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## ‘Of Pride and Joy No Common Rate’: From the Surplus Women Problem to Surplus *Jouissance* in Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester*

Ben Moore\*

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses Margaret Oliphant’s novel *Hester* (1883), arguing that it dramatizes a complex interplay of surplus labour, surplus capital, the figure of the surplus woman, and surplus *jouissance*. The central character, Hester, is read as a figure who embodies the surplus *jouissance* which is both necessary to and disruptive of modern capitalism, and which in the novel stands in opposition to the steady state of the respectable country bank, taken here to align with the Freudian pleasure principle. In support of this reading, the article traces a line from *Hester* back to the ‘surplus women debate’ of the 1850s and 60s, including Oliphant’s contribution to this debate in her 1858 article ‘The Condition of Women’. The novel itself is analysed through its epigraph, taken from a Charles Lamb poem of 1803, and through the multiple meanings of the concept of ‘chance’ which the text presents. My analysis proceeds by way of Freud, J. S. Mill, Marx and Lacan, finding that Lacan’s rereading of surplus labour as surplus *jouissance* ultimately provides the most productive way to read the text’s rearticulation of the surplus women problem.

**KEYWORDS:** Margaret Oliphant, surplus, *jouissance*, surplus women problem, economy, money, chance, speculation, desire.

Margaret Oliphant’s literary output was vast. Her second cousin and companion, Anna Louisa Coghill, called it ‘enormous in volume and multifarious in kind.’<sup>1</sup> The online directory of her work lists 97 novels, as well as novellas and short stories.<sup>2</sup> In 1885, Oliphant wrote of this enormous body of writing: ‘When people comment upon the number of books I have written, and I say that I am so far from being proud of that fact that I should like at least half of them forgotten, they stare – and yet it is quite true.’<sup>3</sup> Such excess was apparently motivated by internal energy as well as economic necessity, since like Dickens she felt a compulsion to write, describing it as ‘like talking or breathing.’<sup>4</sup> At the same time, her fiction repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Louisa Coghill, ‘Preface’ to *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M.O.W. Oliphant*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1899), pp. v–xi (p. v).

<sup>2</sup> *The Margaret Oliphant Fiction Collection*, <[www.oliphantfiction.com](http://www.oliphantfiction.com)> [accessed 4 January 2020]. Oliphant’s literary output was not limited to narrative fiction, but also included poetry, literary criticism (especially in *Blackwood’s Magazine*), history (including *Historical Sketches of the Reign of George II* in 1869 and historical studies of Florence in 1876, Venice in 1887 and Rome in 1895), literary criticism (including *A Literary History of England from 1760 to 1825* in 1876) and biography.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Oliphant, letter of 1 February 1885, in *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002), p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Oliphant, *The Autobiography* (2002), p. 48.

engages with the relationship between women and money. As Nancy Henry has argued, it is 'thoroughly saturated' with 'the subject of money generally and women's negotiation of the financial sphere particularly', while also, in the later novels, exploring 'the notion that money was inseparable from life itself'.<sup>5</sup> These two observations provide the starting point for my reading of *Hester: A Story of Contemporary Life*. Published in 1883, *Hester* explores the fluctuating fortunes of Vernon's Banking House and those connected with it. I have chosen *Hester* not primarily in order to speak to Oliphant studies, but because it is a useful example of a nineteenth-century novel that yields itself to economic and demographic analysis. The wider project from which this essay emerges explores similar networks of surplus money, life and enjoyment in other Victorian novels, including *Little Dorrit* and *Daniel Deronda*.

Oliphant's excessive production certainly had financial motives, since her writing was the sole source of support for her family after her husband died in 1859. At the same time, she presented it as an internal drive indistinguishable from life itself ('like talking or breathing'). In her novels, meanwhile, she interrogated the relationship between money, life and the role of women. This conjunction of life and art gives rise to several questions. Is the energy that generates surplus production the same as the 'life' that is inseparable from money? How might we articulate in more detail the relationship between women, money, life and excess production towards which both Henry and Joanne Shattock point?<sup>6</sup> The significance of these questions extends beyond Oliphant herself to the wider economic and social field of which she was a part. My contention is that *Hester* provides a lens through which to address such topics, because central to the novel is a network of interacting and overlapping surpluses: surplus labour, surplus capital, the figure of the surplus woman, and most significant for my reading, surplus *jouissance*.<sup>7</sup> Through the interplay of these overlapping surpluses, I argue, the novel registers, without ever overtly acknowledging, that *Hester* represents, and indeed embodies, the necessary/unnecessary surplus that Vernon's Bank (and more generally, capitalism itself) requires but also distrusts, transfigured into the form of the surplus woman whose *jouissance* is both a driving force and a disruptive threat within the narrative.

*Hester* has been the subject of renewed critical interest over the last decade or so, largely thanks to its innovative combination of domestic plot, financial plot, and interest in the social position of women. As Henry observes, the story 'reflects Oliphant's own life, not only because a woman has stepped in where men failed to support an extended family but also by the repetition of generational history'.<sup>8</sup> Henry touches here on a theme of family and heredity that has been explored in more detail by Tamara Wagner and Aeron Hunt. Wagner shows that the novel uses techniques borrowed from sensation novels and 'stock-market fiction', especially the trope of repetition through the generations.<sup>9</sup> She argues that such techniques draw out 'the cyclic nature not merely of financial crises, but of a hereditary propensity towards

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Henry, *Women, Literature and Finance in Victorian Britain: Cultures of Investment* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2018), p. 227, p. 238.

<sup>6</sup> See Joanne Shattock, 'Models of Authorship: Margaret Oliphant and George Eliot', *George Eliot Review*, 43 (2012), 18–30.

