

PROFESSIONAL
DOMESTICITY IN THE
VICTORIAN NOVEL

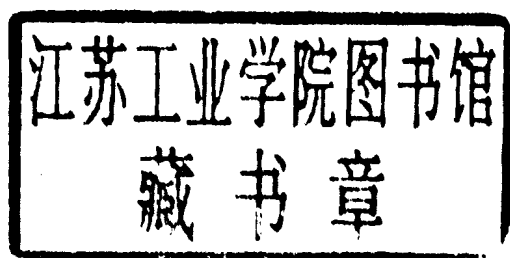
WOMEN, WORK AND HOME

MONICA F. COHEN

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Much attention has recently been given by scholars to the widening of the gender gap in the nineteenth century, and the concept of separate spheres. Testing such constructions, and questioning the stereotypes associated with Victorian domesticity, Monica F. Cohen offers new readings of narratives by Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Eliot, Eden, Gaskell, Oliphant and Reade to show how domestic work, the most feminine of all activities, gained much of its social credibility by positioning itself in relation to the emergent professions. By exploring how novels cast the Victorian conception of female morality into the vocabulary of nineteenth-century professionalism, Cohen traces the ways in which women sought identity and privilege within a professionalized culture, and revises our understanding of Victorian domestic ideology.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly syntheses and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as “background,” feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have re-activated the field.

This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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*For Mary-Ellen and Harvey Feinberg, whose untiring work,
untiring patience, and untiring wakefulness are home.*

Such weighing and mixing and chopping and grating, such dusting and washing and polishing, such snipping and weeding and trowelling and other small gardening, such making and mending and folding and airing, such diverse arrangements, and above all such severe study!

(Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*)

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Introduction

Every story of Victorian domesticity must begin with John Ruskin's paean:

This is the true nature of home – it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home: so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love, – so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light, – shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea; so far it vindicates the name and fulfills the praise of Home.¹

Ruskin's home conjures the set of dichotomies most characteristic of what is understood as domestic ideology: it is a place of peace and not strife, rest and not labor, confidence and not anxiety, unity and not division. As secularized holy ground, it is most distinctly a state of mind: materially indistinguishable from "a part of that outer world which you have roofed over," the home is only "true" if it can be correlated to psychological comfort. The "shelter" is a sense of shelter, the peace a peace of mind. So the great portraitists of Victorian domesticity have recorded and so the critics of its ideological structures have been informed.

In light of Ruskin's imagery, *Professional domesticity* began with the expectation that the home-bound plots of novels written by Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Eliot, Gaskell, Oliphant and Reade would pivot on a narrative convention that used psychological interiority as a means of broadening the scope of privileges associated with individualism. Before long, however, the project had to make sense of the fact that

the domesticity conveyed in mid-century novelistic discourse fostered a collectivist spirit that ultimately edged out the psychoanalytic dimensions of humanist novel-craft. Whereas Ruskin's mythology of the home emerges out of his prescription for female education, something else emerges from a novelist's description of female experience; when she cannot remember, for example, which of her ninety-eight novels she happened to be working on at this biographical moment, Margaret Oliphant describes the home as something other than a holy place of peace and shelter from the workaday storm outside:

Other matters, events even of our uneventful life, took so much more importance in life than these books – nay, it must be a kind of affectation to say that, for the writing ran through everything. But then it was also subordinate to everything, to be pushed aside for any little necessity. I had no table even to myself, much less a room to work in, but sat at the corner of the family table with my writing-book, with everything going on as if I had been making a shirt instead of writing a book. Our rooms in those days were sadly wanting in artistic arrangement. The table was in the middle of the room, the centre round which everybody sat with candles or lamp upon it. My mother sat always at needle-work of some kind, and talked to whoever might be present, and I took my share in the conversation, going on all the same with my story, the little groups of imaginary persons, these other talks evolving themselves quite undisturbed.²

