

**“If he belonged to me, I should not like it at all”
Managing Disability and Dependencies in Charlotte Yonge’s *The Two Guardians***

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<1>Charlotte Yonge’s *The Two Guardians; Or, Home in This World* (1852) dissects what had, by the mid-nineteenth century, become some of the most common clichés in the representation of impairment. In order to illustrate the potentially damaging impact of just such clichés, the novel engages with a spectrum of approaches to different forms of distress, or what the Victorians often indiscriminately termed “affliction.” It details Lionel Lyddell’s progressing blindness, commencing with his family’s neglect of his struggles with “‘green and blue monsters’ as he used to call them, before his eyes” (104) and proceeding to a pointed critique of their treatment of what they gratuitously assume to be complete helplessness once the diagnosis of his visual impairment is confirmed. His diagnosable affliction is juxtaposed with various additional sources of distress, both physical and emotional, that are likewise at first disregarded. What Yonge proposes as a means to break through these cycles of distress, disregard, and feelings of guilt is mutual dependence. It is this interdependence that ultimately enables Lionel to lead an active life in the face of his immediate family’s unease. In an inversion of gender paradigms that nonetheless avoids the feminization of the disabled body, the novel therein also complicates its promotion of the domestic, of the “home in this world” that is meant to prefigure a heavenly sanctuary. Yonge’s religious agenda indisputably inflects her fictional treatment of affliction, yet her complex representation of disability and its metaphorical potential does more than transcend any facile alignment between suffering and either sentimentality or sensationalism. Instead, her thematization of dependence ruptures an array of commonly accepted categories, reactions, and clichés. If some of her characterizations subsequently came to be regarded as representative of Victorian attitudes, it needs to be noted that they were initially innovative as well as intricate, offering alternative representations. This reevaluation of mutual caretaking undercuts ideals of independence that have continued to underlie a prevailing unease in reactions to impairment and, by metaphorical extension, to both emotional and physical dependencies.

<2>Before exploring how a young boy’s reactions to his failing eyesight in *The Two Guardians* facilitate a fictional investigation of dependence as a positively evaluated connecting mechanism within the family and beyond, I shall first briefly sketch Yonge’s resistance to the typecasting of physical fragility or impairment that predominates in nineteenth-century popular fiction. So far from simply underscoring spiritual strengths, or capitalizing on the narrative potential of depicted distress, her realist description of the management of disability at home, in overcrowded, often impecunious families, neither downplays nor sensationalizes the realities of

dealing with disability in Victorian Britain. Instead, disability operates as a poignant—and hence all the more persuasive—example of the need for familial and community interdependence she aims to promote in her fiction. Pain is always excruciatingly real, never in any way etherized, and by focusing on the long-term effects of various conditions, fictional treatment of affliction creates an opening for a defense of different forms of dependencies and hence an opportunity for a more encompassing reappraisal of the complexities of Victorian embodiments of impairment.

<3>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 dependability 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 defense of dependencies as the connecting elements of any functioning community. These dependencies, it is vital to note, have to be, repeatedly and indeed explicitly, defended against the increasingly virulent self-help ideologies of Victorian Britain as they threaten to belittle or pathologize dependence, especially that which is emotional in nature. This stance is what marks out Yonge's promotion of domestic ideals as an important alternative to the excuses for self-sufficiency inherent in the emergent capitalist individualism: the endorsement of dependencies is shown to break through a more and more rampant idealization of the self-made, self-reliant, and also self-sufficient, individual. Dependencies, in this context, become a liability. Hence, it is the value of the disabled family member not so much as a focus point for caretaking at home, but as the active supplier of support or care, that brings out best the significance of mutuality in Yonge's representations. At the same time, the careful delineation of daily difficulties eschews any simple idealization. Dependencies are reasserted as a necessity for everyone's wellbeing or survival, often for their emotional or mental health more than for their physical needs, not a sentimental ideal. It is this avoidance of mere sentimentality, I further seek to show, that lends force to Yonge's recurrent creation of communities of invalids.

Enabling Interdependence in the Victorian Home: Domestic Confines Revisited

<4>What is the most striking in Charlotte Yonge's representation of impairment is the absence of any idealization of pain. Her realist emphasis on the discomfort and, at times, even the annoyance caused by the need to deal with various forms of affliction at home provides a notable counterpoint to the fictional uses of both the "abnormal" and of experiences of sickness in Victorian literature in general.⁽¹⁾ Yonge refuses either to sensationalize the one or to sentimentalize the other. Instead, her interest in the everyday dealing with symptomatically paralleled physical, mental, and emotional, or spiritual, suffering engenders markedly different representations of its long-term effects. As her fictional description of the experience of both disability itself and living with disabled family members deliberately attempts to break through typecast narrative structures, it becomes part of a larger reassessment of domesticity as well. The centrality which variously "afflicted" characters are accorded within this renegotiation of established domestic or social structures and ideals prevents their reduction to a mere narrative prosthesis.⁽²⁾

