CHAPTER 2

“Long, Long Disappointment”

Maternal Failure and Masculine Exhaustion in Margaret Oliphant’s Autobiography

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While mothers populate the background of Victorian domestic fiction, its protagonists are most frequently daughters—often, indeed, motherless daughters. As Carolyn Dever has argued, “To write a life, in the Victorian period, is to write the story of the loss of the mother” (1). Given that so many Victorian novels about women are structured as “lives,” unfolding from youth to a threshold of adulthood signaled, usually, by marriage, it is perhaps inevitable that their dominant point of view should be filial rather than maternal. Premarital motherhood, after all, is a contradiction in terms in the plots of Victorian literature or culture, except as crime or cause célèbre. What is perhaps more surprising is that maternal narratives are largely absent from the smaller canon of Victorian women’s autobiographical writings and from critical discussion of that canon. For example, in Represent—

1 See also Thaden 3–8. For another influential discussion of the “central myth of our culture’s dependence on the mother’s absence” as “sorrowfully but fortunately [making] possible the construction of language and culture,” see Homans, particularly chapter 1.
2 Novels in which premarital maternity appears as crime or sensation include Charles Dickens, Bleak House (1853); Elizabeth Gaskell, Ruth (1853); Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh (1857); George Eliot, Adam Bede (1859) and Felix Holt (1866); and Thomas Hardy, Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891). In two of these novels—Gaskell’s and Hardy’s—the mother is also the protagonist, but in both her extramarital maternity leads to her death. Discussing three novels with mother-protagonists—Anne Bronté’s The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848); Mrs. Henry Wood’s East Lynne (1861); and Caroline Norton’s Lost and Saved (1863)—Elisabeth Gruner calls them “two generic misfits and one popular sensation novel” (304)—marginal to the mainstream of the daughter’s story.
ing Femininity, Mary Jean Corbett’s wide survey of middle-class women’s autobiography, maternity appears infrequently as one part of the domestic milieu with which such autobiographies must reckon. Linda Peterson’s Traditions of Victorian Women’s Autobiography finds three generic sources for women’s autobiography adapted by Victorian writers: spiritual autobiography; domestic memoir; and “chroniques scandaleuses,” or (in their later incarnation) artists’ lives, among which detailed representations of maternity are rare.

Maternal narrative is missing in these places where one might most expect to find it—in women’s domestic novels and autobiographical writings—precisely, I think, because the mother functioned within domestic ideology not only as an ideal but as the icon of an ideal, the apex of the triangle of roles (daughter, mother, wife) that figured womanhood. An icon represents, but cannot possess, a point of view. “The happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history,” George Eliot opines in one of her high-patriarchal moments (The Mill on the Floss 494); if domestic ideology posits mothers as the happiest women, then they must be outside of the “histories” of the domestic novel and of autobiography. In the scheme of domestic ideology, the frictionless (history-less) maternal figure was supposed not only to anchor but also to reproduce the gendered division of labor according to which “female nature, which was governed by maternal instinct, was supposedly noncompetitive, nonaggressive, and self-sacrificing—that is, internally consistent and not alienated; male nature, the counterpart, was competitive, aggressive, and acquisitive” (Poovey 77). As for unhappy or unsuccessful mothers—mothers who are inconsistent or alienated, or who, in producing wayward sons and daughters, fail to reproduce masculine and feminine gender roles—the less said, or written, about them, the better.3 Elizabeth Langland suggests that the “story of the marginal mother” undermines not just representations of gender but also the very genre—the novel—in which they are represented, because “the movement toward narrative closure in the daughter’s story is contradicted

3 Perhaps the most striking representations of maternal resistance and disillusion are Eliot’s Felix Holt’s Mrs. Transome, for example, is “certainly not one of those bland, adoring, and gently tearful women. After sharing the common dream that when a beautiful man-child was born to her, her cup of happiness would be full, she had travelled through long years apart from that child to find herself at last in the presence of a son of whom she was afraid, who was utterly unmanageable by her, and to whose sentiments in any given case she possessed no key” (198). For an extended analysis of Felix Holt as posing a radical challenge to conventional Victorian ideals of motherhood, see Milton in this volume. In Daniel Deronda, Daniel’s mother, the Princess Halm-Elberstain, notoriously rejects the “common dream” entirely; she “wanted to live out the life that was in me, and not to be hampered with other lives” (536–37).
by the opposing impulse toward radical instability and openness in the mother’s tale” (“Patriarchal Ideology” 384).

But if, like the wage-earning middle-class woman, the failed mother was an ideological impossibility and a narrative contradiction, then also like the wage-earning middle-class woman she was nevertheless a historical fact. Given the discomfiting implications for gender ideology of the figure of the failed mother, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most extended representations of Victorian maternal failure that we have should occur in a document whose relation to publication was ambiguous from the start: Margaret Oliphant’s *Autobiography*, which was written in fits and starts over decades and unpublished in her lifetime. The *Autobiography* is also the work of a novelist who, as Barbara Thaden argues, does frequently depict mothers in her novels and “clearly identifies with mothers in her fiction . . . even dead mothers” (20); perhaps not coincidentally, Oliphant was in her lifetime, and largely remains now, a minor and popular rather than a canonical Victorian novelist.

