The Religious Lives of Women in the Novels of George Eliot and Charlotte Mary Yonge

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the novels of George Eliot and Charlotte Mary Yonge, showing how both authors imagine religious forms in ways that empower and liberate women. Although many feminist literary scholars perceive religious forms as oppressive to women, these two Victorian novelists imagine them differently. Drawing on an understanding of realist fiction as creative rather than mimetic, a theory recently articulated by Anna Kornbluh, I show that even though Eliot and Yonge had very different religious beliefs and identities, they both created realist fiction that imagined similar possibilities. I apply Caroline Levine's conception of forms to three Eliot novels and four Yonge novels in order to trace the effects of religious forms in these novels on the lives of women. I demonstrate that women in these novels are often empowered or liberated to move freely, speak publicly, and stand up for themselves to a degree not afforded by secular society.

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Introduction

In Charlotte Mary Yonge's 1876 novel *The Three Brides*, the matriarch of the family, Mrs. Poynsett, is impatiently waiting for the next volume of *Middlemarch*, which she has been borrowing from the circulating library (112). This is but one instance of intertextuality linking the two highly popular Victorian novelists: Yonge (1823-1901) and George Eliot (1819-1880), both of whom wrote realist novels to critical acclaim and commercial success. Although there is no evidence that Yonge and Eliot ever met or corresponded, they certainly were familiar with each other's works, as is evident in references like the one to *Middlemarch* in *The Three Brides*. Just three years before *The Three Brides* was published, Eliot requested a copy of Yonge's *A Book of Golden Deeds of All Times and All Lands* (1864) from Alexander Macmillan and was disappointed to find that it was out of print: "I hope it is to be reproduced" (Eliot *Letters* 444). Eliot's eagerness to read Yonge's collection of stories may indicate an admiration for Yonge. Eliot certainly praised Yonge's ability to create believable worlds and characters that left the reader wondering what happened to them after the end of the story; Eliot wrote that upon finishing a Yonge novel, the reader "has a sense…of the incomplete narrative which cries out for further exploration" (qtd. in Hayter 13).

One might speculate that Eliot's admiration for Yonge may also have been mixed with some weariness of the religiosity and didacticism prevalent in her work, for Yonge was a devoted Anglo-Catholic whose faith profoundly shaped her fiction, while Eliot was famously unorthodox, rejecting established religion. Yonge likewise viewed Eliot and her work with mixed feelings. In multiple letters to various people following the publication of J.W. Cross's biography of Eliot in 1885, Yonge gives her opinion on Eliot's life and writing. While she saw Eliot as a skilled writer—even a genius—she felt that Eliot's fiction increasingly lacked moral power,

which damaged its artistic merit as well. One of the recurring themes is her conviction that G. H. Lewes should not have withheld negative reviews from Eliot: "Artistically I think it was a great mistake of Lewes to keep adverse reviews back— for if they are ever so foolish and provoking…they shew one's mannerisms and blunders. And as to their stinging, one gets hardened and cares very little" (*Letters* "To Gertrude Mary Ireland Blackburne, Feb. 28, 1885"). This criticism is mostly aimed at Lewes, whom Yonge did not perceive as a good influence on Eliot, but Yonge also feels that Eliot's irreligiosity and (in Yonge's view) immoral lifestyle infected her fiction: "It has always seemed to me a fearful thing that, for the sake of her genius and power, her defiance of all moral and religious principle in her own life should be sunk and forgotten as if it had been a sort of heroism" (*Letters* "To Gertrude Mary Ireland Blackburne" Feb. 1885). Yonge seems to be saying that Eliot's personal life choices—in particular, her rejection of organized religion and her cohabitation with Lewes while not legally married—ought to be remembered and censured. Although some people might see Eliot's defiance of social mores as "a sort of heroism," bravely standing up to prudery or judgmentalism, Yonge considers that it is, in fact, a true failing that ought to be recognized as such and not simply overlooked or even praised "for the sake of her genius and power."

The result of Eliot's relationship with Lewes is, in Yonge's opinion, a corruption of Eliot's ideals, which produced poorer art later in her career than earlier in it: "Her ideals, like Daniel Deronda himself, are utter failures. *Romola* fails—the book, I mean—because she had no religious power left wherewith to appreciate Savonarola, and so made him political. Of course Tito is one of her terrible successes" (*Letters* "To Gertrude Mary Ireland Blackburne, Feb. 1885). Similarly, in a letter to Mary Elizabeth Christie in 1896, Yonge echoes the same idea: "She could

represent but not create, and that when she had lived with a world she did not really know, her ideals were absurd, as in Deronda."

Yonge is certainly not alone in finding Eliot's depiction of her ideals, especially in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), to be "absurd." Many critics have observed that the portion of *Daniel Deronda* that deals with the titular character is devoid of realistic characters, even as it rings with lofty moral sentiment. In *The Great Tradition* (1948), F.R. Leavis famously suggested severing the Deronda plot from the Gwendolyn Harleth plot and publishing the latter, which he calls "the good half," on its own (80). According to Leavis, "the bad half" is bad because its "idealism" is actually a "mode of self-indulgence" (82). Similarly, George Saintsbury in *The English Novel* (1913) calls *Daniel Deronda* "*over*-laboured," "unreal," and "unnatural" (qtd. in Johnson 206). George Sampson in *The Concise History of English Literature* (1941) says that *Daniel Deronda* "has never been liked" and calls the ending "forced," while in 1940 D.L. Hobman claims that the character of Deronda is a creature of "arid idealism" (qtd. in Johnson 206-207). In such company, Yonge's comment may almost seem to be vapid by virtue of being so obvious. What is unique about Yonge's theory, however, is that she attributes Eliot's weakness to her inability to produce, claiming that she can only reflect what already is. Eliot's "absurd" ideals, in Yonge's view, are the product of her inability to create, being only able to represent.

The contrast between representation and creation reflects a theory of realist fiction that Yonge and Eliot evidently shared: that writing realist fiction is a work first and foremost of creation, not representation. In other words, realism is not about (or should not be about) reproducing what already exists but about generating a vision of what could be. This idea appears in one of Eliot's letters, in which she says that her fiction is "a set of experiments in life" (*Selections* 466). The term "experiment" implies that Eliot saw her work as comparable to the

scientific process: she created characters and put them in a world, and then she observed what they did. A realist novel is a thought experiment. Eliot's theory of "experiments in life" and Yonge's theory of creation not representation both reflect a theory of realism that is rooted in construction rather than imitation.

Anna Kornbluh is a recent example of this line of thinking; in *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (2019), she argues that realist fiction is not mimetic but rather constructive. The prevailing assumption about realist fiction is that it attempts to depict the real world—that realism imitates the real. Even those who perceive the problems with such a simplistic definition of realism still usually fall back on some sort of mimesis. David Lodge, for example, in *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), defines realist fiction as "the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in nonliterary texts of the same culture" (25). For Lodge, realist fiction may not imitate the real world, but it imitates nonliterary descriptions of the real world. By contrast, Kornbluh moves away from mimesis entirely, arguing that realist fiction is not an attempt to capture what *is* but what *could be*, "a mode of production instead of a mode of reflection" (41). Kornbluh calls this "world-making" (13). Borrowing from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Kornbluh describes two types of models: "model of," which is "a heuristic for apprehending a system," like a model of the *Mayflower*, for example; and "model for," which is "a heuristic for producing a system, such as the architectural blueprint" (10). Some readers may assume that realist fiction is attempting to be a "model of": a miniature depiction of the real world. However, Kornbluh argues that realist fiction is actually a "model for": an original plan for what could be. This picture of realist fiction as a mode of creation, a thought experiment seems to be shared by both Yonge and Eliot. Perhaps

strikingly, even though Yonge and Eliot had very different religious beliefs and identities, they often depicted religion as functioning in similar ways in their fiction.

The central claim of this dissertation is that in Eliot's and Yonge's novels, religious forms often function in ways that empower women. This is contrary to the widespread assumption among professional scholars and amateur readers alike that religion in general, and Victorian Christianity in particular, is primarily an anti-feminist force—that religious forms are merely tools in the hands of the patriarchy.[1] I certainly acknowledge that religion can and does oppress women; there can be no doubt that Victorian Christianity was often patriarchal and repressive. Since this aspect of Victorian Christianity has been well-established by other writers, however, I choose to focus on the positive affordances of religious forms, which are generally neglected and can be harder to see.[2] I am saying that although religious forms, structures, and rituals can be oppressive toward women, they can also be empowering or liberating. The liberatory affordances of religious forms appear in multiple guises in Eliot's and Yonge's fiction, typically functioning in similar ways, despite Eliot's and Yonge's differing religious identities. Using Eliot and Yonge as case studies is particularly useful for showing that religion is more than a matter of identity, widening the vista for research on religion to move past questions of identity. An exclusive focus on religious identity, indeed, can blind one to other aspects of religion, including religious discourse, religion as social structure, the economics of religion, or—my focus in this dissertation—the *function* of religion.

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[1] I use the term "patriarchy" in the way that feminist scholars typically use it, which is represented by Sylvia Walby's famous definition: "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (214).

[2] See, e.g. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979); Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and the Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (1987); and Rosalind Miles, *Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women's History of the World* (1988).

Today, George Eliot remains one of the most frequently studied novelists of the Victorian period, occupying a space in the very center of the Victorian literary canon. Eliot is particularly interesting in relation to questions of gender and religion because of the sometimes confusing contrast between her own life and her work. Even though she rejected orthodox Christianity when she was young in favor of secular humanism, Eliot continued to write fiction filled with religion and religious conversions, as Ilana Blumberg has pointed out. Similarly, even though she had a successful career and lived with a man to whom she was not legally married, Eliot continued to write fiction about women who follow conventional gender norms, submitting to unpleasant duties, denying themselves the pleasures of extramarital sex, and even returning to abusive husbands. Eliot's complex perspective on religion and women's roles makes her a particularly interesting author to study.

Although few people today are familiar with the work of Charlotte Mary Yonge, she was also one of the Victorians' favorite novelists. In 1855, officers in hospital during the Crimean War listed Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) as their favorite novel (Hayter 1). Alethea Hayter reports on a survey of English schoolgirls in 1886, who listed Charlotte Yonge "fourth on the list of favourite authors, after Dickens, Scott and Kingsley and just before Shakespeare" (54). Yonge's work was read and admired by many respected Victorians, including Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Anthony Trollope, Lewis Carroll (who met and photographed Yonge in 1866), Christina Rossetti, and George Eliot herself (1, 13, 61). Like Eliot, Yonge sends sometimes conflicting messages regarding women's rights. On the one hand, she writes, "I have no hesitation in declaring my full belief in the inferiority of woman," in *Womankind* (1876), her handbook for girls (1). This quote is often given as evidence of Yonge's antifeminism, but the context implies that "inferiority" for Yonge has more to do with women's subordinate position in

society than any kind of intrinsic weakness. Both Eliot and Yonge advocated for women's education and pursued professional careers themselves. Yonge's own life choices—especially the choices to remain single, publish books, and edit her periodical *The Monthly Packet*—suggest that she may not really have been as anti-feminist as some critics suppose. Moreover, Yonge's novels certainly provide a complex and multifaceted picture of women's lives and roles, not a simple feminist or antifeminist stance (Selvasingh 2). Regardless of Yonge's personal response to the Woman Question, her literary works provide rich material for analysis. Unlike Eliot, who eschewed organized religion, Yonge was committed to the Church of England; a devout Anglo-Catholic, Yonge taught in Sunday schools all her life and donated the profits from her books to missionary and charitable organizations.

In light of Eliot's and Yonge's quite different life choices and personal beliefs, particularly with regard to religion, it is striking that religion would function in similar ways in both of their novels. Both writers depict religious forms as potentially liberating for women. Even though Eliot was not personally religious and Yonge was, they both portray religion as a positive force in the lives of their fictional characters. For women like Eliot's Dorothea Brooke and Yonge's Amy Edmonstone (and countless other characters in their novels), religious forms provide avenues of escape from the prevailing patriarchal norms. To analyze the ways in which religious forms function in these novels, I turn to Caroline Levine, whose theory of forms and affordances offers me a vocabulary for describing the structures and systems in Eliot's and Yonge's fiction. In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Levine challenges the conventional understanding of form as purely literary or stylistic aspects of a text, divorced from its content or politics. Levine understands forms as abstract concepts that can be applied not only to literary or stylistic techniques but also to political, economic, or social structures. For

example, she interprets legal precedent as a type of rhythm, in which repetition reinforces the original concept. Levine borrows the concept of "affordance" from design theory and applies it to her forms; each form has affordances: things that are made possible by the form. She gives some examples of affordances of different forms: "Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time" (6). Levine pioneers four examples of forms: bounded wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks. I apply these concepts to the situations Yonge and Eliot describe in their novels, from the bounded wholes of separate sphere ideology to the hierarchy of the Church. By looking at where different forms intersect and seeing what happens, I can see how Victorian gender roles shaped and were shaped by Victorian religion. Just as Levine weds form with politics, so I intend to bring together the portability of form and the groundedness of historical context. Following Devin Griffiths's theory of "comparative historicism" and Wai Chee Dimock's theory of "resonance," I seek to study Victorian novels in their historical context in a way that resonates with the twenty-first century.

Since the origins of first-wave feminism in the nineteenth century, feminism and Victorian literature have long been closely connected. Feminist literary theorists of the 1970s and 80s frequently focused their analyses on nineteenth-century novels, possibly in part because by that time, these novels enjoyed a secure canonical status and a high and enduring degree of popular appeal. According to F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948), the four great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. The canonicity of Victorian literature, in addition to the prevalence of women writers in the nineteenth century, probably made this period of literature particularly appealing to scholars seeking to re-examine

literature through a feminist lens. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) explores the lives and works of several nineteenth-century women writers, from Jane Austen to Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. The book's title comes from their reading of *Jane Eyre* (1847), in which they interpret Bertha Mason as Jane's rebellious alter ego, representing all the parts of a woman that the patriarchy rejects, thus splitting the woman into angel and monster. Gilbert and Gubar's work continues to be enormously influential in Victorian literary studies and feminist literary studies. Other second-wave feminist scholars like Ellen Moers, Deirdre David, Elaine Showalter, and Nancy Armstrong also examined the experiences and work of women writers in the nineteenth century in ways that challenged assumptions about women's acquiescence to the patriarchy and showed how subtly these women could resist or subvert oppression. This dissertation owes a huge debt to second-wave feminist scholars like Gilbert and Gubar, for I, too, am interested in how Victorian women worked within patriarchal systems, finding power and liberation in the midst of oppression. I also seek to move beyond the second wave of feminism by considering how other aspects of identity and experience—in this case, religion—affect women's lives.

It is important to note that the work of broadening the literary canon, a project begun by feminist scholars, is still incomplete. There are two key ways in which the canon still needs to be expanded, even after all the work of second-wave feminist literary critics. First, there were women writers whom second-wave feminist scholars studied who never really made it into the canon. For example, Showalter discusses the work of Charlotte Mary Yonge in several places in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Showalter's response to Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (1929), but unlike Elizabeth Gaskell or Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Yonge is still relatively

unknown, even in academic circles, and there is very little research on her many novels, history books, short stories, and articles. Second, like many second-wave feminists, most literary scholars at that time prioritized white, straight, middle- and upper-class women over women of color, women in the Global South, poor women, and queer women. For these reasons, there are still many important women writers whose work continues to be neglected, so the broadening of the canon is ongoing.

In the last few decades, feminist scholars in literary studies and other fields have embraced the idea of intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to refer to the unique types of oppression faced by those at certain intersections of axes of power: "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). Studying these different axes of power separately, therefore, does not do justice to the real lives of those who experience them together. Intersectional feminism seeks to understand and address the interconnected injustices of gender, race, class, and sexuality.[3]

The metaphor of the intersection allows for complex examinations of the way multiple axes of power work together, and this work has been profitable. However, one major gap in the work on intersectionality so far is the neglect of religion. Religion has yet to be taken seriously as a significant aspect of women's lives in the way that gender, race, class, and sexuality have been. This gap is striking, considering how significant religion is for so many women—especially women of color and women in the Global South. To neglect religion is to

[3] For other examples of feminist scholarship examining the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, see Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981); M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (1997); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000); María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia*, vol. 22, no. 1, Winter 2007, pp. 186-209.

neglect the experiences, beliefs, and identities of most of the world's women. Although my dissertation does not focus on women in the Global South, it does reconsider the relationship between religion and gender in ways that may be fruitful for conversations about women and religion more generally. The secularization hypothesis, which predicted that Western secularism would be exported throughout the world by the twenty-first century, has been shown to be false by the persistence of religion throughout the world and especially in the Global South. In order to reconsider the role of religion in the world today, especially in relation to women's issues, it is important to reconsider women and religion in the century that gave us the secularization hypothesis.

By looking at the intersection of religion and feminism in the texts of Yonge and Eliot, I contribute to a more capacious scholarly understanding of religious experiences and epistemologies. I examine the religious lives of women as depicted in Victorian novels, uncovering what religion means for women's experiences, women's writing, and women's rights, and what women's experiences, writings, and rights mean for religion. The Woman Question, which stemmed from the perceived surplus of women in Victorian England, combined with the intense religiosity of the nineteenth century in England, makes Victorian literature a particularly fruitful archive in which to seek insights into women and religion. Moreover, Victorian religion was women's business: historical data show that women attended church at greater rates than men (McLeod 66). As Hugh McLeod notes, contemporary surveys revealed that 66% of church attendees at Anglican services were women. In other denominations, including Roman Catholicism and various dissenting denominations, the exact numbers varied, but nearly all Christian churches had more women than men in their pews (67). Higher rates of religious practice among women correspond to the abundance of religious literature written by women,

including poetry, fiction, and conduct manuals. Given the importance of religion to Victorian women, it is important to take seriously religion in Victorian women's writing. I am doing that by focusing on religion in Eliot's writing, which critics have typically valued for its perceived secularism, and by comparing Eliot to an explicitly religious writer. Because Eliot has so often been seen as a secular writer and Yonge is clearly a religious writer, they may seem to be an unlikely pairing, but my analysis of the forms of women's religious lives in their novels shows how fruitful such a comparison can be.

My dissertation contributes to ongoing conversations on religion among Victorian literary scholars. So far, the religious turn in Victorian studies has appeared more in the study of poetry than in the study of fiction. Cynthia Scheinberg's *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (2002), an early example of the religious turn, challenges readers to take religion seriously in Victorian women's poetry, contending that women poets were "creative agents of theological inquiry rather than merely passive recipients of a patriarchal tradition" (4). F. Elizabeth Gray's *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women's Poetry* (2009) builds on Scheinberg's work by expanding the scope of her analysis to include lesser-known poets. The study of religion in Victorian poetry has been continued by Charles LaPorte, Kirstie Blair, Emma Mason, and others, whose work has shown just how important religion was to all Victorian poets and how important religious poetry was to Victorian ways of thinking and living.[4]

While studies of religion in Victorian poetry tend to focus on poetic form or the role of the poet and poetry in society, studies of religion in Victorian novels tend to focus more on how religious ideas are being worked out in the novels. These scholars seem implicitly to see

[4] See LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (2011); Blair, *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (2012); and Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (2018).

Victorian novels in a similar way to how Eliot and Kornbluh see them: as thought experiments. While the Victorian poet speaks with divine authority in forms that are closely connected to religious forms, the Victorian novelist uses the form of the novel to experiment with church politics, ethics, and doctrine.

Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's *Victorian Reformations: Historical Fiction and Religious Controversy, 1820-1904* (2013) examines the ways in which Victorians used historical novels about the Protestant Reformation to weigh in on the nineteenth-century controversy over Catholic Emancipation. Ilana Blumberg examines mid-century novelists' reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice in *Victorian Sacrifice: Ethics and Economics in Mid-Century Novels* (2013). Analyzing novels by Charlotte Yonge, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and Wilkie Collins, Blumberg traces the evolution of Christian ideals of sacrifice in the mid-nineteenth-century. Mark Knight's *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (2019) focuses on Evangelicalism in the Victorian period, from dissenters like Methodists and Quakers to low-church Anglicans, demonstrating the pervasive influence Evangelicalism had, even on seemingly secular literary genres like the novel. Burstein focuses on novels that explicitly address religion, while Knight shows that even novels that are not typically seen as religious novels were shaped by their religious context—in particular, Evangelicalism. Knight's biggest contribution to the field is his persuasive rebuttal to the idea that the novel is an inherently secular genre.[5] It is easy to see the connection between religion and poetry in the minds of Victorians, but Knight makes it clear that the novel is also tied up with Victorian religious ideas and debates. As Knight puts it, "The ideas, networks, and practices of evangelicalism permeate the content of the Victorian novel, [which] ... is invested in repentance,

[5] This point is reiterated and reinforced in Kevin Seidel's *Rethinking the Secular Origins of the Novel: The Bible in English Fiction 1670-1767* (2021).

convinced that words can affect readers and preoccupied with questions of morality. … The form of the novel was molded by evangelicalism" (xii-xiii). Knight's compelling argument that the Victorian novel is just as shaped by Victorian religion as Victorian poetry is paves the way for further analyses of the novel in relation to religion, including my own analyses of the novels of George Eliot and Charlotte Yonge. Amy M. King's *The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent Natural History and the Novel in Britain* (2019) brings together recent conversations on Victorian science and recent conversations on Victorian religion to demonstrate the connection between the genre of the realist novel and the genre of natural history, which King shows to be a devotional practice. Like Knight, King makes the case for the novel as a more religious form than had been previously assumed.

