully to merge her identity with the ghostly scholar's. Near the end of the story, the narrator is compelled to confront the apparently delusory nature of her vision; persuaded by her aunt to attend a party in the hall of the college library, she realizes that “my” window (319) is a false front, placed there to enhance the building's symmetry. Rushing to her window seat, she sees the ghostly scholar more clearly than ever before and even gets his attention: “as closely as I looked at him he looked at me” (323). This meeting of male and female gaze leads to the story's most triumphant confusion of “fiction” and “reality,” for the scholar opens the apparently nonexistent window with a noise that makes people on the street turn their heads and then — in a gesture fraught with ominous ambiguity — waves at the girl: “He looked at me first, with a little wave of his hand, as if it were a salutation — yet not that exactly either, for I thought he waved me away” (323). That this gesture is at once invitation — mimicking the gesture of the “light woman” who had tried to seduce him — and dismissal underscores the tenuousness, finally, of the narrator's place in the scholarly world. Rather than inviting her into his study, the scholar waves her goodbye, for she never sees him again except for one fleeting moment in later adulthood. As a female sage, then, the narrator has a vision of her own lack of vision, a position that recalls the Autobiography, where, as Laurie Langbauer says, “What Oliphant utters as sage is a self-fulfilling prophecy of her own failure” (vii).

In this regard it is significant that an apparently erotic vocabulary describes the vindication of the narrator's vision when the scholar waves at her:

He seemed to draw me as if I were a puppet moved by his will. He came forward to the window, and stood looking across at me. I was sure that he looked at me. At last he had seen me: at last he had found out that somebody, though only a girl, was watching him, looking for him, believing in him. . . . I watched him with such a melting heart, with such a deep satisfaction as words could not say; for nobody could tell me now that he was not there, — nobody could say I was dreaming any more. . . . I was in a kind of rapture, yet stupor too; my look went with his look, following it as if I were his shadow; and then suddenly he was gone, and I saw him no more. (323-24)

That the rhetoric of “believing in him” — the romantic language of “standing by her man” — legitimates the narrator's belief in her authority recalls Patricia Johnson's point that, in Charlotte Brontë's novels, the romance plot actually figures a plot about the “desire to write,” the “true object all along” (174). Yet the confusion of these two plots in this passage from “The Library Window” points to the ambivalence with which nineteenth-century women writers represent the desire to write, as well as their inability to imagine women as writers of texts rather than as themselves texts written over by cultural narratives. It is unclear whether Oliphant's narrator has such a rapturous climax (“I was so worn out and satisfied,” she says [324]) because she has wholly identified with the writer's
persona, or because she has achieved the romance fiction telos of communion with the male lover. Moreover, the ghost is no longer male muse so much as master, subordinating the narrator to his will in a type of sexual slavery: “He seemed to draw me as if I were a puppet moved by his will” (323).

The scene in which the narrator prepares for the disastrous party in fact recalls the Victorian ritual of the coming-out party, which initiated girls into the institution of heterosexuality. In the furtive hope that “he might perhaps . . . be there,” the narrator puts on her best white dress and necklace: “though I did not think much of my appearance then, there must have been something about me — pale as I was but apt to colour in a moment, with my dress so white, and my pearls so white, and my hair all shadowy — perhaps, that was pleasant to look at” (317). “Pale” as she is here, ghostly as is her still unawakened sexuality, her reference to “colour[ing] in a moment” suggests a capacity for arousal, a telling implication in light of her behavior when she discovers the window’s inauthenticity. Here she becomes even more clearly an image of the hysterized, and sexualized, female body. Her earlier reference to Madge Wildfire, in fact, now links female madness not so much with artistic vision as with sexual frustration. So agitated does she become — as if “my senses must have left me” — that she dismays her elderly chaperon, Mr. Pitmilly, who exclaims “my dear! Mind that you are in public” (320). Yet her next actions are scarcely likely to assuage his fears about her improper feminine behavior in public space: rushing across the street so she can see the scholar from her window, she becomes — bare-armed, bare-headed, and vulnerable to the comments of men in the street — a coded (one might say ghosted) form of that most frightening image of the Victorian public woman, the prostitute: “We came out into the daylight again outside, I, without even a cloak or a shawl, with my bare arms, and uncovered head, and the pearls round my neck. There was a rush of the people about, and a baker’s boy . . . stood right in my way and cried, “Here’s a braw [fine] ane!” (321).