<5>On the contrary, what can seem an almost harsh acknowledgement of the domestic difficulties caused by illness or injury at home serves to emphasize that sacrifice is always—and indeed needs to remain—a sacrifice. As Yonge pointedly articulates in the preface to *The Two Guardians*, the novel’s end deliberately leaves the heroine “unrecompensed save by the effects of her consistent well doing has produced on her companions” (4). She is even prepared to give up the pleasure she begins to derive from taking care of others when she considers that this very experience would do more good to Lionel’s self-absorbed sister. Simply put, even while proposing the participation in a network of dependence as recompense itself, what Yonge stresses is the rejection of the mere idea of any kind of payoff: “Any other [apart from the spiritual] compensation would render her self-sacrifice incomplete, and make her no longer invisibly above the world” (4). In the same vein, the opening chapter of *The Trial* (1864), the sequel to Yonge’s most popular family chronicle, *The Daisy Chain* (1856), references the partial disappointment of the missionary hopes with which the earlier novel ends by stressing that it is “a great thing to sacrifice, but a greater to consent not to sacrifice in one’s own way” (vol.1, 8). It is precisely such uncompromising statements that have caused Yonge’s dismissal or vehement critique throughout the twentieth century. The current reconsideration of her ideals of selflessness and self-sacrifice, I wish to suggest, significantly assists in an analysis of her representations of impairment, while her networks of caretaking become as central to the reassessment of still neglected domestic fiction by women writers.

<6>Yonge’s religion of domesticity, her investment in the right “homes in this world,” has indeed long been seen simply as evidence of her antifeminist endorsement of domestic confines as well as of an anti-intellectual interpretation of faith, of an “idealism [that] is practical rather than visionary” (Colby 189). As Vineta Colby has already shown in her study of domestic realism, Yonge “most gracefully converted the tractarian [sic] impulse into novels of family life” in being concerned primarily with “her characters’ problems of daily living far more than with their problems of dogma and ritual” (186-187). This very conflation of domestic ideology with doctrine, however, engenders a remarkably self-conscious analysis of a range of interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, Yonge’s often misunderstood promotion of self-sacrifice has overshadowed the reassessment of her work in general. Valerie Sanders speaks of the “unease” Yonge causes “in the modern reader—even in those not immune to her appeal—because of her apparent endorsement of conservative, anti-feminist values, and her distrust of ambition” (“All-sufficient” 90). Elizabeth Jenkins particularly targets the presentation of filial duty owed to “parents admittedly silly, selfish or even disreputable” (3-4), whereas the majority of critics have taken umbrage primarily at her promulgation of women’s domestic roles as their primary, if not exclusive, sphere in life. This largely accounts for her continued marginalization even in a project of rediscovering minor (and specifically “forgotten” women) writers. Thus, Malcolm Elwin’s 1934 *Victorian Wallflowers* maintained that her name has become “a standard synonym for smug piety and mawkish sentimentality” (232). In a likewise chiefly dismissive assessment, pointedly entitled “Charlotte Yonge and ‘Christian Discrimination,’” published in *Scrutiny* in 1944, Q.D. Leavis summed up much of the twentieth-century resistance to Yonge’s ideal of self-sacrifice, a resistance that has done more to brand her writing as antifeminist and reactionary than that to her proclaimed Tractarian religious affiliation:

[T]he most blessed life for a man is to give up the natural field for his abilities in order to become a South Seas missionary, and for a woman to renounce a possible husband in order to

devote herself to her relations, even if they are only imbecile grandparents, or on the mere wish of a parent—self-sacrifice is an end in itself. (Leavis 153-154)

The application of this complex ideal of self-sacrifice is as much the result of, as a conscious testimony to, mutual dependence. The endorsement of such interdependence as a foundational element of functioning familial and communal relationships is therefore two-pronged in more ways than one. Mutual dependence is based as much on the state of being dependent as on the ability to be dependable. In its bipartisan nature, it shows self-sacrifice generating a natural right to dependence. Dependencies, so far from being regarded as handicaps or, as such, in any way pathologized, are at once reassuring and constructive in forging strong networks of care. The defense of dependencies is therefore not about subjects of domestic care personified by the often physically dependent, otherwise immobile, invalid character.⁽³⁾ On the contrary, they are about the emotional dependencies created by mutual caretaking at home. Yet as images of caretaking are used to criticize self-help ideologies, the normalcy and even enabling functions of impairment discloses a different picture of the management of disability within the Victorian home as a central cultural institution. It is these issues of interdependence that most urgently compel a reconsideration of the ways in which we react not only to Yonge's enmeshing of didacticism and domestic realism, but also to our own prejudices against both dependence and the domestic. As a result, her fiction offers a revealing conduit for changing conceptualizations of dependencies. It is not merely that her religious doctrine includes an interest in suffering and her focus on the mundane necessarily singles out those confined to the house (and specifically sickroom) as her main protagonists. So far from simply rehearsing either clichéd admonitions on resignation or a typecasting of female nursing, her fiction critically investigates prominent impasses in the social construction and treatment of affliction. In this alone, it already offers a compelling account of the precarious positioning of the disabled body (and especially the female disabled body) in mid-Victorian society.