<sup>7</sup> I follow Jacques Lacan in using surplus *jouissance* to refer at once to an enjoyment that goes beyond the Freudian pleasure principle, a new way of thinking about Marxian surplus labour, and a feminine rather than phallic enjoyment. See Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, trans. by Russell Grigg (New York, NY: Norton, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Henry, *Women, Literature and Finance*, p. 241.

<sup>9</sup> Tamara Wagner, *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815–1901* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 159.

irresponsible risk taking within the family’, albeit one in which the title character, Hester, ‘achieves a better balance between the demands of domesticity, romance, and business than her predecessor’, Catherine Vernon.<sup>10</sup> As will become clear, my reading challenges Wagner’s view that Hester attains a satisfactory balance between competing demands. Hunt, meanwhile, puts the novel into conversation with theories of heredity by Francis Galton and others, suggesting that ‘the novel’s unconventional mapping of talent, heredity, and gender challenged its readers to reevaluate not only the categories through which they conceived business character but also the narratives that shaped them.’<sup>11</sup> Patricia Johnson similarly uses the novel to rethink assumptions about family, including gendered spheres of action, arguing that ‘*Hester* shows that Catherine Vernon carries all before her in the public arena but is brought to ruin by her private family relations’, so reversing usual expectations of the public/private split.<sup>12</sup>

These critics’ attention to the novel’s interest in business, family, money and risk-taking, informs my approach, but I depart from such readings by placing the novel in the context of the ‘surplus women debate’ of the 1850s and 1860s, and by approaching the character of Hester as a nodal point around which a set of conjunctions between the economic and the libidinal gather. *Hester* re-reflects the surplus woman problem – originally a problem of economics and demography – as a problem of Lacanian surplus *jouissance*, and hence an issue of affect and desire. Surplus energy and surplus value are shown to be inseparable over the course of the novel.

### 1. OLIPHANT AND THE SURPLUS WOMEN PROBLEM

The debate around the problem of surplus women came to prominence in Britain in the 1850s and 60s, feeding into the more general ‘Woman Question’ that came to dominate public attention in the later part of the century. Angelique Richardson dates the origin of this problem to the 1851 census, which ‘had revealed that nearly one half of the adult women in Britain had no spouse to support them, giving a “surplus”, as it was termed, of 400,000.’<sup>13</sup> Richardson quotes the *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* from the same year, in which one author states that ‘the order of nature is, that the woman shall be devoted to the cares of maternity and the domestic duties of life; the order of society is, that millions shall have no husband, and therefore, legitimately, no children.’<sup>14</sup> The central anxiety indicated here is that an excess of unmarried women will create an unnatural situation in which both women and society suffer. In a similar vein, W. R. Greg argued in an article of 1862, ‘Why are Women Redundant?’, that this ‘unnatural’ surplus could be resolved by sending more unmarried women to the colonies, where they were in short supply.<sup>15</sup> As well as expressing a gender

<sup>10</sup> Wagner, *Financial Speculation*, p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Aeron Hunt, *Personal Business: Character and Commerce in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014), p. 146; see also Aeron Hunt, ‘Born to the Business’, in *Culture and Money in the Nineteenth Century: Abstracting Economics*, ed. by Daniel Bivona and Marlene Tromp (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016), pp. 25–46.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Johnson, ‘Unlimited Liability: Women and Capital in Margaret Oliphant’s *Hester*’, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 6.1 (2010), n.p.; on risk and finance in *Hester*, see also Elsie Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011) and Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Richardson, *Financial Speculation*, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Richardson, *Financial Speculation*, p. 36.

essentialism which tied women to specific social roles, Greg's solution linked economic and demographic thinking: where there is a surplus in one area, it must be reallocated elsewhere, so bringing the whole system (in this case the British Empire) back into balance.

Arguments from liberal, feminist thinkers as well as socially conservative ones could also recognize the surplus as an economic problem, as in the case of the Langham Place circle, founders of the Society for the Employment of Women (SPEW) and the Victoria Press. They argued that it was limitations on education and work for women – especially middle-class women – that made the surplus into a problem, rather than the existence of the surplus as such.<sup>16</sup> For this group, the surplus of unmarried women should not be regarded in terms of lack, insufficiency or social disruption, as Greg saw it, but as untapped potential; what the character Rhoda Nunn in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) would later call 'a great reserve'.<sup>17</sup>

Although *Hester* does not explicitly engage with the surplus women question in the way *The Odd Women* does, the novel includes amongst its minor characters the Miss Vernon-Ridgeways, two older unmarried sisters who are supported by Catherine Vernon. The Miss Vernon-Ridgeways are strongly associated with the building they live in, known as the 'Vernonry', where they and other poor Vernon relations are stored, acting as what we might call 'surplus Vernons'.<sup>18</sup> The Vernonry functions as an equivalent of Marx's reserve army of labour: the unemployed potential workers whose very unused presence, their status as waste that might one day be utilized, is central to sustaining capitalism. Like George Eliot, Oliphant pays considerable attention to the complex social webs in which her characters move, and the existence of the Vernonry reveals that from her point of view if there *is* a surplus woman problem, it is never really outside familial systems, as Greg and others would have it, but must be dealt with from within.

Most important for Oliphant's rearticulation of the surplus woman problem, though, is Hester herself. By any ordinary measure Hester should not be a surplus woman: she is young, educated, energetic, bursting with life, and indeed has several suitors, but she nonetheless functions as surplus within the economy of the novel, where she is denied the opportunity of the employment in banking that her older relative Catherine enjoys. As an unmarried but still economically and socially valuable older woman, Catherine provides a counterpoint to Hester. Although Catherine begins the novel as an unnecessary surplus – 'She had never come to the bank, never given a sign of having any active interest in it', reflects Mr Rule, the head clerk, 'What then could she be expected to do?' (17) – she in fact turns out to be essential to the bank's survival. Hester, by contrast, maintains her role as surplus throughout the novel, but precisely in that role provides the motivating spark that drives the narrative. In these two characters the surplus woman is transformed into a combination of different forms of surplus. These include surplus labour, since Catherine begins the novel not working, and Hester never does, as well as surplus value, since Catherine injects into the bank her mother's money, which 'has accumulated till it is quite a little fortune' (20). Both women also exhibit surplus energy:

<sup>16</sup> See Richardson, *Financial Speculation*, p. 37 and the appendix of Charlotte Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*, ed. by Clare Simmons (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2001), pp. 557–71.