The issue of failure has dominated the reception of Oliphant’s work since the publication of her first novel, which a reviewer for the *Athenaeum* characterized in terms of unrealized potential: “Had the passages been condensed within a single volume, the tale would have taken a very high rank” (qtd. in Williams 9). That Oliphant’s literary career emphasized quantity at the expense of quality (she published ninety-eight novels as well as biographies, literary histories, reviews, and essays) is an oft-repeated view fostered by Oliphant’s own representations of herself in the *Autobiography* as compelled to write furiously to support her extended family. She also repeatedly claims that her children were a much more important production than her writing, and her failure to preserve them more devastating than that of her literary reputation. “At my most ambitious of times I would rather my children had remembered me as their mother, and my friends as their friend. . . . And now that there are no children to whom to leave any memory; and the friends drop day by day, what is the reputation of a circulating library to me?” (136).

Despite such assertions, the figure of Oliphant the author rather than Oliphant the mother has taken center stage in recent feminist reconsiderations. Feminist scholarship has reevaluated her career as shaped by the pressures created by the gender ideologies of Victorian literary production and reception. Recent readings of the *Autobiography* itself have emphasized the gender- and genre-challenging ambivalence, indeterminacy, and nonlinearity of its narrative. In this essay, I take seriously Oliphant’s claim

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4 Corbett argues that the narrative is shaped by the impossibility “even for middle-class women of the nineteenth century [of] living ‘a literary life,’ in the sense that term might hold for Mill or Dickens or Trollope” (106); Barros, also comparing Oliphant’s *Autobiog-
in the *Autobiography* that the experience of maternity was at least as important, and as vexed, for her as the experience and representation of a literary life. I analyze the *Autobiography* as representing that experience not only through its moving “outpourings of grief” over her maternal losses but also through its reticence and opacity about the implications of her experience of maternal failure.

Oliphant’s autobiographical narrative suggests the weakness of the maternal ideal as an agent of gendered social reproduction even as it celebrates that ideal. The *Autobiography* can be read as a record of the consumption of Oliphant’s enormous energies by her doomed efforts to keep several generations of sickly, impecunious brothers, husband, and sons afloat and alive. Oliphant was widowed after seven years of marriage; during her marriage as well as after her husband’s death she took on financial (conventionally paternal) as well as emotional (conventionally maternal) responsibilities in order to support not only her own children (of whom two sons, Cyril and Cecco, lived to early adulthood), but also two adult brothers (Willie, whom alcoholism rendered incapable of steady employment, and Frank, who came to live with her after he suffered financial ruin, the loss of his wife, and a nervous breakdown) and her brother Frank’s three children.

Despite the extravagance of Oliphant’s experience of masculine illness, impecuniousness, and dependency and what Jay calls her “readiness to publicize her view of men as a separate and inferior race” (*Fiction to Herself* 73), she retained an admiration for masculinity in the abstract. “I have learned to take perhaps more a man’s view of mortal affairs,” she asserts early in the *Autobiography*, comparing herself to Charlotte Brontë and projecting a posthumous reputation for “courage . . . and for honesty and honourable dealing” (11). Her sons, whom she educated at Eton and Oxford, became the receptacles of her hopes for the embodiment of these masculine values. But Cyril was apparently an alcoholic (see Williams 146

*raphy to those of male contemporaries, suggests that “Margaret Oliphant interrogates and problematizes the autobiographical persona as she presents her life narrative. The certitude about the persona that is manifest in the autobiographies of Newman, Darwin, and Mill is absent from the Oliphant persona” (151). Peterson, Langbauer, and d’Albertis all represent the *Autobiography* as a successful exposition of Oliphant’s own personal and aesthetic values—a celebration of “personal taste and aesthetic judgment” (Peterson 169) and of the “importance of the commonplace” (Langbauer 132) in autobiography and in life; and a “critique of the restrictive plots of domestic fiction” (d’Albertis 809). Jay emphasizes the “literariness of the *Autobiography* . . . to dispel the long-held notion that this fragmented self-disclosure is merely a naïve compilation of diary, chronicle, and anecdote” (Introduction x). Barbara Thaden does analyze Oliphant’s fictional representations of maternity in her book on the “maternal voice”; and Jay discusses Oliphant’s “obsessive interest in the mother-child relationship” in *Fiction to Herself* (126–33).
and Trela 23); Cecco, like his father, suffered from tuberculosis; and both were unable or unwilling to assume the valorized masculine role as adults. They remained financially dependent upon Oliphant until their early deaths (Cyril’s at thirty-four, Cecco’s at thirty-five) and themselves produced neither children nor books. Though it repeatedly stages and mourns such masculine decline and failure, the *Autobiography* is ambivalent about acknowledging Oliphant’s own transgressions against the maternal ideal (in her “man’s view of mortal affairs”) or the contradictions and limitations of Victorian gender norms that it reveals.

