

MARGARET OLIPHANT'S CRITICISM OF WOMEN'S SENSATION NOVELS*

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Abstract

As a prolific novelist, short-story writer, reviewer, biographer and critic, Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897) was one of the significant literary figures of the Victorian age. Even though none of Margaret Oliphant's literary oeuvre could secure canonical status today, academic interest on her works was revived thanks to the Anglo-American feminist project of resurrecting neglected works by women writers of the past centuries. Margaret Oliphant devoted her life to writing mostly because of financial reasons. She was producing both fictional and non-fictional pieces at an incredible speed. This enabled her opportunity to voice her opinions on the social, political and literary movements of the Victorian era. Today, her personal position concerning political and social discussions of the period constitutes a major debate in contemporary Victorian studies. Her articles on the concerns of the Victorian Women's movement and her harsh criticism of the 1860s controversial sensational texts are today considered as narrative evidences of her conservatism. This essay thus aims to offer an analysis of two of her articles titled "Sensation Novels" (1862) and "Novels" (1867), which will hopefully reveal the pressure of moralistic aspects of Victorian literary criticism especially on sensation women novelists of the 1860s.

Key Words: *Margaret Oliphant, Sensation Novels, Victorian Literary Criticism.*

MARGARET OLIPHANT'IN KADIN YAZARLARIN SANSASYONEL ROMANLARI HAKKINDAKİ ELEŞTİRİLERİ

Özet

Kraliçe Viktorya döneminde çok iyi bilinen Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897) roman, kısa öykü, deneme, eleştiri ve biyografi gibi farklı türlerinde birçok eser vermiş oldukça üretken bir yazardı. Margaret Oliphant külliyatından hiçbir eser günümüzde edebiyat kanonu içinde yer bulamamış olsa da, Anglo-Amerikan feminist hareketin geçmiş asırların unutulmuş kadın yazarlarının eserlerini canlandırma projesi Margaret Oliphant'ın eserlerine akademik bir ilginin canlanmasına vesile olmuştur. Margaret Oliphant ekonomik sebeplerden ötürü hayatını yazmaya adanmıştır. Hem kurgusal hem de kurgusal olmayan muhtelif türlerde inanılmaz bir hızla eserler üretmiştir. Bu, aynı zamanda, Margaret Oliphant için zamanının sosyal, politik, edebi hareketleri ve tartışmalarına dair kendi düşüncelerini beyan edebildiği bir ortam yaratmıştır. Yazarın döneminin politik ve sosyal hareketlerine karşı tavrı günümüz Viktorya dönemi çalışmaları içinde oldukça tartışılan bir konudur. Dönemi kadın hareketi üzerine ve özellikle 1860'ların kadınlar tarafından yazılmış sansasyonel romanları hakkında yazdığı eleştirilerin Oliphant'ın gelenekçi yanına işaret ettiği düşünülür. Bu makale yazarın "Sansasyonel Romanlar" (1862) ve "Romanlar" (1867) başlıklı makalelerinin Viktorya dönemi edebi eleştirinin ahlakçı yönlerinin özellikle 1860'larda sansasyonel roman yazan kadın yazarlar üzerindeki baskısını vurgulayan bir analizini yapmayı amaçlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Margaret Oliphant, Sansasyonel Romanlar, Viktorya Döneminde Edebi Eleştiri.*

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Literary discussions concerning the dichotomy between highbrow and lowbrow fiction never ceased to bother literary circles, and the Victorian age was no exception. Victorian literary criticism and politics of canonization elevated realist domestic novels as examples of highbrow art while underestimating popular novels that were clustered as lowbrow fiction. This helped push myriad of popular Victorian women novelists into oblivion in the twentieth century. Margaret Oliphant's (1828-1897) attack on the 1860s women sensation novelists epitomizes this treatment. This article discusses Oliphant's criticism of women's sensation novels to reveal (1) how the hierarchy among high and low fiction worked to the disadvantage of women novelists of popular fiction (2) how writing novels in the Victorian period was considered a moral obligation rather than an aesthetic and artistic exertion for women

