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Call #: PR115 .A58 2009

Journal Title: Antifeminism and the Victorian
Novel: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Women
Writers

Volume:

Issue:

Month/Year:

Pages: 97-115

Article Author: Schaffer

Article Title: Maiden Pairs

Imprint:

PATRON:

Talia Schaffer (Tschafter)

Location:

GC SCAN & DELIVER

Antifeminism AND THE Victorian Novel

Rereading Nineteenth-Century Women Writers

edited by
Tamara S. Wagner



C A M B R I A
P R E S S

AMHERST, NEW YORK

PR
115
.A58
2009

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Cambria Press

20 Northpointe Parkway, Suite 188

Amherst, NY 14228

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Antifeminism and the Victorian novel : rereading nineteenth-century women writers / edited by Tamara Wagner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60497-607-6 (alk. paper)

1. English fiction—19th century—History and criticism. 2. English fiction—Women authors—History and criticism. 3. Anti-feminism—Great Britain—History—19th century 4. Women in literature. I. Wagner, Tamara S., 1976 II. Title.

PR115.A58 2009

823'.8093522--dc22

2009005988

"Well." Defs. 1b, 1c, 2b. The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. 16 July 2008. <<http://dictionary.oed.com.remote.libproxy.wlu.ca/entrance.dtl>>.

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CHAPTER 5

MAIDEN PAIRS: THE SORORAL ROMANCE IN *THE CLEVER WOMAN* OF *THE FAMILY*

Talia Schaffer

Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) contrasts the ambitious reformer Rachel Curtis with the self-effacing, disabled Ermine Williams, the real "clever woman" of the novel. However, I would like to suggest that the two "clever women," Rachel and Ermine, actually have something important in common. They share an understanding of marriage that is radically different from our contemporary model. Rachel's and Ermine's marriages redefine romance as familial rather than erotic, and by so doing, suggest an alternative understanding of family.

In so doing, I am following Sharon Marcus' insight in *Between Women* that female relationships were far more complex than previously

assumed. Female friendships, for instance, freely used romantic language without necessarily engaging in a sexual relationship. These friendships often preceded and even facilitated the members' weddings but continued throughout the partners' married lives. Neither a competitor to marriage nor a practice run for marriage, then, female friendship was its own category, a lifelong, close, mutually nurturing connection that sustained both partners.

Marcus' findings can help us rethink Victorian family relations. Might familial relations resemble Marcus' friendship relations, being robustly loving without tipping into the modern opposition of heterosexual and homosexual? Moreover, might Victorian subjects have given nonsexual relationships a kind of primacy that we overlook today? In so doing, I am following Eileen Cleere's lead. In *Avuncularism*, Cleere demonstrates how the "uncle" names alternative economic affiliations in the nineteenth century. Like Cleere, I argue that lateral family relationships offer intriguing new models for Victorian subjects. In the specific case of Yonge's fiction, in fact, sororal and cousinly bonds are so strong that instead of being superseded by marriage, they actually redefine marriage in their own image.

No Victorian novelist was more entranced by extended family relationships than Yonge, whose famous "family chronicles" follow the lives of multiple family members over decades. At the same time, no Victorian novelist has been more critiqued for her inadequate grasp of romantic relations. Georgina Battiscombe has commented wryly that "there are moments when it is only possible to believe that Charlotte resembled that legendary aboriginal tribe beloved of anthropologists in her ignorance of the connection between birth and sex" (Battiscombe 87–88). Her proposal scenes sometime seem risibly immature, like the moment in *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) where Guy Morville literally proposes to his cousin Amy across the body of his adoptive mother/aunt (Amy's mother). Guy actually finds it easier to express himself under these conditions, "as if, now that [Amy] was protected by her mother's presence, he exercised less force in self-restraint" (*Heir* 147). Yet the interposition of the mother's body between cousins might be symptomatic. What

would it mean to have relations between a husband and wife centrally mediated through a mother, making her the apex of their triangle, the stabilising point that grounds the other two angles? What would it mean to find romantic speech liberated, not constrained, by the presence of the mother?