As a middle-class woman who moved in literary circles and educated her sons as gentlemen, Oliphant cannot be taken as typical in her negotiations with the maternal ideal. But her experience and representation of maternity, shaped as much by the brute facts of Victorian mortality as by the complexities of Victorian domestic ideology, make the *Autobiography* exemplary of the pluralist account of Victorian gender ideologies that feminist scholars have been building for the past several decades. In this account, the ensemble of beliefs, representations, and admonishments that we have come to call “domestic ideology,” strikingly prescriptive though its representation of womanhood could be, is most usefully viewed not as a rigid grid by which subjects were firmly positioned, but as the shifting matrix of negotiations with dominant discourses experienced by subjects who varied in their degree of opposition to or articulation with social norms, access to socioeconomic resources, and cultural authority. As Merryn Williams and others have argued, for example, Oliphant’s reputation for conservatism on the “Woman Question,” based on her dismissive responses to the writings of reformers such as Barbara Bodichon and John Stuart Mill, is belied both by the representations of clever, ambitious young women in novels such as *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865–66) and by her later, cautious support for some forms of woman’s suffrage. Oliphant’s

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5 As Mary Poovey influentially stated this position several decades ago, “This ideological formulation [of gender] was uneven both in the sense of being experienced differently by individuals who were positioned differently within the social formation (by sex, class, or race, for example) and in the sense of being articulated differently by the different institutions, discourses, and practices that it both constituted and was constituted by. For some groups of people some of the time, an ideological formulation of, for example, maternal nature might have seemed so accurate as to be true; for others, it probably felt less like a description than a goal or even a judgment—a description, that is, of what the individual should and has failed to be” (3). Other important discussions of the role and representation of women within domestic ideology include those by Armstrong and Langland, *Nobody’s Angels*, both of whom emphasize the forms of power (ideological, for Armstrong; political and institutional, for Langland) accruing to the figure of the domestic angel in the nineteenth century.

6 See Williams in Trela.
representation in her autobiography of the relationship between maternity and authorship is similarly shifting: she represents maternity at different moments as the impetus for her writing, as the impediment to a career of greater literary value, as more important than her literary career, and as a source of pleasure and pain parallel with writing. These shifts create simultaneously a celebration of the maternal ideal, a record of its unintended consequences, and a reluctant elegy for its failure.

Although it is customary to refer to this text as “Oliphant’s Autobiography”—a custom I will follow—the implication of a consistent authorial intention expressed in linear life narrative is somewhat misleading. The first and until recently standard edition of the Autobiography was edited in 1899 from Oliphant’s manuscript by her second cousin and amanuensis Annie Coghill, who organized manuscript sections chronologically; omitted “well over a quarter of the original manuscript,” including Oliphant’s “outpourings of grief” (Jay, “Introduction” ix, x) for her dead children; and concluded with a selection of Oliphant’s letters to fill in the record of her later years. In 1990, Elisabeth Jay returned to the manuscript and produced an edition whose parts are organized by date of composition rather than narrative chronology and which includes material that Coghill omitted. Both editions thus reflect not only the temporal lapses and changing contexts of Oliphant’s impulses toward first-person narrative, but also the judgment of her editors about how best to represent those lapses and changes and through them Oliphant herself. In both arrangements, a logically rebarbative narrative structure announces itself to the reader on the first page: “Twenty-one years have passed since I wrote what is on the opposite page” (Coghill 3); and “To return to the idea with which I started that it was better when I steadily made up my mind in Edinburgh to enter without any props upon my natural lonely life—I am not sure that it was a good idea after all” (Jay, Autobiography 3). Although parts of the narrative progress chronologically, the work as a whole has a contrapuntal rather than a linear organization, combining straightforward retrospective life narrative with anecdotes of Oliphant’s literary milieu and present-tense lamentations for her dead children. Each of these strands is frequently introduced or qualified by negation, as when Oliphant begins her account of childhood by claiming to “remember nothing of Wallyford, where I was born” (18); deprecates the anecdotes as “making pennyworths of myself” (95); or (having interrupted her narrative with mourning) admonishes

7 In this article I quote from Jay’s edition unless otherwise noted. A reprint of Coghill’s arrangement, with a foreword by Laurie Langbauer, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1988. See Jay, “Introduction,” and Jay in Trela for discussions of Oliphant’s manuscript and the issues involved in editing it.
herself: “I must try to change the tone of this record” (86) and “I must try to begin again” (95). Part of what makes the *Autobiography* arresting, then, is how frankly it reveals the difficulty of, and mixed motives inherent in, self-representation.