<sup>17</sup> George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 44. This remark is cited by both Richardson (p. 36) and Emily Steinlight, in *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *Hester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 51. Further references are given in the main text.

Catherine's life has 'been full of exertion and occupation' (24), while Hester is full of 'warmth of life and movement' (34) but lacks an outlet.

My reading of *Hester* here is similar to Emily Steinlight's account of sensation fiction in *Populating the Novel*. For Steinlight, the 'Redundant Woman Question' is a major factor in generating the overdetermination of women in sensation novels. Lady Audley, for instance, 'presented a new kind of heroine and a new kind of problem for the Victorian novel. Rather than a lone woman who has lost her place in the social order . . . she belongs nowhere by virtue of the fact that she occupies many positions at once'.<sup>19</sup> Such novels 'raised the question of why women are redundant'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the genre itself was seen as a result of mass production: 'the hideous progeny of the machine'.<sup>21</sup> This reading supports Steinlight's wider argument that 'a demographic surplus rather than any individual, group, or social type forms the Victorian novel's most elemental human material, and that this surplus . . . exposes the inadequacy of existing political structures'.<sup>22</sup> While Steinlight's account usefully turns our attention to the role of demographic excess in the nineteenth-century novel, my suggestion here is that the surplus women question, and by extension issues of surplus population, must be approached as deeply enmeshed with surplus labour, surplus value, and surplus affective energy.

To appreciate what takes place in *Hester* around these forms of surplus, it is useful to return to Oliphant's most direct engagement with the surplus woman question, which took place in an 1858 article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, titled 'The Condition of Women'.<sup>23</sup> Here she takes issue with the claims that had been made about the scale and nature of the problem, expressing scepticism about a statement by the author Dinah Craik (whom Oliphant does not directly name) in *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* (1858), that 'whether voluntarily or not, one-half of our women are *obliged* to take care of themselves – obliged to look solely to themselves for maintenance, position, occupation, amusement, reputation, life'.<sup>24</sup> For Oliphant, 'never surely was there an odder or more remarkable misrepresentation than this'. She not only questions the statistical reliability of Craik's claim, but contends that the wider family situation of women (and men) is as significant as their marital status, arguing that there must be very few people indeed who lack any father, mother, brothers or sisters to turn to in the event of their failure to marry.<sup>25</sup>

Oliphant does not reject the problem of surplus entirely, but rather shifts its location. In the first place she does this by identifying young men rather than young women as a surplus, both societally (she mentions new Oxbridge graduates waiting for the right opportunity and 'feeling themselves capable for anything, and doing nothing') and domestically (sons are said to be 'about as helpful as the kittens are' in running a household).<sup>26</sup> These excess men mirror

<sup>19</sup> Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, p. 145.

<sup>20</sup> Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> Steinlight, *Populating the Novel*, p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> The broader question of Oliphant's relation to feminism has been the subject of debate. Previous views of her anti-feminism have been moderated by recent critical work, such as Heather Milton's claim that Oliphant paid 'attention to what women suffer because of their lack of legal rights relating to divorce, property, and child custody' even though she showed little sympathy for specific calls for political change. Heather Milton, 'The Female Confessor: Confession and Shifting Domains of Discourse in Margaret Oliphant's *Salem Chapel*', in *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Tamara Wagner (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009), pp. 197–216 (p. 199).

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 508.53 (February 1858), 139–54 (p. 141).

<sup>25</sup> Oliphant, 'The Condition', p. 141.

<sup>26</sup> Oliphant, 'The Condition', p. 143.

the excess energy and economic potential associated with surplus women. What Oliphant finds missing in the debate are all the young women who are in fact *not* useless excess. She protests that 'it is his daughters who keep the tradesman's books, and makes out his bills, almost universally', claiming that:

it is a mere exploded piece of antique nonsense to assert that society flatters women into foolishness, or permits them to be flattered; and that those who find in the young girls of our families only helpless nose-gays of ornament, unqualified to do service either to themselves or to other people, are either totally unacquainted with household life, or have a determined 'cast' in their vision, not to be remedied.<sup>27</sup>

It is this gap, this unrepresented labour force that adds surplus value to the interlinked economies of home and business, that Oliphant's novels seek to fill. At the same time, Oliphant argues that British civilization is only able successfully to maintain itself thanks to the existence of a 'constantly remaining balance of savage possessions', which provide a venue for the otherwise undirected energies of young men to become 'adventurers'.<sup>28</sup> She would later act on these principles: her nephew Frank went to India in 1875, and in 1883, the year of *Hester's* publication, her eldest son Cyril went to Ceylon as private secretary to Sir Arthur Gordon.<sup>29</sup> In a similar way to that prescribed by W. R. Greg, one surplus, the untapped energy of the colonial centre, is resolved through another, the necessary supplement of the colonies, which is considered both a space to be conquered and a resource to be exploited: 'a margin of woods and plains and islands to be won out of the primitive grip of nature, and holding primitive wealth, the wholesome original of all other riches, in their bosom'.<sup>30</sup> The original inhabitants are of course conveniently effaced here, present only implicitly as part of the 'primitive grip of nature'.