My examination of religious forms in Eliot's and Yonge's novels brings the work that has been done on form in poetry, particularly in relation to high-church Anglican traditions, into conversation with work that has been done on novels. With the exception of Blumberg's chapter on Yonge, none of these scholars devotes much attention to novels in high-church Anglican traditions like Tractarianism, but Tractarianism will be central to my work because it is central to Yonge's work. Given its attention to aesthetics, rituals, and religious forms, Tractarianism lends itself to analyses of poetic form in relation to religious form. Scholars like Blair and Mason have fruitfully examined Tractarian poetry, but very little work has been done thus far on Tractarian novels, even though Tractarianism's emphasis church tradition (the narrative of church history) links it to the novel form.[6] The three Eliot novels that I discuss will provide useful points of comparison and contrast with Yonge's novels, for each of these three Eliot novels focuses on a

[6] A notable exception is Lauren Simek's article in *Victorian Review* entitled "Revising Tractarian Reserve: Elizabeth Missing Sewell, Victorian Didacticism, and Novel Form" (2020).

different Christian tradition: Methodism in *Adam Bede,* Anglicanism in *Middlemarch*, and Roman Catholicism in *Romola*.

In order to preview my methods, I offer a sample reading of Yonge's best-known novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). Yonge's first commercial success, *The Heir of Redclyffe* became one of the most popular novels of the Victorian period. J.B. Priestley claims that it was *the* most popular novel of the period, declaring, "Its popularity left Dickens and Thackeray far behind" (Priestley 124). This novel, which made Yonge famous, tells the story of young Sir Guy Morville, whose good-natured charm and humble goodness endear him to the Edmonstone family until their mutual cousin, the jealous and self-righteous Philip Morville, sows discord by promoting slanderous rumors about Guy. The novel comes to a climax with Guy's sacrificial death by a fever he caught tending Philip, after which Philip repents. The most obvious theme in the novel is the danger of proud self-satisfaction, a subject derived from the biblical parable of the Pharisee and the publican, upon which, according to Susan Colón, the novel is based.

Early in the novel, Philip is the trusted and respected confidant of the Edmonstone family, influencing Mr. and Mrs. Edmonstone's decisions to such an extent that he may almost be seen as running the family himself. In the novel's first few pages, Yonge reveals that Philip directs a wide variety of the family activities, giving advice on everything from Mr. Edmonstone's estate management to the eldest daughter Laura's painting (5-6). Given Philip's strong personality, the last person one would expect to stand up to him is little Amy Edmonstone, Laura's younger sister, who through most of the book is characterized as shy, self-deprecating, and submissive. Amy usually behaves according to the "angel in the house" ideal, meekly submitting to the wills of others and quietly performing her domestic tasks. Throughout the novel, Amy is called "silly"

eighteen times, most often in the phrase “silly little Amy,” a descriptor Amy uses to refer to herself at least as often as other people use it. Originally meaning “simple” but later coming to carry derogatory connotations, the word “silly” captures both innocence and frivolity. When Sir Guy proposes marriage to her, she tells him, “I know, and you know, too, that I am a foolish little thing; I have been silly little Amy always” (274). Someone with this type of self-image is not likely to find the courage and self-confidence to defy someone as assertive and dominant as Philip, yet that is precisely what happens when Guy and Amy meet Philip on their honeymoon and Philip presumes to give Amy marriage advice. The narrator tells us that Philip “spoke in the half-compassionate, half-patronizing manner with which he used, now and then, to let fall a few crumbs of counsel or commendation for silly little Amy” (328). It is completely in keeping with Philip’s character and his relation to Amy’s family that he would advise her about how to behave toward her husband, counseling her to submit.

It is a surprising twist when Amy draws herself up with “an expression of dignity” and says, “I think you forget to whom you are speaking” (328). The key to this change in Amy lies in her new title as Lady Morville, which gives her a higher rank than Philip, making it unseemly for him to advise her as he has presumed to do. Yonge makes this clear: “He actually was confused, for in very truth, he had, after a fashion, forgotten that she was Lady Morville, not the cousin Amy with whom Guy’s character might be freely discussed” (328). Amy, in the power of her rank as Lady Morville, which now allows her to speak with authority even to her older, domineering cousin, continues her rebuff, arguing that Philip is deliberately misunderstanding Guy. At the end of her speech, “She left the room, and Philip held her in higher esteem” (328). Thanks to her new rank as the wife of a baronet, Amy can now speak her mind to someone who has always bossed her and her family around, thereby gaining her point as well as his respect.

At first glance, it may seem to be a merely secular structure—the social hierarchy—that gives Amy the power to reprimand Philip, but Amy's rank is also dependent on a religious structure: marriage. Guy's rank applies to Amy once they are married because, according to Christian teaching, the husband and wife are seen as one flesh, united in the bounds of marriage. Christian teaching about marriage creates a bounded whole such as Caroline Levine describes. The idea that marriage unites two people into a single unit first appears in the book of Genesis, when God creates Woman, whereupon Man declares, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (*KJV* Gen. 2:23). This comment is given as the impetus for the doctrine of a husband and wife being one flesh: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). This exact verse is quoted three times in the New Testament, twice in the Gospels (evidently recording the same story, in which Jesus reiterates the "one flesh" doctrine) and once in St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, in which the union of a husband and wife is compared to the union of Christ and the church. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, I must point out that Yonge was deeply familiar with this discourse and invested in these doctrines. The idea that a married couple was a single unit rather than two separate people formed the basis for Victorian laws and traditions. While Victorians disagreed about whether or not a woman's property ought to be legally given to her husband upon marriage, for example, or whether it was right for a man to vote on behalf of his entire household, they still agreed on the principle that a husband and wife should be united in loving intimacy. As Rachel Ablow explains, conservatives who supported coverture argued that it "guaranteed sympathetic communion between spouses, [while] many progressives claimed that only legal equality could enable husbands and wives to enter fully into one another's feelings." It is notable that both

conservatives and progressives agreed that the goal was union between husband and wife. The idea of the spiritual union between husband and wife fundamentally shaped the Victorians' conceptions of marriage, and it enables moments like Amy's triumph in *The Heir of Redclyffe*. This is a bounded whole, as Levine describes, in which Amy and Guy are united. Because Guy is a baronet, Amy suddenly ascends to his social rank when she marries him, leaving behind "silly little Amy" and becoming the dignified Lady Morville who can rebuke Philip, who is only an army captain. The secular social hierarchy, which places a baronet above an army captain, combines with the religious bounded whole of marriage to give Amy power over Philip.

Because the religious form of marriage unites a man and a woman, it always creates the potential to undermine the gender hierarchy. As long as men occupy different statuses, whether based on class hierarchies, military hierarchies, or other hierarchies, their wives will always outrank some man. If women take the rank of whatever man they marry, then they will outrank whichever men their husband outranks. Social hierarchies, which may often be oppressive, can also become a way of empowering women when they are combined with the form of the marriage union. Thus, Amy's previously subordinate rank as a woman is replaced by a superior rank as Lady Morville. When she and Philip were both simply wealthy commoners, he had authority over her because he was a male cousin. But as soon as she is united with Guy in marriage, she gains authority over him because she is the wife of a baronet, and that trumps the hierarchy of gender. Just as Caroline Levine describes, when forms intersect, they can disrupt and undermine each other in surprising and sometimes liberatory ways. In particular, Yonge shows the religious form of the marriage union disrupting the gender hierarchy in a way that empowers Amy.

Throughout this dissertation, I will continue the pattern I have just established of examining novels by Yonge and Eliot to see how religious forms intersect with women's lives. The result of my analysis is the conclusion that religious forms in these novels often function in empowering or liberating ways for female characters. Both Yonge and Eliot depict religion as potentially empowering for their female characters, offering the purpose, meaning, and dignity that the secular world often denied them. This trend in literature parallels what was happening in real life in the Victorian period: religion offered women opportunities available in the secular world. As historian Julie Melnyk shows, "Far from lagging behind the secular realm, religion was for Victorian women one of the few areas of life in which they could claim equality—even superiority—and religious activity was one of the few socially approved outlets for their talent, energy, and creativity" (123). This may help to explain why, despite the ways in which the Victorian Church often reinforced patriarchal oppressions, Victorian women were still overwhelmingly religious—even more than Victorian men. The appeal of religion makes more sense if one acknowledges that its influence on women's lives was not entirely on the side of the patriarchy; religion often lifted women up, and this reality was recognized and reflected in the realist fiction of both Eliot and Yonge, despite their personally divergent religious beliefs and practices.

In Chapter One, I will begin by examining a more conventional depiction of religion—that is, a depiction of religion that accords with the widespread assumption that religious forms are oppressive toward women. This is found in Yonge's *The Three Brides* (1876), in which the very same marriage union that empowered Amy in *The Heir of Redclyffe* silences women by making their husbands into their mouthpiece. In *The Three Brides*, Yonge condemns women's public speaking on the grounds that it is more appropriate for a woman to instruct her

husband to speak on her behalf in public than it is for her to voice her own opinions. This example of the religious form of marriage silencing women contrasts with a similar situation in Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859), in which religious forms enable Dinah Morris to speak publicly. Specifically, Dinah is able to claim that she is speaking on behalf of the Holy Spirit, a claim which justifies her preaching. Dinah perhaps represents Eliot herself here, who "preaches" through her writing. As F. Elizabeth Gray, Cynthia Scheinberg, Christine Chaney, and Charles LaPorte have noted, women writers often claimed some type of prophetic authority, so it is perhaps not surprising to see Eliot create a fictional character doing the same thing. *Adam Bede* provides an example of a religious form, the bounded whole that unites Dinah with the Holy Spirit, providing power and a voice for women.

Chapter Two examines the affordances of philanthropy in Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856), showing how the network of the Church disrupts the borders of the bounded whole of the private sphere. Levine identifies separate spheres ideology, the idea that men should operate in the public sphere while women operate in the private sphere, as an example of bounded wholes. I build on her analysis by showing how this form can be broken by the network of the Church, which affords movement across boundaries. In *The Daisy Chain*, Ethel May is able to enter the public sphere and participate in many activities normally associated with men because she is performing philanthropic labor, operating under the aegis of the Church. For Ethel, the network of the Church allows her to physically travel to the neighboring hamlet of Cocksmoor because her work there involves founding a Sunday school and a church, which constitutes expanding the network of the Church. The empowering affordances of the Church network do not work out quite so well in the case of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. Although Dorothea recognizes the liberating potential of philanthropic work,

she is hindered from accomplishing it by the differing perspectives of the men in her life, from her uncle Mr. Brooke to her husband Mr. Casaubon, both of whom squash her dreams of improving the lives of working class people in the community. Because people in *Middlemarch* have widely varying views on religion and morality, they do not present the kind of uniform religious community that enables Ethel to accomplish so much.

In Chapter Three, I analyze Madonna figures in Eliot's *Romola* (1862-63) and Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865). While it is evident to most readers that Romola is identified with the Virgin Mary, the identification of Ermine Williams in *Clever Woman* with Mary is more subtle. For both women, however, their identification with the mother of Jesus gives them power associated with virginity and raises them to a higher place in the Christian hierarchy. For Roman Catholics like the characters in *Romola* and, to a lesser extent, for Anglo-Catholics like Yonge and her characters, the Virgin Mary occupies a very high position in the Christian hierarchy—lower than God but higher than all other saints or ordinary people. She has influence over Christ and power to instruct and direct human actions. By identifying themselves with this powerful figure, both Romola and Ermine are able to exercise power in their lives and communities that they would not otherwise have been able to do. All three of these chapters support my central claim: that both Yonge and Eliot depict religious forms as potentially empowering for women.

Chapter One

"Channels for God's Spirit": Public Speaking in *Adam Bede* and *The Three Brides*

Introduction

Christian practices and forms are not wholly good or bad. That is the point that theologian and religious historian Lauren Winner makes in her book *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (2018), which investigates deformations or corruptions of religious forms. It is very much related to the point that I am making in this dissertation with reference to religion's depiction in Victorian realist fiction. Winner's book examines Eucharist, prayer, and baptism, three Christian practices that Winner characterizes as good but also potentially corrupt. For example, when a slave-owning woman in the American South prays that her slaves would be obedient, she is using this otherwise wholesome Christian practice of prayer for violent and sinful ends. Winner's examination of these religious forms focuses on their "propensity for violence, for curvature, for being exploited for the perpetuation of damage rather than received for its redress" (14). Crucially, Winner is *not* saying that these Christian practices are inherently bad with no capacity for good, but nor is she saying that the bad things that come of them are separate from the practices. Rather, the damage is characteristic: "Deformations of Christian practices are part of the practices themselves, because nothing apart from God (not church, not sacraments, not saints) is exempt from the damage produced by the Fall" (16). In short, religious practices, forms, and structures can be used for good or ill. Winner is writing a work of Christian theology, whose largely religious audience is likely to assume that practices like prayer, baptism, and the Eucharist are simply and wholly good. As she points out, there are innumerable works already that examine "a practice's

propensity for fostering holiness"—in other words, its positive affordances (14). Her contribution is to point out the negative affordances or potential corruptions of these Christian practices or forms.[7] In this chapter, my claim parallels Winner's as I examine both positive and negative affordances of Christian forms. Winner and I are saying basically the same thing: that religious forms or practices are not all one thing; they are not wholly good or bad. The categories of "good" and "bad" are too simplistic to make sense of the complex workings of religion in the world and in the lives of individuals, and, as I hope to show, the fiction of Charlotte Mary Yonge and George Eliot amply reflects this truth.

Just as Winner's religious audience might not have previously considered the negative affordances of Christian practices, so feminist literary scholars studying Victorian literature may not often consider the positive affordances of Christian forms. Feminist literary critics typically have little difficulty enumerating ways in which religious structures have been oppressive to women, nor do we need to look far for historical literature that amply testifies to this reality. One of the key ways in which the Victorian Church of England appears to act as a tool of the patriarchy, for instance, is in its ban on the ordination of women. If women could not take leadership roles as clergy in the institution of the Church, and during the Victorian era they could not, how could such an institution ever be anything other than purely patriarchal? In particular, if women are not among those who preach to the congregations, who disseminate religious ideas to the public, how could those ideas be anything other than oppressive? Public speaking is a key component of women's empowerment, and religious institutions, including the Church of England in the Victorian period, have done much to silence women in the public sphere.

[7] The way that Winner uses the term "practice" is very similar to the way that Caroline Levine uses the term "form," so I use the words almost interchangeably here.

In fact, women's role in the Church and in society was a major issue in the Victorian period, as is reflected in its literature. One example is Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Three Brides* (1876), which shows what can happen when the institution of the Church adopts and perpetuates patriarchal oppressions—in particular, the silencing of women in the public sphere. Using Winner's term, I call this "characteristic damage." The Church of England, like many other religious structures, is a hierarchy, which Winner might call a "practice," and which Caroline Levine would call a "form." Whatever you call it, hierarchies afford domination and oppression; that is something they can, by nature, do. When the hierarchy of the Church is infected with patriarchy, it can easily become oppressive toward women, and that is precisely what we see in *The Three Brides*. By contrast, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) presents an example of woman's public speaking that relies upon specifically Christian ideas and forms, although this speaking requires the sufferance of the institution of the Church of England (in the person of the local rector). In *Adam Bede*, the same religious forms are at play that we saw in *The Three Brides*—namely, the hierarchy of the Church of England, with its silencing of women's public speaking—but religion is not wholly oppressive to women. Dinah's Methodist religion empowers her to speak publicly. Both novels depict women speaking publicly, but while Eliot's novel implicitly applauds Dinah Morris's preaching, Yonge implicitly condemns Mrs. Duncombe's speech at the town meeting.

The difference is rooted in differing levels of commitment to the institution of the Church: Yonge and many of her characters are deeply invested in maintaining the privileges and powers of the Church of England, while Eliot and some of her characters are willing to leave the Church in order to pursue what they believe to be right. Taken together, these two novels suggest that while the institution of the Church may work against women's empowerment in some cases,

religion can still support such empowerment. Moreover, the institution of the Church can also support women's empowerment in some ways, even while it limits women's freedom in other ways. My other chapters are devoted to examples of Christian forms, including forms found in the Church of England, empowering women. Ultimately, it is simplistic and unhelpful to attempt to sort religious practices into categories of "good" and "bad." Religion functions in multifaceted and complex ways. I attempt to trace the workings of religious forms in Eliot's and Yonge's novels and find how women in these novels exercise agency within these forms. This chapter contrasts Dinah's use of religious forms in *Adam Bede* with the way religious forms function in *The Three Brides*, where they silence women.

There is no question that religious forms and structures have often served as tools of the patriarchy and still do today. *The Three Brides* provides an example of this in a Victorian novel. However, the contention of this dissertation is that religious forms and structures are not wholly patriarchal; they can also be used to empower and liberate women, and this, too, is evident in Victorian novels. Examining *The Three Brides* and *Adam Bede* together allows us to see the complexity of religious forms in relation to feminism; they are not all one thing, either good or bad. In both novels, the Church of England wishes to silence women, but *Adam Bede* nevertheless depicts religion and religious ideas as sources of power for women within this framework. This shows the feminist value of religion, even as religious structures are working with the patriarchy. My central claim in this chapter is therefore very similar to Winner's, in that we both emphasize the moral complexity of Christian forms or practices; at the same time, my claim is the inverse of Winner's because she is emphasizing the negative affordances of Christian forms, while I am emphasizing their positive affordances.

Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that religious structures and practices are not uniformly good or bad (after all, is anything in life?), but it is an important point for understanding *Adam Bede* and *The Three Brides* together. *The Three Brides* depicts the "characteristic damage," in Winner's words, of a hierarchical church structure: that it can oppress vulnerable members, like women. *Adam Bede* takes this up by depicting the same problem (the Church silencing women) and showing how religious ideas, forms, and practices can still be used to empower women. My claim in this dissertation is not that religious forms and structures cannot be used to oppress women; certainly they can be and have been. My claim is that while they are used in that way—even in the midst of all that injustice—they can also be used to empower and liberate women. Applying the injustices of certain groups of Christians to all Christians (even all Christians in Victorian England) creates an overly simplistic and monolithic image of Victorian Christianity. First, it is important to remember denominational differences; Anglican women may not have been allowed to preach, but Methodist women were allowed to do so for a time. Second, it is important to remember the complexity of individual denominations; Anglican women may not have been ordained, but they found many other ways of asserting themselves and using the structure of the Church of England in empowering ways, as my later chapters will show.

Yonge herself is speaking publicly through her writing, of course, work that was both motivated and justified by her commitment to the Church of England. Yonge considered herself as "a sort of instrument for popularizing Church views" (*Letters* August 1893). The Church also legitimized Yonge's writing, allowing her to do it without seeming unladylike, for her writing was only an extension of the charitable work ladies often did through the Church.[8] Yonge

[8] Patricia Comitini makes a similar point about women writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, arguing in *Vocational Philanthropy and British Women's Writing, 1790-1810* (2005) that these writers were able to

donated all the proceeds from her publications to missionary work and other church organizations such as schools and sisterhoods (Hayter 23). It is ironic that Yonge would write a novel like *The Three Brides*, which condemns women's public speaking, while writing and publishing herself. Ultimately, Victorian Christianity is a complex and multifaceted system, which produces both good and ill effects, often at the same time and in overlapping ways. This dynamic is evident in the interplay between *The Three Brides* and *Adam Bede*.

One of the major themes of *The Three Brides* is the conflict between high- and low-church factions within the Church of England, factions characterized by, among other things, differing levels of emphasis on the importance of the Church as an institution. At the low-church extreme lies one of the titular brides, Anne Charnock, who is described as a "semi-dissenter" (125) and who has "no principle more developed than horror of Popery and of worldliness" (146). As a reaction against what they saw as the corruptions of the Roman Catholic Church, low-church Victorians like Anne tended to downplay the importance of the Church as an institution, focusing instead on each person's individual relationship with God. Anne's new brother-in-law, Julius Charnock, is a young Rector with Tractarian ideas, who institutes daily service and other high-church practices at the parish church, much to Anne's shock and dismay. As a Tractarian herself, Yonge clearly endorses Julius's approach over Anne's, even as she invites her readers to admire Anne's sincerity and commitment to her faith.