But the *Autobiography* is marked by opacity as well as revelation, by self-concealment as well as self-expression. As Jay writes, by 1885, when Oliphant began thinking seriously about constructing an autobiography, “she had already written two full-length biographies, reviewed numerous biographies and autobiographies, and recently written a series of articles for *Blackwood’s* on interesting examples of the autobiographical genre” (*Fiction to Herself* 25). She had a strong preference for domestic detail and what might be called human interest in life writing. A biography, she asserts in a *Contemporary Review* essay, ought not to be a “mere record of facts” but to set out “the whole course and progress of a life . . . according to the real scope and meaning which pervade and inspire it” (83). Yet as an author, Oliphant is often reluctant to pursue very far the question of the “real scope and meaning” of a life, whether hers or another subject’s. At the opening of *Jeanne d’Arc* (1896), for example, she asserts that her subject

can neither be classified, as her countrymen love to classify, nor traced to any system of evolution as we all attempt to do nowadays. . . .

How did she come out of that stolid peasant race, out of that distracted and ignoble age, out of riot and license and the fierce thirst for gain, and failure of every noble faculty? Who can tell? By the grace of God, by the inspiration of heaven, the only origins in which the student of nature, which is over nature, can put any trust. No evolution, no system of development, can explain Jeanne. (7–8)

The claim that a subject cannot be explained—the pejorative association of explanation with either French metaphysics or scientific reductionism—is on its face a startling one for a biographer (as well as autobiographer and domestic novelist) to make. Although she emphasizes her use of historical sources (the book includes footnotes, maps, and an index of proper names), Oliphant prefers to celebrate rather than analyze the origins of the heroic womanhood of Jeanne, “the finest emblem in the world in general of that noble, fearless, and spotless Virginity which is one of the finest inspirations of the medieval mind” (8).

In the latter part of the *Autobiography*, Oliphant generalizes this polemical preference for presentation over explanation: “I have never, I am glad to say, been ‘a student of human nature’ or any such thing. . . . My own
opinion has always been . . . that to study human nature was the greatest impertinence, to be resented whenever encountered” (98). The “study” of “human nature” seems to be particularly impertinent when it appears as the study of the nature of gender. In a review of Anna Jameson’s memoirs, Oliphant remarks that “from the beginning of history, . . . whenever it has been necessary, women have toiled, have earned money . . . in total indifference to all theory” (qtd. in Peterson 153). “Theory,” “system,” and “classification” all connote for Oliphant an improper (in the sense of scandalous as well as misapplied) reification of what she understands as individual, improvisational negotiations of natural gender roles. To denaturalize these roles as systemic rather than essential, even from a feminist point of view, is to denigrate the domestic heroism of the kinds of negotiations so familiar to Oliphant herself: “I have always had to think of other people, and to plan everything—for my own pleasure, it is true, very often, but always in subjection to the necessity which bound me to them” (16; emphasis added). It is this sense of “subjection to . . . necessity” that preserves for Oliphant the dignity and meaning of her maternal labors in the face of failure and loss; but the assertion of “necessity” marks the limits of inquiry.

The Autobiography begins with Oliphant’s comparison of herself to a heroic female figure closer to her than Joan of Arc—George Eliot, whose Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, edited by John Cross, she had recently reviewed and disliked for what she took to be its subject’s self-importance.

I have been tempted to begin writing by George Eliot’s life. . . . I wonder if I am a little envious of her? I always avoid considering formally what my own mind is worth. I have never had any theory on the subject. I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children. That, however, was not the first motive, so that when I laugh inquiries off and say that it is my trade, I do it only by way of eluding the question which I have neither time nor wish to enter into. (14)

Again, we see the dismissal of “theory” and an ambivalent representation of her own behavior as part of her nature (“it came natural to me”). Structural (economic) necessity is conceded (“I had to work for my children”)—but then partially retracted (“That, however, was not the first motive”). Similarly, Oliphant simultaneously disclaims introspection (“I always avoid considering formally what my own mind is worth”), exhibits her own self-
knowledge (“I wonder if I am a little envious of her”), and frankly admits to employing a rhetorical stratagem (“eluding the question [of why she writes]”) at the moment of continuing to employ it. In this passage (written before the deaths of her sons), her ability to “avoid” and “elude” is almost playful, proffering to the reader an “involuntary confession” (15) of conflict and ambivalence only to circumscribe it with reticence.

Playfulness in other ways informs the part of the Autobiography written before her sons’ deaths or recollecting that time. A number of Oliphant’s social comedies, such as Miss Marjoribanks and Phoebe, Junior (1876), feature strong heroines who ally themselves with weaker men through whom they will be able to realize their own social ambitions. Similarly, in the Autobiography, Oliphant depicts her maternal, head-of-the-household persona as a figure of almost slapstick vitality. She “loved the easy swing of life, without taking much thought for the morrow, with a faith in my own power to go on working” (117) and emphasizes the “spirit almost criminally elastic [that] ought to have been worn out by work, and crushed by care, half a hundred times by all rules” (135). Her husband, by contrast, is a shadowy presence even while alive, marked by “worries and troubles with his workmen” (62). While Oliphant is “writing steadily all the time, getting about £400 for a novel,” her artist husband’s glassmaking business is turned down by a potential investor who satirically “congratulated my husband that his circumstances permitted him to be so indifferent to profit” (63).8