As competing sub-genres of the Victorian novel, domestic and sensation novels were the major areas where the discussion of high and low art gained momentum in the Victorian literary circles. Generic features of both genres stand as each others' contrast. The domestic novel was the dominant genre of the period, which reinforced the conventions of domestic realism and avoided unconventional and subversive representations. The domestic novel is generally set in domestic settings, taking "its incidents from daily life and depicting middle-class characters" (Fryckstedt, 1987: 10). Though generally there is a love theme at the center of domestic narratives, the main emphasis is "on submission to the will of God, fulfillment of duty, self-sacrifice, and endurance" (1987: 9). Heroines in these novels represent Victorian morals and they usually follow patriarchal norms and conventions. Domestic narratives uphold the myth of the angel in the house and heroines in these texts are emblematic of altruism, morality, domesticity and sanctity. On the contrary, popular sensation novels destroyed this angelic image with the portrayal of transgressive female heroines, who were involved in remarkably shocking, scandalous and sensational events. Especially the 1860s sensation novels by Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Charles Reade, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, Rhoda Broughton and Ouida hit the headlines in the Victorian

publishing sector and created huge demands in circulating libraries. The following excerpt from Lyn Pykett's "A Woman's Business: Women and Writing, 1830-80," succinctly explains notable characteristics of sensation novels:

These exciting and disturbing novels of modern life were remarkable for their devious and dangerous villains, or more usually villainess/heroines, and for their extraordinarily complicated plots usually involving suspense, concealment, disguise and duplicity, fraud, forgery (often of a will or occasionally of a marriage certificate), deception, illegal imprisonment (usually of a young woman), blackmail, bigamy, and even murder or attempted murder. As far as their form was concerned sensation novels were something of a generic hybrid, mixing realism and melodrama, the journalistic with the fantastic, and the domestic with the exotic. (1998: 166-7)

Such scandalous subjects were previously veiled in domestic-realist tradition. Especially unconventional delineation of women characters, which were hitherto unknown to Victorian readers, became cornerstones of the sensation novel, making it a controversial sub-genre that "questioned the sanctity of the family and the stability of middle-class mores" (Harrison and Fantina, 2006: xii).

At the time when sensational writing was living its heyday in the 1860s, Margaret Oliphant was earning her life by writing novels mostly in realist domestic tradition. As the author of more than ninety novels, dozens of short stories, numerous non-fictional pieces, Margaret Oliphant could compete with canonical and productive writers such as William Thackeray, Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope in terms of literary prolificacy. Also worthy of mention, she was a perpetual contributor to *Blackwood's Magazine* between 1854 and 1897, until her death. *Blackwood's*, one of the significant journals of the Victorian age, published various pieces of Margaret Oliphant including serialized novels, short stories, political commentaries, reviews and literary criticism. The time span of Oliphant's hectic writing life witnessed enormous technological developments, fierce political discussions, and social movements, all

of which marked the Victorian period in various ways. The women's movement was perhaps the strongest movement of the time, which explains the abundance of both non-fictional and fictional writings on the Victorian Woman Question. As a prominent literary figure, Margaret Oliphant wrote numerous pieces on the issue¹. However, she displayed a contradictory figure especially regarding her approach to the Woman Question of the time. Her articles and literary criticism reveal that she was unwilling to support the Victorian women's movement. This is perhaps because she was a Tory novelist, who felt closer to conservative and traditional involvements. On the other hand, however, she was also influenced by John Stuart Mill, a liberal, who published influential works such as *The Subjection of Women* and *On Liberty*. Elsie B. Michie explains the complex nature of her political and social involvements in the following way: "In Oliphant's case we have a writer who identified herself with the Tory position and the Tory periodical with which she worked her entire professional life, *Blackwood's Magazine*, but who also actively engaged with Mill's liberal arguments" (2011: 143). It should perhaps be remembered that she was living in an age of transition and doubt, which can explain why she held a bifurcated position regarding many social and political discussions of the time. After all, Oliphant was earning money with her pen. As the only provider of a huge family she might have felt the pressure of Victorian patriarchy on herself as a woman writer. However, on the other hand, she had to meet the patriarchal demands of the Victorian publishing industry to be published. Thus, as a working woman herself, Margaret Oliphant blended progressive and conservative elements in her fictional and non-fictional writings.