That the narrator is “treated like an invalid” after this eroticized display invokes the nineteenth-century discourses surrounding the female invalid that are a springboard for the plot, since the girl was sent to summer with her aunt in the first place because her health was not good (290). When her absorption with the window becomes obsessive, “Aunt Mary . . . held secret consultations over me, sometimes with the doctor, and sometimes with her old ladies, who thought they knew more about young girls than even the doctors” (314). Reading the cause of the narrator’s illness, then, becomes a central hermeneutic problem in the story, just as in larger cultural terms women’s illness posed a diagnostic riddle for nineteenth-century medicine, particularly the famously enigmatic illness of hysteria, with which the narrator is associated in her sexual and emotional derangement. Twentieth-century historians have read nineteenth-century women’s hysteria as an expression of their frustration with domesticity (Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman”; Showalter 121–64), a significant theme given the narrator’s yearning to enter the world of knowledge. Yet the way that the narrator’s invalidism is read by those around her shows how hysteria is not seen as a strategy of protest but is instead read in accordance with a cultural script as an expression of frustrated sexual desire, and thus imperfect assimilation into the world of heterosexuality. Lady Carnbee, a sinister old lady who visits the aunt’s house, thus diagnoses the narrator’s “fevered” (307) state when, seeing her gaze at the library window, she claims that the cause of this obsession is “bound to be some man” (308).
This reading of the narrator’s desire is part of a movement in the story whereby her knowledge, her apparently superior vision as female sage, is shown to be inferior to the knowledge of the elders around her, who in fact do know better than she. Whereas the narrator has been, like most heroines in female Gothic, a kind of detective-interpreter, uncovering the truth of the window, as readers we also know that she is wrong not to heed the portentous hints of the elderly women “in the know” about the curse. Like the aunt, who murmurs “Like a dream when one awaketh” (312) as she watches the narrator repeat what appears to have been her own youthful experience of frustration, these elderly women imply that the narrator’s dream of knowledge is a phase from which she will cruelly but necessarily awake. As her aunt says, pressing her niece to attend the party where she knows she will discover the truth about the window: “My honey . . . I know it will maybe be a blow to you, — but it’s better so” (316).

This twist in the plot about female knowledge — in which the narrator, rather than surpassing, instead lacks the insight of the older generation — rewrites not only the narrative of the female sage, but the Victorian female-quixote plot with its analogy and association between female reading and sexual fall. The plot of sexual fall, though spectrally present in the narrator’s brief rendition of streetwalking, is subsumed within a plot about “normative” feminine development. In “The Library Window,” Paradise Lost is not a fall into sexuality so much as a fall from knowledge through entry into domesticity.

Lady Carnbee, that embodiment of the female Unheimlich, is the figure for this script of domestic confinement, an icon of womanhood at once uncanny and grotesque:

She was like a figure in a picture, with her pale face the colour of ashes, and the big pattern of the Spanish lace hanging half over it, and her hand held up, with the big diamond blazing at me from the inside of her uplifted palm. It was held up in surprise, but it looked as if it were raised in malediction; and the diamond threw out darts of light and glared and twinkled at me. (298)

The ring that so balefully gleams from Lady Carnbee’s hand, and which concentrates her malevolent magic power, hints at her identity as the “light woman” responsible for the scholar’s death, for, in the aunt’s version of the tale, the woman “waved to him, and waved to him. . . . [Y]on ring was the token” (328). The narrator herself makes the connection between the “light woman” of the aunt’s tale and Lady Carnbee when, as she leaves her aunt’s house at the summer’s end, the old woman pats her on the shoulder and hurts her with the ring: “Was that what Aunt Mary meant when she said yon ring was the token?” (330). The wound that the narrator receives at this farewell — “I thought afterwards I saw the mark on my shoulder” (330) — recalls the earlier scene where Lady Carnbee claims that the narrator is pining for a man and also pats her, stinging her with the stone, “a sharp malignant prick, oh full of meaning!” (308).