Although, as Linda Peterson suggests, the Autobiography’s most blissful recollections are of harmony between her literary and domestic responsibilities (“As Oliphant reconstructs her life, professional work seems naturally and necessarily to proceed from the domestic context” [155]), it is Oliphant’s role as mother more than as wife that creates that “domestic context.” In her recollections, one “good time” occurs early in her widowhood:

This [1862–63, the year of the publication and success of Salem Chapel] was also the time when I wrote the [biography] “Edward Irving.” It must have been my good time, the little boat going very smoothly and all promising well, and, always my burden of happiness, the children all well. They had the measles, I remember. . . . It was a day on which Mrs. Carlyle was coming for the afternoon. . . . [She] sat by me, so kind and

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8 The Oliphants’ short marriage suffered first from tensions between Frank and Oliphant’s mother; then perhaps, as these lines suggest, from financial strain; and finally from Frank’s rapidly failing health. See Jay, Fiction to Herself 14–17.
tender and full of encouragement. . . . And by the first post possible that same evening, I got a letter from her telling me that Mr. Carlyle had made her sit down at once and write to tell me that a sister of his had once had just such an attack, which never was repeated. God bless them, that much maligned, much misunderstood pair! That was not much like the old ogre his false friends have made him out to be. (103)

In this scene, harmonies multiply: the activity of nursing sick children not only coexists with, but is also eased by, intercourse with prominent representatives of the “literary life” that Oliphant elsewhere denies living (137); that harmony is not only facilitated by but also extends to include the notoriously unharmonious Carlyles. Even the additional responsibility that later devolves upon the widowed Oliphant for her brother’s family does not immediately disturb her representation of a familial scene in which maternity anchors rather than constrains all kinds of productivity—of text as well as children: “There is no doubt that it was much more congenial to me to drive on and keep everything going, with a certain scorn of the increased work, and a metaphorical toss of my head, as if it mattered! than it ever would have been to labour with an artist’s fervour and concentration to produce a masterpiece” (132). For a time, each new burden produced by masculine failure or death increases Oliphant’s domestic energy and careless bounty.

Yet a warning note, of a less harmonious and more tragic relation between the financial and the more conventionally maternal responsibilities of Victorian domesticity, sounds early in the narrative, when Oliphant describes the friendship of her and her husband with another literary couple, the writers Mary and William Howitt. Unlike Oliphant, Mary Howitt seems to have been vividly attuned to a conventional ideological conflict between authorship and domesticity. Mary Jean Corbett suggests that Howitt’s representation of her writing in her own autobiography “underwrites an unequal and gendered difference between her writerly identity and her husband’s” because “only William’s work must be uninterrupted, sustained over time as his proper occupation” (Corbett 86), while Howitt, like Oliphant, rapidly and without protection from interruption produces ephemera to sustain the household. Howitt’s self-representation prevents Oliphant from recuperating this couple—with its parallels to her own marriage—for her model of domestic and professional harmony; she emphasizes that she “liked [Mary Howitt] greatly” but “not so her husband, who did not please me at all”; characteristically, she does not explain why William Howitt failed to please. Mary Howitt “frightened me very much, I remember, by telling me of many babies whom she had
lost through some defective valve in the heart, which she said was some-
how connected with too much mental work on the part of the mother—a
foolish thing, I should think, yet the same thing [i.e., the loss of children
in infancy] occurred twice to myself. It alarmed and saddened me terri-
ibly—but I liked her greatly” (40).

The Howitt household darkly parodies Oliphant’s own—domestic
disharmony, between husband and wife, literary and maternal activity,
is all too apparent. But Oliphant does not entirely accept this representa-
tion of a conflict between maternal and “mental” work; her attitude both
within and toward Howitt’s anecdote is equivocal. As a young mother, she
is understandably “frightened,” “alarmed,” and “saddened” by Howitt’s
account, given her own recent losses (of two children in infancy in her
first three years of marriage); yet she does not go so far as to concede the
truth of a proposition that she calls “foolish,” finally substituting a judg-
ment of Howitt herself (“I liked her greatly”) for a firm evaluation of her
claims about maternity and mental labor. The close of the anecdote (after
which the Howitts disappear from the narrative) describes Oliphant’s
bemusement at Howitt’s enthusiasm for her eldest daughter’s experience
as a spiritual medium—“the Howitts’ eldest daughter was an art medium
producing wonderful scribble-scrabbles, which it was the wonder of won-
ders to find her mother . . . full of enthusiasm about” (41)—and so further
undermines Howitt’s doom-prophesying authority as an expert on moth-
erhood.

