Margaret Oliphant at the Margins of Maga

By Juliet Shields

From its early nineteenth-century beginnings, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, known popularly as Maga, embraced a masculine form of sociability that had antecedents in Addison and Steele's *Spectator*, and in the moral philosophy of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. This masculine sociability was most vividly embodied in the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, a series of satirical dialogues that, as Margaret Oliphant explained in her 1896 *Annals of the House of Blackwood*, were written by 'a gay and reckless, yet powerful band [of men …] a sort of literary club' (100) whose members included John Wilson, William Maginn, John Gibson Lockhart, and James Hogg. In the *Noctes Ambrosaniae*a group of men loosely based on these contributors meet in Ambrose's tavern, where they jest with and about real and fictional individuals. The setting and tone of the *Noctes* are sufficient to explain why there were no women in this 'literary club'. A recent critic has described the *Noctes*, perhaps with some exaggeration, as 'the ultimate bachelor party' (Niles 115); Oliphant described them more moderately in a letter to John Blackwood as 'rather highly flavoured for my feminine taste' (NLS MS 4111).

The *Noctes Ambrosianae* ran from 1822 to 1835, but the exclusive masculine ethos epitomized in the meetings at Ambrose's tavern permeated *Blackwood*'s throughout the nineteenth century, even though it published fiction, poetry, essays, and reviews by a number of women. David Finkelstein claims in his history of *Blackwood*'s that the publishing firm 'functioned as a tightly run, male dominated space, yet also suggested itself to prospective authors, both male and female, as an open, welcoming and inclusive club of sorts' (16). Oliphant's correspondence with John and William Blackwood during her forty-year relationship with magazine calls into question this welcoming inclusivity.

That William Blackwood asked Oliphant to write the history of his family's publishing house indicates the high regard he had for her work. Yet Oliphant's correspondence, now held at the National Library of Scotland, reveals that however much she might have hoped to write her way into the *Blackwood*'s boys

club, she could never get beyond its margins, and this rankled. Thus, in 1855, Oliphant wrote to John Blackwood, 'I am sometimes doubtful whether in your most manly and masculine of magazines a womanish story-teller like myself may not become wearisome' (NLS MS 4111). In asking permission to review some novels by women that same year, she promised 'to keep from scratching, and conceal the feminine hand' (NLS MS 4111).

Oliphant was deeply ambivalent about the masculine sociability that *Blackwood*'s embodied even though, as I will show, she was skilled at manipulating its conventions. While her reviews for the magazine consistently praise works that promote sociability, she was well aware from personal experience that sociability is defined by its limits or boundaries, by its exclusions as much as its inclusions. To explore Oliphant's ambivalence towards Maga's tradition of masculine sociability, I'm going to focus on 'The Old Saloon', a semi-regular series of review essays that she wrote between 1887 and 1892 using a male persona. The contrast between the literary sociability that 'The Old Saloon's' narrator embraces in these essays and Oliphant's clashes with William Blackwood behind the scenes reveals the complexities of her position on the margins of Maga.

Oliphant envisioned 'The Old Saloon' as 'a standing article upon literature, a review of all the books of the month worth reviewing, with [an] admixture of speculation and general comment' (NLS MS 4490). Like all her contributions to *Blackwood*'s, 'The Old Saloon' was published anonymously, as was standard practice for the magazine. *Blackwood's* tradition of anonymity gave a communal authority to its reviewers' judgments, which were expressed through the 'magisterial' *we* (Onslow 56). Joanne Shattock, who has worked extensively on Oliphant's journalism, claims that Oliphant developed a 'neutral or ungendered voice for her reviewing' (62), but I would argue that in the context of *Blackwood's* an 'ungendered' writing voice is implicitly masculine simply because it is not distinctively marked as feminine. The voice that Oliphant employs in 'The Old Saloon' is no different than that of her other anonymous and ungendered reviews, but the context established in the first installment of the feature implies that the nameless writer is a man even though 'he' critiques the magazine's masculine ethos. To avoid confusion, I'm going to refer to this nameless persona who is but is not Oliphant as the 'narrator'.