By saying, “the writing ran through everything,” Oliphant emphasizes that the work ran through everything and everything through it: the spheres were not at all separate. Admittedly, the passage's description of the home as a busy, noisy, chaotic place of manufacture, work and sociability is not Oliphant's central purpose. But this is nevertheless the effect: in the course of rationalizing female paid labor – that is, her own very middle-class professional writing – according to the terms of female domestic duty, Oliphant makes the home a workplace. For Oliphant, the home is a workshop of sociability not only because it was so in her experience, but because the ideological agenda she chose for her own woman writer's autobiography made it so. For part of what inspired her to write her “life,” she protests, are the unsatisfactory “lives” published about her novelistic competitors, Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography* and John Cross's *George Eliot's Life as Recounted in her Letters and Journals*. In a long deflation of the professional novelist as a mystifying artistic pariah who scribbles away in the isolation of a “mental hot house,” Oliphant is primarily motivated to advance the argument that writing a novel is indistinguishable from other household tasks, not an occasion for self-

indulgent emotional exploration. It is a definitively social process, she avers, no different than needle-work or family chatter, a domestic activity the products of which – those “little groups of imaginary people” – only contribute to the general bustle of a family where work and play are by economic necessity intermixed.

But this representation of the home as work is also a pointed justification for why she may not have always been able to produce her “best.” Oliphant defends her position as a female worker from the perspective of domestic duty, but finds herself forced to inadvertently undermine her position as a serious novelist by implying that when writing is a service one provides for others, there can be no romanticizing it as art. By thus identifying the novel as a social service rather than as an artistic form, Oliphant’s portrayal of novel-writing ends up reaffirming the renunciation characteristic of the domestic woman: as a homekeeper, *she* could not abandon her children for Eliot’s mental hothouse; as a homekeeper, *she* could not indulge in a Trollopian relationship to characters who were, after all, not real-life flesh and blood, as Trollope, she claims, seems to have forgotten. Rather, she had to abandon the hothouse itself; she had to renounce renunciation and live in the material world, exactly what we shall see so many domestic heroines doing in novels written throughout the period. But this renunciation of artistic life is ultimately paraleptic: for by posing her anti-aestheticism in the terms of a woman’s self-sacrificial discourse, Oliphant is still able to preserve the idea of her own artistic potential, however unrealized. In other words, although she speaks of having perhaps failed to produce her best, she uses the rhetoric of female self-sacrifice to challenge any definition of “best” that would separate artwork from homework. In this sense, her preoccupation with work and the various pleasures of renunciation that it engenders not only produces a representation of the home that is quite distinct from Ruskin’s idyll, but occasions a somewhat Protestant and utilitarian aesthetic theory of the novel whereby art is not created by an isolated ascetic spirit, but happens as an organic part and economic supporter of busy household life.

It is not accidental that this version of domesticity emerges out of Oliphant’s defense of novel-production as a social duty. By sneering at George Eliot for her “hot house” study, she revises Ruskin’s flower-like domestic women by asserting that a woman’s natural duty is to support her relations by writing novels beside the family hearth. In this sense, Oliphant’s metaphor of the hothouse employs a romantic discourse of the natural in order to argue in favor of a domesticity that rests on the

sociability and renunciative imperatives of women's literary work. In doing so, she implicitly stresses the wisdom of experience over the information of education, a perspective that will be important in understanding both nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminism's ambivalent relationship to the professional institutions that govern economically remunerative work and the class divisions largely repressed until recently in the women's movement. Hence, the intellectual assumptions informing Oliphant's writerly construction of valuable and evaluable women's work remain middle-class: in the final analysis, the representation of intellectual and emotional labor as a potential livelihood applies to the homekeeper, on an allowance of sorts, whose activities may include washing clothes, but not to the wage-receiving washerwoman who is paid to do only that task.

In novelistic discourse, this ambivalence toward direct remuneration takes shape in interesting ways and affects the encoding of domestic ideology. In Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior*, for example, Reginald, the older son of a widower clergyman with a large and impoverished family, refuses a "sinecure" on the grounds that it means pay without work. His sister, Ursula, the daughter saddled with the bulk of the household work and poignantly wishing that there were "sinecures for girls," argues convincingly, "They pay you for that which is not work, but they will find you plenty of work they don't pay for."³ The sentence invokes two opposites – being paid and not being paid – and equates them through a rhythmic repetition of words (pay, work, for) in inverted syntactic parallel. Heralded by a string of evenly cadenced iambs, each clause's concluding dactyl, "is not work" and "don't pay for," suggests that the absence of work and the absence of pay still artfully inscribe work and pay in the novel's imaginative economy. The syntax implies that there is an epistemological problem inherent in the way the relationship between work and pay is culturally constructed. Because pay makes work legible, pay is often taken as a metonymic representation of work when in truth pay is only a condition that makes work recognizable. In other words, the implied metonym misleads in the sense that although work and pay may coincide, one cannot be taken as evidence of the other.