¹ Margaret Oliphant published several articles in prominent journals of the time about the Victorian Woman Question. Her articles "The Laws Concerning Women" (1856), "The Condition of Women" (1858), "The Great Unrepresented" (1866) and "The Anti-Marriage League" (1896) were published in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Her article on John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women* appeared in *The Edinburgh Review* with a title that reads "Mill on the Subjection of Women" (1869). Also, she published another piece titled "The Grievances of Women" (1880) in *Fraser's Magazine*. In these articles, she voiced her opinions about critical issues such as marriage, women's right to work and vote, holding no brief for feminist forerunners of the period.

Oliphant's non-fictional articles and her ferocious criticism of women's sensation novels are today taken as textual evidences of her conservative tendencies. This is because she was criticizing women's sensational novels for their controversial and subversive portrayal of women characters. Perhaps due to her often cited reviews of the 1860s sensation novels, Margaret Oliphant is remembered as "one of the sensation novel's harshest critics and certainly no ally to feminist advances" (Leckie, 1999: 115). Oliphant's literary criticism indicates that she treated unconventional representations of women in fiction quite unsympathetically and hinted that they were the result of the feminist movement of the time. Two of her articles published in *Blackwood's Magazine* will be discussed thoroughly in this context: "Sensation Novels" (1862) and "Novels" (1867).

The first remark of Margaret Oliphant in her article "Sensation Novels" (1862) is the rising popularity of sensational writing in fiction. She compared the sensation novel with its dominant rival, the domestic novel: "It is a fact that the well-known old stories of readers sitting up all night over a novel had begun to grow faint in the public recollection. Domestic histories, however virtuous and charming, do not often attain that result" (565). As page-turning texts, sensation novels brought sleepless nights for Victorian readers while domestic novels, which Oliphant described as "virtuous and charming" did not always produce such effects. Oliphant's wording is crucial to note at this point; she presented two genres as opponents and by describing the domestic novel as "virtuous" she implied that the other is not. Oliphant described sensation novels as "a class of books abounding in sensation; but the effect is invariably attained by violent and illegitimate means, as fantastic in themselves as they are contradictory to actual life" (565). Apparently, she found sensation narratives unrealistic, or, in other words, not plausible. She tended to suppress scandalous actualities that were happening in real life as well as their representations in fiction. Though Margaret Oliphant wrote that sensational effects in these novels were "violent and illegitimacy" (1862: 565) sensational incidents made themselves apparent first through the newspapers of the period. This is important to note because Victorian scholars agree that

the roots of sensation fiction can be found in sensational journalism, which is why such novels were called “the newspaper novel” (Purchase, 2006: 188). This can explain how sensation novels might have produced representations of certain Victorian ‘truths,’ albeit in an ‘untrue’ form. That means that these novels may offer an idea about what might have been going on in the sacred Victorian families in the form of fiction.

What should be stressed here is that although Margaret Oliphant accepted and even enjoyed sensational effects in male sensation novelists, she did not actually feel the same for women sensation novelists. In “Sensation Novels,” Margaret Oliphant devoted a long space to Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859) and Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861). When discussing these novels, she tended to focus mostly on the literary qualities of the narratives and she praised the novelists’ talents. As the following excerpt will reveal, she thought that Wilkie Collins had a unique place in the sensation genre:

amid all these precursors in the field, Mr. Wilkie Collins takes up an entirely original position . . . shows no love of mystery for mystery’s sake: he wastes neither wickedness nor passion . . . His effects are produced by common human acts, performed by recognizable human agents, whose motives are never inscrutable, and whose line of conduct is always more or less consistent. (1862: 566)

Oliphant further stressed that even though he was producing sensational texts, Wilkie Collins’ novel was also realist and the characters could be found in everyday life. The same, Oliphant thought, was also true for Charles Dickens: “Mr Dickens was one of the first popular writers who brought pictures of what is called common life into fashion” (1862: 574). Speaking of Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, she added that “[t]he book . . . has high qualities of its own, and belongs to a class which possibly never might have come into existence but for the labours of Mr Dickens” (1862: 580). Although Oliphant offered slight suggestions for some narrative aspects of these novels, she exalted Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens. This is perhaps because they were male novelists, who were closer to the realist tradition.