The first installment of 'The Old Saloon' reveals the saloon in question to be 'Maga's library', a book-lined room where Mr. Blackwood and his friends might

enjoy a cigar while discussing recent publications or politics. On the walls hang portraits of the authors of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, a testament to the saloon's history as 'an important centre of … intellectual and social life' (*Blackwood's* 141.855: 127). These representations of the narrator's collegial forebears emphasize his own solitude as he watches the 'blazing fire, which dances on the storied wall, and calls out in gleams of rising and of fading light the faces of our predecessors—the demigods of our early annals, who seem to keep a watchful eye on us, lest we carry their standard with a faltering hand' (*Blackwood's* 141.855: 127). The narrator's anxiety of influence under the watchful gaze of *Blackwood's* pantheon of literary demigods perhaps reflects Oliphant's compounded sense of impostership as a woman attempting to write as a man. Oliphant subtly confesses her femininity when she laments the degeneration of the art of reviewing, admitting 'We are not formed like Jove and Christopher. Our dart is not one made out of the lightning-shaft, as was Lockhart's in his youth' (*Blackwood's* 141.855: 127). The exclusivity of the magazine's early days has been compromised not only by the comparatively mild reviews written by latter-day critics such as Oliphant, but also by the conditions of modern life. The magazine is no longer produced by a small group of men working together in close proximity. These days, the narrator explains, its contributions come from 'distant regions as far as British empire extends, from many a manly pen, such as Maga, with her sound and wholesome partiality for her soldiers and sailors, has always loved. She has her ladies too, but, shall we own it? perhaps loves them less' (*Blackwood's* 141.855: 127). It would be an overstatement to say that Oliphant's male persona allowed her to express anger over Maga's preference for manly pens, but I hope this mildest of reproaches gave her some satisfaction.

Throughout the twenty-five installments of 'The Old Saloon' that Oliphant wrote over the ensuing five years, her narrator cultivated an ideal of sociability that might serves as a kind of literary antidote to the attenuation of social bonds seemingly mandated by the conditions of modern life. As a literary critic, Oliphant based her judgments on moral rather than aesthetic considerations. Barbara Onslow explains that 'Her critical perspective stemmed from her interest in people—their emotions and moral values and the society they both created and inhabited' (56). Oliphant believed that art and literature should have 'a cohesive social function' (Onslow 60). In 'The Old Saloon', her narrator singles out for praise those works that seek to establish a sense of connection, or an alignment of

sympathies, between author and reader. This ideal of literary sociability is difficult to achieve: on the one hand, the author must not allow his personal circumstances to intrude too much into his work, but on the other hand, he must create a sense of intimacy with his readership. In reviewing *Sententiae Artis. First Principles of Art: for Painters and Picture Lovers*, by Harry Quilter, R. A, for instance, the narrator acknowledges that Quilter writes well, but remarks that 'he is unfortunately too conscious, as is the case with so many critics, of himself. It is a danger from which the anonymous critic is mercifully preserved. He cannot talk […] "of the many personal attacks made on ME" or assure the public how little he has "deigned to notice" these utterances' (*Blackwood's* 141.855: 145).

Robert Louis Stevenson, one of Oliphant's favorite targets for abuse, also comes in for criticism on this count. Of Stevenson's *Underwoods*, the narrator declares, the author is doubtless 'in his own personality […] exceedingly interesting to a wide and varied circle', but 'it would be well to be content with that affectionate appreciation, and not allow himself to be deluded into thinking that his house, and his doctors, and his gardeners, and the pretty presents he makes his friends, are equally absorbing in their interest to a large and already much occupied public' (*Blackwood's* 142.865: 710). As authors, Quilter and Stevenson are like poor conversationalists, too absorbed in themselves to consider their audience. Authorial detachment facilitates literary sociability, especially when the topics of discussion are volatile political or religious issues, such as Ireland's bid for Home Rule. Such subjects, the narrator explains, must be 'divested of all [their] adventitious envelopes—of partisan feeling, national sentiment, traditional animosity, sympathy, expediency and all other qualities which tend to obstruct the view' (*Blackwood's*141.855: 151). Authorial detachment, the distancing of the personality from the work, is necessary to civil debate and polite conversation, whether in person or in print.

Yet, paradoxically, literary sociability also requires that the reader feel a sense of acquaintance with the author. In the November 1887 installment of 'The Old Saloon', the narrator is delighted that the books that have arrived for review are 'of a character *intime*—nay *intimissime*—best to be appreciated by genuine lovers of literature' (*Blackwood's* 142.865: 698). What is an intimate book? One that 'without any of the personal revelations of an autobiography [… offers] the unconscious and involuntary exhibition of character, and that kind of opening up of disposition and nature which makes the reader feel himself for the moment the

friend and companion of the writer' (*Blackwood's* 142.862: 235). This sense of companionship, I would argue, is precisely what Oliphant aims to cultivate in readers of 'The Old Saloon'. Her narrator certainly reveals no autobiographical details, but we learn a great deal about his moral and aesthetic values through his reviews.

