

The Charlotte Mary Yonge Fellowship

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

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# "Spirit and Substance": Exploring Charlotte Yonge's Views of Women

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How do you define feminism? Gender norms and views towards women are constantly changing, and what is viewed as offensive towards women is a subjective determination. In the eighteenth century, many unmarried women were referred to as spinsters; while it would be highly offensive to use such a term to describe a woman today, such terminology did not receive a head turn or even a second thought. So, do we classify an individual from the eighteenth century who uses derogatory terms towards women as an antifeminist, or do we excuse the language given the time period? Additionally, the concept of women changing their last name after marriage can be viewed as a tradition of American culture or a remnant of a historically patriarchal society. Do we expect, then, that Victorian women be feminists? The word "feminist" was not coined until the twentieth century, so "protofeminist" would be the more appropriate term. However, given the subjective and categorical nature of the terms protofeminist and antifeminist, such terms are no longer valuable as they oversimplify the complex role of women in society.

Gender roles and norms were particularly complicated in Victorian England. The traditional domestic role of women and their devotion to their husbands and the church lingered as the concept of the new woman—one who was educated, employed, and independent—was emerging (Wikipedia). Charlotte Yonge's novel *The Heir of Redclyffe* was written among the turmoil of changing times in Victorian England and topics of gender permeate throughout the novel. Although the new woman movement only officially began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and Yonge's novel was published in 1853, significant changes were already beginning to occur. The 1850s marked the first woman's suffrage movement led by Barbara Bodichon. The imagery of the 'new woman' started to infiltrate many aspects of society and Yonge may have been influenced by this imagery.

At the same time, Yonge was ardently dedicated to her religious beliefs, and her stringent interpretation of the Bible influenced how she saw the role of women. Yonge's portrayals of women reveal the context that her novel was written in. Literary scholar Elizabeth Juckett claims that Yonge does not create a "fundamental binary [...] between males and females but between a docile or a

delinquent response to church authority" (1494). Juckett argues that Yonge's novel was not focused on gender and rather discusses the subjugation of both male and female characters to the church; however, such lines of reasoning fixate on the influence of religion on Yonge's perspectives and neglect other factors.

One such factor is Yonge's background: while she claimed to oppose women's rights, her own background seems to contradict her beliefs. She is highly educated, unmarried, and published an astounding 180+ works. Yonge was the first editor of *The Monthly Packet*, a magazine that catered to upper class, young women. She blatantly stated in one of her articles from the magazine that she had "no hesitation in declaring [her] full belief in the inferiority of women" (Moruzi 714). From this statement alone, some detractors have been quick to label Yonge as antifeminist, but they are missing the larger context and are only looking at one specific quote from this magazine. From this same magazine, Yonge wrote to female readers, "Be strong-minded, then. With all my might I say it. Be strong-minded enough to stand up for the right, to bear pain and danger in a good cause, to aid others in time of suffering ..." (Moruzi 814). These two quotes from her magazine seem to contradict each other as they express opposing views of women. Additionally, Yonge had to be cognizant of her readers when she was writing and may have wrote in order to appeal to her readers. Thus, her writing may not accurately portray her true beliefs.

Yonge deliberately expresses both profeminist and antifeminist stances in her writing. Detractors who attempt to classify Yonge as a profeminist or antifeminist are not considering the multitude of factors that influence her attitudes towards women as well as the mixed views she conveys to readers in her writing. It is important that readers do not fall into the trap of relegating Yonge to the title of profeminist or antifeminist because it will cause them to miss subtleties of *The Heir of Redclyffe* and not appreciate the complex context that the novel was written in. The dichotomy between both positive and negative views of female characters in the novel indicates that Yonge faced an internal battle between her religious beliefs, the 'new woman' movement, her own background, as well as an obligation to appeal to readers; therefore, not only is it difficult to classify her true views of woman, but it does not do justice to the many factors that influence her own values and her portrayals of women.

Yonge's views of woman are primarily conveyed to readers through her character portrayals and developments. At the start of the novel, Yonge depicts young female characters as silly and insensible while simultaneously portraying Laura, the oldest sister, as the epitome of a proper lady. While it may be true that Yonge's depictions of young female characters as "silly" was intended to be satirical, the repeated descriptions along with character's constant need to suppress the "silly" behavior point to an unconscious stigma around creative and curious young girls that aligns with traditional beliefs in England for how women ought to be trained to behave. Yonge's initial condemnation of female characters who stand out and who openly express emotion and praise for those who conform to their place in society provides a superficial impression to readers that she is antifeminist. Through the contrast in the depiction of young and old female characters, Yonge is suggesting that girls are inherently improper and need to be trained to conform to the traditional feminine standards. When

Charlotte laughs along with Philip, Charles and Amy about the feud within the house of Morville, she is seen as "impudent" and an "inquisitive pussy-cat". Her mother even asks her, "What business have you here?" (Yonge 4). Following her mother's question, Charlotte retreats to her lessons and "look[s] very small" (4). She is often kept away in fear that she will make a fool of herself in public. Charlotte wants to be a part of all the family activities- she wants to contribute and indulge her curiosities- but her mother and father stifle her because her innate curiosity is seen as improper for a girl. Laura later warns Amy of "how often [Charlotte's] inquisitive temper has got her into scrapes" (10). Mrs. Edmonstone seeks to train and teach Charlotte what is proper and polite for a girl, but potentially at the expense of smoldering her personality and her inner drive to discover and explore. Despite changing gender roles, young girls in the Victorian era were still expected to behave like proper ladies suited for marriage and domestic life. Young girls like Charlotte who are naturally curious and do not fade into the background to assume their position in society, were viewed as needing reformation to know their place.

