

The Charlotte Mary Yonge Fellowship

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From Realism to Reserve: Undergraduate Essays on Charlotte Mary Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe

Introduction

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Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823-1901) was one of the most popular novelists of the Victorian period. Although some of her bestselling novels, including *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), undoubtedly proved more popular and influential in their own day than Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), or Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61), the rise of literary studies as an academic field in the twentieth century neglected Yonge's work. Even feminist scholars, who recovered and canonised novels written by women like the Brontë sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, or Mary Elizabeth Braddon, left Yonge out of their endeavours. One of the Victorians' favourite fiction writers, therefore, is all but forgotten by the readers and scholars of today.

Recently, however, scholars have begun to take note of Charlotte Yonge again. Perhaps this is due to the religious turn in literary studies: scholars are beginning to take religion seriously. Specifically, in Victorian studies, they are starting to analyse the role religion plays in Victorian novels, rather than simply taking it for granted as a part of the historical context. Because religion plays such a prominent role in Yonge's novels, they prove a fertile subject for literary analysis that focuses on religion. However, religion is not the only subject in Yonge's works that has received scholarly attention of late. Yonge's works have also sparked conversations on disability, gender, narrative, genre, and science. The diversity of subjects among professional scholars is mirrored by the variety found within this volume: like their more experienced counterparts, the young scholars featured here found many different strains in *The Heir of Redclyffe*.

The essays in this collection were all written as part of a first-year writing class that I taught at the University of Washington in Seattle during Winter Quarter 2020. The class was a composition class with a focus on literature, and I chose to devote the entire quarter to Charlotte Yonge's most popular novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe*. None of the twenty-three students in the class had read the novel before, but most of them professed to enjoy it once they got into it. When my students submitted their first written work, I was impressed with the originality and perceptiveness of their insights. Perhaps it worked to their advantage that, as Madison Herzig points out in her essay, there were no pages on Spark Notes or Cliff Notes for *The Heir of Redclyffe*. Without even very many academic articles on the novel, the students were really on their own to develop arguments. The arguments they developed, especially for their final essays, eight of which are featured here, attend to textual details, draw on the most relevant primary and secondary sources, and ultimately contribute meaningfully to the growing body of scholarship on Yonge. Loath to let

this excellent material go to waste, I contacted the Charlotte Mary Yonge Fellowship because I knew that their website already collected a great deal of useful information and scholarship on Yonge, and I proposed this essay collection. The excellent members of the Fellowship board agreed to lend their platform to these essays.

Herzig's essay proves a helpful starting point for conversations about *The Heir of Redclyffe* because it outlines the original popularity of the novel and its subsequent fall into oblivion in the latter half of the twentieth century. Herzig both provides information about the popularity of the novel in the nineteenth century and today and offers some possible explanations. When a novel that was so wildly popular at one time is so unknown today, an analysis of this phenomenon is imperative.

Jazlyn Selvasingh weighs in on another of the most prominent debates regarding Yonge: her attitude toward women's rights. Was Yonge a feminist since she promoted girls' education and never married but supported herself with her writing? Or was she an anti-feminist since her most headstrong characters like Rachel Curtis in *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) and Mrs Duncombe in *The Three Brides* (1876) generally end up humbled or humiliated? Selvasingh weighs both sides of the debate, ultimately critiquing the assumptions latent in the question itself.

Caitlyn Chau also addresses gender in *Heir*, focusing her attention on differing conceptions of masculinity. Chau's essay displays remarkable research skills for an undergraduate, effectively summarizing Victorian conversations about masculinity and religion before positioning Yonge within these conversations. Chau's essay offers an insightful analysis of the characters of Guy and Philip while also contributing to conversations about masculinity and Victorian Christianity.

Bridget Wipfler's essay on realism and foreshadowing ambitiously tackles narrative theory and genre theory in relation to intertextuality in *Heir*. Wipfler explores Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's novel *Sintram and His Companions* (1814), which is a major influence on Yonge's protagonist in *Heir*. Noting the parallels between the character of Guy and the character of Sintram and between Guy and Jesus in the Bible, Wipfler suggests that these parallels foreshadow Guy's death and that this foreshadowing breaks with the confines of the traditional realist genre.

Joshua Kwok also addresses the parallels between Guy and Jesus Christ, unpacking what Wipfler only alludes to, and giving numerous examples that might have slipped past readers less alive to the religious context. As Timothy Larsen points out in *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (2011), Yonge's first readers in mid-nineteenth-century England would have been very familiar with the Bible, and allusions that slip past twenty-first-century readers would have been glaringly obvious to Victorians. Kwok catalogues many allusions beyond the most obvious, considering how Yonge uses biblical parallels to communicate her Tractarian message while respecting the doctrine of reserve.

Ryan Brownell also examines Yonge's Tractarianism, noting the influence of Romanticism (especially Wordsworth) on John Keble and thereby also on Yonge. Brownell's analysis of the natural world in *The Heir of Redclyffe* contributes to current scholarship on science and ecology in Victorian literature. He also helpfully connects this to Yonge's religion, bringing these two thriving scholarly conversations together.

Suh Young Choi provides a stunningly astute reading of Virgil's *Aeneid* in *The Heir of Redclyffe*. Capitalizing on two references in *Heir* that compare Philip to Aeneas and James to

Achates, Choi explores the implications of these parallels, suggesting a third: Guy and Pallas. Choi's well-informed readings of Virgil complement her thoughtful analysis of *Heir* to create an incisive argument about the classical influence on the novel, which has been mostly neglected by scholars until now.

Finally, Eileen Arata's examination of music and musicians in *The Heir of Redclyffe* connects the numerous references to music throughout the novel, proposing an interpretation that seems so evident once she explains it that one wonders why one did not perceive it before. Arata's essay is especially remarkable because of its shrewd examination of music and musicians in Victorian culture, which provides the backdrop for Yonge's own portrayal of them in her book.

These eight essays give a taste of the remarkable range of topics possible for those studying Charlotte Yonge. They are not long, and the simple, fluid writing style makes them easy to read. It is therefore much easier for one to read through the entire collection, start to finish, than it would be for most academic essay collections. Doing so would be enjoyable for those familiar with *The Heir of Redclyffe*, and it might well inspire those who have not read the novel to try it. Reading through the entire collection together, however, is not the only way to use this book. Students and scholars studying Charlotte Yonge may well find individual essays in this collection relevant to their work. The wide variety of the essay topics means that many different research questions may find relevant interlocutors in this volume. Although these students may not be professional scholars, I think that professional scholars will find original ideas in these essays, which will inspire their own research. I certainly have.