Take, for instance, the review of Sir Henry Taylor's *Correspondence* in the June 1888 installment of 'The Old Saloon'. Usually, the narrator observes, volumes of letters are 'one-sided', containing 'the opinions of one mind on a number of subjects introduced probably by others of which we do not know either the original statement or the subsequent discussion' (*Blackwood's* 143.872: 831). Taylor's *Correspondence*, by contrast, offers 'a record of actual intercourse between himself and his playfellows, companions worthy of him—men, like himself, occupied not only with the highest literary and moral studies, but taking their full share in everything that was passing in their time' (*Blackwood's*143.872: 831). Readers 'sit as if outside an open window, listening to the talk that goes on within […]. It is charming to hear them answer each other, perhaps pleasantly contradict each other, each man keeping to his own view, yet with the accord of disciplined minds and elevated aims' (*Blackwood's* 143.872: 831–32). The narrator demonstrates his own conviviality through his praise for a work that embodies the ideal of literary sociability. As the image of the eavesdropping reader suggests, literary sociability also depends upon the participation of readers, and only those who already possess a degree of moral and intellectual refinement will respond appropriately to books of an intimate character. Thus the narrator remarks, 'we do not address ourselves in the Old Saloon to the vulgar-minded, but to the gentle reader, the courteous, him to whom all who love their art address themselves' (Blackwood's 142.865: 699). The ideal reader of 'The Old Saloon' is, supposedly like its writer, a gentleman.

In the pages of 'The Old Saloon', Oliphant's narrator cultivated social bonds between reviewer and readers by recommending works that would speak to their shared sensibilities. But her correspondence with William Blackwood regarding the column reveals that not only was Oliphant excluded from Maga's privileged inner circle, but that the ideal of sociability could be turned against her to enforce this exclusion. In her *Annals of a Publishing House*, Oliphant observes that in the magazine's early days, the days of the *Noctes*, reviewers were gentlemen who considered 'any thought of pecuniary reward […] insulting and degrading' (99).

The objectivity of their critical judgments depended upon their financial independence. By the time Oliphant began reviewing for *Blackwood's* in 1854, criticism had become a profession, and her voluminous correspondence concerns nothing so much as money. She wrote openly and frequently to John Blackwood about her financial difficulties as a widow responsible for several children; and the occasions when the publishing firm loaned her money are too numerous to count. Jo Haythornthwaite has argued that Oliphant 'took her publisher's kindness rather too much for granted and expected John Blackwood to act as banker, money lender, and financial adviser to her, and always at very short notice' (42). I take the somewhat more sympathetic view that Oliphant's financial dealings with the firm were seriously compromised by her gender, and if she occasionally played the woman card, she was only trying to get what would have been given more freely if she had been a man.

Oliphant's constant inquiries as to whether *Blackwood's* would be interested in an article on this, that, or the next thing make for discomforting reading because the edge of desperation beneath her bantering tone is evident. Her attempted negotiations were always compromised by her knowledge of 'the prestige of the Blackwood imprimatur', which she wanted her work to carry even if it meant accepting a lower price for her wares than other periodicals might have offered (Colby 143). Over the years, she inquired on several occasions about the possibility of a regular and permanent position with the magazine; but although *Blackwood's* was happy to employ Oliphant as a kind of 'freelance editor' revising other contributors' pieces and reading and reporting on manuscripts—work for which she was paid piecemeal—the firm never offered her a salaried position (Colby 146). Indeed, in their correspondence to each other, John and William Blackwood referred to Oliphant as *Blackwood's* 'general utility woman', a title that indicates both her importance to the working of the magazine and the lowliness of her position with the firm. In the many letters that Oliphant wrote to the Blackwoods, she could never address them as equals, but neither did she stand in the relationship of a servant to her masters, as she sometimes feared. She resented her dependence on the firm even while she relied upon its continuance. Luckily, the 'general utility woman' was as necessary to the magazine as it was to her.