Similarly, Yonge expresses her contempt and disapproval of women who are controlled by their emotions through Amabel's initial character development. Amabel is referred to as "silly little Amy" and has earned this title because of her open expression of emotions and her gullibility. Amy's traits are seen as weak because she is often subject to her emotions, often deceived because she trusts people without reason and does not challenge anyone. When she learns about the story of the ghost that supposedly haunts Redclyffe, she believes it and is consumed by her emotions- "she shut herself into her own room in such a fit of vague 'eerie' fright, that it was not till she had knelt down, and with her face hidden in her hands, said her evening prayer, that she could venture to lift up her head and look into the dark corners of the room" (Yonge 59). The idea that Guy could have seen a ghost while at Redclyffe is so frightening and all-consuming for Amy and truly shows her gullibility as she locks herself in her own room and cannot even look up. Just as Amabel has physically contained herself within her small room because of her irrational fear, she has also constrained herself within the stereotype of the "weak woman" who is controlled by her emotions. Yonge is drawing attention to Amabel's weak characteristics and showing how she has given herself the title of "silly little Amy" through her pathetic behaviors. Unlike her sisters who are subject to emotions or have insatiable curiosities, Laura is viewed as the ideal young lady and was seen as a "noble baby" and described as "prematurely wise" by Charles (Yonge 4). Laura is the oldest daughter and is seen as the example that Amabel and Charlotte are working toward as they mature over the course of the novel. Amabel herself says that she wishes she "was as sensible as Laura" (10). Yonge's belief that women need to be trained to act prudently aligns with her Victorian Anglican beliefs and her condemnation of women because of her interpretation that Eve convinced Adam to taste the forbidden fruit ("Yonge"). Since Laura is seen as the example of women knowing their place in society, it is interesting that Yonge chooses to describe Laura as educated. Philip offers to send her his algebra textbooks so that she can study mathematics and she agrees with him. However, Yonge does not use education as a way to uplift women from their place so that they can transcend the social ladder, she employs it to "work down many useless dreams and anxieties" and "prevent [her] from dwelling on the future" (Yonge 133).

Additionally, Laura does not decide to start studying on her own accord; she is conforming to Philip's decision that she should study. By immediately following Philip's suggestion, Laura parallels Yonge's belief that "one's husband's ideas" were "much better and deeper" ("Yonge"). In essence, Yonge conveys to readers that women need to view their husband's ideas as paramount and be educated to take control over their emotions.

The novel seems to follow the trajectory of character development as defined by Laura up until Amy's rebuff to Philip. This marks a turning point in the novel as Amy, especially, is no longer bound by Laura's ideal standard of behavior. Amy is now her own individual and has lost her title of "silly little Amy" and has gained a new one: Lady Morville. Her bold and scathing statement, "I think you forget to whom you are speaking," surprises both readers and Philip (Yonge 359). For the first time, Amy has taken a stand for what she believes in and she is perceived well by Philip who now has more respect for her. Instead of writing this scene between Amy and Phillip under a disapproving tone, Yonge shows her approval for Amy's newfound boldness and assertiveness. She describes, through Philip's lens, the "spirit and substance beneath that soft girlish exterior" (359). Yonge's depiction of this scene completely contradicts the perspective towards women that she has developed. Yonge appears to be advocating for women to stand up for what they believe in and speak up rather than know their place and stay there. The Victorian era was a time of change in perspectives towards women with the concept and image of the new woman. Perhaps, Yonge was consciously or unconsciously influenced by the new woman imagery she saw around her in the form of new fashion, art, and literature (Wikipedia). Even Yonge's characterization of Laura changes as she is actually punished for conforming to Philip's desire to keep their relationship under wraps. It appears as if Yonge's beliefs have flipped as she no longer applauds Laura's submission and reproves Amy's emotionality.

In addition to Yonge's change in characterization of Amy and Laura, Yonge creates care communities that contradict the customary caretaker role of women in Victorian England (Schaffer 63-64). While women were traditionally expected to take on the role of primary caretaker when family members fell ill, Yonge does not limit the caretaker role to women.

Yonge establishes Guy as a committed caretaker to Charles in addition to Mrs. Edmonstone. Guy also takes the lead of nursing Phillip when he falls ill. Amy accompanied him to help Phillip and although she is more closely related to Phillip and a woman, she takes a step back in caretaking. By not relegating woman to the role of caretaking, Yonge appears to be advocating for gender equity through the development of her care communities. After the turning point of Amy's change in characterization, Yonge seems to adopt feminist views and beliefs, so at the end of the novel readers are left confused about Yonge's stance.

Despite the apparent shift in Yonge's tone, this shift is by no means an absolute one. Yonge's strong perspectives and opinions of women carry through the novel and all strong characters are not viewed as positively as Amabel. Mrs. Henley, a very independent woman, is described by Guy as having a "self-reliant air" that is good for her brother but does "not sit as appropriately on a woman" (Yonge 184). Such a statement goes back to Yonge's belief that men were supposed to be strong and

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independent, but it was not right for women to behave this way because they were inferior. While some detractors may label Yonge as protofeminist or antifeminist, such labels not only fail to capture the breadth of factors that influence her but also ignore the subtleties of her novel. Readers must be cognizant of the mix of both protofeminist and antifeminist perspectives and realize that placing Yonge's views into a box reduce her and the context of Victorian England to a single dimension. Instead of asking whether Yonge is a protofeminist, we should utilize the ambiguity to explore the context that her novel was written in and better understand her writing.

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