Oliphant's article resituates the surplus from unmarried women outside families to unrecognized female labour within the family, and extends its range to include young men, helping to provide a justification for British colonialism. In the context of Oliphant's writing career, we might also read her criticism of the notion of surplus women as a defence of her own position and writing practice. In 1856, as the mother of two young children, she was already 'being told that I was working too fast, and producing too much.' The surplus here is not the woman herself, but what she produces, and that production can be calculated in economic terms. 'I was . . . getting paid about £400 for a novel', she remarks.<sup>31</sup> Yet the surplus of Oliphant's writing could at times exceed financial reason. In 1865, she wrote in a letter to Blackwood, the publisher of *Miss Marjoribanks*, 'I meant it to be only four or five numbers but I have already put in too many details to make that possible, and it seems to suit my demon best to let it have its own way.' Unnecessary details erupt from Oliphant's pen, motivated by a demonic energy, despite the fact that satisfying Blackwood was vital at this time. She was writing from Paris, where 'the very air is dear, and to breathe is expensive'.<sup>32</sup>

If the 1858 article anticipates *Hester* in the way it illustrates the dangers of failing properly to integrate excess young men and women into financial and affective economies, *Hester* is more pessimistic than the article about the prospect of such integration. Although *Hester*

<sup>27</sup> Oliphant, 'The Condition', p. 150.

<sup>28</sup> Oliphant, 'The Condition', p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters*, p. 140, p. 312.

<sup>30</sup> Oliphant, 'The Condition', p. 140.

<sup>31</sup> Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters*, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters*, p. 197.

could be usefully expending her energy to support the family business, she is prevented from doing so, while at least one of the male characters – Edward Vernon – represents a dangerously underemployed male energy that finds its outlet not in colonial adventure but in destructive speculation. *Hester* makes the question of surplus women a more complex matter than the earlier article. It transforms the figure of the surplus woman into an embodiment of the surplus energy that is both necessary and dangerously disruptive to the financial and libidinal economies of modern capitalism.

## 2. READING *HESTER* (1883) THROUGH ‘HESTER’ (1803)

Although *Hester* is subtitled *A Story of Contemporary Life*, it begins in approximately the 1820s, when we are introduced to Vernon’s Banking House, located in the fictional town of Redborough, somewhere in the English home counties. The bank undergoes a great crisis when, on the eve of an expected bank run caused by his own recklessness, the owner and manager John Vernon abandons his post and flees to France, leaving only Catherine Vernon, an unmarried cousin with her own substantial wealth, to step in, invest almost all of her own money in the bank, and save the day. We then shift to the narrative present, which is not explicitly dated but must be the 1850s or 60s, in which Catherine, who has never married, continues to run the bank as a steady and respected figure in the town, surrounded by various Vernon family members whom she supports, including two young male relations: Harry Vernon, a kind of reliable plodder, and Edward Vernon, a gifted but resentful protégé who feels Catherine to be a constricting influence on him. Into this situation arrives Hester, the penniless daughter of John Vernon, who is unaware of her father’s role in the earlier collapse. With her mother she moves into the Vernons, after which her interactions with the other Vernons, and Edward’s gradual precipitation of a second banking crisis, become the main focus of the narrative.

The central characteristics of *Hester* are already indicated by the novel’s epigraph, taken from Charles Lamb’s (1775–1834) poem of 1803, also called ‘Hester’:

A springy motion in her gait,  
 A rising step, did indicate  
 Of pride and joy no common rate  
 That flush’d her spirit:  
 I know not by what name beside  
 I shall it call: if ’twas not pride,  
 It was a joy to that allied  
 She did inherit.  
 ...  
 She was train’d in Nature’s school,  
 Nature had blest her.  
 A waking eye, a prying mind,  
 A heart that stirs, is hard to bind:  
 A hawk’s keen sight ye cannot blind,  
 Ye could not Hester.<sup>33</sup> (1)

<sup>33</sup> These lines reproduce stanzas 3–6 of the original eight, except for two omitted lines: ‘Her parents held the Quaker rule, | Which doth the human feeling cool’. Charles Lamb, *Prose and Poetry with Essays by Hazlitt and De Quincey* (London: The Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 71.

The poem from which this epigraph is taken resurfaces a number of times, most notably in Chapter 5, where the narrator quotes the same lines, as well as Lamb's final stanza.<sup>34</sup> The poem describes a young woman who has died, whom Lamb had often seen and felt himself to be in love with, though he had never spoken to her, putting it somewhat in the spirit, if not the style, of Baudelaire's later 'À une passante' ['To a Passer-By'] (1855). The narrator's comments in Chapter 5 evoke this context:

Neither Nature nor Hester had any fear. She was like her namesake in the poem, whom the 'gentlehearted Charles' beloved of all men, could not, though she was dead, give up the expectation of meeting as heretofore, 'some sunny morning'.

'When from thy cheerful eyes a ray,  
Had struck a bliss upon the day,  
A bliss that would not go away,  
A sweet forewarning.' (45)

In both poem and novel, Hester bursts with life. For Lamb, she exceeds the limits of death that should contain her, so that he 'cannot . . . by force be led | To think upon the wormy bed | And her together.'<sup>35</sup> In these lines it is at least partly his desire that refuses the image of the wormy bed, implicitly preferring its inverse, the sexual or marital bed, the site of life and generation rather than death. At the same time, Lamb aligns desire and death even as he seems to reject their conjunction. The final stanza links Hester to a 'bliss that would not go away', which persists not only through the day but after death.<sup>36</sup> This persistence, in the manner of Shakespeare's sonnets, includes the lines of the poem we are reading.

There is, then, a pleasure that goes beyond death in this poem. In Freudian terms, such pleasure goes beyond that which is itself already beyond the pleasure principle: the death drive. This persistent joy acts as a surplus or excess, which cannot be either 'bound' in life or defused by death, and which is seen through the lens of a male desire that likewise cannot contain it within language, since the speaker 'know[s] not what name' to call Hester's liveliness. Such surplus is central to Oliphant's novel, where it defines both Hester herself and to a lesser extent Catherine Vernon.