I would like to suggest that one meaning of this feminine wounding is menarche, the moment of female sexual maturation associated in Victorian medical discourses with the potential for both hysteria and unruly sexual appetites. In the scripts that Victorian physicians used to “read” menarche, such desires needed to be contained within a narrative of acculturation in which the young girl learned to accept her heterosexual role and destiny (Gorham 88–91; Smith-Rosenberg, “Puberty to Menopause,” esp. 184–91; Oppenheim 253–59). In this sense, the period of menarche is also the moment when young
women enter a pre-written cultural plot about femininity, a kind of inevitable generic, as well as gender, destiny and, given its domestic telos, one about which the bookish narrator would be likely to feel fear and ambivalence. The image of blood in Lady Carnbee’s warning — “There’s things about, uncanny for women of our blood” — (298) both evokes menstruation and reads it as an inescapable feminine curse, like that on the female members of the narrator’s family. In light of this thematics of female inheritance, it is significant that Lady Carnbee eventually bequeathes the girl the ring with which she had marked her body.

This feminine inheritance, however, has an apparently double meaning, for not only is the ring associated with menarche — menstrual “wounding” — but with the oddly phallic “malignant prick,” an image that recalls the snake or scorpion lurking in the narrator’s book about the South American forest. If the ring is read, however, as an image for mature female sexuality as well as the menarche that inaugurates it, this contradictory imagery of power and powerlessness (of both phallus and wound) points to the ambiguous place of female desire in domestic ideology, where, like a ghost, the female body is at once spectral and disturbingly present. As an emblem of sexual “lightness” and transgression — “yon ring was the token” — the ring apparently mocks Lady Carnbee’s boast to the narrator that “I was a support to virtue, like Pamela, in my time” (298). Yet Lady Carnbee is like Pamela, if Richardson’s heroine herself is an ambiguous cultural icon, potentially a Shamela, or sexual woman lurking beneath the rhetoric of domesticated female virtue (and the very name, Carnbee, suggests carnality).

Thus, whereas the scholar embodies a paternal literary authority and its newer, high-cultural incarnation from which the narrator is exiled, Lady Carnbee is the story’s terrifying mother-figure, signifying not only the cultural trajectory that links women to sexuality and domesticity but, more importantly, stories about the narrative. These stories include Pamela and also the Gothic, the genre her uncanny weirdness most obviously invokes and which has been linked with women’s fear of domesticity (see Massé 20-39). Indeed, Lady Carnbee’s age — she is so old in the mid-nineteenth-century as to be, by birth, an eighteenth-century woman — harks back to the period of the Gothic’s origins. In larger literary-historical terms, however, the presence of this character points to a crucial shift between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the representation of feminine transgression. Recently Elizabeth Barnes has discussed how eighteenth-century narratives, which tend to focus on seduction and unruly female sexuality, were replaced by the nineteenth-century narratives in which women are chastely domesticated; both types of female Bildung, however, have at their center a matrophobic plot in which the daughter is afraid of repeating the mother’s fate. According to Barnes, the seduction narrative whose themes still linger in the nineteenth-century novel is the maternal ghost, the “spectre of betrayed and disillusioned womanhood” that haunts the happier domestic narrative (158). Thus, although the aunt claims that the “light woman” is “not like you and me” (328), the women are alike in a way that illuminates Lady Carnbee’s multivalent significance figuring at once witch-like power and womanly weakness. Her story, buried at the heart of “The Library Window,” tells the originary fable — the mother-plot, as it were — of woman’s fall from knowledge. In this narrative Lady Carnbee might seem the betrayer, not the betrayed, the powerful rather than the powerless: the “light woman” has the power to kill through a seductive version of domestic “influence.” Yet the scholar’s revenge on the women for invading his study with their sexuality is to
tantalize them with a “dream” of learning that can only evaporate, leaving them stranded in textual and sexual frustration. The only power women have, then, is hidden and Gothic, reminiscent of the black veiling that, Miss Havisham-like, swathes Lady Carnbee, and which suggests the potentially transgressive but still finally limited power of women within domesticity.