The family romance, made (in)famous by Freud, has also occupied the attention of queer theory, particularly in terms of the extended family, where avuncular and cousinly relationships provide a way out of the often-stifling nuclear family. As Eve Sedgwick advises, "forget the Name of the Father. Think about your uncles and your aunts" (59). Uncles and aunts, Sedgwick argues, can provide alternative role models, complicate the Oedipal nuclear family, and give a fresh perspective on one's parents as "elements in a varied, contingent, recalcitrant but re-forming seriality" rather than authorities (63). This interplay between avuncular multiplicity and paternal authority marks queer theory, as Denis Flannery argues. Major queer theorists assume that "since the queer subject is that which is expelled (or expellable) from the monolithic family then the queer subject is primarily without siblings," yet their analyses of fiction and autobiographical tales constantly allude to empowering relations with their own or their parents' siblings, suggesting a different model (6). The tension Flannery identifies is evident in Yonge's fiction as well, for characters praise their loving family relations while readers pity their imprisonment within a "monolithic family."

The Clever Woman of the Family centres on three same-sex pairs: the cousinly couple of Alick and Colin Keith, the sister duo of Rachel and Grace Curtis, and the sister pair of Ermine and Alison Williams. Each of these dyads has a third member whose familial loyalty is troubled and whose return to the more stable couple troubles its dynamics. Yonge thereby reconstitutes "family" beyond nuclear families cantered on heterosexual couples. In a nuclear family, one would not expect parents to travel away from their children. But in a lateral family composed of siblings, members can be independently mobile, thereby disrupting, reconstituting, and extending family units in a kind of plot dynamic not usual in more traditional fiction.

A brief review of the lateral families of *Clever Woman* will demonstrate the way this pattern works. First, the cousins Alick and Colin Keith are military officers who have difficult relations with their worldly, selfish siblings, Alick's sister Bessie and Colin's brother Lord Keith. When Bessie and Lord Keith enter Avonmouth, they disturb the social networks, and although they end up marrying one another, their perturbations are felt long after both of them die. Similarly, the sisters Ermine and Alison Williams have a happy same-sex union, jointly rearing their pretty niece Rose. For their brother Edward, having ruined the family and come under criminal investigation, has fled to Russia, leaving them to care for his daughter. Meanwhile, sisters Rachel and Grace Curtis remain firmly allied on family matters, and, as we shall see, imagine themselves as married. But their alliance is troubled by the return of the third adoptive sister/cousin, Fanny. Fanny arrives with a brood of seven children who express resentment of the Avonmouth clan and insist on preferring alien institutions: a distant landscape, an unfamiliar military organisation, an unknown father, and an unrelated teacher. Alick scolds Bessie; Colin lectures Lord Keith; Ermine and Alison write pleading letters to Edward; and Rachel tries to discipline Fanny and her boys. But the wayward siblings refuse management, and their unpredictable behaviour validates the loving stability of the lateral family pairs by comparison.

Indeed, the dyadic family structure eventually triumphs. As Kim Wheatley has pointed out, "both Ermine and Rachel are described as the 'other selves' of their sisters" (902). Wheatley's argument offers a perceptive sense of how dependent *Clever Women's* characters are on "characters who are versions of each other" (902). By the end of the novel, the two Keith men, the two Williams sisters, and two of the Curtis women, get rearranged into romantic pairs: Alick and Rachel, Colin and Ermine, Fanny and Alison. However, these marriages do not interrupt the couples but reconstruct them. Husband and wife become "characters who are versions of each other." This novel trains them—and us—to regard the familial pair as the ideal model for adult coupledness.