Loss and disappointment, however, erode Oliphant’s vision of domes-
tic harmony and vigorous productivity. In addition to the infant deaths of
the 1850s, she loses her ten-year-old daughter, Maggie, in 1864, and her
nephew Frank some fifteen years later. While Maggie’s death provokes the
passionate lamentation with which Jay’s edition begins, and causes Oliph-
ant uncharacteristic “upbraiding and reproaching [of] God” (9), it lacks the
finality of the much later deaths of Cyril, in 1890, and Cecco, in 1894: “My
own children, my very own, born of me, have all been taken away from
me”; she is now “a mother childless” (79). In the face of this terrible oxy-
moron Oliphant’s continued energy finally comes to seem to her not comi-
cally productive but uncannily torturous: “All this misery does not give
me even a headache. I neither eat nor sleep for days together and I am as
well at the end of them as I am at the beginning. What is to become of me,
shall I never die?” Looking back she sees not bounty but lack. “My three

9 For a discussion of Howitt’s autobiographical representation of the relation between
maternity and writing, see Corbett 86–89. On the argument that intellectual labor could
harm women’s reproductive systems, see Russett 104–29.
boys, for Frank [her nephew] was mine too all now gone. . . . Madge [her niece] married too and in an unfortunate way. All failure, failure everything, and I am thought a successful woman, but everything I touch seems to go wrong” (81).10

These words come from one of three lamentations written during the month of Cecco’s death. It is in these grief-stricken entries—for they read like diary entries rather than autobiographical retrospect—that Oliphant confronts her own sense of maternal failure. She begins one meditation by confessing that “[o]ne cruel man the other day told me I had ruined my family by my indulgence and extravagance” (79). Oliphant vacillates in her response to this charge. First, she reasserts her beneficent intentions: “I do not honestly before God think so . . . I meant, having no money to leave [Cyril and Cecco], to endow them with the best education, and a happy youth” (79). She acknowledges that “this education has not come to much, in any case. . . .” But she rejects the possibility that the education was misguided: “My Tiddy [i.e., Cyril], God forgive and bless him, partly by his own fault, my Cecco by the long burden of illness which has kept him back, have not achieved those high hopes which I seemed so fully justified in forming.” She reiterates the blamelessness of her intentions—“What was wrong was done in love and not wrongly meant. And now my work is accomplished, and my trust fulfilled however badly” (82). Even as these words contain the saving reminder of the seriousness of her efforts, the next bitter turn undermines that seriousness: “If I had broken down as many women might in that sad Time [sic] after my husband died, before Cecco was born, how very, very little difference it would have made. . . . Nobody thinks that the few books I will leave behind me count for anything. I have no such thought” (82). On the one hand, Oliphant seems to dismiss her authorial as well as her maternal efforts; on the other, once again she reminds herself, if only by denegation, of her own productivity—the more than “few books” that she will leave behind. Through these vacillations she arrives at a slightly more hopeful conclusion: “Cecco would have gone unborn had that [i.e., her earlier death] been so—I am wrong to say it—his dear life . . . could not have been left out” (83). She will, despite the obliterating intensity of her grief at the present-tense moment of this writing, return to the retrospective narrative of the Autobiography—half of which, Jay points out, was written after Cecco’s death (Fiction to Herself

10 Oliphant’s nephew Frank became an engineer and died of typhoid in India at the age of twenty-five (Williams 119). Her niece Madge, whom she trained as an artist, made a marriage to a businessman fourteen years her senior that Oliphant considered “unfortunate” (81); she died of scarlet fever less than two months after Oliphant’s own death (Williams 185).
recharacterizing it as directed “consciously for the public, with the aim (no evil aim) of leaving a little more money for [her niece] Denny” (95). Repeatedly, it is the return to her persona not singly as author or as mother but as woman working for her children that allows Oliphant to move past self-reproimation and complete despair.

To the extent that she entertains self-reproach, Oliphant does so in a way that turns the “cruel man’s” image of maternal excess on its head. She mentions a “sadder theory” about “the great sorrows that have clouded the end of [her] life,” and elaborates this “theory” in a footnote:

This is what I thought—that I had so accustomed them to the easy going on of all things, never letting them see my [financial] anxieties or know that there was a difficulty about anything, so that . . . it took all thought of necessity out of my Tiddy’s mind, who had always, I am sure, the feeling . . . that nothing was likely ever to go far wrong so long as I was there. The sentiment was not ungenerous . . . And my Cecco . . . who was stricken by the hand of God [i.e., illness], until that too rendered further going on impossible, by the drying up of my sources and means of getting [literary commissions] for him—so that I seem sometimes to feel as if it were all my doing, and that I had brought by my heedlessness both to an impasse from which there was no issue but one. . . . Who can tell? God alone over all knows, and works by our follies as well as our better ways. Must it not be at last to the good of all? (117)

Though the self-doubt is grave, it is literally marginal to her main narrative, and again, the excesses to which Oliphant admits are those of generosity and energy. Again, too, questions perform the role of a conclusion, putting determination of cause and effect beyond human comprehension. These questions, particularly the last, echo Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (which Oliphant came to appreciate during her mourning for Maggie): “Behold, we know not anything / I can but trust that good shall fall / At last—far off—at last, to all, / And every winter change to spring” (LIV 13–16). The echo is not confined to the language, for Tennyson’s, too, is an elegy in which doubt is finally answered by assertion rather than by argument or explanation.