The main thing that Anne lacks, in the worldview of the novel, is a commitment to the institution of the Church. When describing her own upbringing in South Africa, Anne declares that she did not go to any church but to "Mr. Pilgrim's," who, she explains, is not a clergyman but "a settler. He used to pray and expound every Sunday. … He gathers together a little flock of

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speak publicly through their writing by portraying it as a form of philanthropy, which was consistent with conservative gender roles.

all denominations, who only care to hear the word" (32). Elsewhere, multiple characters criticize Mr. Pilgrim for taking on the role of a clergyman in Anne's life when "he had no right" to do so (187, 420). While Anne has a strong personal commitment to the Christian faith, she has not submitted herself fully enough to the Church of England to be guided by its teachings. Instead, "All her doctrine comes out of the Westminster Catechism"—the catechism used by Presbyterians and other Calvinist denominations (139). The development of Anne's character and the plot involving high- versus low-church groups reveal the novel's commitment to the institution of the Church of England. Yonge makes it clear that it is not enough to simply believe in the Bible and practice the Christian faith as best you can. It is not sufficient to do what Mr. Pilgrim does: praying and preaching without any formal ordination. In *The Three Brides*, participation in the Church is an essential part of the Christian faith; sacraments, which are provided by the Church, are described as "a necessity of a Christian's life" (367). Unfortunately, it is this commitment to the institution that enables injustices, including patriarchy, to be set in stone so that they cannot be easily changed. If one is committed to an institution that forbids women's public speaking, then one reaches a dead end, which is why women's public speaking in *The Three Brides* is condemned.

Of course, many Victorian women had no wish to be ordained or to preach, so the Church of England's ban on women's ordination did not affect them. *The Three Brides* shows us that the Church's ban on women's ordination and preaching led many of its members to reject women's public speaking altogether, whether it was in a religious context or not. This is why Mrs. Duncombe's public speech at the town hall meeting is condemned. Nevertheless, even widespread limitations on the rights of women, including their right to be heard in public meetings, were not necessarily felt as oppressive by all women. Mrs. Poynsett, commenting on

Mrs. Duncombe's activism for women's rights, declares, "For my part…I can't see what women want. I have always had as many rights as I could exercise" (150). Interestingly, Mrs. Poynsett is almost rebuked by Jenny Bowater, the wise, saintly, self-sacrificing character in the novel (Yonge novels usually have at least one), who points out that Mrs. Poynsett may feel satisfied only because she enjoys the privileges of class: "'Ah! but we are not all ladies of the manor,' said Jenny, 'nor do we all drive coaches'" (150). This little exchange suggests that some women may have been content even under apparently oppressive systems, including those designed to silence women in public, while other women chafed against such restrictions.

The attitude toward the Church of England in *The Three Brides* is quite different from the attitude toward the same institution in *Adam Bede*. Some of the main characters in *Adam Bede* are Methodists, so they are not members of the Church of England at all. These characters, including Dinah Morris, are presented in a positive light. Aside from one or two characters (who are depicted as uneducated and unenlightened), many of the Anglicans in the novel also tend to think highly of Dinah and (albeit to a far lesser degree) the other Methodists. Even Mr. Irwine, the Anglican rector, does not do anything to hinder Dinah from preaching on the Green in his parish, even though such interference is presented as at least potentially his duty and her preaching as a challenge to his authority; he permits Dinah to preach, however, out of admiration and respect for her as a person (103). More importantly, even among the Anglican characters, the Church of England is not depicted as an institution essential to life, as it is in *The Three Brides*. While Eliot presents Anglican worship as beneficial to Adam (245), she also presents the rituals and sacraments of the Church of England as useless in Hetty's life: "She was one of those numerous people who have had godfathers and godmothers, learned their catechism, been confirmed, and gone to church every Sunday, and yet, for any practical result of strength in life,

or trust in death, have never appropriated a single Christian idea or Christian feeling" (430). Eliot here implies that the forms and structures of Anglicanism are empty and useless for Hetty.

Unlike Yonge, who presents the Christian faith as empty without the structure offered by the Church of England, Eliot presents characters with vibrant Christian faiths who are outside the Church and characters inside the Church who yet retain nothing of value from it. In *Adam Bede*, the Church of England is only valuable insofar as it provides particular benefit to particular people (like Adam) because of their particular experiences; it does not necessarily have intrinsic value. For Dinah, who has chosen to belong to a different religious community, the Church would only stifle the growth and practice of her faith. Even Adam, who is Anglican and derives spiritual benefit from Anglican worship, acknowledges that it is merely a matter of personal preference, telling Dinah: "I won't ask you to go to church with me of a Sunday; you shall go where you like among the people, and teach 'em; for though I like church best, I don't put my soul above yours, as if my words was better for t' follow than your own conscience" (553-554). The general attitude toward the Church is much different in *Adam Bede* than in *The Three Brides*. While in *The Three Brides*, membership and participation in the Church is an essential part of the Christian faith, in *Adam Bede*, it is just one choice among many, and not necessarily the best choice for everyone. When the institution of the Anglican Church does not serve a person, they are free to choose a different religious community, as Dinah has done. Despite social pressure to conform to Anglicanism, Dinah persists in her Methodism, showing that it is a deliberate choice on her part and something that she firmly believes in. By choosing one Christian denomination over another, Dinah exercises agency in a world where Christianity is taken for granted. Dinah's disassociation with the Church of England allows her to speak

publicly, and the novel's lenient attitude toward Church membership means that Dinah's public speaking is not condemned.

My analysis of the two novels' attitudes toward the institution of the Church reveals the potential pitfalls of religious institutions, even as it affirms the liberatory affordances of religious forms. While the institution of the Church of England seems to work against women's empowerment in this case, religion still works with women. The secular world of the nineteenth century generally frowned upon women's public speaking, even in non-religious settings. Crucially, it is *because* of religion that Dinah is able to speak publicly in *Adam Bede*. Specifically, it is because she is seen as speaking on behalf of God. Dinah is able to justify her preaching by claiming that the Holy Spirit has given her a gift and that she has a responsibility to use it: "It isn't for men to make channels for God's Spirit, as they make channels for the water-courses and say, 'Flow here, but flow not there'" (134). Dinah is arguing that it would be wrong to forbid women from preaching just because of their gender; to do so would be to direct God's Spirit to "flow" in one place (in men) but not in another place (in women).[9] Dinah's speech is therefore identified with God, as if she is united with the Holy Spirit. In *The Heir of Redclyffe*, the bounded whole of marriage gives Amy power that otherwise would have belonged to her husband; similarly, in *Adam Bede*, Dinah is able to access divine power through her union with the Holy Spirit. However, the bounded whole of marriage and the resulting interchangeability of the marriage partners actually works to silence women in *The Three Brides*. In public settings, women are expected to remain silent while their husbands speak for them. Just as opponents to women's suffrage argued that a husband's vote represented the whole family, so

[9] It is worth noting that the Methodist authorities do, in fact, forbid women's preaching at the end of *Adam Bede*, and Dinah chooses to comply with this restriction. Most of the novel, however, is set before the ban. Evidently Eliot was particularly interested in the ways that women used religious forms to enable their own public speaking, as Dinah does. Following Eliot, I also choose to focus on how religious forms function before the ban rather than emphasizing the moment in which Methodism became like most other major Christian denominations at that time by banning women from preaching.

in *The Three Brides* Yonge suggests that the husband's voice should suffice for the wife as well. In reality, of course, both situations oppress and silence women, preventing them from asserting their will or communicating their ideas in the public sphere. While union with the Holy Spirit empowers Dinah, union in marriage oppresses women in *The Three Brides*.

Male Mouthpieces and "Female Interference" in *The Three Brides*

Speech is a prominent motif in Yonge's *The Three Brides*. Strikingly, the novel begins with eleven lines of unattributed dialogue as Mrs. Poynsett, the matriarch of the family, converses with her two youngest sons. The novel follows the Charnock-Poynsett family, an upper class family of five sons who were raised by their mother after their father's death. The three eldest sons all marry around the same time, and the titular three brides all descend upon the family home on the same day. The opening chapter introduces these three characters, in each case describing their voices as they greet their new mother-in-law. Anne, wife to Miles Charnock, has a "fagged timid voice" (11), while Rosamond, wife to Julius Charnock, speaks with "a fuller sweeter tone than had yet been heard" (13). Cecil, wife of the eldest son, Raymond Charnock Poynsett, is characterized by non-verbal communication—"greeting hand and cheek"—although it is Cecil who later becomes most enamored of the power of women's speech (12). The immediate emphasis on speech and women's voices in the novel's opening chapter sets the scene for later conflict revolving around women's public speaking.

The most prominent scene in which women's public speaking is displayed and discussed occurs at a meeting in the town Assembly-room. After a fire destroys a factory in the neighboring town of Wil'sbro', the gentry of the region call a meeting "of both sexes, to consider of the relief of the work-people"—namely, the women who had previously been employed in the

factory (61). Raymond brings his young wife Cecil to the meeting, where she meets a certain Mrs. Duncombe, whom Raymond's brother Frank previously described as being "in the strong-minded line—women's rights, and all the rest of it" (27). At the meeting, Mrs. Duncombe tells Cecil that she "would not have missed this meeting for anything. It is a true woman's question" (83). Mrs. Duncombe's eagerness to be involved in the decision-making process, however, does not seem to be in keeping with the approach Raymond (who is leading the meeting) intends to take. While it is a meeting "of both sexes," he expects only the men to actually speak formally, even if the ideas they present originate with women. Raymond himself proposes an idea for employing the factory women in making clothing to sell, an idea which "he had been instructed to propose by the kindly souls who ordinarily formed the St. Nicholas *bureau de charité*, who had instructed him to be their mouthpiece" (85). The fact that Raymond is serving as a "mouthpiece" for the ideas of the local ladies' charitable organization establishes the norm for this meeting; Yonge explains this so that her readers will be suitably surprised by what happens next.

Mrs. Duncombe, in "a clear, rather high-pitched voice," questions the practicality of the plan Raymond proposed, a move which shocks everyone present (85). Raymond responds to her questions while "judiciously concealing how much he was taken aback by this female interference" (85). When Mrs. Duncombe suggests that another plan might be necessary in order to provide for the factory employees, Raymond asks "in a sort of aside, 'Do you wish any expedient to be proposed?'" (86). The fact that Raymond speaks to her in an aside indicates that because she is a woman, he does not consider her as fit to participate in the main discussion, so conversation with her must be apart from the public business of the meeting. Moreover, his use of the passive voice ("to be proposed") indicates that he doesn't expect *her* to propose anything,

an expectation that is confirmed a moment later when he suggests that her husband should present her idea to the assembly. But Mrs. Duncombe refuses to follow the convention of using a male mouthpiece and replies, "Oh no! he is not here. No, it is no use to instruct anybody; I will do it myself, if you please," whereupon she "hopped upon the platform, and with as much ease as if she had been Queen Bess dragooning her parliament, she gave what even the astounded gentlemen felt to be a sensible practical exposition of ways and means" (86). Mrs. Duncombe's idea is, in fact, so superior to the other ideas proposed that even those who disapprove of her behavior are obliged to accept it as the best solution to the problem.

The scene recalls a similar one in Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* (1861), in which the bishop's wife Mrs. Proudie interrupts Mr. Harold Smith's lecture on the islands of the South Sea, in which he claims that "it is to civilization that we must look…for any material progress in these islands," at which Mrs. Proudie interrupts, "And to Christianity" (66). The surprise experienced by Raymond and the other people present at the Assembly-room when Mrs. Duncombe speaks is shared by Mrs. Proudie's listeners, who witness her interruption with "great amazement" (67). In his Barchester novels, Trollope often makes jokes at Mrs. Proudie's expense; the reader is supposed to sympathize with her poor husband, the bishop, whom she rules with an iron fist. This literary context shows that Yonge was by no means alone in characterizing women who dare to speak publicly as viragos.

In spite of Mrs. Duncombe's evident capability, which no one questions, the characters whom the novel portrays as good and wise condemn her behavior as inappropriate for a woman. After the meeting, in the Charnock-Poynsett family circle, Cecil, who is depicted throughout the novel as naïve, gullible, and foolish, praises Mrs. Duncombe's speaking. The family matriarch, Mrs. Poynsett, disagrees: "She could have got her husband to speak for her," or in his absence,

"She should have instructed some other gentleman. A woman spoils all the effect of her doings by putting herself out of her proper place" (88). Parents in Yonge's fiction are almost always wise, so it makes sense to take Mrs. Poynsett's view as the one the novel is presenting as correct. However, if any reader were inclined to doubt which of the characters to believe, doubt vanishes when Julius exclaims, "Perfectly disgusting!" (88). Perhaps more than any other character in *The Three Brides*, Julius's word is presented as truth, so when he condemns Mrs. Duncombe's behavior, it becomes apparent that the reader is also supposed to condemn it. In fact, all the characters except for Cecil are united in their opinion that "the delicate edges of true womanhood ought not to be frayed off by exposure in public" (88). Julius's wife, Lady Rosamund, whom a writer for the *Saturday Review* justly described as "the author's favourite bride," ("Three Brides" 643) teases the men about wanting to take credit for women's ideas but seriously agrees with her husband and mother-in-law: "Any woman who is worth a sixpence had rather help her husband to shine than shine herself" (88). Mrs. Duncombe is portrayed as sincere and hardworking, and her plans to improve sanitation and help the poor residents of the parish are shown to be sound, but public speaking is the one thing which she ought not to do.

What is particularly interesting about the novel's depiction of women's public speaking is that it also acknowledges that women may have valuable ideas and information about issues of public interest. The only thing a woman is not permitted to do is to present her ideas and information in a public forum; this task must be ceded to her husband. The union of husband and wife that works to Amy's advantage in *The Heir of Redclyffe* actually works to women's disadvantage in *The Three Brides*. If a husband and wife are one flesh, then what he does, she does, and vice versa. Elsewhere in the novel, a wise friend of the family states, "What a woman does her husband does" (181). This union—this bounded whole—means that if a man articulates

his wife's ideas in a public forum, it is just as good as if she said it herself, except that it protects "the delicate edges of true womanhood" (88). The unity of husband and wife within the bounded whole of marriage is a major focus of the novel. As Lucy Sullivan argues, the novel's central theme is "the paramount significance of sexual love" (5). The characters who make mistakes usually do so because they have some misplaced loyalty toward their family or another group, which conflicts with their loyalty to their spouse; this fault appears in both men and women in the novel. Sullivan emphasizes that Yonge values the bond between spouses: "In this novel, perhaps above all her others, she expresses a conviction of the beatitude of the marriage relationship, 'the comfort the one ought to give to the other' informed by a mutual trust in and respect for gender differentiation, and the imperative that it supersede its forerunner, filial piety" (5). Because Yonge wants to emphasize the union of husband and wife throughout the novel, she uses that union to explain why women should not speak in public. In her view, the husband is essentially the same as the wife yet better suited to public speaking.

From a feminist perspective, however, the bounded whole of marriage actually oppresses the woman in this case by eliding her identity with her husband's. This form, which is created by the Church, is used to silence women. Despite Yonge's acceptance of women's intelligence and ability, her commitment to the institution of the Church obliges her to accept this form, which, when viewed through a feminist lens, had been distorted so as to cause harm rather than good. While Yonge certainly would not have acknowledged the harm of silencing women, her depiction of this silencing force in her novel is troubling to feminist readers who recognize the importance of women's voices.

In spite of Yonge's obvious criticism of Mrs. Duncombe's public speaking, her attitude toward Mrs. Duncombe and the women's movement generally throughout the rest of the novel is

much more ambivalent. After the meeting at which Mrs. Duncombe shocks the company by speaking for herself, the woman becomes something of a hero for trying to improve sanitation in the town and, when poor sanitation leads to an outbreak of fever, nursing the sick at great personal risk. At first, when Mrs. Duncombe takes up the issue of drainage in the town of Wil'sbro', others deride her for making a fuss about something they do not perceive to be a problem and especially for becoming involved as a woman, when it is not perceived as a woman's issue. Mrs. Duncombe *does* perceive it as a woman's issue, but Yonge perhaps intends her readers to chuckle at this assertion. The novel's villain, the conniving Lady Tyrrell, says to Mrs. Duncombe about Wil'sbro': "You are longing to have a voice there," who which Mrs. Duncombe replies, "I am. It is pre-eminently a woman's question, and this is a great opportunity. I shall talk to every one" (115). Mrs. Duncombe's comment that "this is a great opportunity" implies that she is seeking opportunities to speak on important issues, and she takes up the question of drainage primarily as an excuse to put herself forward. Other characters in the novel find it absurd that she would use the issue as a platform from which to speak. Rosamond declares, "It struck me as a funny subject for a lady" (127), and a shop owner in Wil'sbro' complains that Mrs. Duncombe had been speaking to her "about the drains, and such like, which isn't fit for no lady to speak of!" (203). These comments would seem to be perfectly in keeping with Yonge's earlier condemnation of Mrs. Duncombe's public speaking. At this point in the novel, Yonge seems to be condemning Mrs. Duncombe's very involvement with the drainage problem.

This impression is heightened by general criticisms of Mrs. Duncombe for not being sufficiently womanly, especially in her neglect of her family. Mrs. Duncombe is a somewhat less caricatured version of Charles Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* (1852-1853), whose

concern for children in Africa prevents her from caring for the children in her own home. When young Frank Charnock comments that rather than busying herself with reforms, Mrs. Duncombe "would do better to mind her children," two other characters exclaim, "Children! Has she children?" (150). Their ignorance of the fact, in spite of their acquaintance with Mrs. Duncombe, suggests how uninvolved Mrs. Duncombe is with her children. Frank further illustrates Mrs. Duncombe's neglect of her children by saying that she "drops them in the gutter" and sharing an anecdote of finding one of the Duncombe children in a gutter with worn-out boots; the bonne, described as "a fine smart foreign woman" was flirting with a man rather than watching the children (151). Frank tells how when he brought the child home, Captain Duncombe—called "poor Duncombe"—had tears in his eyes. "I fancy he feels their mother's neglect of them," Frank comments (151). It is striking that it is Mrs. Duncombe who bears the brunt of the blame, neither the bonne nor the children's father. It is implicitly Mrs. Duncombe's fault that the bonne is neglectful; Mrs. Duncombe should have known better than to hire a "smart foreign woman" when she could have hired an honest, English girl (151). Again, Yonge seems to be critiquing Mrs. Duncombe for neglecting her feminine duties in favor of reform work that is seen as none of her business.

However, this negative depiction of Mrs. Duncombe does not continue through the entire book. In fact, Julius later admits that "there seem to me to be excellent elements" in Mrs. Duncombe (236). His future sister-in-law, Lenore, agrees, adding, "She is so thorough, so true and frank; and much of this oddness is really an inconsistent struggle to keep out of debt"—due to her husband's gambling (237). When the poor drainage in Wil'sbro' leads to water pollution, which causes an epidemic, many of the other characters realize that they should have taken Mrs. Duncombe's warnings more seriously. Raymond confesses, "We talked about meddling women,

but the truth was that they were shaming us by doing what they could" (334). Similarly, Julius explains to their neighbor Sir Harry that Mrs. Duncombe did not cause the epidemic, as Sir Harry seems to think, but that "she tried to prevent it" (360). When Cecil's father, whom the reader is predisposed to distrust, visits the Charnock Poynsett home, he claims that "sanitary arrangement and all connected with them are beyond the range of ladies, who are happily exempted from all knowledge of the subject" (395). At this point in the novel, the reader is clearly supposed to chuckle at his ignorance, as it was Mrs. Duncombe who was most informed about the sanitary problems in Wil'sbro' and men who dismissed her concerns. Mrs. Duncombe also becomes one of the heroes of the epidemic by tirelessly nursing the sick when others are afraid to enter houses with the fever. Heroically nursing the sick is a common trope in Victorian fiction, as Miriam Bailin points out in *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction* (1994). In novels like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), George Eliot's *Romola* (1862), and Yonge's own *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), tending to those who are ill is a common indication of heroism, if not saintliness. By the end of the novel, she is admired by most of the main characters. Whereas she had previously considered religion to be an interference with real philanthropy, Mrs. Duncombe eventually converts to Roman Catholicism, which in true Tractarian fashion is depicted as less than ideal but still considerably better than atheism (116). While not the true exemplar that Yonge makes of Julius, Mrs. Duncombe does end the novel moderately well. This shows that Yonge is not entirely against women taking on leadership roles. She does balk at women speaking in public, though, an antipathy that evidently derives from her Church's rules against women's ordination and preaching.

The Three Brides depicts what can happen when religious forms—in this case, the hierarchy of the Church of England—are deformed or damaged, as Winner describes. Because

domination and oppression are affordances of the form of hierarchy, this kind of silencing of women is characteristic damage: it derives from qualities inherent in the form. By itself, *The Three Brides* seems to simply confirm widespread assumptions that religious forms and structures are inherently oppressive to women, particularly in nineteenth-century England. However, taken together with *Adam Bede*, Yonge's novel helps to complete a complex image of the affordances of religious forms: affordances that can sometimes oppress and sometimes liberate women. This complexity is further worked out in examinations of other novels by Eliot and Yonge, which I provide in subsequent chapters.