In being an object of envy for both Northcote, the Dissenting minister who has a salary but no poor people in his congregation to tend, and for Ursula, to whom a salary would provide her father with irrefutable proof of her contribution to the household he takes for granted, Reginald's vocational condition stresses the importance of work and the

importance of pay without endorsing any notion of paid work. In this sense, Ursula's evocation of the sinecure as workless pay for payless work performs a strange reversal: rather than desire to work so as to have money, she seems to desire to have money so as to be free to work. Her model of domesticity does not demand pay *per se*, only the recognition that pay would confer. Such domesticity is professional in Harold Perkin's sense that it, at least overtly, eschews wage-labor in favor of service-based prestige.⁴

In representing the home as work, Oliphant is thus forced to confront one of the accuracies of Ruskin's idyll: the absence of pay, which for Ruskin and generations of materialist critics after him means the removal of capitalist work and the consequent preservation of capitalist ideology through a virtual phantasmagoria of domestic leisure. For Oliphant, however, the absence of the wage clouds the home's visibility as a workplace. She turns to the idea of domesticity as a "sinecure for girls" – as, that is, a profession – as a means of inscribing work that deserves pay but does not get it through direct conventional channels. In doing so, she depicts her very own domestic work situation, which was, as one reviewer acerbically implies, remarkably close to that of a sinecure. For Oliphant was, after all, a professional novelist. And as a novelist, one of her disgruntled reviewers comments, she had access to what was essentially workless pay:

In what other calling would she have been so fortunate? Perhaps if she had been a painter, a picture dealer might have advanced her a few guineas. But we know of no "profession" other than letters in which remuneration can be anticipated to the same amount and on the same terms. Solicitors do not finance barristers to the tune of several thousands. A struggling surgeon will probably fail to raise a five pound note on the strength of a promise to cut off the lender's leg if called upon to do so. When the countless iniquities of "the trade" are rehearsed by prosperous and well-fed authors, let not the recording angel fail to note that publishers have long done and still continue to do, what is asked and expected of no man in any other kind of business.⁵

Although the reviewer distinguishes novel-writing both from "professions" and "trades" by bracketing the terms in patronizing punctuation, his comparison of the writer to the lawyer or the surgeon and the publisher to the businessman suggests that novel-writing both is and is not a professional business. His high-minded objection, like Reginald's, is to workless pay. But Oliphant would have argued that such workless pay culminated in doing a great deal of pay-less work: she acknowledges the generosity of her publishers, but complains that they were still

considered her “benefactors” even when “the balance changed” (*Autobiography* 90), thereby implying that she was often underpaid, if paid at all. Indeed, her Byzantine arrangements with publishers for future work often meant that she received in the end less than she might, had she marketed each piece individually and closer to a projected publication date, as canny strategists like Trollope often did. But Oliphant had so many extended advances going on at the same time that it is unlikely that she made the best deals per item, and this perhaps explains why she never made as much money as Trollope, despite her popularity and productivity.⁶ In so far as her publisher “bankers” provided her with use of their capital “for nothing,” requiring no security other than her sound mind (*Blackwood’s*), her business dealings departed from conventional capitalist arrangements. Like so many other novelists of the period, she made money as a professional rather than as a laissez-faire capitalist.

Reginald’s sinecure and his sister’s praise for it introduce into the novel an idea of paid unpaid work. In the Anglican church, Oliphant identifies an institution that, in its practice of paying individuals to do unpaid work, provides a locus of value for the narrative generation of a courtship plot. Romance, and consequently Oliphant’s success in the literary marketplace, are enabled by a financial arrangement traditionally cited as evidence of clerical corruption. That sinecures can be praised by virtue of the *de facto* social work they perform suggests that Oliphant’s novel is positioned to intervene in Reform politics, albeit in a fundamentally conservative if not ironic way. Although Oliphant claims that the purpose of her novels was to entertain, not to preach, and that the purpose of her writing them was to earn a living, not to create art, the political implications of working at entertaining and entertainment as work collapse separate spheres in a slippery, however audacious, way. For when Ursula wishes for professional domesticity, for a “sinecure for girls,” is she wishing for a concrete share in patriarchy or is she setting up the institution of marriage as patriarchy’s false imitation? Is it patriarchy that professional domesticity questions, or only its fake? In this sense, Oliphant exemplifies some of the more complicated formal and political issues at stake in the figure of the professional home.