### 3. THE STATIONARY STATE AND SOCIAL STASIS

The link between the libidinal concerns raised by the epigraph and the economic world that saturates the novel requires further conceptualization. One starting point is J. S. Mill's account of the 'stationary state', which he considers the natural endpoint of a nation's economic development. It is a state in which 'no further addition will be made to capital, unless there takes place either some improvement in the arts of production, or an increase in the strength of desire to accumulate.'<sup>37</sup> Significantly, Mill brings together material productive capacity ('the arts of production') and desire ('desire to accumulate') as the two driving forces of economic development. If the end of the 'desire to accumulate' is one of the main prerequisites for the stationary state, this makes it an economic parallel to the goal of the Freudian pleasure principle,

<sup>34</sup> There are also re-quotations of the line 'A springy motion in her gait' on p. 90 and p. 141.

<sup>35</sup> Lamb, *Prose and Poetry*, p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> Lamb, *Prose and Poetry*, p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, 7th edn (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923 [1871]), p. 172. I am grateful to Michael Sanders for drawing my attention to Mill on the stationary state.

which seeks to bring an end to excitation (equivalent here to economic agitation or 'addition') within the organism. In the stationary state, as in the achieved state of Freudian pleasure, there is an end to desire, and a lack of active energy. This state is comfortable, but as Freud observes it points ultimately towards death. Mill recognizes the proximity of the stationary state to death when he calls it 'an apparently stagnant sea', though he does not think the ideology of pure progress is an acceptable alternative.<sup>38</sup> Mill sees economic production and accumulative desire as co-extensive, paving the way for us to read this conjunction in *Hester*. Yet his scheme opposes both of these to death, so it does not help us deal with the apparent persistence of the 'bliss that would not go away' once the Hester of Lamb's poem has attained the stationary state of death.

As well as registering an alignment between the economic and libidinal, Mill's description of the stationary state has implications for wealth and population, challenging Malthus's argument that the constant growth of population is inevitable. For Mill, the best state of mankind is one where 'while no one is poor, no one desires to be richer', and such a state will be accompanied not only by a reduction of desire, but also a restraining of population, which is a potential good, since 'A population may be too crowded.'<sup>39</sup> Yet this state is a danger as well as a promise, since it involves an end to desire and economic development as well as an end to the problem of surplus population; it can be summarized as an end to surplus itself. Such an outcome promises social benefits, but cannot be conceived other than as a form of death, since it requires the eradication of surplus enjoyment from the social system. Psychoanalysis posits, however, that surplus enjoyment, what Lacan names *jouissance*, is what keeps a system or organism running. To eradicate desire is to eradicate *jouissance*, and therefore to eradicate life.

Oliphant's novel brings to the surface the tensions implicit in Mill's analysis, especially the tension between a drive towards *jouissance* on the one hand and the pleasure principle's drive towards comfortable stability on the other (though these drives are not always easily separable, as I discuss below). The pleasure principle, which leads towards the stationary state, is represented in the text by Catherine, whose early activity blossoms into 'more than her grandfather's steady power of holding on' (22) as she gradually grows the bank. Her actions ultimately lead to a reduplication of self rather than new life. While she remains childless, the town is reshaped in her own image: 'Her name was put to everything. Catherine Street, Catherine Square, Catherine places without number' (23). For Freud the drive towards repetition is the motivating force of the death drive, and indeed Catherine's second salvation of the bank leads to her death. This takes place while she is sitting with Hester, her energy and money both depleted, at which point 'she sighed two or three times heavily, then there was no sound at all' (455).

If Catherine's steady success with the bank is the positive side of the stationary state, its negative side is the condition of 'dullness' and 'nothing' that Hester fears when describing her life to the city banker Roland Ashton: 'this is dullness [sic] – this is nothing', she tells him, 'not living at all, but only going on because one cannot help it' (306). Hester is referring to her experience in the Vernonry, where she is held in a kind of stasis. This deathlike experience is countered by her main role in the narrative, which is as surplus *jouissance*, or pure joy. Such joy exceeds death, as is evident in Lamb's poem, and Hester's outliving of Catherine. It thereby resists the stasis of the pleasure principle, but is simultaneously the driving force behind financial ruin. Mill, by contrast, presents desire as accumulative, whether of money or

<sup>38</sup> Mill, *Principles*, p. 746.

<sup>39</sup> Mill, *Principles*, p. 749, p. 750.

population, rather than as leading to excess enjoyment. In *Hester*, though, desire is associated less with economic use-value than with waste and uselessness. In financial terms, speculation is its main vehicle. As Mill rightly observes, the road to the stationary state requires a situation where there is no 'waste' from a given system, but Oliphant's novel shows that existence without waste, or what Georges Bataille calls expenditure, is not possible.<sup>40</sup> In what follows I look more closely at the repercussions in *Hester* of this necessity of waste, focusing on the connections it draws between love, money, chance and Lacanian *jouissance*.

#### 4. LOVE, MONEY AND CHANCE

In contrast to a reading based on Mill's model, a Marxist approach to the novel might begin by observing that in taking Lamb's poem as her epigraph, Oliphant takes a quite conventional Romantic trope – the idea of the young innocent girl who is close to nature – and transforms it into terms more suitable for a society shaped by what Carlyle called the cash nexus. In *Hester*, the young girl's natural vitality now represents the capacity to shape and direct a family business; but only if, as with Catherine Vernon, it is allied to reserves of capital. In this light, Lamb's line 'Of pride and joy no common rate', takes on a new significance, becoming a pun on 'rate' as a financial term, and so anticipating the significance in the novel of rates of interest and rates of growth. Indeed, rates of financial growth prove too low for Edward Vernon, the trusted but ultimately disloyal heir to Catherine Vernon, who develops a 'taste for speculation' (376), finding himself taken over by what Hester calls 'a fever and an excitement' (376) that leads him to risk the bank's assets for his own gain. He seeks, that is, an 'uncommon' or excessive rate of return that would mirror the uncommon pride and joy of Hester.