<7>Most importantly, Yonge never uses her fictional invalids in unidirectional relations of care or reduces them to a mere narrative prosthesis. As Martha Stoddard Holmes has shown in a recent study, Yonge may at times seem to push “the overt Christian message that disability is not an affliction but a blessing,” yet she also presents “disability and mutual dependency as pervasive social goods” (*Affliction* 51-52).⁽⁴⁾ Holmes speaks of “fictions of interdependency” that posit this value as “both a social norm and a social good, catalyzing a range of relationships” (“Victorian” 29). In this, they articulate a message that “[r]eaders wedded to concepts of autonomy and self-expression have rankled at” (“Victorian” 37). In describing picturing a dubious, self-conscious, enjoyment of Yonge's domestic visions as emotional abandonment, Sanders has thus suggested that “[t]hose who enjoy her works surrender themselves wholeheartedly to her world of intense family bonds, emotional dependency, spiritual anxiety, and physical tribulation” (“All-sufficient” 90). Yet the most illuminating examples are perhaps expectedly negative. It is precisely the mismanagement of disability, as detailed in *The Two Guardians*, that brings out the need for the endorsed dependencies more forcefully than the more openly acknowledged caring role taken up by invalids in Yonge's later fiction. While this novel's representation of the family's difficulty in affirming dependencies not only creates intricate plotlines, but also generates scenes of conflict that can be startling in their harsh critique of selfishness (as well as of a wrongly assumed sense of patronage), *The Two Guardians* engenders the more poignant and enabling narratives of interdependence.⁽⁵⁾

The Careless Family's Confines

<8>*The Two Guardians* is of special interest in Yonge's development of a fictional translation of her religion of domesticity in that it articulates the Lyddells' general as well as religious carelessness through the exposure of their indifference to each other's needs. In what is indeed Yonge's most extensive and most uncompromising denunciation of parental failure, the family's inability first to recognize and then to deal with Lionel's impairment acts in part as a metaphorical projection that brings out a more encompassing absence of interdependency in the family. As Caroline, the eldest daughter puts it, "Ours is a very odd household; we all go our own ways in our own worlds" (150). As a result, it is "neither a very happy [home], nor a very satisfactory one" (183). The domestic conflict is illustrated through a juxtaposition of two family crises that translates the underpinning doctrinal issues into a perhaps more easily recognizable domestic conflict: Lionel's blindness and Caroline's engagement to a fashionable man with no religious or, it is later added, political principles. In targeting a readership beyond her immediate Tractarian circle, Yonge steadily increases the irreligious suitor's general unpleasantness as if to justify the more emphatically Caroline's ultimate rejection of him. So if the exposure of parental neglect as the immediate cause of Lionel's impairment may be seen as a device to render its more subtle effects on all the children's lives visible, Caroline's dilemma specifically underscores the lack of confidence between parents and children: "And, alas! none saw so little of those young hearts as the parents, who had never earned their confidence; so that when they turn to them, it was from duty, as to rulers, not as to counsellors and friends" (267). This is in contradistinction to the function of an orphaned cousin, Marian Arundel, who is promptly resented as "a sower of dissension in the family" (281). As she struggles with likewise neglected feelings of isolation and the low spirits they cause, her emotional distress is significantly juxtaposed with the Lyddells' various afflictions. It is, we shall see, central that it is the outsider whose orphaned state makes her the more keenly aware not only of the positive value of familial, or pseudo-familial, networks, but more importantly, of their initial absence in the large household of children into which she becomes informally adopted. And what particularly enables her to accomplish this is precisely a struggle with her own condition of loneliness and the depressed spirits it causes. In the context of Yonge's ideal of mutual dependence, it is the difficulties she faces that single her out as an understanding caretaker.