If the sororal logic of *Clever Woman* creates a lateral kind of narrative, in which rogue siblings travel away from the original family, returning

to challenge its values and either get reincorporated or expelled, this plot alters the readers' sympathies. In the *Bildungsroman*, and indeed in most nineteenth-century fiction, we identify with the character who leaves the family of origin in order to grow. But Yonge generally wants us to disapprove of anyone who leaves home:

In Yonge's novels in general [...] growth is represented as deviance and a happy plot resolution is the near-perfect restoration of an originary, idealised familial union. Ignorance—which requires dependence upon an omniscient parent—is indeed bliss. The novel stops because it has finally overcome its story [...]. Yonge's [...] family chronicles, presents the younger generation's development as dangerous. It is, in fact, a kind of reverse *Bildungsroman*, where independent youths get forced back, via discipline, and pain, into the wholly dependent, adoring relationship of early childhood. (Schaffer, "Magnum" 273–274)

The Clever Woman of the Family showcases this reversion to an idealised family of origin, and it does so by rethinking marriage as something more like sororal adoption. It establishes same-sex familial dyads as the most stable and nurturing structure so that the reader wants to punish those who endanger them and to see characters rewarded by achieving them.

Why should family ties be the preferred model for romantic unions in Yonge? Recent work in disability studies suggests an answer. Martha Stoddard Holmes has eloquently argued that in *Clever Woman*, disability generates "a mesh of interdependencies, not organised around the false binary of pure independency and pure dependency" (Holmes 36). Because everyone in this novel helps others and requires help in turn, an ethic of mutual care evolves. Following Holmes' insight, Tamara S. Wagner has recently suggested:

What can be termed Yonge's religion of domesticity, a grounding of her spiritual agenda in everyday responsibilities, is rooted in this ideal of mutual dependence and, ultimately, in the dependency provided by a caretaking that is never unidirectional.

Most importantly, this ideal of interrelationships at home seeks to highlight, not erase, the individual's role while stressing each family member's need and, by implication, natural right to depend on others, to be dependent as well as dependable, to be depended *on*, that at the same time implies a defence of dependencies as the connecting elements of any functioning community. ("Belonged" par. 3)

Holmes and Wagner agree that Yonge foregrounds dependency as a shared experience, and that Yonge achieves an exceptionally sympathetic understanding of the disabled subject's emotional life. Since virtually every Yonge character is disabled at some point, the experience of enforced dependency becomes a mode of maturation.

What I want to add to Holmes' and Wagner's insight is that interdependency is, often, indistinguishable from falling in love. And this means that love is redefined as caretaking, rather than desire. Characters court each other by wheeling chairs to windows, fluffing pillows, and changing dressings. Invalidism and romance are synonymous because Yonge uses them to express the same aim: mutual care, loving interdependency. This means that anyone can provide such care, whether the person is a relation or a spouse. While Holmes and Wagner read Yonge's privileging of dependency as a unique way of writing disability, I find it an equally unusual way of understanding romance.

In order to explore this model, I will investigate two scenes of female marriage and then focus more closely on the marriages of the two "clever women" of the novel, Rachel and Ermine. First, the novel's opening scene stages a marriage between sisters. Rachel objects to her mother's birthday gift, a white wreath, because she does not want to decorate herself for the marriage market. Rather, she asserts to her sister Grace:

"From this moment we are established as the maiden sisters of Avonmouth, husband and wife to one other, as maiden pairs always are."

"Then thus let me crown our bridal," quoth Grace, placing on her sister's head the wreath of white roses.

"Treacherous child!" cried Rachel, putting up her hands and tossing her head, but her sister held her still.

"You know brides always take liberties. Please, dear, let it stay till the mother has been in, and pray don't talk before her of being so very old." (36)

This scene sets the pattern for marriages in *Clever Woman*. First, Rachel gets tricked into marriage as her partner entreats her to conform for the sake of "the mother"—a situation that will be replayed, as we shall see, when she marries Alick Keith later in the novel. Second, she dons a ring on her head rather than her finger, a kind of symbolic coronation that "crown[s]" her as a unique, powerful figure, instead of symbolising her union with another.