The epigraph's designation of 'pride and joy' as the qualities of no common rate is thus appropriate not only to Hester, but also to Edward. Yet it is Hester who not only possesses these characteristics but embodies them. The poem's statement that 'pride', or perhaps 'a joy to that allied', have been 'inherited' by Hester is suggestive here, making her joy something biologically internal rather than spontaneously developed, an essential rather than contingent feature of her character. Inheritance is of course the passing down of family wealth as well as family likeness, a matter of business as well as nature, so that economic and biological drives are implicitly intertwined in both the epigraph and the person of Hester.

In this sense Oliphant revisits the relationship between love and money that was a pre-occupation of earlier nineteenth-century writing, most famously in Jane Austen's novels.<sup>41</sup> Yet whereas Austen offers the possibility that a satisfactory balance can be reached between economic sense and romantic sensibility, 70 years later Oliphant's text shows that there is always a surplus left over in the equation of love and money, whether narratively, economically or affectively. This is what the traditional marriage plot conceals without resolving. Such excess cannot be balanced, and so goes beyond the 'common rate'. That it is Hester herself, and the wasted female potential she represents, who most fully occupies the place of this surplus becomes clear in the description of her arrival in Redborough aged 14: 'So active and young as she was, and full of superfluous strength, it was impossible for her to return to her pillow

<sup>40</sup> Mill, *Principles*, p. 731. See for instance Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume 1: Consumption* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1988).

<sup>41</sup> See for instance Dorothy van Ghent, *The English Novel, Form and Function* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953), pp. 105–23; Elsie Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), pp. 26–64; Karen Newman, 'Can this Marriage be Saved: Jane Austen Makes Sense of an Ending', *ELH*, 50 (1983), 693–710.

as her mother had done' (44). Like the early morning she steps into, Hester has a 'world of latent possibilities in her' (45). Oliphant would in 1897 describe Charlotte Brontë's heroines in similar terms, stating "They wanted their life, their place in the world, the rightful share of women in the scheme of nature."<sup>42</sup> Yet as Valerie Sanders observes, Hester's most striking characteristic is that she 'feels too much', which makes her an 'outsider to the end'.<sup>43</sup> Her feeling is in excess of her 'place in the world', but rather than transforming that world Hester will remain throughout the novel a representation of surplus energy, surplus desire and surplus female potential. This is especially so because she lacks another form of surplus: the capital which her cousin Catherine was able to invest in Vernon's Bank.

In the same chapter as her arrival, Hester meets Edward, who is searching the fields for 'a rare flower that grows here' (46), but which he has never been able to find, and does not this day, remarking 'I don't think I shall find my flower this morning . . . I will walk home with you if you will let me' (49). The obvious reading here is that Edward has after all found his rare flower, in the form of Hester, and certainly this is what he comes to believe, reproducing the conventional separation of women from the world of business which the flower metaphor implies when he tells her, later in the novel, that understanding of business is 'not what a man wants in a woman . . . What he wants, dear, is very different – just to lean upon you – to know that you sympathise, and think of me, and feel for me, and believe in me' (370). Edward wants to make Hester into the 'nosegay of ornament' that Oliphant's 1858 article had insisted young women are not. An alternative reading, however, is that Hester *deflects* Edward from finding the rare flower he seeks, in which case the novel disallows such a convenient but ultimately insufficient metaphor for women. This reading, which I prefer, sees Hester as exceeding the symbolism of the flower, and fits with the references to her 'superfluous strength' and 'latent possibilities', which likewise seem to overflow their limits. Such superfluity is also evident in Hester's desire to teach languages. Significantly, she speaks French, German and Italian, which are modern languages, and languages of international trade, whereas Edward speaks only 'a smattering of Greek and Latin' (48): evidence of a classical education, but useless for business. Hester's wish to teach is rejected by almost everyone around her, including Catherine Vernon, who holds the economic fate of the family in her hands. This leads Hester to feel finally that 'the work she had once found herself so capable of, she was now capable of . . . no longer' (72), so rendering her knowledge superfluous. Hester is instead kept in a state of worklessness in the Vernony, as an unused reserve of surplus labour and productive potential.

What Hester instead comes to wish for as the novel progresses is what she calls her 'chance', a word freighted with meaning in the text.<sup>44</sup> It is a term introduced by Ellen Vernon (later Merridew), an extravagant and fashionable though somewhat frivolous cousin of Hester. As Hunt notes, there is a superfluity of real and fictional cousins in this story; 'I suppose we are all cousins' (240) remarks Emma Ashton at one point.<sup>45</sup> When launching a series of 'dancing teas' for the young people of the neighbourhood, Ellen tells Hester and her mother:

<sup>42</sup> Philip Davis and Brian Nellist, 'Introduction' to Margaret Oliphant, *Hester*, pp. vii–xxvi (p. xiv).

<sup>43</sup> Valerie Sanders, 'Mrs Oliphant and Emotion', *Women's Writing*, 6 (1999), 181–89 (p. 184).

<sup>44</sup> On the development of chance in the nineteenth century see Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Theodore Potter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>45</sup> Hunt, *Personal Business*, p. 161.

I want you to be my right hand; just like my sister. . . . It would be nice for me, and it would be giving Hester the best of chances. . . . What could be better for a girl? All that she will meet will be the best sort of people: and she would have her chance. (205)

Hester responds with ‘shame and indignation’ (205), stating ‘I don’t want any chance’ (205). The chance Ellen intends is the Austenian one of a marriage proposal, as the minor character Emma Ashton, who always speaks directly and has no capacity for embarrassment, makes explicit, telling Hester that having a paid salary ‘hurts a girl’s chance’ (237). Emma will finally and unexpectedly get her own chance late in the novel, with a rushed proposal from Edward on a train to London, after Hester has refused to elope with him (407).