In her criticism of the sensation genre, Margaret Oliphant targeted mostly women sensation novelists. She foregrounded the dichotomy between sensation and domestic narratives, taking the latter as the only reference point through which other narratives could be evaluated. For instance, she wrote that “the more we perceive the perfectly legitimate nature of the means used to produce the sensation, the more striking does that sensation become” (1862: 566). The word “legitimate” is the key to understand her approach to the effects of sensational texts. She did not consider what was happening in most sensation narratives as true representations of real Victorian experiences. According to her, most of them did not even reflect Victorian lives. Thus, while exalting Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, she accentuated the writer’s ability to create “legitimate” sensations:

We cannot object to the means by which he startles and thrills his readers; everything is legitimate, natural and possible; all the exaggerations of excitement are carefully eschewed, and there is almost as little that is objectionable in this highly-wrought sensation-novel, as if it had been a domestic history of the most gentle and unexciting kind. (1862: 566)

What Oliphant meant by “legitimate” sensation can be guessed by looking at the following quote where she additionally wrote that “the distinguishing feature of Mr Wilkie Collins’ success is that he ignores all these arbitrary sensations, and has boldly undertaken to produce effects as startling by the simplest expedients of life” (1862: 566). It seems that she opposed “legitimate” sensation to “arbitrary” sensations. While she approved the first one (legitimate), she openly disapproved the latter (arbitrary), which could be equated to bodily sensations, excessive emotions and passions. Thus, Margaret Oliphant accepted milder forms of creating sensations in realist tradition but protested against what she considered as excessive ways, which were ironically mostly seen in women’s sensation novels. She thought that the way emotions and passions were used in fiction could be really dangerous because this was the only way of creating sensations in literary texts:

The rise of a Sensation School of art in any department is a thing to be watched with jealous eyes; but nowhere is it so dangerous as in fiction, where the artist cannot resort to a daring physical plunge, as on the stage, or to a blaze of palpable colour, as in the picture-gallery, but must take the passions and emotions of life to make his effects withal. (1862: 568)

For Margaret Oliphant, wild emotions and passions were most dangerous if they pertained to women characters written by women novelists. For instance, she thought that Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*² was a "dangerous and foolish work," (1862: 567) because at the center of the novel stood a sinner woman, who gained the interest and sympathy of readers:

We have just laid down a clever novel, called 'East Lynne,' which some inscrutable breath of popular liking has blown into momentary celebrity. It is occupied with the story of a woman who permitted herself in passion and folly, to be seduced from her husband. From first to last it is she alone in whom the reader feels any interest. Her virtuous rival we should like to bundle to the door and be rid of, anyhow. The Magdalen herself, who is only moderately interesting while she is good, becomes, as soon as she is a Magdalen, doubly a heroine. It is evident that nohow, except by her wickedness and sufferings, could she have gained so strong a hold upon our sympathies. This is dangerous and foolish work, as well as false, both to Art and Nature. Nothing can be more wrong and fatal than to represent the flames of vice as a purifying fiery ordeal, through which the penitent is to come elevated and sublimed. (1862: 567)

2 Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* was published in 1861. The novel tells the story of an adulterous woman, Isabel Vane, who comes from an aristocratic family. Isabel Vane's elopement with her lover Francis Levison and her later pangs of remorse as a lovelorn woman constitute the major plot of the lengthy novel. It was an instant success and remained a best-seller for the entire century. *East Lynne* was a mixture of realist and melodramatic elements, making it apt for stage adaptations. Thus, it was very popular on the stage in the Victorian period, too. Today, *East Lynne* is considered as one of the representative novels of the sensation genre.