The sociable setting and the ethical imperative assumed by the model of work characteristic of professional domesticity lead to a vision of novelistic domesticity as somehow communitarian. I use this somewhat clumsy word to capture the sense in which the home is presented as a

small community where routine work is held as the primary source of meaning in individual life. Of course, this work is generally represented as intellectual rather than physical and therefore presumes a set of associations to the middle classes that distinguishes professional domesticity from the industrialist discourse of "social problem" novels. I use "communitarian" very broadly and do not mean to suggest that this depiction of the home contained an overtly collectivist agenda that posited a small community's control over production and distribution. I should point out, however, that many advocates of women's property reform did use the value of domestic work (even if that work was presented strictly as emotional or psychological labor) as grounds for a more equitable distribution of household property, and who is to say what role novel-reading may have had in the persuasiveness of that argument.

Central to the depiction of the home represented in these novels is a notion of work that reveals ties to Protestantism in its extroverted, continuous, self-renunciative nature: consistently Victorian novels unveil domesticity as an elected vocation. In stressing the importance of devoting a cultivated knowledge of the specific to the service of others, the homecraft of these novels betrays a vocational purport that places it on the cusp of late nineteenth-century professional culture.

In seeing the home as a vocational outlet, it becomes possible to see Victorian feminism overlapping nineteenth-century professionalism in so far as both movements are concerned with the social role and value of communal principles. The assertion of women's rights as merited by a female's inalienable connection to others (whether experienced as a blessing or a curse, biologically determined or culturally mandated) precedes and in some ways foreshadows the professional's conception of his or her service as a sign of entitlement.

Like my use of the term "communitarian," I use the word "professionalism" broadly as well; both serve me more as descriptions than as definitions. The narrative of my findings developed whereby I saw the home as a place of nonpersonal sociability, as a workplace, as a vocation and then as a profession. But even if I had been able to reconstruct a nineteenth-century professional culture, as I have tried to do with the help of historians who see in Victorian England the seeds of the modern British welfare state, by which homekeeping would indeed count as a profession, being a housewife could never be quite the same as being a doctor. So even if we accept the argument that in nineteenth-century England's professional society all occupations were potential profes-

sions, we would have to allow that all professions were not potentially equal. As Mary Poovey has demonstrated, midwifery may have been professionalized, but it was nevertheless closed out from that profession called medicine, gender difference having played the operative role.⁷ Hence we can only understand the gender-neutral professional domesticity presented in these novels in a prescriptive rather than a descriptive relationship to the historical moment in which they were produced.

Mary Poovey and Nancy Armstrong, among others, have demonstrated how the separate sphere doctrine of Victorian England used emotion and psychology to displace politics and to effectively elide class conflict from the collective consciousness. In this light, the domestic ideology represented by cultural products like novels can be seen as middle-class political interest masquerading as psychology. Armstrong has argued that Woman, as a figure of emotion and psychological interiority, came to lubricate the sharp contradictions of social praxis by naturalizing class conflict into the universal language of a “personal life” governed by sexual and romantic preoccupations.⁸ Poovey has argued that this divorce between the personal and the political, the private and the public, provides the basis for the rise of an ideological professionalization whose exclusionary logic only replicated middle-class hegemony. The woman, according to this narrative, remains the amateur against which the professional expert is measured and empowered.

In the meantime, historians of nineteenth-century professionalism suggest that Victorian society, while being entrepreneurial and capitalistic, was also increasingly professional and at times socialistic; because English professionalism created and promoted a host of collectives and associations, communitarian structures and presumptions existed alongside capitalist incentives and institutions, which changes what can be understood by the term “middle class.” I adopted this model of Victorian society in *Professional domesticity* because it helps to account for why, unlike the novels Poovey and Armstrong address, this set of novels uses the home unexpectedly as a trope for expressing hostility towards, and indeed a wish to repudiate, the psychological language of individualistic subjectivity that Poovey and Armstrong identify as characteristic of domestic ideology. In other words, the novels of *Professional domesticity* substitute occupation for preoccupation and thereby borrow easily from Protestant traditions of work. They articulate claims to prestige and economic rights (though not necessarily political rights) by virtue of properties, both material and intellectual, manufactured at home. Hence scenes of baking, mixing, chopping, dusting and waxing occur