‘Chance’ is also the term used for moments of speculation in the novel. Edward claims that ‘John Vernon was a fool; he threw his chance away’ (318) when criticizing the former manager’s failure to succeed in risky investments; Hester, thinking of the ‘peaceable wealth with which Vernon’s was associated’ (338), cannot ‘understand how everything could hang upon a chance, how fortune could be gained or lost in a moment’ (338). A chance in this sense is a moment of crisis, and a gamble, in which success or failure hang in the balance. Hester waits most of the novel for her chance to come, but when it does, with Edward’s attempt to elope and the ruin he brings to the bank, it is not her but Catherine who steps forward to salvage the business. At its heart, therefore, the novel is a study in Hester’s uselessness, despite all her wishes to the contrary, despite all her potential, and despite the extreme feelings of either desire (in the case of Harry, Edward and Roland Ashton) or hatred (in the case of Catherine), that her presence provokes. Although the novel makes Hester useless, it remains fascinated with this uselessness. The narrative hangs between two dramatic banking crises, one of the 1820s and one of the 1860s; the kind of moments which, as Marx observed, are not disruptive of capitalism but rather fundamental to its (mal)functioning. Yet what Oliphant spends most time on (approximately 34 of 45 chapters) is not these dramatic upheavals, but the large middle between them; the period of suspension and waiting, of energy held in reserve.

The concept of the ‘chance’ becomes more complicated after Hester hears of Catherine’s behaviour as a younger woman, when, following the disaster caused by Hester’s father, she had saved the bank from a devastating run through her swift action in using her maternal wealth to guarantee deposits. Hester wishes:

To have that golden opportunity – the occasion to do a heroic deed, to save some one, to venture your own life, to escape the bonds of every day, and once have a chance of showing what was in you! This was not the ‘chance’ which Emma Ashton desired, but it appealed to every sentiment in Hester. (300)

In this respect Hester is a partial rewriting of Dorothea from *Middlemarch* (1871–72), but one in which Dorothea’s desire for religious or intellectual greatness has been transmuted into the desire for a leading role in a family bank, so that what is base and vulgar for Dorothea – the handling of money, which is always secondary for her, even when she promises Will Ladislaw to ‘learn what everything costs’ – becomes noble for Hester.<sup>46</sup> Despite Hester’s desire to prove

<sup>46</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2004), p. 622. The influence here may run both ways, since Q. D. Leavis suggests that Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865–1866) was an influence on *Middlemarch*. See Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 184–85.

herself, however, it remains hard for her to define what she really wants, what her 'chance' will look like, because it is not a person or an object but an event, a disruption of the everyday, and one which is in unprecedented in her experience.

### 5. THE ERUPTION OF JOUISSANCE

The disruption of the everyday which Hester desires can be understood through Jacques Lacan's rethinking, in seminar XVII (1969–1970), of Marx's concept of surplus value as surplus *jouissance*. As I have already indicated, surplus *jouissance* is excessive enjoyment that goes beyond the limits of the pleasure principle. Lacan proposes that surplus *jouissance* is another form of the surplus value that is extracted from the worker under capitalism: 'What Marx denounces in surplus value is the spoliation of *jouissance*. And yet, this surplus value is a memorial to surplus *jouissance*, its equivalent of surplus *jouissance*'.<sup>47</sup> As Marx was aware, the extraction of surplus labour certainly spoils the enjoyment of the worker, but Lacan also argues that the transformation of labour from a thing with qualities to pure value, which is the move made by modern capitalism, is accompanied by a transformation in which *jouissance* becomes pure value, something to be exchanged, bought and sold. This perspective allows us to recognize that moments of chance in *Hester* are also moments of *jouissance*, of enjoyment that goes beyond the steady state of the pleasure principle and the 'peaceable wealth' (338) of the county bank.

Such moments are slippery; they slide between business and marriage, desire and finance, so that, for instance, Hester finds it hard to tell whether Edward is in love with her or consumed with his own thoughts about speculation:

Was he in love? She did not want to turn the question upon herself, to bring the matter to any conclusion, one way or another. He was very pale that evening, yet would flush, as she herself did, growing red in a moment and then pale again; and there was a watchful air about him as of a man who expected to hear something or see some one whom nobody else looked for. A man who was in love did not behave so. (266–67)

Edward flushes like Hester, but is preoccupied by his risky speculations rather than by her. Yet the line between the two thoughts is not easy to draw, the narrator remarking that: 'One great emotion clears the way for another. Edward in the commotion of his being was almost ready to rush into words that, being said, would have turned his life upside down' (267). One 'chance' (a speculative gamble) almost turns into another (a proposal).

Edward's emotions in this scene do not distinguish between sexual desire and enjoyment of speculation. Echoing the financialization which makes stock-market speculation possible, enjoyment has become unmoored from the object to which it is supposedly attached. This is why Edward can spend such a large part of the novel obsessed with Hester, but then transfer his offer of marriage at a moment's notice from her to Emma, when he happens to find himself on the same train to London, thus giving Emma her chance after all: 'We could be married tomorrow morning', he tells her, 'and start immediately after -' (407).