The mock-marriage itself destabilises normative categories. It is, of course, a union between sisters, debarred by their familial relation from sexual consummation. Two women enacting a mock-marriage might normally seem like a scene of barely suppressed same-sex desire, but we need here to utilise Marcus' helpful idea of "just reading," a practice "which attends to what texts make manifest on their surface" (Marcus 3). "Just reading" shows us that Grace and Rachel are indeed "maiden sisters," whose bond is comradely, not erotic. The white wreath on Rachel's head confirms that she is the bride, but in the next line Grace identifies herself as the bride. Two virginal brides, two maidens, sisters whose amity occurs for the sake of "the mother": this is marriage as a confirmation of pre-existing family dynamics, whose outcome is to reinforce the participants' status as "child."

Second, *Clever Woman* sets up a female marriage between Fanny Temple and her boys' governess Alison Williams. "So she is your fate?" inquires Alison's sister. "Oh, yes," replies Alison, "if there had been ten more engagements offered, I could not have helped accepting hers" (86). The language is, obviously, romantically ambiguous. Finding the person who is one's "fate" and offers one an "engagement" seems more marital than vocational. Alison is identified as a male suitor, given her strength of character, her masculine appearance (Yonge stresses her thick

eyebrows), her vocational success as the breadwinner of the household, and her skill at disciplining the boys. She remarks on "the influence of [Fanny's] winsome brown eyes and caressing [manner], as I know I should if I were a man" (88).¹ Alison and Fanny achieve a female marriage of the sort that Marcus describes, an egalitarian union in which Alison can live with Fanny and coparent the children (Marcus 206, 212, 233). As Ermine sums up, "I think you may as well get a license for the wedding of Alison Williams and Fanny Temple at the same time. There has been quite a courtship on the lady's part" (528).

Yet if others read Fanny's "courtship" of Alison in romantic terms, Fanny herself expresses it in sororal language. "I want to have her for good; I want to make her my sister! [...] If ever her sister could spare her, she must never go away again" (383). Here Fanny insists that Alison is her sister, while simultaneously acknowledging Alison's sisterhood to Ermine. We might suspect that Fanny recasts Alison sexlessly, as a sister, in order to cover her real erotic interest. But in *Clever Woman*, that is not the case. Fanny's sororal emphasis does not frustrate Alison's desire. Rather, Fanny and Alison feel a mutual loyalty that is just as accurately expressed by familial as by romantic language. Their love scene occurs when the two women are relaxing in a kind of postcoital bliss (only, typically for a Yonge novel, they are actually enjoying the aftermath of a disabling disease):

That night, when Conrade and Francis [the brothers who are recovering from diphtheria] were both fast asleep, their mother and governess sat over the fire together, languid but happy, and told out their hearts to one another—told out more than Alison had ever put into words even to Ermine, for her heart was softer and more unreserved now [...]. There was thenceforth a bond between her and Lady Temple that gave the young widow the strong-hearted, sympathising, sisterly friend she had looked for [...] and that filled up those yearnings of the affection [for] Alison. (383)

Fanny Temple and Alison Williams become "sisterly friends," a result that is depicted as triumphantly satisfying all their emotional needs. I do

not mean to say that there is no desire in this pairing, but rather, that desire quite simply does not interest Yonge, and consequently gets virtually no narrative attention. Yonge is far more concerned with establishing a bond of mutual dependency, admiration, and loyalty, a bond that she represents with the shorthand of the sororal romance. When one sister dyad becomes "husband and wife to one another, as maiden pairs always are" and the other becomes "sisterly friends" it is clear that Yonge is working to revalue sisterhood as the name for the closest adult ties. This is the model that shapes the two main marriage plots of the novel.

Martha Stoddard Holmes explains that nineteenth-century writers associated disabled women with emotional excess in order to mark them as unfit for marriage. Holmes singles out Ermine Williams in *Clever Woman* as an unusual case, in which disability actually facilitates professional success and permits marriage (although not biological children) (34–73). I concur with Holmes' influential reading, but instead of exploring how Ermine gets married in spite of her lameness, I want to explore how Yonge uses her lameness to redefine marriage.