Women's Preaching and Divine Guidance in *Adam Bede*

Like *The Three Brides*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) depicts the Church of England as a potentially oppressive structure, limiting and guiding the religious practices and expressions of its people—especially women—in ways that are harmful. The metaphor that Dinah Morris uses is of a river whose course may be modified by human efforts. The Holy Spirit, however, is not like a river, according to Dinah; it ought not to be forced to flow in one place or another according to human will (134). God's will takes precedence, and when his Spirit flows in a person, empowering them to perform a religious task such as preaching, the appropriate human response is submission to the divine will. Dinah's criticism of human efforts to direct God's Spirit, coming as it does in a conversation with the Anglican rector Mr. Irwine, constitutes a criticism of the Church of England's approach to spiritual gifts, specifically with regard to women. The Church of England forbade women from preaching, considering that God would never want a woman to fulfill a role that seemed, to their minds, to be so patently contrary to nature. A gentleman who witnesses Dinah's preaching reflects, "But surely nature never meant

her for a preacher" (67). Dinah's approach, however, which is characteristic of many Methodists in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, requires less structure and gives less power to the institution of the Church; it bypasses the form of the hierarchy. Her approach involves following what she perceives to be divine leadings, wherever they may take her. Perceiving that the hierarchy of the Church is potentially limiting, Dinah rejects that form.

Her response to the Church's silencing of her voice takes a different form from her aunt, Mrs. Poyser. When Mrs. Poyser has her "say-out," she asserts herself in a less religious fashion, claiming, "I've a right to speak, for I make one quarter o' the rent, and save th' other quarter" (392-394). Mrs. Poyser appeals to economics to justify her right to speak as she criticizes their landlord. Mrs. Poyser certainly enjoys talking and is acknowledged to be witty and articulate (397). However, she does not speak in public to a listening audience but rather in private settings, especially in the home. While Mrs. Poyser is certainly an example of a strong woman who resists patriarchal restrictions on women's behavior, she does not serve as well as a counterexample to Mrs. Duncombe in *The Three Brides* because she does not speak publicly, which is what Yonge condemns. Dinah, on the other hand, speaks publicly and justifies her speech not on economic grounds, like her aunt, but on religious grounds; her right to speak is based on her vocation, her spiritual calling. Dinah does not turn away from religion in order to free herself from the constraints of the hierarchy of the Church; she embraces other religious forms. Specifically, Dinah rejects Christian doctrines about church authority by appealing to Christian doctrines about the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. As we saw in *The Three Brides*, religious forms can be pernicious, but *Adam Bede* shows that the antidote may also be found in religious forms.

The form that empowers Dinah is a bounded whole, which unites her with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the divine Trinity. In Christian teaching, the Holy Spirit is understood

to indwell baptized Christians: "The Spirit of God dwells in you" (*King James Version*, Rom. 8:9). Methodists tended to emphasize doctrines related to the Holy Spirit more than Anglicans, especially teachings related to spiritual gifts, which are talents or abilities understood to be given to Christians by the Holy Spirit. Multiple passages in the New Testament instruct Christians to use their spiritual gifts for the benefit of other Christians, often listing examples of spiritual gifts. For example, St. Paul writes in his First Epistle to the Corinthians:

> "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues." (1 Cor. 7-10)

Based on passages like this, many Methodists argued that it would be wrong to neglect the exercise of a spiritual gift, even if its use would violate social norms. Therefore, if a woman has the gift of preaching, then she ought to preach, even if women's public speaking was normally condemned. As Dinah tells Mr. Irwine, Methodist women are permitted to preach "when they've a clear call to the work, and when their ministry is owned by the conversion of sinners and the strengthening of God's people" (134). Since she is not a member of the Church of England, Dinah operates outside the hierarchy of the Church in order to follow more freely the dictates of her conscience—in particular her calling to preach.

The feminist power of the Methodist faith, which is depicted in *Adam Bede*, is well-established historically as well. Eliot's depiction of Dinah is based on her own aunt, Elizabeth Evans, who had a similar experience as Dinah has when she visits Hetty in prison. But

Elizabeth Evans was hardly an anomaly either; rather, she was part of a significant movement of women preachers at the time. James E. McConnell notes that at the time that *Adam Bede* takes place, around the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, there were many Methodist women preaching (250). One of the most well-known women preachers of the time was Mary Cosanquet Fletcher, whose sermons may have inspired Eliot's composition of Dinah's sermon at the novel's start. As McConnell explains, "Mrs. Fletcher's rhetorical pattern of expounding a particular biblical text, exhortation and finally an emotive call for the hearers to seek a personal salvific relationship with Christ also flows through Dinah's mouth as she delivers her message on the Green" (247). Dinah is a fictional example of what certainly was a historical reality: many Methodist women preachers used their platform to empower themselves and others. Christine Krueger argues that this is evidence that religious contexts were not entirely beholden to patriarchal control: "The fact that women's public speech, including calls for social reform, flourished within the context of a religious discourse suggests that the patriarchal domination of that discourse does not amount to monolithic control" (6). In other words, the sermon form gave women a platform for their messages, which they would not have found in the secular world.

As Krueger points out, these messages often included calls for women's rights as well as calls for more general social reforms, including economic reforms. Robert James Muscutt has recently argued that Dinah should be understood as representing "pressure for change in Hayslope" because she is part of a movement associated with progressivism (20). Muscutt explains that Methodists "were vilified for the vehemence of their religious dissent, but also for their association with political dissidents who threatened the ecclesiastical and secular authority of the Anglican Church, and ultimately, it was feared, of the state" (25). Dinah would have been

seen as radical, not only for being a woman preacher, but for being a potential political insurgent as well. This historical context, which would have been well-known to Eliot's first readers, helps us understand how truly revolutionary (in more ways than one) Dinah is.

Like *The Three Brides*, *Adam Bede* draws attention to women's voices early in the novel. Dinah Morris is first introduced when she delivers a sermon on the Green. As a Methodist, Dinah is already subject to skepticism and distrust from the residents of Hayslope, and as a woman, she is regarded still more as a spectacle. However, her gender also makes her interesting to the people so that they do go to hear her preach, even though they might not have done so for a male preacher. Eliot describes the ways in which the townsfolk seek to hear Dinah's preaching without embarrassing themselves by publicly associating with Dissenters: "All took care not to join the Methodists on the Green, and identify themselves in that way with the expectant audience, for there was not one of them that would not have disclaimed the imputation of having come out to hear the 'preacher-woman,'—they had only come out to see 'what war a-goin' on like'" (63). In spite of her marginalized status as a Methodist and as a woman, then, Dinah still derives some power by the sheer novelty of her position as a woman preacher. Moreover, her youth and beauty give her still more sway over the people of the town. One representative resident, Wiry Ben, declares, "I'll stick up for the pretty women preachin'; I know they'd persuade me over a deal sooner nor th'ugly men" (65). As a woman preacher, then, and especially as a young and beautiful woman preacher, Dinah is able to communicate her message to audiences who might not have been reached by a male preacher.

Of course, Dinah does not consider herself as communicating her own message but as communicating a message from God. As she says to her aunt, Mrs. Poyser, "I didn't preach without direction" (123). Dinah considers herself a channel for the Holy Spirit, the third person

of the Holy Trinity, so her sermons are simply God's messages, being sent through her mouth. Dinah describes the experience of receiving this type of inspiration from the Holy Spirit: "I felt a great movement in my soul, and I trembled as if I was shaken by a strong spirit entering into my weak body. … I spoke the words that were given to me abundantly" (136). Clearly, Dinah perceives herself as a mouthpiece for the Holy Spirit. This is similar to the arrangement in *The Three Brides*, wherein a man speaks the ideas of his wife, but instead of a woman being silent while a man speaks for her, she speaks for God. Her union with the Holy Spirit functions similar to the marriage union, except that instead of silencing her, it gives her a powerful platform.

Later in the novel, when Dinah visits Hetty in prison, she experiences the presence of God keenly and feels that she is merged with it, joint with Christ in a holy bounded whole: "She felt the Divine Presence more and more, — nay, as if she herself were a part of it, and it was the Divine pity that was beating in her heart, and was willing the rescue of this helpless one" (494). Ryan Marr argues that Dinah is so fully united with God that she becomes for Hetty "an embodiment of the living Christ—the one who suffers on behalf of another," thereby helping to achieve Hetty's redemption (96). Marr writes, "Through this divinization of sorts—that is, by achieving union with 'the Divine presence'—Dinah reaches the full embodiment of the mediatorial role unwittingly prophesied for her by Lisbeth, who at one point mistakes the ministering Dinah for an angel" (84). Union with Christ, which forms a major theme in Christian theology, here places Dinah into a transcendent, powerful role, which Marr argues "outshines" the more disappointing role of "a doting wife" that is assigned to Dinah by the end of the novel (97). Dinah's union with "the Divine Presence," which is described so explicitly in this scene, is implicit everywhere else in the novel as Dinah serves as a mouthpiece for the Holy Spirit. The

form of the bounded whole may have silenced women in *The Three Brides*, but it gives Dinah a microphone.

Krueger finds this arrangement dissatisfying because of the implication that the woman is passive, while the actual ideas come from God: "Women preachers referred to themselves as 'vessels,' 'mouths,' and 'temples' of the Word. Moreover, the legitimacy of the woman preacher's fruits depended on the precarious sanction of the Holy Spirit, who was imagined to have engendered her message" (10). Even though Krueger's language strongly implies that she does not take these women's claims of inspiration seriously, she still dislikes the notion that a woman should even be seen as a passive mouthpiece; it would be more satisfying for Krueger if the women were seen as speaking their own ideas. It is true that the idea of a woman preacher being merely a mouthpiece for the Holy Spirit smacks disagreeably of mid-twentieth-century secretaries typing up their male boss's letters, having no agency themselves beyond the duty to deliver a message. Is the feminist power of women's public speaking undermined if they are seen as—or if they actually *are*—speaking not their own words but the words given to them by the Holy Spirit? I would argue that it is not. Who actually does the speaking *does* matter. After all, in *The Three Brides*, when a husband speaks on behalf of his wife, feminist readers feel dissatisfied. We would prefer that the wife speak for herself: it is not enough that the ideas are hers; the actual voice must be, too. When the roles are reversed, then, and it is the woman who is the mouthpiece, there is still power in that, even if she is simply passing on ideas that she is given, as Dinah describes: "Sometimes it seemed as if speech came to me without any will of my own, and words were given to me that came out as the tears come, because our hearts are full and we can't help it" (135). It is still a woman who is standing up on a platform on the Green in the eyes of all

the residents of Hayslope, calling them to repentance; if it were not radical, it would not be so threatening.

After all, there is a long tradition in religious writing by both women and men of claiming inspiration from the Holy Spirit. From St. Paul to Christopher Smart, male writers have long been in the habit of claiming the authority of the Holy Spirit for their work. In the opening lines of *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton invokes the Holy Spirit as a muse, calling on the one who "didst inspire / That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed, / In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth / Rose out of Chaos… / … I thence / Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song" (lines 7-10, 12-13). The fact that these writers have claimed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit in no way limits the significance of their accomplishments. Neither does it lessen the significance of women's preaching if it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Krueger's objection to women preachers' claims of inspiration puts too much emphasis on the perceived source of the ideas, missing the importance of the one actually speaking.

Moreover, Eliot suggests that there is not really a difference between speaking from one's own heart or mind and speaking from divine inspiration. Eliot's narrator examines Dinah's ability to know how and when to speak, suggesting first that it comes from extensive experience, which has given her good instincts, but then noting that Dinah would have claimed that it came from divine guidance:

> "For her girlhood upwards she had had experience among the sick and the mourning, among minds hardened and shrivelled through poverty and ignorance, and had gained the subtlest perception of the mode in which they could best be touched, and softened into willingness to receive words of spiritual consolation or warning. As Dinah expressed it, 'She was never left to herself; but it was always given her when to keep silence and when

> to speak.' And do we not all agree to call rapid thought and noble impulse by the name of inspiration? After our subtlest analysis of the mental process, we must still say, as Dinah did, that our highest thoughts and our best deeds are all given to us." (158-159)

Eliot implies that inspiration and instinct are not, after all, very different. This could be seen as Eliot's naturalistic explanation for what others would describe as supernatural phenomena, but it also constitutes a sign of respect for the supernatural claims the Dinah makes. After all, Eliot does not say that Dinah is mistaking instinct for inspiration; she admits that even science, "our subtlest analysis of the mental process," would be insufficient to explain Dinah's ability to say just the right thing at the right moment (158). It may well be inspiration, Eliot's narrator implies, but it may also derive from extensive experience. Elsewhere in the novel, Eliot's narrator says of Dinah, "For her reliance, in her smallest words and deeds, on a divine guidance, always issued in that finest woman's tact which proceeds from acute and ready sympathy" (156). In other words, divine guidance produces tact, which is produced by sympathy. The conflation of the categories of divine guidance and sympathy—of inspiration and instinct—means that whether a woman preacher speaks from her own mind or from the mind of God is irrelevant. For Eliot, it is all the same thing. Dinah may perceive herself as a passive mouthpiece, but she is also exercising her own will and articulating her own ideas.

Dinah, by speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wields enormous power. She is actually identified with God inasmuch as her words are identified as the Holy Spirit's words. I am not saying that Dinah would have been understood by anyone to be divine (though Lisbeth does mistake her for an angel), but her words may well have been understood to be of divine origin. She certainly understood herself to be speaking words that came directly from God. Not

only does her religion, specifically the doctrines of vocation and spiritual gifts, give her an opportunity to speak publicly, but it also gives her speech additional weight and authority.

As we saw in *The Three Brides*, it is the hierarchical form of the Church of England that lends itself to the silencing of women. Dinah evades this by being outside the institution of the Church. As a Methodist, Dinah is not a member of the Church of England, and her outsider position is emphasized throughout the novel. While preaching near the beginning of the novel, the narrator notes, "She held no book in her ungloved hands" (67). This detail highlights the fact that Dinah speaks from the heart and not from any premeditated or approved text. It sets Dinah apart from Anglicans, who would have the Book of Common Prayer in their hands during worship services and foreshadows Mrs. Poyser's later comment to Dinah that "you've got notions i' your head about religion more nor what's i' the Catechism and the Prayer-book" (122). Dinah's separation from the Church of England gives her freedom to believe in "notions" that do not come out of the central texts of Anglicanism. It also frees her from the teachings of the Church that would prevent her from preaching. She is not part of that hierarchy, so she is not beholden to its affordances.

However, it is striking that while Dinah is definitely outside the institution of the Church, she is not outside religion. As McConnell writes, "Dinah feels that although her actions are not accepted by the Anglican Church, she is beyond reproach in carrying out what she sees clearly as God's call" (249). In other words, Dinah's story may constitute an indictment of the hierarchy of the Church (or at least, an example of how it can be used wrongly), but it still upholds the idea that religion can be liberating for women. Religious forms still play a key role in Dinah's empowerment, especially the form of the bounded whole that unites her with the Holy Spirit and gives her a voice of authority.

In spite of the power and strength that Dinah's religion gives her throughout the novel, many readers find the ending dissatisfying, as Dinah marries Adam and gives up preaching. Dorothea Barrett and Gillian Beer, for example, have both read Dinah as "a disappointing, compromised female character," to use Muscutt's words (Muscutt 20). Marr argues that in both *Adam Bede* and the biblical story of the rape of Dinah, "the maintenance of social order comes at the cost of the full equality and independence of women" (87). Indeed, the fact that Dinah has ceased preaching at the end of the novel is quite dissatisfying, when we have seen how empowering her vocation is for her. Because she has resigned her vocation and gotten married, it is easy to connect these two things, as if marriage is what silenced her. Especially in light of the way in which the marriage union is used to justify women's silence in *The Three Brides*, it is not unreasonable to connect Dinah's marriage with her silence at the end of the novel. However, I suggest that her resignation of her vocation is less the result of her marriage than it is the result of a stricter use of Church hierarchy among Methodists. In other words, marriage is not the primary force silencing Dinah; Church hierarchy is.

This is evident first in the simple fact that Dinah stops preaching because her church has forbidden it. Women preaching was forbidden on July 25, 1803 by a Methodist conference in Manchester, England, forcing women like Dinah to either relinquish their work or join a different religious group. Dinah chooses to submit to the ruling of her religious leaders, who are now imposing a similar kind of hierarchical structure to the one already at work in the Church of England. It is this hierarchy, not her marriage, that obliges Dinah to give up her preaching. In fact, throughout *Adam Bede*, Eliot depicts marriage as explicitly *not* an interference with preaching. Early in the novel, when Seth wants to marry Dinah, he explicitly declares that he would not prevent her from preaching but would, in fact, allow her to preach even more: "I'd

never be the husband to make a claim on you as could interfere with your doing the work God has fitted you for. I'd make a shift, and fend indoor and out, to give you more liberty—more than you can have now, for you've got to get your own living now, and I'm strong enough to work for us both" (78). Seth's offer to support Dinah so that she can devote more time to the ministry hardly sounds like a threat to silence her; certainly for Seth, marriage would open more doors for Dinah's preaching. Similarly, when Adam proposes to Dinah, he tells her that he would not prevent her from doing as she sees fit: "I'd never think o' putting myself between you and God, an' saying you oughtn't to do this, and you oughtn't to do that. You'd follow your conscience as much as you do now" (552). Like his brother, Adam intends to support Dinah's preaching, even explicitly saying that on Sundays, while he is attending the local Anglican service, "you shall go where you like among the people, and teach 'em" (554). In short, *Adam Bede* does not depict marriage as the reason that Dinah gives up preaching. On the contrary, the novel is very explicit about the terms of Dinah's marriage to Adam—that she would still be allowed to preach.

It is not surprising that Eliot would depict marriage as a support for a woman's preaching rather than a hindrance to it. After all, Eliot's own aunt, Elizabeth Evans, who formed the basis for Dinah's character, testified that marriage made it easier for her to preach. Writing in her *Autobiography*, Evans describes the impact her marriage had on her ability to preach, saying that her husband stood up to critics for her and that she "met with very little persecution or opposition when I had a friend to plead my cause" (qtd. in Muscutt 23). For Evans, her marriage paved the way for her to practice her vocation because her husband supported her in conflicts with other people. Given this context, it makes sense that Eliot would describe a similar dynamic in her novel. For Dinah, marriage is not what forces her to lay down her calling; Church hierarchy, harnessed in support of the patriarchy, is what eventually silences her.

Considering how Dinah's religion empowers her to speak publicly with a voice of divine authority, it is hard to deny that Eliot depicts religious forms as potentially liberating for women. The power that Dinah derives from her union with the Holy Spirit contrasts strikingly with Hetty's misery and helplessness in her pregnancy, which Eliot explicitly depicts as the result of Hetty's irreligiosity. Having not "a single Christian idea or Christian feeling" to buoy her up, Hetty is miserable, without direction or security (430). Dinah, on the other hand, feels confident even when preaching to those who might otherwise be seen as posing a potential threat to her safety: "the roughest miners" (320) and people who live outside the bounds of propriety (547). Religion is a decidedly empowering force in Dinah's life.

Conclusion: Mrs. Duncombe and Dinah Morris as Queen Elizabeth I

In *The Three Brides*, Yonge uses women's public speaking as an avenue into the subject that really interests her: the importance of the marriage union. In the novel, married couples who are at odds with each other, each pursuing their own interests without regard to the other, make themselves unhappy and lose the respect of other people in their community. Cecil and Raymond Charnock Poynsett are the paradigmatic example of this—a match of convenience and propriety, which lacks mutual love and respect and thus falls apart. By contrast, the relationship of Julius and Rosamond Charnock is the shining example of love and intimacy in a marriage; from the novel's beginning, they clearly adore each other, and they each enter into the other's pursuits. What is striking in Yonge's depiction of healthy marriage in this novel is that it promotes both intellectual companionship, normally associated with feminist ideas worked out by such thinkers as Mary Wollestonecraft, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and clearly demarcated gender roles. Rosamond is characterized by a desire to, as she puts it, "help her

husband to shine [rather] than shine herself" (88). For Yonge, a woman speaking in public is indecent because she is usurping the rightful place of her husband, which is in the public eye, while sacrificing her own unique role, which is essentially private. The bounded whole of the marriage union, which enables Amy to stand up to Philip in *The Heir of Redclyffe*, becomes a prison of silence for wives in *The Three Brides*.

Interestingly, when Mrs. Duncombe violates propriety by speaking for herself at the town hall meeting, Yonge compares her to one who was famously *not* a wife: Queen Elizabeth I. When Yonge first introduces her readers to Mrs. Duncombe, she describes her as having a "complexion going with the yellower species of red hair and chignon, not unlike a gold-pheasant's, while the thin aquiline nose made Cecil think of Queen Elizabeth" (84). Mrs. Duncombe, whose first name is Bessie (a nickname for Elizabeth), speaks at the meeting "with as much ease as if she had been Queen Bess dragooning her parliament" (86) and is elsewhere described as comporting herself with "Elizabethan majesty" (240). These comparisons to the Virgin Queen might at first seem to temper Yonge's criticism of Mrs. Duncombe's public speaking. After all, during the reign of Queen Victoria, the role of monarch was not necessarily seen as incompatible with Victorian femininity: Victoria depicted her work as monarch as a duty thrust upon her, which may not have been well-suited to her, but which she undertook to the best of her ability nonetheless. If Elizabeth were seen in the same light, then this might seem to imply that Mrs. Duncombe is simply doing her best with the role she has been given, perhaps through her husband's failure to take the lead, and that she is not really to blame. However, in reality, the Victorians depicted Queen Elizabeth quite differently from how they depicted their own Queen.