Edward's transferral of attachment from Hester to Emma shows that, although Hester has been a central protagonist in his life, she can just as easily become useless excess. This is also the case for the novel as a whole, since Hester is both the focus of the narrative and a

<sup>47</sup> Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, p. 81.

representative of unneeded surplus. Lacanian psychoanalysis sees this duality of desire and useless surplus as fundamental to *jouissance*. Commenting on Lacan's Seminar XVII, Alenka Zupančič explains that one of Lacan's key moves is to shift from Freud's theory of the replacement of the lost object of identification with the 'unary trait' towards 'a notion of loss which is closer to the notion of *waste*, of a useless surplus or remainder, which is inherent in and essential to *jouissance* as such.'<sup>48</sup> As we have seen, Lacan defines *jouissance* as that which serves no purpose, that which is not needed. Yet, as Marx demonstrated, capitalism is the system that puts the surplus to work, that turns supposed 'waste' – labour that is not needed to sustain the worker – into the driving force of capital accumulation, so that surplus value becomes what Zupančič calls 'the waste or loss that counts'.<sup>49</sup> As Zupančič also shows, for Lacan *jouissance* is what 'necessitates repetition' (158), and so works against life, taking the form of the death drive.<sup>50</sup> 'This life is full of repetitions' (454), Catherine tells Hester towards the end of the novel, just before she dies: 'People think the same thing does not happen to you twice over, but it does in my experience' (454). Hester is indeed the repetition of Catherine, the surplus Catherine so to speak. Repetition is also at the heart of the Freudian death drive, which strives to return to a state of somnolence. Hester is therefore simultaneously a figure of life, in her role as *jouissance* in excess of necessity, and a figure of death, in her role as a repetition of Catherine and her position as useless waste.

It might seem strange to put Hester, who bursts with life, on the side of the death drive, as my reading is starting to do, but as we have seen, this conjunction was foreshadowed in Lamb's poem, where Hester's unsettling 'wormy bed' interrupts the Romantic idealization of Lamb's narrator. Moreover, Edward shows in the course of the novel that for modern society, sudden generation and sudden destruction, especially of money, are not opposites, but manifestations of the same phenomenon, emerging from speculation and the enjoyment it brings. They are opposed not to one another, but to the steady state of the pleasure principle. This steady state is present in the novel as both the condition of reputable county banking and the quiet, useless domestic life of a middle-class woman, which Hester pictures as a kind of living death ('not living at all, but only going on because one cannot help it' (306)). This condition is one possible outcome of the surplus women problem, if the unmarried woman is seen as an unused and unusable excess. In contrast to this dullness, when Edward sends a letter instructing his broker to engage in risky speculation, he feels it 'may blow himself into atoms if he lingers' (325). The explosion of life Edward's speculation brings him is also potentially an explosion leading to death, and both are opposites of the steady but empty existence Hester fears.

The conclusion of the novel returns to the surplus woman question, but does so ironically, reversing the original problem. In doing so, the text again positions Hester as an embodiment of disruptive but necessary *jouissance*. While the surplus woman of the 1850s and 1860s had no opportunity to marry, in the final pages of Oliphant's novel Hester has been left by one man but still has another two to choose from: Harry Vernon and Roland Ashton. Oliphant

<sup>48</sup> Alenka Zupančič, 'When Surplus Enjoyment meets Surplus Value', in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII, sic vi*, ed. by Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 157. The unary trait is a single act or object that stands in for the other person, as in the fetishization of a desired person's item of clothing or Dora's supposed adoption of a cough in imitation of her father's in Freud's case study.

<sup>49</sup> Zupančič, 'Surplus Enjoyment', p. 170.

<sup>50</sup> Zupančič, 'Surplus Enjoyment', p. 158.

makes this choice a parody of the conventional marriage ending, with the novel's final lines showing that such an apparently desirable outcome is wholly insufficient:

And as for Hester, all that can be said for her is that there are two men whom she may choose between, and marry either if she please – good men both, who will never wring her heart. Old Mrs Morgan desires one match, Mrs John another. What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice? (456)

In this choice there is something deeply, painfully lacking for Hester, summarized in the observation that both men will 'never wring her heart', which is to say, they offer no possibility of *jouissance*. Wagner makes the somewhat unconvincing suggestion that Hester's choice of partners represents a 'promising future', but Sanders recognizes that the ending is 'one of Oliphant's flattest and most unenthusiastic ringing of wedding bells, all the real emotion of the novel having been expended on the night when Catherine's prompt actions saved Vernon's bank'.<sup>51</sup> To rephrase Sanders, we can say that in the dénouement of the novel, libidinal and financial energy interchange with one another, as they did in Edward's dual passions for Hester and speculation, and that as the one substitutes for the other the conventional marriage ending is disrupted. The novel therefore concludes by registering that a sufficient, comfortable domestic life, like a reliable provincial bank, is not in itself satisfactory. Instead, the disruptive surplus which ruined both her father and her lover remains, implicitly, what Hester herself desires, and indeed what shapes desire as such, so that it is also what this novel – and perhaps the novel as a form – runs upon.

In summary, *Hester* dramatizes in a sophisticated way a set of tensions that emerged from the mid-century surplus woman debate, but extended into the economic, affective and cultural life of the later nineteenth century. Hester herself stands for the surplus female potential that could and should be put to work, but is not, and at the same time represents a disturbing conjunction of surplus labour and surplus *jouissance*. In this way, the novel responds to the social and financial concerns of a period in which exchange value was becoming increasingly dominant, as were concerns about population, the social roles of women and speculative risk. The novel plays out the struggle of the pleasure principle against the drive towards *jouissance*, which unlike Mill and Marx, and going beyond Freud, Lacan shows to be fundamental to both psychical and economic life. Paradoxically enough, Lacan's transhistorical theoretical framework thus provides an ideal way to read the historical and narrative dynamics of Oliphant's own moment. This is a moment in which the struggle between pleasure principle and *jouissance* manifests itself as the inability of the provincial family bank to deal with a surplus that threatens the stability of its structures, but which it cannot dispose of. This surplus is at once surplus value and surplus *jouissance*, and both are aligned with Hester, who is also a transformed figure of the surplus woman. In this way, the novel registers the anxieties of a moment, in the late nineteenth century, when old forms of provincial, personal family banking were being overtaken by more fluid but also more risky forms of finance, within which both money and *jouissance* were less tightly bound.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

<sup>51</sup> Wagner, *Financial Speculation*, p. 162; Sanders, 'Mrs Oliphant and Emotion', p. 185.