Nevertheless, at the end of the *Autobiography*, Oliphant returns to the question of the disparity between her “high hopes” for her sons in their youths and their subsequent declines. “My dearest, bright delightful boy somehow missed his footing, how can I tell how?” she writes of Cyril, who “took a second-class [degree] at Oxford,—a great disappointment, yet not disgraceful after all.” Briefly she contemplates answers, adducing
conflicting possibilities such as “inherited tendencies” (presumably toward alcoholism); the “perversity of youth, which he never outgrew”; a dislike of hard work; and the influence of her own tendency to “laugh at the superior people.” Again, however, she finally dismisses the attempt at explanation with a question, concluding with the irreducible fact of her own loss: “Why should I try to explain? He went out of the world, leaving a love-song or two behind him and the little volume of ‘De Musset,’ of which much was so well done, and yet some so badly done, and nothing more to show for his life. And I to watch it all going on day by day and year by year!” (152–53). Jay suggests that Oliphant has a “fatalis[tic]” sense of character—her own and others’—as she often has recourse to concluding “phrase[s] such as ‘It was my way’ or ‘But so it was’ or ‘I could have done no other’” (Fiction to Herself 31). These assertions have, paradoxically, the same effect as her questions (“Why should I try to explain?” “How can I say how?”) and vacillations (great disappointment/no disgrace; inherited tendencies/maternal influence; well done/badly done): assertions of necessity, mutually canceling descriptions, and dismissive questions all serve to render explanation nugatory. In doing so, they mark, for Oliphant, the limit of what can be discussed: while her personal suffering falls within that limit, the systems, theories, and classifications of gender ideology fall without.

Yet the (continuing) centrality of motherhood to gender ideology means that the personal experience of maternal failure cannot easily be separated from its social implications. According to Jay, not only the one “cruel man” but “many of Oliphant’s acquaintance felt that she had been an over-devoted mother” (Autobiography 171).11 As Sally Shuttleworth suggests in an essay on the Victorian “demonic mother,” the threat of overdevotion or “maternal excess” (43) was one of the contradictions built into the maternal ideal. Through maternal excess, “The sacred passion [i.e., maternal love] can itself be demonized, turned into an avenging force which destroys both the angelic mother herself and the concord of the domestic hearth, revealing all too clearly the precarious balance of the patriarchal bourgeois order” (44). Shuttleworth quotes one advice-writer on the “relaxing effeminacy” that “emotional immoderation” can produce (43). Some contemporaries of Oliphant apparently viewed her sons as effete if not effeminate: “He lived at home an idle and self-indulgent life,” one acquaintance observed about Cyril, “... and no more melancholy decadence than that of the vivid sparkling Eton boy into the elderly and deprecating loafer... could be

11 For an argument, however, that most critical and biographical representations overstate the failure of Oliphant’s sons, see Peterson 160–64.
imagined” (qtd. in Williams 145). Another wrote of Cecco that his presence seemed to impose the necessity “to moderate and hush our talk when he was by, as one does for a much older person who must not be disturbed or worried” (qtd. in Williams 174). The explicit distortion in each case is one of age rather than gender: Cyril has become “an elderly and deprecating loafer”; Cecco is like “a much older person.” But the “decadence” of these images and their emphasis on delicacy and incapacity suggests a more generally flawed masculinity.  

Oliphant sometimes represents herself as troubled by her children’s continued dependence on her and by their apparent rejection of the conventional structures of heterosexual adulthood: “My heart fails me when I think how entirely I represent home to [Cecco, Denny, and Madge]. . . . I think now it would be nothing but blessedness, that one of the girls at least, and my Cecco, should each find some one who would be the partner of their lives—and so be weaned from me” (59), she writes. When faced with this “blessedness” in Madge’s case, however, she considered the outcome “unfortunate” (81; see Williams 172–73). And the Autobiography’s closing image of Cecco suggests her unwillingness to lose the only familial intimacy and fulfillment (however diminished) of her maternal expectations remaining to her:

My Cecco took the first steps in the same way [as Cyril]; but, thanks be to God, righted himself and overcame—not in time enough to save his career at Oxford, but so as to be all that I had hoped—always my very own, my dearest companion, choosing me before all others. . . . When he was absent he wrote to me every day. I never went out but he was there to give me his arm. . . . I can hear myself saying “Cecco and I.” It was the constant phrase. But all through he was getting weaker: and I knew it, and tried not to know. (153–54)