In *England's Elizabeth: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (2002), Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson examine literary and artistic portrayals of the Virgin Queen throughout

England's history to see how understandings of her legacy were shaped. In the Victorian period, Elizabeth was often depicted as greedy, power-hungry, and eminently unfeminine. Not all nineteenth-century writers agreed on the degree to which Elizabeth should be seen as chaste due to her virginity or promiscuous due to the various flirtations and love triangles in which she was involved, but as Dobson and Watson put it, everyone "emphatically agreed that above all she had wilfully and irresponsibly refused to be domesticated" (155). Portraying Queen Elizabeth as unfeminine and problematic because of her refusal to get married created a foil for Queen Victoria, so that Victoria's marriage and motherhood could constitute strong evidence for her femininity and propriety, despite her role as monarch. Maintaining both conservative gender roles and Tory reverence for the monarch (attitudes Yonge certainly shared) in the Victorian period, then, required vilifying Elizabeth. Anna Jameson, in her *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns* (1831), writes of Elizabeth, "One more destitute of what is called *heart*, that is, of the capacity for all the gentle, gracious, and kindly affections proper to her sex, cannot be imagined in the female form" (qtd. in Dobson and Watson 157). Elizabeth's lack of proper feminine qualities is echoed fifteen years later by Jacob Abbott in his *History of Queen Elizabeth* (1849): "There are very few traits of her character which represent her clothed in any of the gentle proprieties of womanly beauty and grace" (qtd. in Dobson and Watson 155). Elizabeth, by declining marriage in order to hold onto power, was unfeminine and thereby repulsive. Moreover, her persecution of Roman Catholics and especially of Mary, Queen of Scots became increasingly suspect in the era of Catholic Emancipation and the Oxford Movement (150). Yonge herself wrote a book called *Unknown to History; A Story of the Captivity of Mary of Scotland* (1882), in which she defended the Catholic Scottish monarch, portraying Elizabeth as unable to

inspire the same kind of chivalric devotion in her male followers that Mary could, another sign of Elizabeth's insufficient femininity.

When Yonge compares Mrs. Duncombe to Queen Elizabeth, then, it is hardly a sympathetic description. For Yonge, as for many of her contemporaries, Elizabeth would have been seen as unpleasantly, even revoltingly, unfeminine. Mrs. Duncombe's unwillingness to let a man speak for her is compared to Elizabeth's unwillingness to marry and give up power to her husband. Elizabeth's virginity did not recommend her to Yonge as an example of chastity; rather, it connected her with unfeminine independence and self-assertion. Mrs. Duncombe's comparison to Elizabeth drives home the connection between the impropriety of women's public speaking and the sanctity of the marriage union.

Interestingly, Eliot also compares Dinah to Queen Elizabeth, albeit much more subtly than Yonge makes the same comparison. One of the physical traits that was most associated with Queen Elizabeth was her red hair—specifically, light or blonde-tinted red hair. This trait features in Yonge's description of Mrs. Duncombe, who has the "yellower species of red hair," which reminds Cecil of Elizabeth (84). Similarly, Dinah is described as having "pale reddish hair" (67) and, elsewhere, "pale auburn hair" (581). Especially in conjunction with Dinah's confidence and public speaking, this trait may well have reminded Victorian readers of Queen Elizabeth, just like Mrs. Duncombe's light red hair reminds Cecil of Elizabeth. Insofar as Eliot is connecting Dinah to Queen Elizabeth, she may not be offering a tacit critique of women's public speaking in the same way that Yonge is. Considering the positive portrayal of Dinah's public speaking throughout the novel, it would be surprising if she were. But there is also reason to believe that Eliot may have harbored a more sympathetic view of Queen Elizabeth than Yonge did. For one thing, *Adam Bede* was written eighteen years before *The Three Brides*, and as Dobson and

Watson note, the negative view of Elizabeth developed gradually during Victoria's reign; at the start of the Victorian period, Elizabeth enjoyed a much more respected position in the public imagination. In fact, when Victoria first became Queen, commentators worried that she would not be able to fill the shoes of England's most famous Queen regnant to date (147-148). Early in the Victorian period, Elizabeth was seen as a unifying figure for England, one who bridged the gap between Catholic and Protestant, drawing England together under one banner (Dobson and Watson 151). For Eliot, then, Elizabeth may have represented peace and unity across religious differences. Comparing Dinah to Elizabeth, then, would be tantamount to saying that Dinah promoted peace and progress, something that would be in keeping with her identity as a Methodist preacher. *Adam Bede* promotes religious tolerance, with the union of the Methodist Dinah and the Anglican Adam as the paradigmatic example. Since Elizabeth was seen as a figure of religious tolerance, healing the wounds caused during the violent reigns of both her Protestant and Catholic predecessors, it makes sense for Eliot to allude to her in the novel.

Eliot refers explicitly to Queen Elizabeth I when describing the old portraits that are found in the gallery above the cloisters in the old wing of the manor house: "mouldy portraits of Queen Elizabeth and her ladies" (301). The portrait of Elizabeth is found in the cloisters, a part of the house that would once have housed Catholic monks or nuns before the abolition (and, in some cases, physical destruction) of Roman Catholic churches, monasteries, and convents during the reigns of Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, and her brother, Edward VI. The presence of Elizabeth's portrait in this place perhaps signals Protestantism's supersession of Catholicism, but it could also represent the harmony in which the Protestant Elizabeth resides in a Catholic space, again pointing to the theme of religious tolerance.

Queen Elizabeth was the head of the Church of England, and it was during her reign that many of the practices and traditions that later defined Anglicanism were developed. The Thirty-Nine Articles, to which Anglican priests in the Victorian period were still required to ascribe, were developed during Elizabeth's reign. The references to Elizabeth in both *The Three Brides* and *Adam Bede* signal Yonge's and Eliot's meditations on the Church of England and women's role in it. Yonge compares Mrs. Duncombe to Elizabeth in order to cast her as repugnantly unfeminine; Yonge's point is that women ought not to put themselves forward when they could step back and allow their husbands to take the spotlight. Eliot, on the other hand, compares Dinah to Elizabeth in order to cast her as a peacemaker, a brave woman who forges bonds between those who had been divided over religious differences. Both authors are using Elizabeth to meditate on the role of women in the Church—Yonge to condemn any public role for women, and Eliot to suggest that women's public role may result in greater harmony.

In these two novels, women's public speaking is portrayed in opposite ways, but it still operates within the same form: the bounded whole. In *The Three Brides*, the bounded whole of the marriage union and the hierarchy of the Church thwart women's attempts to speak publicly. However, in *Adam Bede*, the form of the bounded whole is applied differently, uniting Dinah to the Holy Spirit, a union which empowers her. This demonstrates the way that one form can produce both positive and negative results for women. As Lauren Winner argues about Christian practices, they are not wholly beneficial nor wholly detrimental. So far, I have shown that the bounded whole of marriage can empower women (as it does for Amy in *The Heir of Redclyffe*), and it can disempower them (as it does for women in *The Three Brides*). The form of the Church, insofar as it is a hierarchy, can lend itself to oppression, as we see in both *The Three Brides* and *Adam Bede*, but as I shall show in Chapter Two, the Church can also be seen as a network, which

is a form that affords the crossing of boundaries, a liberating capability for Ethel May in Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*. Similarly, the quality of virginity, which makes Elizabeth problematic for Yonge, becomes a path to religious power for Romola in Eliot's novel of the same title and for Ermine Williams in Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family*, as I show in Chapter Three. All of this demonstrates the importance of attending closely to the nuances of religious forms and structures; we cannot assume what their fruits will be.

Chapter Two

"No Coherent Social Faith and Order":

Sainthood and Secularization in *Middlemarch* and *The Daisy Chain*

Introduction

Who that cares to know the novel of *Middlemarch* (1871-72), and how the different themes and characters convey George Eliot's social vision, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the prologue about Saint Teresa? In it, Eliot describes the life of Saint Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth-century Spanish saint known for founding and reforming religious orders, contrasting Teresa's legacy with the "blundering lives" of nineteenth-century women who share Teresa's idealistic, passionate nature (3). "Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion" (3). Eliot seems to be critiquing nineteenth-century England for its narrow sphere of opportunities for women to have an impact on the world. Women like Saint Teresa or Dorothea Brooke may have big dreams and ardently held convictions, but if they are unlucky enough to live in nineteenth-century England, their efforts will be wasted, and they will end up "foundress of nothing" (3). What is it about nineteenth-century England that prevents women from accomplishing great things, as Saint Teresa did in sixteenth-century Spain? Eliot explains: "For these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (3). In other words, "later-born Theresas" may have the passion and energy to do good in the world, but with only a "vague

ideal"—without a consistent, unified religious community—they fritter their energy away on little things, rather than focusing it on one "long-recognisable deed" (3). It may surprise some readers to learn that Eliot perceives Dorothea's world—in which everyone is Christian and nearly everyone is Anglican—as lacking this "coherent social faith and order." But as I shall demonstrate, Dorothea's world is not nearly as religiously unified as it might appear on the surface. In fact, the religion of Middlemarch and Lowick is remarkably varied and individualized.

Eliot's meditation on the futility of nineteenth-century women's passions for changing the world is also surprising because of its apparent disregard for the vast philanthropic labors actually undertaken by women in the nineteenth century. Women's philanthropy was both a large-scale endeavor and a topic of widespread debate. F.K. Prochasksa, in his seminal work *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (1980), reports that by the end of the nineteenth century, about 500,000 women were working "continuously and semi-professionally" in the field of philanthropy (224). In *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (2002), Dorice Williams Elliott argues that women's philanthropy was controversial because it troubled distinctions between the public and private spheres, thus threatening what many perceived to be the foundations of society (3). Elliott quotes an anonymous 1859 article in *Fraser's Magazine*, which says of women philanthropists: "They are not really young women—they are Public Persons" (qtd. in Elliott 3). This writer's concern with the public nature of philanthropy reveals the cause for some Victorians' alarm at the thought of women speaking and writing on social issues, founding and running charitable organizations, and visiting city slums: such behavior is too public, and women ought to remain in the private sphere. However, this *Fraser's* writer does not speak for all Victorians. As Lydia Murdoch points out,

many people saw philanthropy as an extension of women's domestic role; prison reformer Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) and housing reformer Octavia Hill (1838-1912) both explicitly defended their activism as a "private" endeavor, consistent with the doctrine of separate spheres (Murdoch xxvi). It was this question of whether philanthropy was public (and therefore objectionable for women) or private (and therefore permissible) that made it such a vexed subject. Considering how widespread and controversial women's philanthropy really was in nineteenth-century England, it is surprising that Eliot would seem to dismiss the possibility that a woman could achieve anything that would be remembered long after her death, as Saint Teresa did. After all, even today, is not everyone familiar with Victorian reformer Florence Nightingale (1820-1910)?

Nor was Eliot at a loss for fictional examples of Teresa-like philanthropists. I look here at one such example: Charlotte Mary Yonge's popular 1856 novel *The Daisy Chain, or Aspirations: A Family Chronicle*, which Eliot read aloud to George Henry Lewes while they were in Florence in 1860 (Hayter 1). *The Daisy Chain*'s heroine, Ethel May, makes it her mission at age fifteen to reform the nearby hamlet of Cocksmoor, which she successfully does over the course of the novel, founding a school and later a church there. Ethel perfectly matches Eliot's description of Saint Teresa, whose "passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life," but Ethel is far from being a "foundress of nothing" (3). Her accomplishment in founding both a school and a church is the central achievement of the novel. Since we know that Eliot was familiar with this novel, it makes sense to read *Middlemarch* in the context of *The Daisy Chain*—maybe even as a response to it. Dorothea's trajectory starts similarly to Ethel's, with a young girl sitting at home, concocting plans for improving the lives of poor people in her neighbourhood, but it ends very differently.

Dorothea's plans to improve the cottages in her neighbourhood are dependent on men who have varying degrees of commitment to the plan, and ultimately she accomplishes little.

Why the difference? I propose that the key lies in what Eliot calls a "coherent social faith and order." In my analysis of these two novels, I shall show that religious forms and structures actually help to empower Ethel, allowing her to accomplish her goals and partially to break out of the confines of the domestic sphere, while Dorothea suffers from the lack of these religious forms and structures. This happens in two ways. First, I shall use Caroline Levine's theory of form to articulate how the form of the Church (a network) affords movement across boundaries, specifically the boundary between the private and public spheres, while the form of land ownership (bounded wholes) contains. Because Ethel is working in the purview of the Church, she partially breaks out of the private sphere; Dorothea is working in the purview of the landlord, so she does not. Second, I shall use philosopher Charles Taylor's theory of secularization to show how the form of the diverse and individualized religious landscape of *Middlemarch*, which I'm calling a fractal tree, is more secularized than the form of the comparatively uniform religious landscape of *The Daisy Chain*, which is more like a line; it is this secularisation that impedes Dorothea, while Ethel succeeds because she is living in a pre-secularized world. Both of these examples show how religious forms actually serve to empower and liberate women in these novels.

Forms of Philanthropy

Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015) articulates a fresh theory of form that combines traditional formalist attention to ways of organising literary works with political theory's attention to social structures. Levine understands forms as abstract

concepts that can be applied not only to literary or stylistic techniques but also to political, economic, or social structures. For example, she interprets legal precedent as a type of rhythm, in which repetition reinforces the original concept. Levine borrows the concept of "affordance" from design theory and applies it to her forms; each form has affordances: things that are made possible by the form. Each form has its own affordances, capabilities that may be active or latent, depending on the use of the form. Of the four forms that Levine articulates in her book, I will use two here: bounded wholes and networks.

Levine points out that when scholars talk about "form," they are often talking about bounded wholes; the most famous example is Cleanth Brooks's metaphor of "the well wrought urn," a symbol for a poem. Just as the urn contains an otherwise slippery liquid, so a poem contains the contradictions and tensions inherent in language (Levine 29). In the decades since Brooks's 1947 *The Well Wrought Urn*, scholars have challenged his celebration of the poem's containing unity, arguing that celebrating containment is politically problematic. Levine suggests that these later scholars have looked too narrowly at the affordances of bounded wholes, ignoring the potentially liberating affordances of the form (27). Drawing on Levine's reconceptualization of the positive affordances of bounded wholes, in my introduction I explored the ways in which this form can empower women, describing Amy's newfound authority in the bounded whole of marriage in Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), and in my first chapter I described the empowering effect of Dinah's unity with the Holy Spirit in *Adam Bede* (1859). In this chapter I shall focus on the negative affordances of bounded wholes, extending my examination of the problems with the bounded whole of the marriage union in *The Three Brides* (1876) to show the ways in which "totalities exclude and imprison" (Levine 27). I shall use the form of the bounded whole to describe two different social realities that appear in these novels. First, I shall use it to

describe Victorian separate spheres, as Levine herself does: “The walls of the private home emerge as a containing form that traps women” (43). Both Dorothea and Ethel are confined in the domestic sphere. Second, I shall use the form of the bounded whole to describe the system of land ownership in nineteenth-century England: each landlord has a certain portion of land over which he exercises control; the borders of his property represent the bounds of this whole and the limits of his authority. As we shall see, this form prevents Dorothea from doing as much good as Ethel does by working in a different form: the network of the Church.

To develop her theory of network, Levine draws on recent scholarship on networks, from Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory to Mark Granovetter’s work on the “strength of weak ties” (qtd. in Levine 112). Borrowing terminology from network theory, Levine describes the ways that networks connect *nodes* (or points) via *pathways* (or lines). Networks can expand by linking to new nodes, as when a marriage brings a new person into a kinship network, or when a new rail line connects a new city to the rail network: “the network form affords a certain infinite extensiveness” (117). However, as Levine points out, actual networks often face high barriers to expansion, such as cultural and religious conventions governing marriage, or the cost of infrastructure to expand a rail network (118). In my analysis of the network of the Church of England in *The Daisy Chain*, I shall consider how the barriers to expansion (the difficulty and cost of founding new schools and churches) actually increase the network’s liberatory affordances for Ethel.

My analysis in this chapter will focus on the intersection of networks and bounded wholes. Specifically, I shall show how the network of the Church in *The Daisy Chain* empowers Ethel to move out of the private sphere, while in *Middlemarch* Dorothea is bound by multiple enclosures without the opportunities afforded by a network. Levine points out that when

networks and bounded wholes come into contact, the network can sometimes break out of the bounded whole, crossing borders, or it can be limited by the bounded whole, stopping at borders: "Networks and enclosures are constantly meeting, sometimes sustaining and reinforcing one another, at other times creating threats and obstacles" (119). I argue that in *The Daisy Chain*, the network of the Church threatens the borders of the bounded whole of the domestic sphere. One might assume that the Victorian Church would reinforce traditional divisions between male and female roles, and in many respects it did. However, my analysis of *The Daisy Chain* shows how complex the notion of Victorian separate spheres was. As Dorice Williams Elliott has pointed out, women's philanthropy turned public into private by casting women's philanthropic work as domestic. Distinctions between public and domestic life were further complicated by Victorian portrayals of England itself as domestic—as opposed to the foreign colonies. This expansion of separate spheres opened up the whole of England to women. The whole concept of separate spheres, then, is much more fluid and complex than might be initially assumed. When the network of the Church allows women like Ethel to cross the threshold of the home, it further complicates the definition of separate spheres.

Yonge identifies *The Daisy Chain* as a "Family Chronicle—a domestic record of home events, large and small, during those years of early life when the character is chiefly formed, and as an endeavour to trace the effects of those aspirations which are a part of every youthful nature" (Preface). Describing the book as "overgrown," Yonge claims that it is neither a "tale" nor a "novel." In other words, it does not fit neatly into the forms of fiction to which Yonge's readers were accustomed; it breaks boundaries. Yonge's description of the ways in which her book traces events and effects echoes Levine's description of networks, connecting nodes of various degrees of significance over space and time. Even from the start, *The Daisy Chain* sets

itself up as a text that breaks the boundaries of enclosures by following the pathways of networks.

The story certainly justifies Yonge's descriptor "overgrown." Thomas Collett Sandars, reviewing *The Daisy Chain* for *The Saturday Review* in 1856, calls it "prolix and tedious," complaining of the lack of plot: "An utter absence of incident through a history of nearly seven hundred pages is a serious trial to our patience" (416). While I might suggest that Sandars exaggerates the eventlessness of *The Daisy Chain*, I do admit that there is far more to the book than can be concisely summarized, so I shall focus only on the events that pertain to Ethel's philanthropic work in Cocksmoor, which is one of the main plotlines in the book, and which is the subject of my own analysis.

The Daisy Chain chronicles the lives of the May family, an upper-middle-class family in the town of Stoneborough with eleven siblings, over the course of several years. The novel's alternate title, *Aspirations*, signals the main theme of the novel: ambition. While some of the siblings have unhealthy or immoral ambitions, others have laudable ambitions. Ethel's goal of reforming the nearby hamlet of Cocksmoor is certainly portrayed as one of the latter. The novel opens with fifteen-year-old Ethel, who is fifth in the line of eleven siblings, begging her governess, Miss Winter, to accompany them to Cocksmoor so that they can visit a poor family there whose need has come to their attention. While they are there, Ethel laments the poor conditions—both materially and spiritually—in which the residents live and sets herself the goal of founding a church there: "There would be a worthy ambition! … Let us propose that aim to ourselves, to build a Church on Cocksmoor! … I'll never leave off thinking about it till it is done" (23). The rest of the novel recounts Ethel's work, often with the help of her siblings, to start a Sunday school, raise money for a church, purchase land, and eventually found a church in

Cocksmoor, the crowning achievement of the novel. Ethel certainly gets help, in the form of both labour and money, from other people, including both family members and friends, but Yonge makes it clear that it is Ethel's drive and vision that brings about the reforms in Cocksmoor. At the consecration of the new church, a family emergency obliges Ethel to leave after the service before the celebration, which the narrator says is actually fortunate because it allows everyone else to speak openly of their admiration for her work without embarrassing the modest Ethel. "She had not thought of self hitherto...and she did not guess that, in the sight of others, she was not the nobody that she believed herself. Her share in the work at Cocksmoor was pretty well known" (543). The fact that Ethel's friends and acquaintances credit her for the accomplishments at Cocksmoor accords with the impression Yonge creates throughout the novel: Ethel is primarily responsible for the reforms at Cocksmoor.

Ethel's work in Cocksmoor gives her opportunities that she might not otherwise have had to engage with the public sphere and to physically leave the home. The novel's first chapter follows Ethel's endeavours to obtain permission to walk to Cocksmoor, including finding a man to act as their protector. Even Miss Winter, the middle-aged governess, is not a sufficient chaperone for the trip. This shows the status quo of the domestic sphere to which women are confined: women are not allowed to walk to Cocksmoor without a male protector. Later in the novel, however, after Ethel has made a habit of walking to Cocksmoor in order to teach in her Sunday school, she obtains permission to walk thither alone or with just her younger sister, a significant break from the domestic sphere that usually kept women physically at home except under certain circumstances. In addition to greater freedom of movement, Ethel, her sister Flora, and the parish ladies' committee engage in activities that would otherwise be considered "business"—writing letters to men inquiring about the purchase of lands, for example—in the

pursuit of founding the school and church. Such activities, which would normally fall in the public sphere, are made possible for Ethel and the other ladies because they are working in the purview of the Church; the network of the Church creates paths from the private sphere to the public sphere, enabling Ethel to partially or temporarily break out of the private sphere. I am not saying that Ethel is completely liberated from the confines of gender roles. Such a reading would be inconsistent with other events in the novel, such as her decision to give up her study of classical language in order to focus on more appropriate, ladylike accomplishments. I am saying that the confines of the domestic sphere are partially ruptured in a few particular ways, and that this rupture occurs as a result of the network of the Church.