However, Oliphant's clashes with William Blackwood over 'The Old Saloon' didn't concern money so much as authorial autonomy. After the first six months of the

feature, Blackwood decided he wanted to open up 'The Old Saloon' to other contributors, who would share the authorial persona that Oliphant had created. But Oliphant felt a sense of proprietorship over the column, writing 'I think the Old Saloon loses its meaning when it becomes so completely a mixture by different hands. It wants individuality and unity' (NLS MS 4540). Sharing the column might have been the sociable thing to do, but Oliphant clearly didn't want the feature that she had originated and fought for wrested from her control. Here we see that to participate in collective forms of authorship wasn't always desirable. Sometimes it was preferable not to be part of the club. Similarly, when Blackwood accused Oliphant of using 'The Old Saloon' to review works by her friends and favorites, he turned Maga's ideal of clubbability against her, suggesting that if the magazine was going to differentiate between insiders and outsiders, he should be the person to draw the dividing lines. Oliphant responded to this accusation by offering to give up the column entirely. 'The Saloon in George Street is unquestionably yours', she wrote, referring to the firm's Edinburgh offices at 45 George Street, 'but the Old Saloon as a seat of criticism was not invented or thought of by you, but by me. You did not and cannot own it, nor is it any necessary part of Maga, any more than Ambrose's Tavern was' (NLS MS 4592). Through the comparison to the fictive Ambrose's Tavern, Oliphant claims 'The Old Saloon' as her own intellectual property, and perhaps also suggests that the 'owners' of Ambrose's—that is, the authors of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*—would not have been treated as poorly as Blackwood treated her.

In the event, 'The Old Saloon' ended in December of 1892 and in July of 1894 Oliphant proposed 'a series of perhaps four articles, called the "Spectator" or the "Looker-on", or some such title, a sort of review of the three or four months preceding […] with a reflection of the Society and lighter morals, politics, art, and literature of the time' (NLS MS 4621). The 'Looker-on', as the narrator of the eponymous series came to be called, was more markedly male than 'The Old Saloon's' narrator—a confirmed bachelor who enjoyed the company of his friends' wives of an evening. The name suited Oliphant's sense of marginalization at Blackwood's and in literary circles more generally as she watched bold New Women and angry Young Men shoot to fame in the 1890s. Although *Blackwood's* obituary on Oliphant, published in July of 1897, affectionately awarded 'our charming "Looker-on" the proud title of the most accomplished periodical writer of her day' (*Blackwood's* 162.981: 162), the praise seems facile given the frustration of her last years at the magazine. The obituary

opened with a quotation from Oliphant's posthumously published *Annals of a Publishing House*: 'It has been the fate of "Blackwood's Magazine" to secure a genuine attachment from its contributors more than any other literary organ has ever had'. This attachment is 'the same sort of feeling which makes sailors identify themselves with their ship, rejoicing in the feats which they attribute somehow to her own personality, though they know very well what is their own share in them' (*Blackwood's* 162.981: 161). Oliphant undoubtedly identified strongly with the *Blackwood's* ship even though she was sometimes regarded by its editors as a cabin boy who might take care of any odd jobs on board the ship rather than a full-fledged sailor. As for *Blackwood's* feats, she knew very well what was her own share in them.

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In the pages of 'The Old Saloon', Oliphant's narrator cultivated social bonds between reviewer and readers by recommending works that would speak to their shared sensibilities. But her correspondence with William Blackwood regarding the column reveals that not only was Oliphant excluded from Maga's privileged inner circle, but that the ideal of sociability could be turned against her to enforce this exclusion. In her *Annals of a Publishing House*, Oliphant observes that in the magazine's early days, the days of the *Noctes*, reviewers were gentlemen who considered 'any thought of pecuniary reward […] insulting and degrading' (99). The objectivity of their critical judgments depended upon their financial independence. By the time Oliphant began reviewing for *Blackwood's* in 1854, criticism had become a profession, and her voluminous correspondence concerns nothing so much as money. She wrote openly and frequently to John Blackwood about her financial difficulties as a widow responsible for several children; and the occasions when the publishing firm loaned her money are too numerous to count. Jo Haythornthwaite has argued that Oliphant 'took her publisher's kindness rather too much for granted and expected John Blackwood to act as banker, money lender, and financial adviser to her, and always at very short notice' (42). I take the somewhat more sympathetic view that Oliphant's financial dealings with the firm were seriously compromised by her gender, and if she occasionally played the woman card, she was only trying to get what would have been given more freely if she had been a man.