<9>The making of a home and especially of the networks of mutual dependence that make it a real home "in this world" forms the novel's leitmotif. It also constitutes the crux of Yonge's representation of affliction as the center-point of her expounded religion of domesticity. What complicates its realization in *The Two Guardians* is that the Lyddells' initial inability to look after each other necessitates the heroine's renunciation of what she repeatedly describes as her dream-home with her other guardian, her cousin Edmund Arundel, who marries her childhood friend. Marian's dreams of a home notably center not on marriage, but on her integration into the household of these slightly older married friends. It is an adoption fantasy that hinges on the forging of a community connected through lifelong friendship rather than consanguinity. Its sacrifice is carefully prepared for throughout the novel, as it is repeatedly evoked as a "vision that had delighted her [Marian] from the first years of her orphanhood [...] her beloved hope of the home she longed for" (323). Yet as Marian becomes Lionel's most reliable support, this interdependence already resolves her struggles with her sense of loneliness; so much so, in fact, that her attempt to give up her blind cousin's "exclusive preference" (282) would ultimately

constitute a sacrifice as well: “It was the hardest thing Marian had ever had to do, to give up the being first with him” (283). Foreshadowing her final sacrifice, it is vital to Marian’s recognition of the potential of interdependence. Absorbed in her own distress, expecting to remain “wretched for life,” Caroline is able to overcome her prostration when touched by Lionel’s care:

“Lionel,” repeated Caroline.” “Yes, he has been very anxious about you.” “Poor boy!” sighed Caroline. “Well, Marian there is one thing still to be done. Only one, and it is all that I shall live for. I shall devote myself to him, if I can but do anything to please him, and make him care for me when you are gone. It will be my one object.” “Yes,” said Marian, “it will be very good for you both.” (279)

<10>Yet the relationship of mutual caretaking that Marian seeks to establish between brother and sister is cut short by Caroline’s death. It is central to Yonge’s rejection of the most common paradigms of sentimental narratives of suffering that Caroline dies of a minutely delineated, excruciatingly painful, inflammation of the windpipe, not a broken heart. As detailed studies of the common idealization of the sickroom in domestic realism have amply shown, spiritual recompense, like sentimental gratification, was regularly shown to be rooted in the experience, including the witnessing, of various forms of affliction. Miriam Bailin has influentially diagnosed the Victorian sickroom as “a haven of comfort, order, and natural affection” (6). But as Yonge re-channels prevailing paradigms, she significantly undercuts the efficiency of the sickroom topos.

As David Brownell has already shown, there is no “instantaneous conversion” in Yonge’s fiction: it is “never as sudden or dramatic – as sentimental – as it might be in, say, Dickens” (169). Contrary to the expected paradigms of the Victorian sickroom topos, illness regularly fails to be cathartic in itself. In this circumvention of sudden redemption at the death- or sickbed, even “[r]ecovery is often more trying than illness” (373), as it is put in *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865). In this later novel, the heroine’s diphtheria and “depressed spirits” — both the results of her mismanaged charity institution — become at once displaced and cured by their juxtaposition with the enabling permanent disabilities of a series of interconnected characters. Not only does she profit from the companionship (rather than advice) of her future husband’s blind uncle, a clergyman whose sermons notably are “even more striking now in his blindness” (161). She is also paired with the novel’s second heroine, her wheelchair-using literary rival, one of the very few disabled women in Victorian fiction who are granted a happy marriage. She moreover becomes an exemplary adoptive mother, while continuing to publish under the pseudonym “The Invalid.”(6) Much of the complexity of Yonge’s fictional treatment of impairment is increasingly brought out through the sheer proliferation of juxtaposed invalids. What characterizes them all is an interest in long-term issues. Thus, they avoid the dangers both of sensationalism and sentimentality: accidents are largely off-stage and even life-threatening conditions rarely cataclysmic in their repercussions on sufferers or bystanders.(7)

<11>The earlier *The Two Guardians* may bow (or at the very least, nod) to the expected paradigms of mid-century sickroom scenes in facilitating a poignant farewell scene between the blind brother and the dying sister, but this does more than simply prefigure what Holmes has termed “dyads of care” (“Victorian” 35). Precisely the mutual reliance between brother and sister and, even more pointedly, between the cousins, first and foremost serves to accentuate the mother’s inability to be of any support to anyone. In this, the novel perhaps the most effectively,

and provocatively, ruptures any sentimental representations of maternity. With a vehement rejection of filial duty at all costs, it emphasizes that such caretaking is prompted by an acquired sense of duty, often involving self-sacrifice: it has notably nothing to do with the prompting of (maternal) instinct.⁽⁸⁾ Realizing the dead end of a one-sided caretaking that moreover inverts the expected paradigms, Mrs. Lyddell instead suffers a physical as well as mental breakdown that renders her—in pointed contrast to her blind son or dying daughter—a “great charge to them all” (335). In her condemned “sanguine spirit” (235) that is shown to account for her carelessness and which foregrounds the constructive, positively valuated, effects of Marian’s “depressed spirits” through force of contrast, she has downplayed the “fearful signs” (207) even strangers notice in Lionel: “it is not he, poor boy, whose eyes are the worst in the house; but [Mrs. Lyddell] will not see anything amiss with Lionel” (223). After repeated shocks, including financial difficulties, Mrs. Lyddell exhibits such “increased excitability and irritation of her nerves” that the doctors “feared for her mind” (319-20). In her “confirmed state of ill health, and almost of hypochondriacism” (323), however, even suffering fails to alter her, and this renders her ultimately unredeemable.