Again, Margaret Oliphant compared the sensation heroine Isabel Vane with her domestic rival, Barbara Hare, whom she described as "virtuous" but implied at the same time that she was presented as subordinate to the story of the wicked woman character. That the reader is interested in the sinner woman character and not in the virtuous concerns Oliphant most in this evaluation. Michael Diamond states that, in her interpretation of *East Lynne*, Oliphant "disapproved of wicked or morally flawed characters being depicted sympathetically" (2004: 203). Also, by noting that the novel is "false, both to Art and Nature," again, Oliphant ignored middle-class realities and took such representations as an assault on the middle-class moral values.

Margaret Oliphant's reviews of women's sensation novels also highlight the fact that writing novels in the Victorian period was not independent from writers' moral duties. Whenever Oliphant criticized the representation of vicious women and wicked female experiences in novels, she pointed to the representative obligations of women novelists. She denied that wicked representations could in some cases be true to life and she made this more clear in her second article titled "Novels" (1867), where her brief references to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's³ works, Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, and also to an anonymous work titled "The Story of Elizabeth" revealed that she felt really uneasy about how women novelists presented women characters and their romantic relations in novels.

In her article titled "Novels," (1867) while again speaking of *East Lynne*, Margaret Oliphant first mentioned that the novel becomes "a great success without any particular reason" (1867: 170). In this article, she focused especially on the last volume of the novel where the heroine Isabel Vane, whose sins and transgressions were detailed in the first and the second volumes, "return[ed] to her former home under the guise of the poor governess" (1867: 170). As the following excerpt will make clear,

3 Mary Elizabeth Braddon was one of the best-selling authors of sensation genre. She published *Lady Audley's Secret* in 1862 and the novel secured a lasting place in the circulating libraries of the Victorian age. In contrast to Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's portrayal of the adulterous heroine in *Lady Audley's Secret* is extraordinarily provocative, which is why it outshone *East Lynne*'s popularity.

what disturbed Oliphant was that the complete attention was given to the sinner heroine particularly in the last part of the novel: “there is not a reader who does not feel disposed to turn her virtuous successor to the door, and reinstate the suffering heroine, to the glorious confusion of all morality. These are not desirable issues of the art of story-telling” (1867: 170). Her statements about the ‘right’ nature of fiction are important because, first, as the writer of mostly domestic novels and as a notable reviewer of her time, Oliphant was speaking from a powerful position. Second, by commenting on what is desirable and not desirable in literary texts, she endeavoured to support and preserve conventional literary styles and to suppress signs of subversive alternatives in fiction. Such an attitude serves to marginalize the texts that make visible what Oliphant considers as undesirable and immoral issues in literary works. Realist domestic novels, which were considered representing high art in literature, reinforced the conventional life styles through fictional representations and secured canonical status in time. However, sensation novels were categorized as low fiction and even though most of them sold in extremely high numbers throughout the century, they were gradually decanonized.

In “Novels,” Margaret Oliphant devoted a long space to an anonymous book titled “The Story of Elizabeth.” Although the writer of this novel is still unknown today, Oliphant’s interpretation of the novel’s heroine is crucial to note because she commented on the heroine again by comparing her to domestic heroines. This is how she saw the heroine: “Elizabeth is naughty to an extent which no heroine of our acquaintance has yet attempted; she is cross, she is disobedient, she is sullen and perverse; and even, perhaps the most unpardonable sin of all, she is untidy” (171). As a contrast to the heroine of this anonymous novel, Margaret Oliphant presented a palatable description of a domestic heroine, and her sympathetic attitude can be felt: “[t]he good girl of domestic life, the angel of ordinary novels, has nothing in common with this creature of glowing flesh and blood, who storms and cries at everything that comes in her way, and keeps up no appearances, and is bent only upon being happy” (1867: 172). What Oliphant overlooked here was that sensation

heroines chased happiness, too. Yet, on their way to happiness they had to do things which could require the risk of involvement in criminality. Oliphant interpreted this as selfishness: “in one way a selfish girl, thinking how to be happy and nothing else; never attempting to be good, and seeing happiness only in its vulgar aspect, as a matter of drives, theatres, and attendant admirers” (1867: 176). What she perhaps meant by “vulgar aspects” and “a matter of drives” were the illegitimate feelings, extra-marital relations and sexuality, which, in women’s sensation novels, were reflected mostly through the affective experiences of women characters.