Ethel's philanthropic work in Cocksmoor is essentially the work of the Church of England. Both the Sunday school and the church in Cocksmoor are nodes in the network of the Anglican Church. Multiple of Levine's forms could be applied to the Church: the hierarchy from the Archbishop of Canterbury down to the lowliest curate, the rhythm of saints' days and liturgical seasons, or the bounded whole of church membership.[10] But the form that is most visible in *The Daisy Chain* is the Church as a network: numerous nodes in the form of parish churches and schools linked to one another. It is a "centralized network" inasmuch as all the nodes connect back to a centre: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the monarch, and ultimately, Christ (Levine 120). The Church of England is also sorted into what Levine calls "network clusters" in the form of parishes and dioceses, local sections of the network that connect to other clusters by hinges (120). Cocksmoor is in the parish of Stoneborough, so when Ethel creates new nodes in Cocksmoor, she is expanding the cluster of which she is a part; the main church at

[10] Joseph McQueen examined the rhythms of the church calendar in relation to the rhythms of poetry in his presentation at MLA 2020, "Sacralizing Time in a Secular Age: The Liturgical Calendar and John Keble's *The Christian Year*."

Stoneborough becomes the hinge, connecting Cocksmoor to the rest of the network in other parishes.

Yonge makes it clear that the church in Cocksmoor is important not only for the sake of giving the people the experience of going to church but for the sake of connecting them to a larger body: a network. In Ethel's first visit to Cocksmoor at the start of the novel, they meet the mother of twin babies who have not been christened because, as the mother says, "'Tis so far to go" (22). Christening—or baptism—is the sacrament that brings a person into the community of the Church, initiating them as a member. The inability of the mother to have her babies baptised highlights the fact that the distance between Cocksmoor and Stoneborough is a barrier to membership in the Church, not just to a particular type of experience on Sunday morning. Ethel's work is important because it connects the people of Stoneborough to the network of the Church by establishing new nodes an easy distance from their homes.

Some networks expand by extending pathways to bring previously disconnected nodes into the network. For example, a marriage expands a kinship network by bringing a new person into the family; the marriage creates a pathway that links two families together in a new way. On the other hand, some networks expand by creating altogether new nodes that previously did not exist at all. Reproduction expands the kinship network in this way: a child born into a family expands the network not by linking it to something outside but by forming a new node. In *The Daisy Chain*, Ethel expands the network of the Church by creating new nodes. When she perceives that the residents of Cocksmoor cannot attend church services or Sunday school at Stoneborough because it is too far away, she determines to bring the church and Sunday school to them by establishing these nodes in Cocksmoor, thus connecting the people of Cocksmoor to the Church (and thereby to God).

Levine describes the potential for networks to crack open bounded wholes, but points out that many networks have high barriers to expansion (117-8). It is not always quick or easy to connect to new nodes, and this can limit the liberatory affordances of networks. For example, transportation networks in theory could cross national borders, connecting people from different nations. In reality, however, many transportation networks do *not* cross national borders, either because of insurmountable natural obstacles like bodies of water that are too broad to cross with roads or railroads, or because of political obstacles that prevent the free flow of traffic across borders. The fact that it is difficult to expand certain networks can diminish the power of the network form to rupture bounded wholes. However, what is interesting about *The Daisy Chain* is that Ethel is not liberated from the domestic sphere by moving along pre-existing pathways in the Church network; she is liberated by her efforts to establish new nodes and pathways for that network. In other words, the fact that there is a high barrier to expanding the network actually works in *favor* of Ethel's liberation from the bounded whole of the domestic sphere, which is the reverse of the pattern Levine identifies. This example shows that the difficulty of expanding a network can actually be an affordance that helps rather than hinders the disruption of bounded wholes.

The network of the Church helps Ethel slip into the public sphere, but it is just such a form that Eliot's Dorothea Brooke lacks. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea has an ambition similar to Ethel's: she wants to improve the dilapidated cottages on her uncle's estate, thereby improving the lives of the tenant farmers who live in them. The novel's first chapter introduces Dorothea returning "from the infant school which she had set going in the village" (a curious allusion to philanthropic work to which Eliot never recurs) and sitting down to work on a plan for some cottages, a task which Eliot's narrator tells us "she delighted in" (8). Just as Yonge's reader first

meets Ethel longing to go to Cocksmoor, so the reader of *Middlemarch* first meets Dorothea working on architectural plans for cottages. Both opening chapters emphasize that these activities are important to their respective heroines. Unlike Ethel's successful plans to reform Cocksmoor, however, Dorothea's plans to improve or replace the cottages are largely unsuccessful. Although she is intelligent, passionate, and dedicated, Dorothea lives in a patriarchal world that obliges her to rely on men. Her uncle, Mr. Brooke, is too parsimonious to lay out funds for the improvement of the cottages on his estate, and she is only able to influence Sir James Chettam to try her plan because he is courting her. Even then, when Sir James is fully deluded by the notion that Dorothea likes him, and he is most interested in working with her to improve the cottages, the only role that Dorothea plays is to show him her plans, which he subsequently discusses with his estate manager (21). Thus, the closest Dorothea gets to success is a mere conversation with Sir James, but it is men who actually pursue the plan; she has no direct hand in it. Eliot later informs us that Dorothea and her sister Celia have visited the building site, but the implication is that this is more akin to tourism than work. Unlike Ethel, Dorothea is not actually *doing* anything to pursue her ambitions, and she is certainly not doing anything alone; she is obliged to settle for watching men do the work. After Dorothea's engagement to Mr. Casaubon, when Sir James knows that he has no hope of her, he continues to pursue the plan as "a landlord's duty" (46). Dorothea is now obliged to focus her energy elsewhere, but "she gave to Sir James Chettam's cottages all the interest she could spare from Mr Casaubon" (46). By calling the cottages "Sir James Chettam's" and implying the Dorothea is not as involved with them now that she is engaged to Mr. Casaubon, Eliot emphasizes how little Dorothea has actually done. To the extent that the cottages are actually improved, it is the work of Sir James and, later, Caleb Garth, working in the interest of "business," not the work of Dorothea's

philanthropy. Dorothea herself accomplishes little, and her sphere of influence continues to be confined to the home. No new opportunities for freedom or engagement with the public sphere open up for Dorothea. The borders of the domestic sphere remain tightly closed around her.

The reason that Ethel's philanthropy is successful and empowering, while Dorothea's is not, is that Ethel is working in the purview of the Church, while Dorothea is working in the purview of the landlord; the Church, as we have seen, is a network, but land ownership takes the form of bounded wholes. While it is true that the Church of England exists in Dorothea's world, too, it functions quite differently. For one thing, the problems that Dorothea runs into in the secular world are present in the Church, too: her plans are dismissed as the idealistic visions of a naïve girl by the distinguished clergyman Mr. Casaubon just as much as by her uncle Mr. Brooke. Furthermore, as I shall argue in the next section, the Church in *Middlemarch* is much more divided and therefore less influential and effective than in *The Daisy Chain*.

With the network of the Church stimied by hypocrisy and division, Dorothea is obliged to work within the purview of the landlord, which is a bounded whole. This form proves to be much less liberatory for her than the Church network is for Ethel. The principle of land ownership is that each landowner is in possession of a certain portion of land, with clear borders all around. His authority and responsibility extend to those borders and no farther; similarly, the authority and responsibility of his neighbors extend on the other side up to the border of his property but not farther. Unlike the Church, which is constantly working to cross borders and build new nodes to connect new people to itself, a landlord works to maintain his borders in order to protect against poaching, for example, or burglary.

The bounded whole of land ownership does not challenge or rupture the borders of the bounded whole of the domestic sphere. Dorothea can have dinner table conversations about the

improvement of cottages, but it is still the responsibility of the landlord (Sir James Chettam, Mr. Brooke) or his designated representative (Caleb Garth) to carry out any plans. Dorothea's influence is at first limited to Mr. Brooke's estate; the borders of land ownership and her own confinement in the home prevent her from having any kind of power on any other estate. Moreover, she is only able to make improvements to Mr. Brooke's estate with his approval and funding, something he is reluctant to give. She is only able to exercise influence over Sir James Chettam when the prospect of extending a kinship network motivates him to submit to her ideas; the eventual connection to Sir James via Celia continues this tenuous influence, but the bounded whole of land ownership—and the authority of the landlord—continues to confound any chance of Dorothea's active engagement with the work. Without a pathway across the borders of her own sphere, Dorothea is blocked at every turn, confined within the domestic sphere and the bounded wholes of estates.

Eliot makes it clear that Dorothea's inability to engage in meaningful work to improve the world is stifling to her, even using metaphors of constraint and imprisonment that recall the form of the bounded whole. During the period of her widowhood, when Dorothea would seem to be most at liberty to do as she likes, she continues to feel stifled for want of something to do: "In her luxurious home, wandering under the boughs of her own great trees, her thought was going out over the lot of others, and her emotions were imprisoned. The idea of some active good within her reach, 'haunted her like a passion'"—an allusion to William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (1798) (Eliot 469). The metaphor of imprisonment and the descriptor "within her reach" both imply that Dorothea is confined within a bounded whole, seeking a way to accomplish something worthwhile but unable to do so because of the confines of her sphere. In addition to the metaphor of the prison, Dorothea's situation is also compared to a tomb: "She longed for

work which would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain, and now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb" (295). Here, the confines of her life are explicitly contrasted with her desire to do good in the world. Similarly, during her marriage to Mr Casaubon, Dorothea suffers "the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid" (Eliot 173). In the midst of this "stifling oppression," Dorothea's "religious faith was a solitary cry," her one hope of getting out of the bounded whole that imprisons her (173). This implies that Dorothea has some sense of the liberatory potential of religion, but she has not been able to harness the power of the network of the Church as Ethel does, for reasons that I shall explore in the next section. Ultimately, Dorothea's Church is filled with people whose personal religions are not necessarily the religion taught by the Church, which means that the people of the Church—whether clergy or laypeople—are divided and spend more time fighting with each other than they do expanding the network of the Church. As I shall show, the religiously pluralistic landscape of *Middlemarch* prevents the network of the Church from being effective for Dorothea in the way that the Church is for Ethel, who lives in a religiously uniform world.

Many scholars have pointed out the potentially liberatory potential of philanthropy for women. Dorice Williams Elliott, for example, has described the ways in which philanthropy blurred the borders between the public and private spheres for nineteenth-century British women. Patricia Comitini builds on Elliott's argument, claiming that philanthropy allowed women to "venture out into the public sphere under the aegis of benevolence" (78). Comitini argues that philanthropy *seemed* to be a domestic task, and could thus be justified, but it actually involved engagement with the public sphere. Philanthropic work could even be professionalized and allow women to become involved with politics, as Hugh Cunningham points out (147). It is certainly

nothing new to suggest that philanthropic work such as Ethel performs could allow women to partially break out of the private sphere. What is significant about my comparative analysis of *The Daisy Chain* and *Middlemarch* is that it demonstrates that not all philanthropic projects are created equal. Ethel's philanthropy is much more liberatory than Dorothea's, and the key difference is the form of the structure in which they are working.

My comparison of forms in *The Daisy Chain* and *Middlemarch* also provides an example of how Levine's conceptualisation of forms can be useful for describing otherwise abstract forms. It might at first seem difficult to pinpoint how the differences between the realm of the Church and the realm of the landlord could affect a woman's ability to break out of the private sphere. However, by seeing the Church of England as a network and land ownership as a system of bounded wholes, it becomes apparent how one troubles the borders of the domestic sphere while the other does not. While Levine's forms do not map onto social phenomena with a one-to-one equivalency (land ownership could also be seen as a hierarchy, for example), they do reveal some of the ways in which social phenomena work together, reinforcing or troubling one another.

Another advantage of my formal analysis is that it reveals the different affordances of religious and secular structures. It is easy to assume that secular structures are typically more liberatory to women than religious structures; the Church is often seen as a chief tool of the patriarchy. But by considering the affordances of different forms, we can see that a structure like the Church opens up doors for women that might not be opened by secular structures like those governing land ownership. Seeing the Church as a network allows us to understand the ways in which it can trouble or even rupture the borders of the domestic sphere. Even though the Church of England may not have overtly endorsed the liberation of women in the nineteenth century, its

very form allows women like Ethel a degree of freedom. Levine's approach to formalism allows us to perceive these affordances of religious structures.

The Form of Secularization and Individualized Religion

Possibly the most influential twenty-first-century work on religion and secularization is philosopher Charles Taylor's 2007 tome *A Secular Age*. Taylor traces the history of secularization in the North Atlantic world from the Middle Ages to the present, ultimately making an argument for an understanding of secularization that resists the subtraction hypothesis. The subtraction hypothesis is the traditional understanding of secularization: the proposal that secularization is characterized by the decline of religion—the removal of religion from society. This hypothesis has faced critiques on multiple fronts in recent decades, due in part to the fact that nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predictions of the decline of religion have not been fulfilled. The United States is a striking example: even with rapid and revolutionary advances in science and technology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a majority of Americans still say they believe in God. A 2017 Gallup poll found that 87% of respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Do you believe in God"? (Hrynowski). Similarly, a 2014 Pew Research study found that 89% of Americans believe in God, with varying degrees of certainty ("Belief in God"). If secularization is measured by religious belief, then the United States today can hardly be regarded as secular. However, it is evident that *something* has changed with regard to religion since the Middle Ages. Taylor posits an alternative definition of secularization. In Taylor's view, religion has not declined so much as it has splintered and multiplied in a phenomenon he calls the "nova effect." In Taylor's words, "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and

indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (3). Taylor's definition of secularization, which has been adopted by scholars in a variety of fields, is more about the conditions of belief—the whole framework in which one approaches belief or unbelief—than it is about the belief itself.

Medieval Europeans believed in God unquestioningly—what Taylor calls "naïvely" (30). It would occur to few people living in this pre-secularized world that someone might *not* believe in God—or even believe in God in a different way. Everyone followed the same religion, and they did so without a sense of personal choice in the matter. In the sixteenth century, the Protesant Reformation introduced more options: now one could be Roman Catholic or Protestant, so one's religion was no longer axiomatic. The Enlightenment furthered this process by introducing (at least for élites) the possibility of exclusive humanism: a worldview in which human flourishing is the highest goal. By the nineteenth century, there were multiple religious and irreligious options available to people, making religion more a matter of personal choice than ever before. In Taylor's words, "It's as though the original duality, the positing of a viable humanist alternative, set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond" (299). Religion has not died out; it has multiplied. The fundamental change between the Middle Ages and the present day—the change called "secularization"—is characterised by religious pluralism and the consequent emphasis on individual religious choice. In our current secular age, each person decides for themself what to believe and practise, being aware that there are other options.

Taylor's metaphor of the nova pictures a world in which one religion suddenly splits into two and then immediately into numerous religious options. This form could be likened to a tree:

a single trunk at the bottom splits into multiple branches, from which other branches and twigs grow. In geometry, this type of shape is called a fractal tree: a shape characterized by infinite splitting so that what starts as one line ends up as a mesh of lines. The form of the fractal tree can be used to picture the phenomenon Taylor describes. Just as a uniform religion in the Middle Ages explodes into numerous options in the Enlightenment period and beyond, so a fractal tree splits and then keeps splitting, multiplying ends. If presecularized Europe is a line, secularized Europe is a fractal tree. I intend to use the forms of the line and the fractal tree in my analysis similarly to how Levine uses the forms of the bounded whole, rhythm, hierarchy, and network. These forms describe the state of secularization in *Middlemarch* and *The Daisy Chain*, with *Middlemarch*'s religious landscape being a fractal tree and *The Daisy Chain*'s religious landscape being a line.

Each form has its affordances. The affordances of a fractal tree include freedom and diversity. In the fractal tree of religious pluralism, one has the freedom to choose which religion one wants to follow, and the result is religious diversity. The affordances of the line include unity and clarity: anything that starts at one end will certainly end up at the same place on the other end. In the line of religious uniformity, all people follow the same path and thus end up at the same destination; it is clear where one is going. To our Western, post-Enlightenment minds, freedom and diversity may seem like far greater values than unity and clarity. However, as my analysis of these forms in *Middlemarch* and *The Daisy Chain* will show, unity and clarity in *The Daisy Chain* actually help Ethel more than the comparative freedom and diversity in *Middlemarch* help Dorothea.

Using Taylor's definition of secularization and the forms of the line and the fractal tree, I examine the worlds of *Middlemarch* and *The Daisy Chain*, arguing that the world of

Middlemarch is more secularized than the world of *The Daisy Chain*. This is evident in the religious pluralism of *Middlemarch*, which can be described as a fractal tree, compared to the religious uniformity of *The Daisy Chain*, which can be described as a line. Eliot creates a world in which each person has their own religion, which may be nominally Christian but which is ultimately rooted in something unique to themself. From Mr. Casaubon's devotion to his own scholarly stature to Dorothea's devotion to Mr. Casaubon, each character in *Middlemarch* has a personal religion that is not shared by their neighbors and consequently not taken for granted. While in the religious fractal tree of Eliot's novel, each person has the freedom to choose their own religion, they lack the clarity and unity afforded by the religious line in *The Daisy Chain*. Yonge imagines a world in which almost everyone is Anglo-Catholic, even though the actual demographics of Victorian England reveal that Anglo-Catholicism was really a minority position. In *The Daisy Chain*, however, the importance attributed by all the characters to events like christenings and confirmations indicate the influence of Anglo-Catholicism in the community.[11] Most of the characters in *The Daisy Chain* are more like the inhabitants of medieval Europe in that they believe in God unquestioningly and naïvely. Ethel lives in a world that has not experienced the nova effect; she lives in a religiously uniform world, experiencing what Eliot calls a "coherent social faith and order" (3). Religion in Ethel's world is a line: there is one clear path to follow, and everyone follows the same path.

Dorothea's world in *Middlemarch* is characterized by ubiquitous nominal Christianity but actual religious pluralism. The variety of religions represented in the parishes of Middlemarch and Lowick go far beyond mere divisions between high- and low-church or between Anglicans

[11] This is typical of Yonge's novels. In *The Heir of Redclyffe*, for example, the Anglo-Catholic Edmonstones receive a visit from their distant cousin Guy Morville, who also turns out to have high-church persuasions. Later in the novel, when Guy returns to his own estate of Redclyffe, he rejoices to find that the new clergyman there has begun holding daily services, indicating that he, too, is Anglo-Catholic. The chances that all of these characters would be Anglo-Catholic in the real Victorian England are very slim, but Yonge's fiction is not a representation of the world in which she actually lived so much as a thought experiment about the world in which she might *like* to have lived.

and Dissenters. Eliot makes it clear that even though her characters would all say that they are Christians, their actual, personal religions are much more diverse. She even explicitly contrasts their internal faith from their outward faith. One striking example is Caleb Garth, whose religion is "business," a word that he says with a "peculiar tone of fervid veneration, of religious regard" (158). To make it clear that this is not merely a figure of speech, Eliot goes on to contrast Caleb's religion of business with his nominal Christianity: "Though he had never regarded himself as other than an orthodox Christian…, I think his virtual divinities were good practical schemes, accurate work, and the faithful completion of undertakings" (159). Similarly, Mr. Casaubon "held himself to be, with some private scholarly reservations, a believing Christian" (264). But, the narrator tells us, "Mr. Casaubon's immediate desire was not for divine communion and light divested of earthly conditions; his passionate longings, poor man, clung low and mist-like in very shady places" (264). Both Caleb Garth and Mr. Casaubon have personal deities that contrast with their nominal Christianity. Celia, too, makes an idol of her baby Arthur, who is thrice described as a "Bouddha," comically implying that Celia's devotion to her child is akin to religion (305, 331, 500).

Several characters' romantic relationships are described in religious terms. For example, Dorothea's admiration for Mr. Casaubon is depicted throughout the novel as a sort of religion. Eliot tells us that Dorothea's "faith" in him filled in the gaps in his actual speech, making him seem better than he actually was: "what believer sees a disturbing omission or infelicity? The text, whether or prophet or of poet, expands for whatever we can put into it, and even his bad grammar is sublime" (32). Her dedication to him is described as "kissing his unfashionable shoe-ties as if he were a Protestant Pope" (33). Mrs Cadwallader compares her marriage to Casaubon to entering a religious order, later also remarking, "I wish her joy of her hair shirt," a

reference to ascetic religious practice (38-39). Will also describes Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon as an act of religious devotion, saying, "It is the most horrible of virgin-sacrifices" (225). This comparison is not limited to Casaubon's critics; the narrator, reflecting Dorothea's own thoughts just before her marriage, says, "she was a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation" (28). Even Mr. Casaubon himself reflects with bitterness in the latter days of their marriage that "her wifely devotedness was like a penitential expiation of unbelieving thoughts" (260). Mr. Lydgate imagines that his wife, too, will regard him as a sort of deity, supposing that his knowledge will be "a shrine to consult" and his ardor will be "worship[ped] as sublime," an expectation in which he is sorely disappointed (362). Instead, he later begs for Rosamond's forgiveness "with almost a cry of prayer" (433). This turning of the tables reverses his expectation of being worshiped by casting him as the worshiper and his wife as the deity.