12 A. C. Benson made this comment in 1888, just before the decade in which the word “decadence” became associated with illicit sexual styles, including homosexuality. Jay also quotes Benson as remarking on “something ‘morbidly passionate’ in her love for her boys” (Fiction to Herself 42). An Eton man himself, the “semi-official biographer” (Dellamora 59) of Walter Pater and an associate of the “Decadents” of the 1890s, Benson would surely have been aware of this connotation, but how specifically he intends it here seems impossible to determine. The conjunction of language such as Benson’s, Oliphant’s cryptically expressed anxieties about Cyril’s misbehavior, and both Cyril and Cecco’s lack of apparent heterosexual ties might lead the twenty-first-century reader to wonder where their own self definitions fall within what Richard Dellamora investigates as “masculine experience during the [Victorian] period, experience not only of men who appear recognizably ‘homosexual’ but of a wider and more varied range of men” (5). The sexual attitudes and experiences of the Oliphant sons are, however, unrecoverable, certainly without research beyond the scope of this essay and possibly at all.
In the context of the ideological matrix that Shuttleworth discusses, this uxorious image might seem to put Oliphant in the category of the “demonic mother” transgressing the boundary between maternal and romantic passion. The practice of blaming mothers for perceived failures of masculine subjectivity would develop in a more virulent strain in some of Freud’s theories. In his speculative essay on Leonardo da Vinci (1909), for example, published only a decade after Oliphant’s *Autobiography*, Freud claims that the subjects in all of his “male homosexual cases” had in childhood had a very strong maternal attachment that “was evoked or encouraged by too much tenderness on the part of the mother herself” (99). For Oliphant, however, this representation is neither transgressive nor blameworthy; on the contrary, it is part of her increasing idealization of Cecco after the more actively unsatisfactory Cyril’s death. Unlike Cyril’s degeneration, Cecco’s devotion repays Oliphant’s own and partly makes good her losses. Cecco was also more successful than Cyril in inheriting Oliphant’s literary mantle. As Peterson writes, “By the end of 1885 Cecco’s story ‘Grateful Ghosts’ was in proofs for *Blackwood’s Magazine*, and Oliphant was writing happily to the publisher: ‘I trust too that your last new contributor, Cecco, will give you and the public satisfaction, and that this may be the beginning of a long connection’” (Peterson 163). Cecco is the last man standing in the *Autobiography*; but in the end, like Cyril, he dies leaving little literary—and no human—progeny.

The *Autobiography*’s theme of exhausted, unproductive masculinity and energetic female productivity is all the more ominous because it is not confined to Oliphant’s family but is amplified in the narrative’s marginal and secondary male figures: William Howitt; the painter Robert Macpherson, whose wife, Geraldine, according to Oliphant, “work[ed] like a slave—nay, as no slave ever worked—at the common trade, the photographing, at which she did quite as much, if not, people said, more than, he did” (75) and who, according to Williams, was left, after his death, with four children and debts to pay off, while suffering from rheumatism and heart disease (102); and Oliphant’s good friend (and biographical subject) John Tulloch, principal of St. Andrew’s College, who suffered from depression. Oliphant admired him greatly, but she wrote to him on one occasion, “But think, please if it had been me who had been ill, what would have become

13 The complete absence of information about Leonardo’s unmarried mother, Caterina, which Freud acknowledges, does not inhibit him from concluding that “like all unsatisfied mothers, she took her little son in place of her husband, and by the too early maturing of his erotism robbed him of a part of his masculinity” (117). Freud however left undeveloped, and often expressed uncertainty about, the now discredited connection he asserts here between what he represents as two forms of gender deviance.
of me?—no income going on whether one could work or not—no wife to take care of me” (qtd. in Williams 140). Reading, in the wake of Cecco’s death, a biography of Archbishop Campbell Tait, whose children and wife died in an outbreak of scarlet fever (172n 84), she writes, “Oh good archbishop you are better than I, only three years and a half off 70 and surely one can’t be made to live longer than that. . . . I could turn to and work or write a love story or draw or skate or walk a mile—anything, anything—but my burden is more than I can bear” (86). In Oliphant’s experience and in her writing, the debt, depression, and death that men suffer almost appear as indulgences that women, who carry the burdens of planning and acting, cannot afford.

Like Thomas Hardy, whose representation of marital relations in Jude the Obscure (1895) she notoriously attacked, Oliphant could see to the end of Victorian gender ideology without welcoming what might lie beyond it. And so the Autobiography ends with an emphasis on loss—the loss of what Oliphant has created, children and text:

And now here I am all alone.
I cannot write any more. (154)

Jay suggests that this cadenced closing “was as carefully contrived as any of her deliberately unconventional endings to novels” (Fiction to Herself 30), and it is not accurate in broad reference to Oliphant’s professional writing, which continued up to her death in 1897. But it captures a truth of the autobiographical narrative, which has gone as far as it can in representing Oliphant’s negotiations of the maternal ideal and her sons’ deviations from the masculine ideal. The Autobiography remains suspended between recognition and denial of the limitations of these ideals. If that suspension is evasive, it also allows Oliphant to resist implication in the cultural double binds that make women responsible for the reproduction of gender roles that at the same time constrain their efforts to meet those responsibilities. Why, indeed, should Oliphant try to explain?

Works Cited