Oliphant's constant inquiries as to whether *Blackwood's* would be interested in an article on this, that, or the next thing make for discomforting reading because the edge of desperation beneath her bantering tone is evident. Her attempted negotiations were always compromised by her knowledge of 'the prestige of the Blackwood imprimatur', which she wanted her work to carry even if it meant accepting a lower price for her wares than other periodicals might have offered (Colby 143). Over the years, she inquired on several occasions about the possibility of a regular and permanent position with the magazine; but although *Blackwood's* was happy to employ Oliphant as a kind of 'freelance editor' revising other contributors' pieces and reading and reporting on manuscripts—work for which she was paid piecemeal—the firm never offered her a salaried position (Colby 146). Indeed, in their correspondence to each other, John and William Blackwood referred to Oliphant as *Blackwood's* 'general utility woman', a title that indicates both her importance to the working of the magazine and the lowliness of her position with the firm. In the many letters that Oliphant wrote to the Blackwoods, she could never address them as equals, but neither did she stand in the relationship of a servant to her masters, as she sometimes feared. She resented her dependence on the firm even while she relied upon its continuance. Luckily, the 'general utility woman' was as necessary to the magazine as it was to her.

However, Oliphant's clashes with William Blackwood over 'The Old Saloon' didn't concern money so much as authorial autonomy. After the first six months of the feature, Blackwood decided he wanted to open up 'The Old Saloon' to other contributors, who would share the authorial persona that Oliphant had created. But Oliphant felt a sense of proprietorship over the column, writing 'I think the Old Saloon loses its meaning when it becomes so completely a mixture by different hands. It wants individuality and unity' (NLS MS 4540). Sharing the column might have been the sociable thing to do, but Oliphant clearly didn't want the feature that she had originated and fought for wrested from her control. Here we see that to participate in collective forms of authorship wasn't always desirable. Sometimes it was preferable not to be part of the club. Similarly, when Blackwood accused Oliphant of using 'The Old Saloon' to review works by her friends and favorites, he turned Maga's ideal of clubbability against her, suggesting that if the magazine was going to differentiate between insiders and outsiders, he should be the person to draw the dividing lines. Oliphant responded to this accusation by offering to give up the column entirely. 'The Saloon in

George Street is unquestionably yours', she wrote, referring to the firm's Edinburgh offices at 45 George Street, 'but the Old Saloon as a seat of criticism was not invented or thought of by you, but by me. You did not and cannot own it, nor is it any necessary part of Maga, any more than Ambrose's Tavern was' (NLS MS 4592). Through the comparison to the fictive Ambrose's Tavern, Oliphant claims 'The Old Saloon' as her own intellectual property, and perhaps also suggests that the 'owners' of Ambrose's—that is, the authors of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*—would not have been treated as poorly as Blackwood treated her.

In the event, 'The Old Saloon' ended in December of 1892 and in July of 1894 Oliphant proposed 'a series of perhaps four articles, called the "Spectator" or the "Looker-on", or some such title, a sort of review of the three or four months preceding […] with a reflection of the Society and lighter morals, politics, art, and literature of the time' (NLS MS 4621). The 'Looker-on', as the narrator of the eponymous series came to be called, was more markedly male than 'The Old Saloon's' narrator—a confirmed bachelor who enjoyed the company of his friends' wives of an evening. The name suited Oliphant's sense of marginalization at Blackwood's and in literary circles more generally as she watched bold New Women and angry Young Men shoot to fame in the 1890s. Although *Blackwood's* obituary on Oliphant, published in July of 1897, affectionately awarded 'our charming "Looker-on" the proud title of the most accomplished periodical writer of her day' (*Blackwood's* 162.981: 162), the praise seems facile given the frustration of her last years at the magazine. The obituary opened with a quotation from Oliphant's posthumously published *Annals of a Publishing House*: 'It has been the fate of "Blackwood's Magazine" to secure a genuine attachment from its contributors more than any other literary organ has ever had'. This attachment is 'the same sort of feeling which makes sailors identify themselves with their ship, rejoicing in the feats which they attribute somehow to her own personality, though they know very well what is their own share in them' (*Blackwood's* 162.981: 161). Oliphant undoubtedly identified strongly with the *Blackwood's* ship even though she was sometimes regarded by its editors as a cabin boy who might take care of any odd jobs on board the ship rather than a full-fledged sailor. As for *Blackwood's* feats, she knew very well what was her own share in them.

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