Will's love for Dorothea is also repeatedly described in religious terms, from his indignance at his artist friend's "desecration" in treating Dorothea as a mere model for a painting to his "hymn" about love that he sings on his way to Lowick Church to see Dorothea (138, 292). Rosamond and Will both describe his admiration for Dorothea as "worship" (270, 293). Even Dorothea's love for him is compared to the love of God for humanity: "There are natures in which, if they love us, we are conscious of having a sort of baptism and consecration: they bind us over to rectitude and purity by their pure belief about us; and our sins becomes that worst kind of sacrilege which tears down the invisible altar of trust" (476). Dorothea's love for Will does for him what Christ does for Christians; it purifies him and sets him on the path to good.

Dorothea and Will explicitly discuss the experience of having personalized religions, though neither of them explicitly acknowledges to the other the central role that romantic relationships play in their religious lives. Dorothea tells him, "I have always been finding out my

religion since I was a little girl," following up her statement with the question "What is *your* religion?" (244, ch. 39). The very question implies a world in which different people have different religions. Though Dorothea and Will are both nominal Christians, when it comes to what things they revere and follow, they might not be the same. Will says that his religion is "to love what is good and beautiful when I see it," a subtle reference to his love for Dorothea herself (244, ch. 39). Dorothea's awareness of religious pluralism is further highlighted by her later comment, "I have always been thinking of the different ways in which Christianity is taught, and whenever I find one way that makes it a wider blessing than any other, I cling to that as the truest" (308). Even in the Christian context of this novel, then, there is a wide variety of approaches to religion, and it is up to the individual to choose one to cling to. The religious landscape of *Middlemarch* is a fractal tree, branching out into a wide variety of religious options, and each person has the freedom to choose the option they want.

Eliot also reveals that this religious diversity and individualism has not always characterized the parishes of Middlemarch and Lowick. This is one of the key aspects of the fractal tree: it starts with one, unified line, but once it begins to split, it continues to split until a single trunk has become a mesh of tiny twigs. Just as Taylor describes pluralism as something that arises with secularization—in contrast to pre-secularized societies—so old Mrs Farebrother describes the difference between the religious uniformity of her youth and the religious pluralism of the present day: "When I was young, Mr. Lydgate, there never was any question about right and wrong. We knew our catechism, and that was enough; we learned our creed and our duty. Every respectable Church person had the same opinions. But now, if you speak out of the Prayer-book itself, you are liable to be contradicted" (108-109, ch. 42) Later Mrs. Farebrother also refers to "those [clergymen] who preach new doctrine" (357). Especially in the context of

Mr. Farebrother's rivalry with Mr. Tyke, the Evangelical clergyman, it is likely that Mrs. Farebrother's chagrin is primarily based on her experiences with Evangelicalism, a movement Taylor identifies with the process of secularization. According to Taylor, nineteenth-century British Evangelicalism, with its focus on philanthropy and self-discipline, paved the way for "a humanism of duty, will and altruism" (96). It is this movement that Mrs. Farebrother perceives as having disrupted the religious homogeneity of her youth, an observation that turns out to be remarkably astute when compared with Taylor's study on the subject, which of course has the benefit of hindsight as well as scholarship.

The prevalence of explicit references to the religious pluralism of Middlemarch and Lowick harken back to Eliot's comment in the prelude that modern-day would-be Saint Teresas are "helped by no coherent social faith and order" (3). The inconsistency and variety of faiths in Dorothea's world make it difficult for her to accomplish her goals. Although she has the freedom to choose her own religion, as a woman in a patriarchal society, she still lacks many other freedoms and might benefit from greater unity of faith in her community. If everyone felt as she did that "we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords—all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us," then perhaps they would be willing to help her improve the living conditions of the cottagers (21). But the people around her do not have the same views on the "social duties of the Christian" that Dorothea has (41). Eliot makes it clear that Dorothea's inability to make substantial reforms in her neighbourhood is directly linked to the fact that men like Mr. Brooke and Mr. Casaubon do not share her views about helping others. This is why the network of the Church does not empower Dorothea as it empowers Ethel: it is not sufficiently unified. The fractal tree lacks the unity of the line. Perhaps if Dorothea were living in a less secularized world, in which there *was* a "coherent social faith

and order"—a uniform sense of truth and morality—then she would be able to accomplish something significant and memorable like Saint Theresa did.

This is precisely the kind of world in which Ethel May lives. In spite of the actual religious diversity of Victorian England, Yonge crafts a world in which nearly everyone shares the same high-church Anglican views. The May family, their friends, their clergymen, and even the poor people in Cocksmoor all appear to share the same perspectives and values—the perspectives and values of Yonge's own Anglo-Catholicism. The religious landscape of *The Daisy Chain* is not a fractal tree but a line.

The novel opens just after the birth of the May family's youngest child, who is shortly to be christened. Alan Ernescliffe, a young gentleman whom Dr. May has taken in after nursing him back to health from a fever, plans to stay a little longer at their house, even though he is now perfectly recovered, so that he can attend the christening. He has agreed to stand in for the baby's absent godfather (11, ch. 1). Alan's eagerness to attend the christening, and the Mays' choice of him as a proxy for the godfather, both attest to his high-church sensibilities. This christening is also important to the Mays' eldest daughter Margaret, who laments that her brother Richard cannot return from Oxford for the event: "It is the first christening we ever had without our all being there" (16, ch. 2). Alan's and Margaret's high view of the sacrament of baptism is shared by their "old nurse," who is "extremely gratified" to have the honour of representing one of the godmothers (35, ch. 4). The importance of the christening is underscored by the fact that, a family emergency preventing her from being baptised on the usual Christening Sunday, the family decides to take the baby to the church on a weekday because "she could not be kept unbaptized for another month" until the next Christening Sunday (35, ch. 4). The Mays' sense of urgency in baptising their baby contrasts with poor Mrs. Taylor's procrastination in taking her

twins to be christened, a delay which is occasioned by the distance from the Taylors' home in Cocksmoor to the church in Stoneborough (22, ch. 3). For even Mrs. Taylor appears to have high-church leanings, as evidenced by her lament about Cocksmoor: "It is not like what I was used to, ma'am; I was always used to keep to my school and to my church" (22, ch. 3). Since education and involvement with the Church of England were two key priorities of Anglo-Catholics, Mrs. Taylor's references to school and church reveal her tendency in that direction. Even in the opening few chapters, therefore, Yonge establishes that everyone, from patients turned friends like Alan to the "deserving poor" like Mrs. Taylor, share the same high-church views of sacraments.

Confirmation, as well as baptism, is depicted throughout the novel as an important rite and one that must be taken seriously. In fact, a major plot point revolves around the need for Harry to be confirmed early because, joining the navy, he is going out to sea in his early teens. Rather than risk his dying while yet unconfirmed, the family decides to let him be confirmed earlier than usual. Harry's habit of practical joking threatens this, however, something that grieves everyone. When Dr May suggests that Harry's levity shows that he "cannot be in a fit state for Confirmation," his sisters Ethel and Mary cry out "in tones of entreaty," and Harry flees, evidently to weep in private (227, ch. 25). Everyone in the family considers Harry's being "cut off from Confirmation" to be a severe punishment: "The decision as to the Confirmation was a great grief to all" (227, 229, ch. 25). Harry expresses his concerns to his sister Margaret that if he falls overboard without being Confirmed and admitted to the sacrament of Holy Communion, then he might not be saved and never see his late mother again in heaven (231, ch. 25). Eventually, however, Dr May decides to allow Harry to be confirmed after all, news that makes Ethel and Norman "too happy for words," and gives Harry's face a serious expression, "but with

a look on it that had as much subdued joy as awe" (232, ch. 25). The intense feelings of all the Mays about the question of Harry's Confirmation show how important the sacrament is to them, revealing their high-church sentiments.

One might think that Harry's Confirmation is important to the May family not because of the importance of the sacrament, but simply because he is about to go to sea. However, other characters' Confirmations are also taken seriously. Before Norman's Confirmation, he makes a habit of reading a little from the Greek New Testament every day, saying, "I met with a sermon the other day that recommended reading a bit of it every day, and I thought I should like to try, now the Confirmation is coming" (151, ch. 18). It is striking that a teenage boy would take this rite so seriously as to devote time each day to prepare on his own. Yonge reveals the importance of Confirmation in Norman's mind again later when he is falsely accused of wrongdoing at school. He asks his father, "Do you think it will interfere with my having a Confirmation ticket?" (198, ch. 22). Dr. May explains that while it likely will not prevent him from being confirmed, it may affect his career. Norman says, "Very well then, it had better rest. If there should be any difficulty about my being confirmed, of course we will explain it" (198). This exchange reveals that Norman values Confirmation more highly than his career. Their friend and neighbor, Meta Rivers, also takes her Confirmation seriously, as evidenced by her comment that she will continue teaching at an unpleasant school if it is right: "I could not bear to give up anything that seems right just now, because of the Confirmation" (207, ch. 23). Yonge's narrator later adds: "She was very earnest in her Confirmation preparation, most anxious to do right and to contend with her failings" (211, ch. 23). Even those outside of the May family, then, consider Confirmation to be so important as to merit especially self-sacrificing behaviour in order to prepare for it. Yonge later tells us that Ethel's and Meta's friendship is enhanced following their

Confirmation, implying that full membership in the Church and participation in Holy Communion had forged a new bond (238, ch. 26). The emphasis on the importance of sacraments shows the May family, as well as their friends and neighbours, to be high-church Anglo-Catholics.

Further evidence of the uniformly Anglo-Catholic sentiments of Yonge's characters can be found in their admiration of high-church literature, including the poetry of John Keble (1792-1866), who was one of the founders of the Oxford Movement, author of *The Christian Year* (1827), and a close personal friend of Yonge's. After a visit to London, Norman brings Ethel a copy of Keble's *Lyra Innocentium*, of which she says, "It is just what I wished for" (143, ch. 17). When Ethel admires the book's binding, Norman explains that he saw an identical copy of the book at Meta Rivers's house, which prompted him to seek one out as a gift for his sister. This shows that not only do the May siblings read and enjoy Keble, but so do others in their neighbourhood. Keble's involvement with the Oxford Movement strongly identifies all the characters with Anglo-Catholicism. The religion of Ethel's world has not splintered into diverse options, as it has in Dorothea's world. Rather, it remains in a single, unified line.

Those familiar with *The Daisy Chain* might object that Norman actually encounters intellectual challenges to his faith when he attends Oxford (439). While engaging in debates about the basis for religious belief, Norman begins to doubt even his own arguments in favour of religion. This could disrupt my picture of Ethel's world as unquestioningly, uniformly Anglo-Catholic, and I would agree that Norman's encounter with religious skepticism is a sign of secularization in Victorian Britain. However, I contend that Norman's experience at Oxford is not really part of Ethel's world. Victorian Oxford was overwhelmingly a masculine world, from which Ethel is quite separate. In addition to the obvious point that Oxford is masculine by virtue

of being an all-male institution, the university is also explicitly masculinely coded in *The Daisy Chain*: when some members of the May family visit Oxford to see Norman deliver a prize-winning poem, Yonge highlights the dominance of men and distinct separation between men and women. In the hall where the performance is given, women are physically separated from men, being seated in a gallery above. The floor below is "fast being paved with heads, black, brown, gray, and bald, a surging living sea" of men (373). Yonge describes the visual contrast between the many colours of the women's dresses and the uniform black suits of the men as "the flower-garden of ladies" and "the black mass below" (373). This picture of division and contrast highlights that Ethel does not belong at Oxford any more than the skepticism of Oxford belongs in Ethel's world. In fact, it is the sight of Ethel's world—of their hometown of Stoneborough and of Meta Rivers in particular—that eventually drives away the doubts from Norman's mind. He tells Ethel later, "Sometimes the sight of my father, or the mountains and lakes in Scotland, or—or—things at the Grange, would bring the peace back" (439). Norman's euphemism "things at the Grange" is clearly a reference to his future wife, Meta, whose feminine confidence in him drew him back to his faith. The world of Oxford, which Norman calls "this world of argument and discussion," is clearly distinct from Ethel's world (440). Oxford is masculine, while Ethel's world is feminine. Oxford is characterized by doubt and religious options, while Ethel's world is characterized by faith and religious uniformity. Although Yonge does present secularization as present in England, it has not reached the world in which Ethel lives and works. Ethel's world is still pre-secularized.

The formal difference between the religious landscapes of *Middlemarch* and *The Daisy Chain* indicates a difference between the conditions in which Dorothea and Ethel are working. As Eliot says in her prelude, Dorothea is "helped by no coherent social faith and order," causing

her efforts to be "dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognisable deed" (3). The pluralism of Dorothea's world matches Taylor's description of secularized societies, in which religion is a matter of personal, conscious choice. By contrast, Ethel does live in a world with a "coherent social faith and order," as evidenced by the ubiquitously Anglo-Catholic sentiments of all her friends and family. The religious uniformity of Ethel's world matches Taylor's description of pre-secularized societies, in which religious belief is taken for granted because there are no other viable options. It is this uniform support from those around her that enables Ethel to accomplish a "long-recognisable deed" by founding a school and church in Cocksmoor. Because religion in Ethel's world is a line, in which there is but one option, and everyone follows the same path, she is able to take advantage of the unity and clarity afforded by that form. By contrast, the freedom and diversity afforded by the fractal tree ultimately do little to help Dorothea, who needs the support of others in order to accomplish her plans.

It may perplex some readers that *Middlemarch*, which is set at the time of the first Reform Bill in 1832, should depict a more secularized society than *The Daisy Chain*, which is set later—presumably around the time of its publication in 1856. Does this suggest that secularization regressed between 1832 and 1856? I suggest that the difficulty arises from the assumption that realist fiction is mimetic: that it depicts the real world or at least attempts to depict the real world. This understanding of realist fiction has been criticized and complicated by many scholars, however, including, most prominently, J. Hillis Miller and George Levine in relation to *Middlemarch* and Gavin Budge in relation to Charlotte Yonge's fiction. In contrast with this oft-criticized "common sense" understanding of realist fiction as a depiction of the real world, I would adopt something more akin to Anna Kornbluh's recent theory of realism as

"world-making" (13). Realist fiction, for Kornbluh, is not mimetic; it is not an attempt to capture what *is* but what *could be*, "a mode of production instead of a mode of reflection" (41). Kornbluh's theory here echoes Eliot's claim that her fiction is "a set of experiments in life" (*George Eliot Letters*, vol. 1, 216). If we understand realism as not a reflection of reality but rather a thought experiment, then it becomes less troubling to find a less secularized society in a later novel. After all, historical data regarding the religious demographics of Victorian England show that it was nowhere near as uniform as Yonge makes it out to be in *The Daisy Chain*. Census data indicates that 5,292,551 people attended an Anglican church on Sunday, March 20, 1851. Some of these would be high-church, and some would be low-church. But while Anglicanism was the most popular denomination, it was rivaled by Methodists, who boasted 2,726,107 attendees that Sunday, and Congregationalists, with 1,214,059 attendees. These are the biggest groups, but millions of people also attended a variety of other religious gatherings, including Presbyterian, Unitarian, Roman Catholic, and Mormon churches, as well as Jewish synagogues (Murdoch 40-42). Since Anglicans made up not even half of church attendees, and Anglo-Catholicism was just one strain of Anglicanism, we can conclude that the ubiquitous Anglo-Catholicism of *The Daisy Chain* is far from an accurate representation of mid-Victorian England. Rather than depicting the world as it really was, Yonge is depicting the world as it might be—and perhaps, being a devout Anglo-Catholic herself, as she would have liked it to be. Similarly, notwithstanding Eliot's scientific language in *Middlemarch*, it may be that England in 1832 was more uniform than Eliot depicts it. *Middlemarch* is an experiment in the mind of a secular humanist in the 1870s; when considered this way, it is not surprising to find it quite secularized.

The traditional narrative of secularization depicts religion as gradually disappearing from society with the rise of science and humanism. An assessment of *Middlemarch* and *The Daisy Chain* according to this model would conclude that both worlds are pre-secularized, since both are very religious. The religious language that Eliot uses to describe her characters' romantic and professional passions would simply reinforce this conclusion. This assessment of the novels would result in a misunderstanding of what Eliot is mourning when she contrasts Saint Teresa and Dorothea. It would seem to be merely a critique of increasingly stringent gender roles in nineteenth-century England as compared to sixteenth-century Spain, when in reality it is a "Dover Beach"-esque lament over the loss of naïve belief such as Taylor identifies with pre-secularized Europe. I am not claiming that Eliot would like society to return to pre-secularized unity. She knew that this was not possible, and she was eager to discover what morality and society would look like without orthodox religion. However, her prelude indicates that she recognized the value of the unity afforded by a homogeneous religious landscape, and she mourned its loss. Taylor's theory of secularization allows us to perceive the differences between *Middlemarch* and *The Daisy Chain* (and between Dorothea and Saint Theresa) as being primarily differences of forms of religious landscape—the difference between a fractal tree and a line. Secularization hinders women from accomplishing something memorable and thus being honored as saints by posterity.

Conclusion

Considering Eliot's prelude to *Middlemarch* in the context of *The Daisy Chain*, a novel with which we know Eliot was familiar, sheds light on which elements of nineteenth-century British society Eliot is critiquing. Eliot's sharp critique of conventional gender roles in the finale

of the first edition, in which she blames Dorothea's failures on women's education and social expectations, is fleshed out by her preface, which blames the religious incoherence of a secularized society. While *The Daisy Chain* reveals what the network of the Church can do for women, *Middlemarch* shows what life without such structures would look like: women would be more confined than ever. While *Middlemarch* shows the difficulties of women's philanthropy in a secularized society, *The Daisy Chain* depicts the success of women's philanthropy in a pre-secularized society. It is tempting to assume that Victorian religion was at least as patriarchal as the culture at large—and maybe more so. But these novels paint a different picture: both Eliot and Yonge depict religion as potentially liberating for women, offering them opportunities to pass into the public sphere and to accomplish significant, memorable achievements.

Chapter Three

Ave Maria: Madonna Figures in *Romola* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*

Introduction

The nineteenth century was, in many respects, the age of the Madonna, and this has several interesting implications for Protestant and secular novelists in Victorian Britain. In England, the removal of legal strictures on Catholic practice and participation in civic life brought to the fore the longstanding conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Michael Wheeler calls Catholics and Protestants "the old enemies," and certainly the conflict between the two groups extends back to the time of the English Reformation, yet as Carol Engelhardt Herringer notes in *Victorians and the Virgin Mary* (2008), this conflict focused on Mary more in the Victorian period than it had in the past: "Representations of the Virgin Mary were the subject of lengthy and intense public discussion only in the nineteenth century" (19). Increased focus on the Virgin Mary in Protestant-Catholic debates may have been the product of increased focus on Mary within Catholic teaching and practice at this time. Cementing the long-held beliefs of many Catholics, the Roman Catholic Church officially affirmed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (that is, the idea that she was conceived without sin in the womb of her mother, St. Anne) in 1854; a sharp increase in Marian apparitions and a greater focus on Marian devotion also marked this period. Considering the heightened focus on the Virgin Mary in the nineteenth century, it is perhaps not surprising to find Victorian novelists using her as a basis for their fictional characters. What is more surprising is that Protestant novelists would draw on the Catholic vision of Mary—as sinless, powerful, and a mother not only to Christ but to all

Christians—not the Protestant vision of Mary—a good person, but neither sinless nor extraordinarily powerful.

Neither George Eliot nor Charlotte Mary Yonge was Roman Catholic, but both evoke Catholic Mariology in the novels they wrote in the 1860s. George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-63) is set in fifteenth-century Florence, where Roman Catholicism is not only the dominant religion but shapes all aspects of people's lives; the novel's titular character takes on the role of the Madonna in the eyes of others when she performs acts of charity. Shona Elizabeth Simpson identifies Romola's philanthropic work as "mothering," a connection cemented by the title the Florentines use for her: the "blessed mother" (Simpson 61). Romola's identification with the Virgin Mary as a mother to all—a distinctly Catholic understanding of Mary—is not what one might expect from an agnostic author who was raised Protestant. Even though Eliot later rejected orthodox Christianity, she retained many of the cultural assumptions and attitudes of Protestantism, and she was never anywhere close to being Catholic. When writing *Romola*, however, Eliot devoted herself to historical research, reading stacks of books on Italian history and culture, books that undoubtedly reflected the Catholicism of the time and the country. In spite of her Protestant youth and her subsequent agnosticism, then, Eliot had found something useful in Catholic thinking—the powerful figure of the Madonna—which she chose to use in her novel.