Even in adulthood the narrator continues to be haunted by this feminine destiny:

when old Lady Carnbee died — an old, old, woman . . . it was found in her will that she had left me that diamond ring. I am afraid of it still. It is locked up in an old sandal-wood box in the lumber-room in the little old country-house which belongs to me, but where I never live. If any one would steal it, it would be a relief to my mind. (331)

The narrator ends the story, thus, as she began, in a liminal position on the borders of femininity. She never lives in the country-house with the ring, and it would be a relief to her mind — to her identity as a woman of mind — if the ring was stolen. The continued association of femininity with otherness (the Indian sandal-wood box) renders foreign the world of domesticity that should be familiar to the narrator. The narrator’s last glimpse of the scholar occurs after she, as an adult, returns from another realm of Otherness, India, as a widow with her children and seems to see the ghost waiting in the crowd at the docks: “all at once I saw him, and he waved his hand to me . . . . I landed almost cheerfully, thinking here was some one who would help me. But he had disappeared, as he did from the window, with that one wave of his hand” (331).

The meaning of the scholar’s gesture, however, differs subtly from that of his earlier farewell. Although she sees this vision as she is about to resume her maternal duties in England, the ghost’s wave could invite the narrator away from domesticity rather than saluting her in it. Like both her maiden aunt and Lady Carnbee, who is either widow or spinster, the widowed narrator is not obviously attached to a man. It is striking, indeed, that a narrative about feminine acculturation should end in a Gothic zone of loss, exile, and widowhood, like the end of the Autobiography where Oliphant — having lost both husband and children, the domesticity for which she was presumably writing — says “And now I am all alone. I cannot write any more” (150). The narrator also appears unable to write further, surrendering all claims to knowledge in her last line, “I never knew what Aunt Mary meant when she said ‘Yon ring was the token,’ nor what it could have to do with that strange window in the old College Library of St Rule’s” (331). And yet she notes this lack of knowledge to suggest she knows more than she tells, a position curiously like that which Josef Breuer associates with the hysteric who “suffers mainly from reminiscences” (7).

In this sense the context with which I began this essay — reading the story as valedictory Kunstlerroman, in which Oliphant also suffers from reminiscences — suggests a way of interpreting its contingency in the same issue of Blackwood’s as “The Anti-Marriage League.” It is certainly ironic that Oliphant seems to defend marriage in the article when the story is riddled with ambivalence about domesticity. And it is also ironic that she castigates Hardy and Grant Allen for writing sexual narratives that can corrupt female readers (137) when her story, albeit in the reticent and veiled fashion of the domestic narrative, encodes a sexual plot. Yet we can also see in Oliphant’s protest against Hardy a fear, common to Victorian domestic feminists, of how sexual discourses can negatively
define women as objects. Like "The Library Window," *Jude the Obscure* is about a male scholar who attempts to escape, and is finally destroyed by, the seduction of women defined by their bodies rather than their minds. If Jude’s first wife, Arabella, a character to whose coarseness Oliphant violently objects (138–39) is the novel’s most obvious incarnation of the flesh-bound woman, even Sue Bridehead, the New Woman and intellectual, finally cannot succeed as a thinker because she is a hysteric, the image of woman as nervous and sexual body. As Penny Boumelha says, Sue’s “sexuality is the decisive element in her collapse. . . . It is Sue, and not Jude, who is the primary site of that ‘deadly war waged between flesh and spirit’ of which Hardy speaks in his Preface” (142,145).