<12>In that the Lyddells constitute an extreme example of dysfunctional domesticity, they bring out the most clearly and effectively Yonge’s linkage of her religion of domesticity to her integration of Anglo-Catholic propaganda into popular fiction. Within the realization of her religious agenda, it is admittedly this family’s indifference to the observance as much as the specificities of faith that renders them ineffective as a supportive network or familial community of interdependence. The connection to a more encompassing parental neglect, however, is by no means unidirectional either. Although it is strongly suggested that the Lyddells’ general disregard of each other’s needs is rooted in their lack of spiritual commitment or practices (as in the absence of regular family prayer as a unifying experience at home, for example), their more general indifference therefore also functions as a more widely understandable indicator of the dangers of neglected spiritual or physical welfare at home. On both accounts, they serve as a negative example. In a key scene, Edmund notices Lionel’s failing sight and remarks on “a sort of indistinctness about the pupil” (175), expressing his “wonder [that] his family are not more anxious” (174). The ownership he cannot claim illuminates the parents’ forfeiture of their responsibility: “I only know if he belonged to me, I should not like it at all” (174). Lionel shelters his aching eyes with his hands or pulls his hat over his forehead “to keep off the hideous sunshine” (172). The detailed rendition of his symptoms includes his explicit complaints that “the letters look green and dance about” (101) when he reads by candlelight, that he sees “green and blue monsters” (104) that would have, it is pointedly put, alarmed most other mothers: “She [Marian] thought her mamma would have been very uneasy if she had heard of those green and blue monsters, and she wondered whether Mrs. Lyddell knew or cared about them, but Lionel was one of the least regarded of the family” (104). His compensatory strategies are likewise symptomatic, insightfully hinted at throughout the narrative: he plays chess “more by the touch than the eye” (208), announces that his “bad eyes have made [his] ears sharper” (214), and altogether is “so quick and ready that it was impossible to tell how far the defect of sight went” (208). That he has been the least regarded of the children brings out the exposure of parental neglect the more pointedly:

He had in former times, missed their demonstrations of affection, though healthy, high-spirited, and by no means sentimental, the craving had been only occasional, he had done

very well without them, and had gained habits of freedom incompatible with being petted. He had never been used to be interfered with, and could not understand it at all; and that remembrance of past neglect embittered all his feelings. (239)

<13>So far from being a Tiny Tim figure or in any way feminized, Lionel is “indeed, reckless and unruly; by reputation the naughty one of the set” (54). Nor are his monsters a visionary experience. On the contrary, they are a young boy’s self-consciously jocular attempt to draw attention to a disconcerting experience. As Jacqueline Banerjee has stressed, given the “obvious didacticism, one might expect Yonge’s large bands of siblings to speak in stilted sentences, with constant interruptions from the author. On the contrary, children’s dialogue is her special strength” (190). It is partly due to this commitment to realism that Yonge never exploits the sentimental potential of the suffering and specifically the dying child. It is not merely that she eschews what Peter Coveney has diagnosed as the “real use” of child-death in sensational narratives at the mid-century: “to increase sadistic tension” (138).⁽⁹⁾ There never are idealized, martyr-like, child figures in Yonge’s novels. On the contrary, Yonge emphatically explodes the evangelical representation of the precociously religious child. In her later novels, this rejection becomes increasingly explicit. In *Magnum Bonum* (1879), a boy’s habit of “think[ing] himself forty martyrs all in one” is even described as an attitude that needs to be policed, or as his elder brother puts it, “there will be no living with him” (184). It would make him “only fit to be stitched up in one of [the] little red Sunday books” (184). Likewise, *The Pillars of the House* (1873) pokes fun at Clement Underwood’s extreme interpretation of Anglo-Catholicism, agreeing with his brothers’ ridicule of his propensity to be “on the high-road to be St Clement the Martyr” (vol.1, 179). Called “Tina” at home, he is notably the only feminized character of the novel, in contrast to the number of very active, useful, self-confident, invalids, male and female, in the novel. His feminization is the result of a “sauciness” disguised as meekness: “Tina’s meek sauce is aggravation itself” (vol.1, 92). These examples illustrate the underestimated complexities of Yonge’s fictionalization of family life.