Ermine's disability makes her perceive herself as an object instead of a desirable or desiring subject. She tells Colin that she is "a helpless commodity," "a wretched remnant," and an "old cinder" (94, 143, 154). She even splits off her moral agency from her inert body when she muses, "it would be very unfair of me to take advantage of that, and give him such a thing as I am" (154). This comment suggests that she regards herself as a sort of bad purchase, and wants to protect Colin from making a poor consumer choice. Presumably, Ermine's disability would preclude consummating the marriage, and the long dispute over whether or not they can marry is undecidable because it hinges on desires and capabilities that Colin and Ermine cannot name to each other, and certainly cannot articulate to the reader. In this case, the problem with Ermine's body would be precisely that it is not an object, but a responsive subject, and that marriage would require her to give up what, for lack of a better word, we might call her objectivity. Safety lies in being a "helpless commodity," and it is painful to stir, to want, to need. Once Ermine allows herself to feel again, she realises that she has become vulnerably

dependent on Colin. Although the first time they separated she was stronger, now "the parting [...] would be infinitely more wretched than the first" and might "cost her [...] her life" (366). Indeed, "there seemed to be a source of weakness in his nearness" (424–425).

Ermine clings to her immobility as emotional protection, although its physical basis remains ambiguous. She asserts that "the [gunpowder] explosion, rather than the fire, did mischief below the knee that poor nature could not repair, and I can just stand, and cannot walk at all" (140). However, Alison's account contradicts this. "In general health she is certainly greatly restored, and has the strength to attempt more" (93). Indeed, Ermine's mobility improves drastically during the course of the novel. At the beginning of the story, we see Ermine helplessly stuck in her chair, unable to get to church or even go into the garden unless the local wheelchair happens to be available for rent (122). But as Colin courts her, Ermine acquires crutches (379). By the end of the story, Ermine is able to use her wheelchair and her crutch to visit Rachel—the first social call she has made since the explosion (426). From being an object who must be carried or pushed around, Ermine becomes an independent subject moving by her own volition.

When Colin first returns to Ermine, she tells him that he is welcome to come, under certain conditions:

"That is, while you understand that you said good-bye to the Ermine of Beauchamp Parsonage twelve years ago, and that the thing here is only a sort of ghost, most glad and grateful to be a friend—a sister."

"So," he said, "those are to be the terms of my admission."

"The only possible ones."

"I will consider them. I have not accepted them."

"You will," she said. (144)

Ermine explicitly insists on a sororal redefinition of their union. Part of establishing a sibling relationship means disembodiment. Making herself into a thing and then a ghost, she erases the sexual body, reconstituting their relationship as an amicable rather than an erotic one.

While Colin does not accept the conditions, he leaves the discussion unresolved, suggesting no alternative. Sisterhood thus becomes the only available model for marriage between Ermine and Colin.

Sororal and fraternal discourse dominates the dialogue when Ermine finally consents to marry Colin. She agrees because Colin's brother consents, and Colin reacts by inquiring whether Ermine's siblings will permit it. Beyond the sibling gatekeepers, however, marriage itself gets emptied of its usual meaning. As Ermine tells Colin, "The suspicion is gone; the displeasure is gone; the doubts are gone; and now there is nothing—nothing but the lameness and the poverty; and if you like the old cinder, Colin, that is your concern;" and she hid her face, with a sort of sobbing laugh" (522). Ermine's understanding of marriage is a negative one. It is not that approval and endorsement are present, but that suspicion, displeasure, and doubts are gone. "And now there is nothing." A marriage that should mean plenitude is instead made possible by emptiness. And Ermine repeats her self-identification as an "old cinder," an extraordinarily self-hating description, no longer even a damaged commodity or a thing, but a useless, burnt-out, valueless remnant. The language indicates a real fear and reluctance to enter the married state. Unable to imagine herself as a subject, yet knowing that the old self-identification as "a cinder" is gone, Ermine lacks a valid idea of herself. Yet Ermine's doubts are assuaged by the atmosphere of their married life. On their wedding evening, they merge into a haven of rest, a kind of infantile presymbolic union:

The patient spirits had reached their home and haven, the earthly haven of loving hearts, the likeness of the heavenly haven, and as her head leant, at last, upon his shoulder, and his guardian arm encircled her, there was such a sense of rest and calm that even the utterance of their inward thanksgiving, or of a word of tenderness would have jarred upon them. (536)

Perfect bliss is perfect stillness, silence, and immobility. If this is their true moment of union, it is one whose physical components are more paternal than sexual, with Colin protectively putting his arm around

Ermine. But it is also an explicitly disembodied image. They are not physical bodies but "patient spirits" and their union is more like death than like marriage. Ghostly, disembodied, nonsexual, their union is too blissful for words. The home is (almost literally) heaven.

Its homelikeness is more than a metaphor. Colin has constructed the house for Ermine, but after the wedding Ermine adds her own touches. As Colin exclaims, "Why, Ermine, what have you done to the room? It is the old Parsonage drawing-room!" Ermine inquires, "Did you not mean it, when you took the very proportions of the bay window, and chose just such a carpet?" (539). They have jointly re-created the home of Ermine's youth, where Colin fell in love with her, down to the very scent of oak-leaf geranium, which Ermine has especially procured for the purpose. Miraculously redeposited in the lost paradise of the childhood home, arms (and nothing else) entwined, this is marriage as regression.

Whether that marriage has a sexual component is something Yonge leaves indeterminate. Because Ermine's injury is to her *lower* legs, we do not know if it precludes sex. On their very wedding night, Colin has to rush off to his dying brother's bedside. As the narrator remarks, "Ermine had to continue a widowed bride for full a fortnight" (535). Wheatley reads this absence as symptomatic, arguing that "the absence of sex in Colin's and Ermine's marriage is hinted at by the fact that Colin and Ermine are forced to spend their first two weeks of marriage, including their wedding night, apart" (909). By so obtrusively baffling the sexual aspect of their union, Yonge forces us to consider what a marriage would be like outside of sex, indeed, what a nonsexual romance might be.² Desire is simply irrelevant to the real pleasures of union, which are familial, not erotic.

The other main couple of *Clever Woman*, Rachel Curtis and Alick Keith, follow a similar pattern. This marriage too is predicated on bodily self-hatred and features a prolonged, indecisive courtship, a proposal whose terms imagine the woman as an object for sale, and the woman's acceptance only when female family members concur. In both cases, the couple finds that marriage returns them to the blissful haven of the childhood home. However, the groom's sibling dies suddenly, necessitating his

absence while still a newlywed, and forcing the marriage to commence on a nonsexual basis.

Alick Keith is first introduced as a quasi family member. When Fanny brings Colin and Alick Keith home, "Lady Temple had opened the door, and brought in upon them not one foe, but two! Was Rachel seeing double?" (110). While fair, young, feminised, lazy Alick looks nothing like the burly, bearded, middle-aged, efficient Colin, their connection is continually emphasised in *Clever Woman*. They are cousins from the same clan, their same surname creates confusion in the military records, they have the same deep blue eyes, and they live together amicably. If Alick is a brotherly cousin to Colin, he is a brother by adoption to Fanny, who explains that "I used to play with him every day till I came to you [...]. Mamma was so fond of him, she used to call him her son" (152). Cousin and adoptive brother, Alick is thereby positioned as an acceptable member of the family romances in Yonge.

Indeed, Alick's profession fits him to be an honorary member of these female social circles. Although Yonge has the men of *Clever Woman* deeply involved in British imperial violence in India, she seems to imagine military service in wholly domestic terms. Alick, Colin, and their peers use military service to learn to sacrifice themselves for their comrades, give dinners, nurse the sick, organise balls, set up charities, collect ornaments, respect their social superiors, and maintain harmonious relations within the regiment. The Curtis women were little prepared for the resources of a practised staff-officer. Never had a ball even to them looked so well arranged, or in such thorough style, as a little dexterous arrangement of flowers, lights, and sofas, had rendered those two rooms" (280). India, Australia, and South Africa become exemplary outposts of British social virtues, where traditionally feminine skills are flawlessly executed by the military men. Rachel must learn to admit the military men's superiority and eventually, to emulate them. Rachel's nephew Conrade is absolutely right when he comments that marrying into the regiment has salvaged Rachel. "She is not a civilian now," Conrade points out. "I did think a most benighted thing to marry her, but that's what it is. Military discipline has made her conformable" (543).