The story of the female body, in other words, has already been written; that of the female mind, or a plot about mind that transcends the “hostile duality of body and mind,” in late nineteenth-century “woman question” novels (Boumelha 86) does not exist. Oliphant, the apparent opponent of the New Woman, is no different in her inability (in DuPlessis’s term) to “write beyond the ending” of her culture’s romance narratives than the New Women novelists of her day, who similarly had difficulty in writing the story of the woman artist without ending with a romance plot that exiles women from art. If anything, by finally placing the narrator between domesticity and art, “The Library Window” is a more moving indictment of women’s frustration with cultural discourses of femininity than the end of the New Woman novel *The Beth Book*, which unconvincingly grafts a romance ending onto its Kunsteroman of the female writer (see Doughty). “It is a longing all your life after — it is a looking — for what never comes”: in this sense, the aunt’s words in “The Library Window” suggest that the yearning of late nineteenth-century women writers for a world that did not use the female body to devalue the female mind can only haunt their texts as a potent if unsatisfied desire.

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NOTES

1. “The Library Window” has indeed been a neglected story, but as this essay went into press Jay’s new critical biography of Oliphant appeared with the claim that the story is “at once the most accomplished and least self-indulgent account of the woman writer’s predicament that Mrs. Oliphant ever produced” (263). For Jay’s reading of the story, see 263–66.

2. James, high priest of the new high culture, had this to say of Oliphant’s career:

   The poor soul had a simply feminine conception of literature: such slipshod, imperfect, halting, faltering, peeping, down-at-heel work . . . a quivering mass of faintness and fatuity. Yes, no doubt she was a gallant woman . . . but an artist, an artist! (qtd. in Williams, *Margaret Oliphant* 57–58)

3. Much recent scholarship has addressed the characterization by Victorian science of the female reproductive system as a synecdoche for “Woman,” and one moreover that read femininity as itself pathological. See Ehrenreich and English 97–100; Oppenheim 189–90; Russett 116–18. For more on what Russett calls the “war between books and babies” — the belief, used to naturalize women’s exclusion from education, that the female reproductive system and the female mind were in perpetual conflict over vital energy — see Russett 119–29; Oppenheim 182–86; 193–201; Michie 144–47.
4. For more on Oliphant’s complex views on gender, see Williams’s “Feminist or Antifeminist?”.
5. For more on sexuality and the female reader, see Flint, esp. 209–18, 253–55, 274–76.
6. I am indebted to Elizabeth Geren for her perceptive comments on the connections between women’s reading and writing in the story.
7. For more on the difficulties Victorian women had in defining themselves as sages, but also the possibilities for authority and voice this discourse offered them, see Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse, especially the introduction. For more on the sage as both prophet and outsider, see Landow 32.
8. Although at one point she describes it as “flat and blank like a piece of wood” (327), the narrator in “The Library Window” also calls the window a “living window” when she sees her visions there (296). This language of metamorphosis — of animation through textuality — resembles the image at the beginning of “The Yellow Wallpaper” when the (similarly unnamed) narrator characterizes the paper on which she clandestinely writes as “dead paper” (24), ironic in a story where paper comes to life with a vengeance. Although I have no evidence for such an influence, and quite possibly the periodical in which Gilman’s story was published would not have been easily available in Britain, it would be interesting to know whether Oliphant was familiar with Gilman’s story, published four years before hers.
9. To see the pale, sickly narrator as the spectral image of female desire and appetite recalls what Brumberg says about Victorian adolescents and chlorosis, the anemia and pallor common in pubescent girls in the nineteenth century (see 171–78). Associated, like the newly-diagnosed and similar disorder anorexia, with the evaporation of appetite, chlorosis was nonetheless linked by Victorian physicians with ailments of female puberty which they read as really symptomatic of sexual voraciousness. It is worth noting, too, that one source cited by Flint (58) links girls’ reading to the premature onset of menstruation, considered undesirable because of the connection of menarche with sexuality.

WORKS CITED


Landow, George P. “Aggressive (Re)interpretations of the Female Sage: Florence Nightingale’s *Cassandra.*” Morgan 32–45.