<14>In *The Two Guardians*, a series of negative examples likewise underscores the need for functioning familial relationships by force of contrast. In this, it takes specifically the rejection of any unquestioning endorsement of filial duty much further than some of Yonge’s later novels. So far from preaching resignation or censuring the blind boy’s understandable anger, the most exemplary characters validate the condemnation of his mother’s neglect when it transpires that earlier intervention might have saved his eyesight: “‘All neglect, too,’ he added; then vehemently, ‘I don’t believe, no I don’t, there is any pauper’s son in the parish that would have been so used!’” (230). The language is remarkably violent: “it is my mother’s neglect [...]. She has regularly thrown my sight away, as much as if she had pulled my eyes out and thrown them over the hedge” (233). Marian may suggest that blaming anyone will not make him feel any better (230), and yet her sympathy firmly rests with Lionel, and so does that of Edmund’s consummately, almost preternaturally, good wife: being apprised of the Lyddells’ neglect, she indulges in “warm abuse of the parents, in which Marian was not indisposed to join” (287).

<15>In one of the perhaps most insightful, pointedly critical, representations of the realities of experiencing disability in Victorian Britain, the censure of the Lyddells extends to their mismanagement of Lionel’s needs after the diagnosis. The first reaction is perceived as an ironic

manifestation of neglect. The parents forget the boy's presence (and his superior hearing) as they are instead allocating blame: "I believe they both forgot I was there. They are apt to forget me, you know. He regularly stormed about the neglect, and told her it was all her fault" (231). This witnessing of marital conflict exacerbates his feelings of isolation, which become coupled with anger at unwanted and unnecessary caretaking. Thus, in an overcompensation of hitherto lacking parental care, his father behaves as if Lionel were already completely blind and hence, he assumes, completely helpless: he "led me about, and poked me in and out of the carriage, as if I was blind already; it put me almost in a rage" (230). His mother suddenly voices concern about his "sitting on the damp grass" (234), and there is a painfully embarrassing uproar when his father sees him stumbling over a footstool, which "would have been a trap for any one" (247). Their belated attempt to compensate for previous indifference threatens to infantilize or feminize him. It is in order to reject these common gender alignments of helplessness, dependence, and femininity that Lionel vents his resentment at being suddenly "petted" (239). In his moments of despair, he moreover fears that his impairment could turn him into "a good-for-nothing, dependent wretch" so that he might "[a]s well be a woman, or an idiot at once" (231-232). Hence, it is of substantial importance that the blind family member is neither a frail, consummately good, (orphan) girl nor a wise clergyman whose sermons appear to profit from his impairment. In a series of symbolic scenes, he is shown to be able to ride on horseback, accompanied by his orphaned cousin, who thereby overcomes her own isolation within the initially dysfunctional family. In a striking rejection of such typecasting, the blind boy galloping on horseback instead prefigures Yonge's marriageable disabled heroines, wheelchair-using writers, and ideal adoptive mothers, with their nursing ex-officers. So far from avoiding what is otherwise Yonge's foremost interest in female disabled bodies, this projection onto the growing young man accentuates the need to engage with fears of dependence. It renders the renegotiation of mutual support at home more pressing, expressing all the more emphatically its entire absence from the Lyddells' household.

<16>In representing this mismanagement of disability, the novel offers an instruction manual of the treatment of impairment that works (like the delineation of the absent ideal home), primarily through negative examples. They even include a clergyman, Lionel's brother Walter, whose feminization contrasts with the blind boy's endeavor to appear "manly and careless" (242) — an association of assumed indifference and independence with manliness that he notably needs to overcome. From the Lyddells' introduction onwards, Walter serves as Lionel's double, as an emotional prop or projection, a role that is usually that of a disabled character (Holmes, "Twin" 223-24). Lionel turns out to be "the flower of the flock, with principles as good as Walter's, and so much more manly and active" (215). Quiet, bookish, Walter displays so much timidity as to be regarded effeminate: "Even Marian began to share the feeling [...] when she heard him aver his preference for quiet horses" (115). Her disappointment at a "man grown up" failing "to set things to rights" (115) may rehearse traditional gender paradigms: "Marian thought if she was a man, a man almost twenty, destined to be a clergyman, she had it in her soul to have done great things; then she would not be shy" (116). Yet the same lack of courage also renders Walter helplessly awkward in dealing with his brother. Emasculation does not engender a more "feminine" nursing. On the contrary, he is immobilized by "his agitated, fidgeting manner, [...] excessively nervous at the notion of being left to take care of Lionel back to the house," which Marian notices "in a sort of despair as to Walter's being of any use" (258). If Lionel has to conquer his "almost desperate, defiant spirit of independence" (238), he does not share the feminization of

his irresolute brother: he is a “fine tall boy” with “the glow of youth and health on his face, spirit and enterprise in every feature” (314). Edmund and his wife Agnes are astonished to see “[t]he poor blind boy” enjoying “a pretty cantering on the turf” (334):
Lionel rode almost close to [Marian], a bright glow of sunshine on his lively face, and a dexterity and quickness in his whole air that made Agnes hesitate for a second or two, whether he could really be the blind youth. [. . .] Agnes did not know how to believe that he could not see, as she watched his upright bearing, and rapid, fearless step, so unlike the groping ways of persons who have lost their sight later in life. (335)