At the same time, it is Rachel's provincial English town that is haunted by fear of the racial Other. As Conrade remarks, "Oh, Aunt Rachel, your F.U. thing [her female employment training school] is as bad as the Sepoys" (340). Indeed, the military men and boys are constantly identifying the abusive matron in charge of this establishment as a "Sepoy," remarking on her Indian face and viewing her as a perpetrator of the Mutiny (319, 342, 352, 388). In a reversal that is typical of Yonge's writings, England is treated like a dangerous foreign space needing purification, while the colonies are treated like charming sites for demonstrating one's domestic virtues.³ Only subjects trained by imperial militarism—including Fanny, using "the simple statecraft of the General's widow" (336)—can expose the dangerous institution.

If Alick is the colonial ruler governing a wayward outpost in Avonmouth, we see his disciplinary techniques firsthand on Rachel, surely the most unruly of natives. Rachel felt "a certain compulsion in his look" even before they marry, and after some years of marriage, Ermine remarks approvingly that Alick has used "irony" to make Rachel restrain herself (352, 544). Rachel herself comments that "I found myself talking in the voice that always makes Alick shut his eyes" (541). Just as Grandcourt controls Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* (1871–1872), Alick's gaze, Alick's tone, do the chilling work of curbing Rachel.

For Alick's disciplinary skill has nothing to do with his physical strength. Alick is feminised in multiple ways. He looks much younger than he is, and, like Grandcourt, "both face and figure [were] fair and pale, and though there was a moustache, it was so light and silky as to be scarcely visible; the hair, too, was almost flaxen, and the whole complexion had a washed-out appearance. The eyes [...] were little seen under their heavy sleepy lids" (145–146). Alick's laziness is proverbial, as he can imagine nothing better than sitting in the shade with a cool drink in "a languid, easy posture" (146).

His physical effeteness might be connected to his disability. Rachel discovers Alick's bodily deficit when their hands collide in attempting to catch a bug:

To have crushed the fly would have been melancholy; to have come down on the young soldier's fingers, awkward; but Rachel did what was even more shocking—her hands did descend on, what should have been fingers, but they gave way under her—she felt only the leather of the glove between her and the newspaper. She jumped and very nearly cried out, looking up with an astonishment and horror only half reassured by his extremely amused smile. "I beg your pardon; I'm so sorry—" she gasped confused. "Inferior animals can dispense with a member more or less," he replied [...] and as he spoke he removed the already half drawn-off left-hand glove, and let Rachel see for a moment that it had only covered the thumb, forefinger, two joints of the middle, and one of the third; the little finger was gone, and the whole hand much scarred. (182)

It is hard to read this as anything other than a castration image. Rachel feels understandable horror at Alick's missing "member" as he flashes it at her privately. Alick's symbolic castration joins his feminised appearance and domestic skills in order to make him an ideal woman. It is because Alick is, in a sense, transgendered, that he feels no concerns about his damaged body precluding marriage. Wholly escaping the bodily self-hatred of Ermine, Alick is perfectly satisfied with a body that lacks "a member more or less," because his body now matches his visage and behaviour as fully feminised, the ideal subject position in a Yonge novel.

In another novel, Alick would need remasculinisation, rather like Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) or Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), who also like to laze about with a male best friend to whom they are suspiciously attached, until narrative exigencies force them to acquire energetic professional productive skill leading to a properly heterosexual relationship. Alick, however, undergoes no such reformation. Rather, it is Rachel who needs re-educating. Rachel's robust social welfare interests and indifference to personal ornamentation worry her social circle; she needs a properly feminine guide.