By also hinting at the works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Margaret Oliphant wrote that “[w]hat is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshy and unlovely record” (1867: 174). Her criticism specifically targeted Braddon’s heroine; Lady Audley, whom she found “fleshy and unlovely” because she is a desiring and self-expressive woman character. While criticizing the appearance of such sensation heroines in fiction written by women, Margaret Oliphant commented on how and what women writers should have written:

It is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclination herein attributed to them. It may be done in carelessness. It may be done in that mere desire for something startling which the monotony of ordinary life is apt to produce; but it is debasing to everybody concerned. (1867: 174)

Oliphant accused not only women writers who produced sensation novels but also women readers who craved and devoured such texts, creating a big demand in the publishing market. Thus, through her criticism, she attempted to judge and correct both writers and readers of sensation fiction. In her reviews, she dealt with the representative qualities of women’s sensation novels in a rigid way and she reminded women novelists of their moral obligations. As a matter of fact, this was not a new concern in Victorian literary criticism. Patricia Ingham writes that when *Jane Eyre* was first published in 1847,

rumors arose as to the gender of the writer because reviewers “found matters such as the brutality, attempted bigamy, and an unmarried woman’s passion for a married man in *Jane Eyre* easier to accept from a male author” (2006: 26-7). Margaret Oliphant’s interpretation of *Jane Eyre* is also worthy of mention at this point. She wrote that the love plot in *Jane Eyre* offered an allusion to the women’s rights movement of the time: “Nobody perceived that it was the new generation nailing its colours to its mast. No one would understand that this furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the ‘Rights of Woman’ in a new aspect” (1855: 312). This is important because it seems that Margaret Oliphant found *Jane Eyre* dangerous as a propaganda of the Victorian feminist movement. Seemingly, even for realist writers such as Charlotte Brontë, the appearance of such subjects matters in their works culminated in similar unfavourable reception. For women sensation novelists, such a reception created an extra burden because the generic qualities of the sensation genre were themselves very shocking, let alone the fact that they were written by women: “For some Victorians, it was bad enough having to read about bigamy, social climbing, grotesque physical violence and interracial marriage without the additional outrage of knowing that a woman’s delicate mind lay behind these scandalous subjects” (Eagleton, 2005: 126). That could be one reason why Margaret Oliphant found it embarrassing for women writers to produce such scandalous women characters and topics.

Though sensation novels were not considered serious literature, the critical reception of these popular novels reveal that they were read and criticized seriously. This is due to the representative and affective power of the novel genre in the Victorian period. Margaret Oliphant’s trenchant criticisms of the 1860s literary craze, the sensation novel, can be considered as a reaction to the unconventional aspects of especially women’s sensation narratives, which were double charged because they were created by women writers and written mostly for women readers. For Victorian women, writing was not only necessary for economic or personal fulfilment, but it was also a moral obligation. One reason why Victorian women gained such a role as writers was because

they wrote largely for female readership. This can be observed particularly when the conduct literature⁴ of the time is considered. In the nineteenth century, conduct books and manuals for women were not only very popular but it was believed that they were also necessary to teach women the upright manners and the right rules of etiquette. At a time when women were expected to read such works as guidebooks, sensational narratives were believed to corrupt women readers’ mind. These narratives were considered extra-ordinary and their affective powers were feared; thus they incited criticism among literary circles. Herself a novelist, Margaret Oliphant also thought in the same vein. She wrote from a powerful position as the writer of well-sold and respected domestic novels and with a moralistic intention as a rigid critic. By openly preaching what was proper and improper to write in novels, she intended to delimit and shape what constituted literary marginalities for the 1860s Victorian literary scene, reminding women writers of their moral responsibilities.

4 Sarah Stickney Ellis’ (1799-1872) books are perhaps the most referred to examples in this genre. To guide Victorian women about their duties and obligations, Mrs. Ellis wrote *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843) and *The Mothers of England* (1843). As the books’ titles plainly evoke, these works aimed at training women about their feminine roles and obligations.

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