<17>The horseback riding, while recuperative, or therapeutic, simultaneously serves on a symbolic level as an indicator of dependability. Despite her shyness, low spirits, and sickly pallor, Marian is importantly introduced “sit[ting] like a heroine” (15) on horseback. In contradistinction to Walter’s “preference for quiet horses” (115), she needs to “feel that the creature [she] rides is alive—not an old slug” (8). In all her quietude, Marian is a “spirited thing [and] a girl of sense” (65). Neither does her courage fail her during a potentially dangerous incident in which Lionel’s horse stumbles, throws him, and leaves Marian to chase it to the astonishment of a shepherd boy “in amaze at the lady in chase of the runaway steed” (276). By no means “mortified at having been obliged to remain thus helpless, while a girl was doing what he would have so much enjoyed,” Lionel is “disconsolate” but “not bitter” (276-277). Despite the parents’ protestation, they continue their rides. Lionel learns to balance his assertion of activity and his dependence on his cousin as he keeps closer at her side without relinquishing control over his horse. This balancing act stands in metonymically for the restructuring of all significant relationships in the novel. At first, the value Lionel attaches to independence makes him reject any assistance: “he treated offers of reading to him as insults, and far less would he endure to learn any occupation that might serve him when his sight should be quite gone” (240). Ultimately, however, he not only learns woodcarving as well as netting, but also enjoys going to “exhibitions, where [Marian] saw for him, and there were lectures, readings, and other oral amusements” (324).

<18>*The Two Guardians* tracks the detrimental absence, construction, and ultimately, transformative potential of interdependence. Throughout Yonge’s fiction, its assertion hinges on an exposure of dysfunctional relationships. Yet what renders this tripartite structure (lack, construction, transformation) pivotal in the case of the Lyddells is the extremity of its initial absence. It is therefore not merely that the novel is peculiarly startling in its uncompromising condemnation of parental neglect and what is shown to be the consequent failure of other relationships within the family to develop without the orphaned ward’s influence. It is a symptomatic redeployment of the sentimental orphan-figure that it is the long isolated outsider who becomes the primary homemaker. For Lionel, Marian is “his real sister” (270). This is an acknowledgement of an accepted dependability that underscores the need of such familial, or pseudo-familial, relationships. If Marian, moreover, sacrifices the ideal home of her adoption fantasies, she also chooses a place where she is needed, a place of activity, over the heaven in this world that means quiet withdrawal. That caretaking involves care (in every sense of the word), in fact, not only ruptures any sentimentalization, but defends the described dependencies against allegations of escapism into the shelter of home that Ruskin was to describe so memorably: “the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home” (122). It is therefore particularly significant that not even the

most exemplary homes in Yonge's novels ever yield an easy realization of this shelter. This is precisely in order to short-circuit mere sentimentalization that ends up underestimating the value of dependencies.

<19>The representation of blindness in *The Two Guardians* takes up some of the most easily sentimentalized figures (the blind, neglected, child and the unwelcome orphan) to facilitate instead an assertion of mutual dependability. Being dependent on each other, it is emphasized again and again, automatically ruptures any unidirectional alignments. What the often misunderstood concept of self-sacrifice denotes is the ability to be dependable. This potential of interdependence to forge dyads and ultimately groups of care is then shown to extend to the integration into a network in which each member is appreciated for their exchangeable roles. The mutuality of the represented caretaking therein effectively mediates between the desire for independence and the need to be allowed to feel dependent. This mutuality provides the resolution Yonge offers to the conflicted approaches to disability and dependence in Victorian society, and it simultaneously transforms established literary clichés. At a time when fictional and non-fictional discourses revolved around the strictures of society, including the imprisoning constrictions of the household, her novels aimed to show that the careless, loosely constructed, family could create confines of its own. A rethinking of this endorsement of interdependence through a delineation of the effects of its absence hence also shows that an analysis of domestic women writers without a sidestepping of their commitment to specific ideologies or doctrine is not only possible, but can be immensely valuable for a reconsideration of Victorian domesticity in general. Most importantly, however, its investment in a mutual dependability may therein induce us to rethink the still pervasive alignments between self-sacrifice and the renunciation of self-realization.