Alick's proposal to Rachel foregrounds the Yongian understanding of marriage. Rachel remarks that she would like to lessen the

annoyance to her mother at any cost. Alick responds, "'Will you?' [...]' 'At the cost of yourself?'" (410). In this proposal, Alick treats Rachel as a commodity with a "cost," much as Ermine did, and he suggests marriage for the sake of her mother. Like Ermine, however, Rachel initially refuses because she imagines herself as a bad purchase and does not want the man burdened with her. Alick's focus on Rachel's mother is not just a clever rhetorical ploy. As Grace perceptively points out, "[H]er mother was more in love with 'dear Alexander' than Rachel was" (417). Whereas his interaction with Rachel is fraught and indecisive, he charms Mrs Curtis into adoring him. "Her surrender of judgement was curiously complete. 'Dear Alexander,' as thenceforth she called him, had assumed the mastery over her from the first turn they took under the cathedral," and in a kind of ecstatic swoon, leaning on his arm, she wanders, oblivious of time (412–413). As in *Heir*, courtship is mediated through the mother.

Just as Ermine and Colin end up in a precise replica of Ermine's originary home, so too do Rachel and Alick return to Alick's sacred childhood space. When Rachel and Alick end up at the house of Alick's saintly uncle Mr Clare, Alick "evidently felt himself coming home" (439). What Rachel enjoys is the serenity and stillness of the place, the "atmosphere of quietude," which "seemed to lull her on in this same gentle, unthinking state of dreamy rest" (445–446). Like Ermine and Colin, then, Rachel and Alick enter into marriage that is a haven of wordless peace, a homecoming that returns one to infantile dependence upon a strong support in profoundly familiar surroundings. Indeed, looking back over her experience in the Clare household, Rachel feels that finally "she had her childhood's heart again" (477).

Finally, as with Ermine and Colin, the idyll is interrupted by a sibling's death, which calls away the groom while still a newlywed. Alick's sister's death brings on a severe illness. Bedridden, shaking, feverish, and headachy, he spends weeks being just as sexually unavailable as Colin was during his fortnight's absence (505). In this case, Alick's illness is not necessarily meant to signal a sexless marriage, since they do have children later. But in narrative terms, the man's absence makes

us focus on the nonsexual aspects of the union, and the sibling's death may be partly an acknowledgment that the new spouse has taken on the sibling's role. Indeed, since Colin's brother and Alick's sister are both worldly, problematic figures who oppose their siblings' interests (and who, incidentally, marry each other), Colin and Alick have now replaced them with better sibling types in their chosen brides.

What I am naming the sororal romance shows marriage in ways that contradict the normative marriage plot. Whereas the marriage plot shows ardent young suitors eager to wed, but interrupted by various problems, the Yongian marriage plot shows the opposite: reluctant, averse, middle-aged suitors for whom marriage is a terror that is hard to stave off. They regard their bodies as damaged commodities and marriage as a consumer transaction. They require the permission, sometimes, the persuasion, of their families before they consent to wed. When they finally concede, the marriage re-enacts childhood bliss and the partner fills the asexual role of sibling. Disability often makes it possible to recast marriage explicitly in these terms instead of erotic ones. In Yongian terms, mutual emotional dependency produces a good relationship, regardless with whom the relationship is formed. Reading the sororal romance reveals that at least some Victorian women may have understood marriage, not as the portal to maturation, but as the reversion to childhood; not as the initiation into sex, but as the permanent disqualification from sex; not as an economic guarantee, but as an emotional one; not as the exit from the originary family, but as the eternal ratification of familial bonds.

ENDNOTES

1. "Manner" was accidentally deleted from the Broadview edition and has been supplied by recourse to another edition of the novel.
2. Mia Chen offers the intriguing suggestion that "in the work of Charlotte Yonge disabled female characters fulfil crucial reproductive roles, but [...] this reproduction is social, not biological."
3. I have discussed this logic in "Taming the Tropics."

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