Endnotes

(1) Compare Julia Miele Rodas on Dickens's changing uses of disability (53). Although self-definition against "afflicted" doubles continued to play a central role—as Rodas puts it, "that earlier query persists: 'who or what am I in relation to this other creature?'" (61) — what is rendered pivotal is the more and more prominent depiction of disability as an integral part of daily life. Dickens's early writing may focus on "freakish idiosyncrasies," yet increasingly mid-century fiction illustrates "that illness and disability are a part of the ordinary course of life" (Rodas 80).(^)

(2) For the concept of narrative prosthesis, see Mitchell and Snyder.(^)

(3) In a recent article on the treatment of disability in the context of the Victorian work ethic, Cindy LaCom stresses anew the centrality of industrialization, capitalist economic theories, and an attendant ideology of self-help for discourses on the disabled (547-548).(^)

(4) In his seminal overview of the representation of the Oxford Movement in literature, Raymond Chapman already stresses that Yonge “avoids the danger, inherent in secular as well as religious puritanism, of valuing loss and suffering for their own sake” (84). It is not only that she altogether “kept more sanity and plain common sense about scruples and duties than many minor Anglican novelists,” but in particular that her fictional treatment of the disabled cuts through reader expectations: “Her invalids — and they abound in her books — are not all saintly, and they are not made out to be more blessed than the fit. It is the attitude that counts, patient endurance in whatever way of life comes to one” (84). Chapman refers to “the invalids who dominate family life and provide models of patience or warnings against selfishness,” suggesting that they constitute devices “common enough in the mid-Victorian novel,” so that Yonge “does not show herself a rebel or an innovator when she depicts them” (73). More recently, detailed attention to her interest in caretaking at home has been propelled both by the rise of disability studies in analyses of Victorian literature and by growing interest in domestic, reputedly vehemently antifeminist, women writers in general. The resulting rereading of her fictional treatment of invalidism has shown that she self-consciously diverges from common literary uses of various, often interconnected, forms of affliction in fiction.(^)

(5) Growing interest in the legacies of the Victorians’ representations of impairment can thereby assist in the recuperation of long neglected novelists, breaking through generic confines that have inadvertently been erected by the almost exclusive focus on proto-feminist, chiefly anti-domestic, works that has characterized studies of women’s writing over the last decades. I am particularly indebted to Holmes’s engagement with a “dependency critique” as she locates an important “source of enabling narratives of interdependency [in] Victorian writing” (“Victorian” 29).(^)

(6) Both heroines, moreover, are paired with invalidated officers, whose own suffering has rendered them exemplary caretakers. Compare Wheatley (904). Holmes has suggested that disabled characters are thereby accorded privileges that allow them to transcend gender boundaries (*Affliction* 54). The happy ending of the disabled woman’s romance plot at the same time rewrites the death of Margaret May in *The Daisy Chain*. Compare Sanders’s discussion of both central invalids around whose sofas “several other kinds of woman” revolve “like so many satellites round a sun” (*Eve’s Renegades* 61-62). On the fulfilled marriage-plots that address rather than elide issues of impairment see Holmes (“Twin” 231).(^)

(7) For a detailed treatment of this specific concept in Yonge’s work, see Holmes, “Victorian” 30, 32-34. In Yonge’s *The Pillars of the House* (1873), for example, after having a leg amputated, “our little lame white-hearted Cherry” (vol.1, 34) not only receives an offer of marriage, but becomes the sole guardian of her brother’s orphan boy, the heir to the family estate, while continuing to exhibit her artwork and adding to the family income. Such successes in private and public are far removed from the invalid sofas that become centers of domestic happiness and their extension to traditional charity work in some of Yonge’s earlier novels. As the vicar says of

his paralyzed wife's charitable activities in *The Young Step-Mother* (1861), "'she is never off the sofa, but —' And what a bright look he gave! as much as to say that his wife *on* the sofa was better than any one else *off*' (38). An uncharacteristically saccharine—and "fairy-looking" — embodiment of "playful manner, high spirits, keen wit, and the active habits that even confirmed invalidism could not destroy" (42), she is not necessarily the easiest role-model for the novel's inherently low-spirited, even "morbid" and "gloomy" (135) heroine.(^)

(8)The exemplary families of Yonge's fiction are carefully forged, often centering on adoptive family members like Marian. They need to be carefully cultivated; they cannot be taken for granted. Yonge significantly continued to explode any alignments of familial nursing and instinct. In *The Trial*, it is by emphatically dismissing any theories of "women's instinct" that Dr. May ruthlessly sums up a spoilt young woman's inability to nurse her brother by stressing that she has "everything to learn" after leaving a fashionable school: "Woman's nonsense! Instinct is for irrational brutes, and the more you cultivate a woman, the less she has of it, unless you work up her practical common sense too" (vol.1, 22).(^)

(9)Coveney specifically targets "the one last, careful, twist of the knife of the sadist masquerading as moralist" (136) in the intensely popular death-scene in Mrs. Henry (Ellen) Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), but considers this the nadir and yet also the expected result of sentimental representation in the domestic fiction of the previous decades, including Dickens's influential descriptions of Little Nell and Paul Dombey.(^)

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