Charlotte Mary Yonge was also not Roman Catholic, yet she, too, incorporated the figure of the Madonna into her fiction. As Kim Wheatley maintains, the character of Ermine Williams in *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) is a wife, adoptive mother, and (implicitly) a perpetual virgin (909). Being both a virgin and a mother would of itself associate Ermine with the Virgin Mary in the context of the 1860s debates, and Yonge's novel plays up this association through its depiction of her general saintliness. It is perhaps less surprising for Yonge to adopt

the Catholic image of Mary as powerful, perpetually virginal, and sinless than it is for Eliot. As a Tractarian, Yonge was personally much closer to Catholicism than Eliot ever was. In fact, Herringer even groups "advanced Anglicans" (her term for high-church Anglicans, Tractarians, and ritualists) like Yonge in with Roman Catholics on the issue of Mariology, noting that many advanced Anglicans, while less vocal than Catholics on the subject, did actually believe in the sinlessness of Mary and advocated practicing limited forms of Marian devotion (14, 29). Given this context, it is understandable that Yonge would also incorporate Catholic understandings of the Virgin Mary into her fiction.

In both *Romola* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*, those characters who are identified with the Madonna exercise power and influence over others. Using Caroline Levine's understanding of the form of the hierarchy, I contend that this is because their identification with the Madonna associates them with her power and authority. The Virgin Mary occupies a high place in Catholic thought, just below Christ but above all the other saints and ordinary Christians; her place in this hierarchy gives her power, honor, and authority. While the form of the hierarchy may often be oppressive, and religious hierarchies certainly have often been oppressive, I attempt to show that hierarchies can sometimes actually work to empower women. In this case, Romola and Ermine are able to take advantage of the fact that one woman (Mary) holds a very high place in the Christian hierarchy, so identification with her also gives them the advantages of that high place. Specifically, Romola and Ermine both exercise power and influence over people in their communities, as the figure of the Madonna does over Christians who revere her; moreover, Ermine also exercises influence over the men in her life, especially her husband and adopted son, just as Mary exercises influence over Christ (which is why some

Christians pray for her to intercede on their behalf). This power and influence that Romola and Ermine have comes from their identification with the Madonna.

Some feminists criticize the cult of Mary for promoting passive, self-sacrificing, submissive femininity. In the second-wave feminist text *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), Marina Warner recounts her experiences growing up Catholic and being taught to venerate Mary and "to emulate her in thought, word, and deed: her chastity, her humility, her gentleness. She was the culmination of womanhood" (xx). Insofar as Mary is associated with submission, humility, and sexual purity and is held up as a role model for women more than men, the symbol of the Virgin Mary functions more to perpetuate misogynistic gender roles than to empower women. However, Warner goes on to examine the various roles and titles attributed to Mary: Second Eve, Maria Regina, Queen of Heaven, Bride of Christ, Mother of God, Mater Dolorosa, Intercessor, Co-Redemptrix. Many of these roles and titles connote power and authority, contrasting with the image of the humble, submissive maid of Nazareth.

Perhaps the quality most associated with Mary is her virginity, which when combined with her motherhood makes her a miraculous figure. In Warner's words, "There is no more matriarchal image than the Christian mother of God who bore a child without male assistance" (47). However, despite the power latent in the image, Warner argues that Mary's status as a virgin mother has been used in the West to hold women to impossible standards, obliged to maintain chastity at all times. The image of the Virgin Mary made virginity seem inherently virtuous, connecting sex with sin. However, this is not the only way to understand virginity. Warner mentions several pagan goddesses who were virgins, concluding, "their sacred virginity symbolized their autonomy, and had little or no moral connotation. They spurned men because they were preeminent, independent, and alone" (48). This more empowering understanding of

virginity is in line with Kimberly VanEsveld Adams's subsequent interpretation of virginity, an interpretation Adams applies to Mary and to Eliot's Romola (Adams 178). Warner also suggests that Queen Elizabeth I—the Virgin Queen—falls into this category, arguing that for Elizabeth, "her virginity principally indicated she could not be subjected or possessed" (48). However, Warner avers that Mary's virginity—and the virginity of those who imitate her—is not empowering. Because it has a moral connotation, Warner concludes that Mary's virginity falls into a different category than the virginity of pagan goddesses or of Elizabeth I and that this other category is oppressive. Warner rightly notes that Mary has been held up as an example of chastity for young women in ways that perpetuate the sexual double standard and unfairly punish female sexuality. However, given the abundant evidence that virginity can and has been empowering for women, I follow Adams in asserting that the figure of the Virgin Mary may well be co-opted as a source of empowerment, as happens in *Romola* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*.

Another title for Mary, which Warner discusses, is that of Queen. As Queen of Heaven, Mary rules in a celestial realm and also wields authority on earth. Warner argues that images of Mary as a Queen were used by the medieval church to reinforce their own power and authority. Because Mary was associated with the Church, images depicting her in queenly garb, including a crown and bejeweled clothing, paint the Church as glorious and powerful, as the (male) church leaders wanted to be seen. They wanted to depict the Church as a rival to the great medieval monarchs, and making Mary into the Queen of Heaven was one way to do that. "For by projecting the hierarchy of the world onto heaven, that hierarchy—be it ecclesiastical or lay—appears to be ratified by divinely reflected approval; and the lessons of the Gospel about the poor inheriting the earth are wholly ignored" (Warner *Alone* 104). In other words, the Church

was able to derive symbolic power from its association with Mary, the powerful Queen of Heaven, at the expense of the poor and vulnerable, including women. The image of Mary as Queen of Heaven also reinforced the power of actual queens, Warner says: "The honour paid Mary as queen redounded to the honour of queens, to the exclusion of other women" (104). Warner acknowledges that symbolic association with powerful images of Mary can result in actual power on earth, but she considers this a possibility only for those who are already in positions of power: popes, bishops, and queens.

Warner's insight is a powerful one, and I extend this possibility of empowerment through identification with the Virgin Mary to more than just the elites. In the decades following *Alone of All Her Sex*, Warner herself has also come to acknowledge that modern iterations of the cult of Mary often work to empower the weak and marginalized. In her 2012 article "Our Lady of the Counterculture," Warner examines ways in which the figure of the Virgin Mary has been co-opted by oppressed communities, including women, though typically outside the bounds of orthodox Roman Catholicism. The phenomenon Warner describes—people who are not Roman Catholic finding power in the symbol of the Madonna—seems to be reflected in *Romola* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*, since neither Eliot nor Yonge was Roman Catholic. However, both Eliot and Yonge invoke traditional Catholic images of Mary, drawing on conventional, orthodox images. This contrasts with the more unorthodox invocations of the Virgin Mary described by Warner ("Our Lady"). My analysis of *Romola* and *Clever Woman* extends Warner's argument by showing that Mary can be used as a symbol to empower women, even within the bounds of traditional Catholicism.

Hierarchy

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine acknowledges that of the four forms she discusses, hierarchies are most associated with injustice. "Hierarchies rank—organizing experience into asymmetrical, discriminatory, often deeply unjust arrangements. The most consistent and painful affordance of hierarchical structures is inequality" (82). Throughout this dissertation, I have been concerned with the unjust inequality of the gender hierarchy, which values men and masculinity above women and femininity (and forces everyone into one of those two categories). The usual alternative that is suggested as a replacement for the gender hierarchy is gender equality, which could subvert both the binary and the hierarchical nature of the current system. Like Levine, I and probably most literary critics endorse this suggestion: gender equality is certainly to be desired. However, gender equality has not been achieved at present, and it had certainly not been achieved in nineteenth-century England. For Eliot, Yonge, and their characters, the hierarchical binary of gender continued to impose its unjust order on their lives. In the absence of gender equality, they looked to other ways to disrupt the gender hierarchy and, in some cases, found it in alternative hierarchies. As Levine contends, "Hierarchies themselves can overlap and clash to surprisingly productive and emancipatory effect, producing political opportunities as well as tragic endings" (107). Even systems, structures, and forms that have oppressive affordances can still be co-opted by the poor and marginalized. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), Michel de Certeau examines how "consumers"—that is, the people upon whom systems are imposed—act upon and with the products and systems they receive. Far from being passive recipients, consumers take an active part in defining a culture by *how* they use the products (of various kinds) that are given to them. De Certeau gives the example of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, who were conquered

by Spanish colonizers and were forced to submit to an entirely new system of behaviors, rules, symbols, and beliefs. De Certeau points out that even though the indigenous peoples played no part in developing these systems that were imposed on them, they nevertheless played an active role because they "often *made of* the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept" (xiii). De Certeau's point is that forms can be co-opted by the marginalized for purposes that may be quite different from the purpose the forms' producers intended. Similarly, the form of the hierarchy, with all its capacity for oppression, can be and has been co-opted for more liberatory purposes. Levine examines multiple, conflicting hierarchical binaries in Sophocles's *Antigone*, showing how they disrupt one another. I am doing a similar thing with *Romola* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*, showing how the Catholic hierarchy can disrupt the gender hierarchy when women are identified with the Virgin Mary.

The word "hierarchy" actually originated as a word for describing spiritual and ecclesial structures. As Levine notes, the word "hierarchy," from the Greek words for "sacred rule," first came into use in the sixth century CE to describe tiers of angels and was later used to describe Church leadership. The word "hierarchy," of course, has since come to be applied to a wide variety of structures and systems both sacred and secular. But the type of hierarchy that I describe in this chapter, which extends from the lowliest Christian up through the clergy to the saints, to Mary, and finally to God, is actually very close to the original meaning of the word. What is interesting about the Catholic hierarchy (and I specify Catholic because most Protestants would usually have a different hierarchy) is that it elevates a woman, the Virgin Mary, to nearly the highest rank. For Catholics, Mary is not equal to God, but no one else is equal to her. Sinless,

perpetually virginal, and instrumental to the miracle of the Incarnation and thereby to redemption, Mary stands alone above all the saints and other Christians.

The Victorian Virgin

The latter half of the nineteenth century was characterized by a dramatic uptick in Marian devotions, especially on the Continent and in Ireland. Continental influence on English Catholicism also led to the installation of more statues of Mary in Catholic churches in England as well as increased Marian devotions generally. Marian devotional books sold well in Victorian England. For example, *The Foot of the Cross; or, The Sorrows of Mary* (1858) by Frederick William Faber was in its tenth edition by 1886 (Wheeler 231). The enthusiasm for the Virgin Mary was intensified by a series of Marian apparitions in France, the United States, Bavaria, and Ireland throughout the nineteenth century (231).

Marian devotions were practiced by Catholics more than by Protestants in the Victorian period. As Herringer explains, there were two basic ways that the Victorians might see the Virgin Mary: the Catholic way and the Protestant way (21). Catholics saw Mary as sinless, perpetually virginal, and a mother not only to Christ but to all people, and especially to nuns. Protestants perceived Mary as sinful (like all other humans except for Jesus himself), the mother of other children after Jesus, and at best a positive role model to subsequent Christians. Herringer sums up the debate as centering on the question of "whether, and if so to what extent, Mary embodied the three major characteristics most often asserted to be innately feminine: whether she was sinless, whether she remained a virgin; and whether she was a model mother" (20). Protestants and Catholics agreed that Mary was a virgin at the time that she gave birth to Jesus Christ, and they agreed that Christ himself was sinless, but they disagreed about Mary's sinlessness and

whether or not she remained a virgin after Jesus's birth. Mary's sinlessness, which was represented by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, was widely believed by Catholics and some Protestants even before it was made official Catholic dogma in 1854. The Church's official declaration of the doctrine, however, brought the issue to the forefront of public discourse, leading to celebrations from Catholics like Aubrey de Vere, whose *May Carols* (1857) describes Mary reaching down from heaven to put her stamp of approval on what Catholics had already believed, as well as criticisms from Protestants like Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, who claimed that the truth of Scripture had been "overlaid by papal error" (qtd. in Wheeler 234). Many Protestants perceived devotion to Mary as idolatry, leading to the derogatory term "mariolatry."

Between the extremes of Catholic devotion to Mary and Protestant disgust at such devotion lay Tractarians like Charlotte Yonge, who were sympathetic to the Catholic impulse to venerate Mary, but resisted being too adamant about Marian doctrines lest they unnecessarily make enemies within the Church of England. Many Tractarians encouraged a greater recognition of the Virgin Mary in Anglican practice. Yonge's mentor John Keble, for example, advocated praying to Mary in his poem "Mother Out of Sight" (1868), which he originally intended to include in his 1846 collection *Lyra Innocentium*. In "Mother Out of Sight," Keble suggests that we are all like children who suddenly realize that their mother has left the room as we look about for the mother we cannot see: the Virgin Mary. "So unforbidden may we speak / An Ave to Christ's Mother meek," Keble writes, concluding his poem by calling Mary a "spotless lily flower," hinting at her sinlessness. Even in his earlier collection *The Christian Year* (1827), which was enormously popular and widely read even outside Tractarian circles, Keble calls Mary "Mother undefiled" in his poem "The Purification," and in "The Annunciation of the

Blessed Virgin Mary," Keble writes, "Ave Maria! thou whose name / All but adoring love may claim," implying that while we ought not to love Mary with the adoration we give to Christ, she may rightly claim all other types of veneration and love (151). Yonge herself, following Keble's example, used her periodical *The Monthly Packet* to promote repeating the first half of the Hail Mary (Herringer 61). While Keble and Yonge may seem to be quite Catholic on this issue, their tendency to advocate caution or to back down in the face of Protestant critique speaks to their Protestant roots. Keble, for example, agreed not to publish "Mother Out of Sight" in *Lyra Innocentium* because others were concerned that its Mariology was too Catholic (Herringer 1). Yonge, too, justifies her promotion of the Hail Mary for Protestant readers of *The Monthly Packet* by arguing that it "was an anthem, not a prayer, and was to be taken as ascribing glory to Him who took our flesh upon Him, and did not abhor the Virgin's womb" (qtd. in Herringer 61). Yonge is responding to potential objections from Protestants that it is idolatrous to pray to Mary because it treats her as divine; Yonge's point is that reciting the Hail Mary is not actually praying to Mary but rather praising God for humbling himself enough to become a baby in Mary's womb. Keble and Yonge's writings on Mary encapsulate the Anglican concept of the *via media*—the middle road between Catholicism and Protestantism—by attempting to bridge the gap between Catholic and Protestant understandings of Mary.

Herringer suggests that Victorian portrayals of the Virgin Mary may reflect understandings of femininity and women's roles, since Mary was seen by so many people as a paradigmatic woman or an ideal woman. In Herringer's words, "In a culture intent on distinguishing genders, discussions about the Virgin Mary, especially in her role as the mother of Jesus, were a way for Victorians to articulate what characteristics were essentially feminine and which were reserved for the masculine" (3). For both Catholics and Protestants, the figure of the

Madonna became a battlefield for disagreements about religion and gender. Herringer's analysis of the connection between Mary and understandings of gender and gender roles lays the groundwork for my analysis of Madonna figures in *Romola* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*, when identification with the Madonna gives female characters a degree of power they would not have had without such identification.

The Visible Madonna in *Romola*

Most of George Eliot's fiction was set in a time earlier than her own, but *Romola* (1862-63) was her only true historical novel. Set in fifteenth-century Florence, *Romola* meets its eponymous heroine helping her blind father with his scholarship and follows her through a marriage to the dashing young Tito (who, in true Eliotic fashion, turns out to be a villain), a conversion experience, a life of service to the poor, and finally, after Tito's death, the establishment of a home with his mistress and their child. That Romola is a Madonna figure is taken for granted by most scholars of the novel (see, e.g. Simpson 58, 61, 63; Schiefelbien 176; Adams 164). There is substantial textual support for this interpretation, and I agree with the prevailing understanding of Romola as a Madonna figure.

It remains interesting that the foremost scholar on the nineteenth-century cult of the Virgin in Britain, Carol Engelhardt Herringer, simply disagrees with the prevailing interpretation of Romola as the Virgin Mary. Herringer argues that Romola is not to be understood as representing the Catholic Virgin Mary but rather as the Victorian feminine ideal: the "angel in the house." Some readers might struggle to see a clear distinction between how the Victorians perceived the Virgin Mary and how they perceived the ideal woman. Indeed, many scholars have identified the Madonna with Coventry Patmore's misogynistic feminine ideal, and certainly some

Victorian writers did portray Marian characters as sweet, passive, and selfless (Adams 89). However, as Kimberly VanEsveld Adams points out, the Madonna can be read in more ways than one; Adams points out that she can be a feminist symbol of free movement and power (90). Herringer also distinguishes between the Victorian feminine ideal and the Madonna, according more power to the latter. Firstly, Herringer contends, it is important to separate the Protestant Virgin Mary from the Catholic Virgin Mary. I agree with Herringer that such a distinction is important; too often scholars elide denominational differences among Victorians, grouping all Christians together. In the case of Mariology, Victorian Catholics saw Mary as much more powerful and purer than Victorian Protestants, who usually perceived Mary as an ordinary woman who just happened to be the mother of Christ. Herringer argues that the Victorian feminine ideal, the "angel in the house," resides on a continuum between the extremes of the Protestant Virgin Mary and the Catholic Virgin Mary. According to Herringer, Protestants actually spoke disparagingly of Mary, often as a reaction to the high praise Catholics afforded her. Somewhere in between folly and sinlessness, between weakness and power, lay the Victorian feminine ideal. It is this feminine ideal that Herringer sees in the character of Romola, not either of the images of the Virgin Mary. "Romola is more virtuous and more competent than the Protestant Virgin Mary, but weaker than the Catholic Virgin Mary, for she can never effectively challenge any of the men—her father, her godfather, Savonarola, Tito—who direct her actions" (23). In Herringer's view, then, Romola is not a Madonna figure because she lacks the influence over the men in her life that the Virgin Mary is presumed to have over Jesus.

While I agree with Herringer on many points and rely heavily on her analyses of the Virgin Mary in Victorian England, I disagree with her on her interpretation of *Romola*. In spite of the explicit connections drawn between the character of Romola and the figure of the Madonna

in the novel, Herringer concludes that Romola is *not* to be read as a Madonna figure because she does not have the power of the Madonna to influence the men in her life. It is true that Romola fails to control or even sway her father, her priest, or her husband. I suggest, however, that there is another kind of power attributed to the Madonna, and that Romola does have this kind of power. She has power over ordinary citizens—over the people of Florence and of the plague-stricken village—just as the Madonna has power over ordinary Christians who venerate her. The numerous Marian apparitions in Europe in the nineteenth century provide a good example of how devout Catholics would respond if they were to encounter Mary themselves. What becomes apparent is that they obey her. In 1830 in Paris, a nun called Sister Catherine of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul saw an apparition of the Virgin Mary, who instructed a medal to be made according to a pattern Sister Catherine saw, with a promise of grace accompanying those who wore the medal (Glass). The Madonna's orders were obeyed, and the medal was mass produced (Boss 487). Similarly, when two French children witnessed the Marian apparition at La Salette-Fallavaux in 1846, she gave them a message of repentance for the people and a secret to each of the children, which they later sent to the Pope (Clugnet). In both these examples, as in many other similar cases, Mary appeared with instructions or commands, which those who saw her obeyed. It is this pattern that we see replicated in *Romola*, when Romola gives commands to the citizens of Florence or of the plague-stricken village, and they obey her. While Romola may not have the kind of power that Herringe envisions, she certainly does have power that is similar to the Madonna's power.

It is helpful to think about Romola's identification with the Virgin Mary in the context of nineteenth-century Marian apparitions. For both Eliot and her Victorian readers, Marian apparitions were common enough that they would have heard of them and would have been

familiar with how those who saw Marian apparitions responded. Romola's interactions with the citizens of Florence and the surrounding region would likely have reminded the novel's first readers of the numerous Marian apparitions throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. When the people respond to Romola as they would to the Madonna, this would have clearly identified the novel's heroine with the Holy Virgin. This identification lifts Romola to a higher place in the religious hierarchy of her time than she would otherwise have occupied. As a Florentine woman, she had limited power, but as the Madonna, she can command and be obeyed.

The first story Eliot tells about Romola after her conversion is situated in the context of Marian devotion, and it explicitly identifies Romola with the Madonna. Florence is under siege, and the plague is wiping out its malnourished citizens. Eliot describes the people praying that the Virgin Mary would come to the city and rescue them: "When were they in more need of her pleading pity than now?" (371). Immediately after these prayers, Eliot describes Romola moving through the streets on her philanthropic mission, "clad in the simplest garment of black serge, with a plain piece of black drapery drawn over her head" (372). She encounters some workmen who are standing over a man lying on a stretcher, arguing over whether he is dead or just very ill. Romola gives the man some wine and revives him to apparently perfect health in a manner of seconds (372). This quasi-miracle, coming as it does directly after prayers to the Madonna, clearly identifies Romola with the Holy Virgin.

Not long after the incident in which Romola revives the half-dead man on the stretcher, in the chapter entitled "The Unseen Madonna," Eliot describes a procession passing through the streets of Florence with an image of the Madonna hidden beneath layers of veils and curtains. The following chapter, "The Visible Madonna" describes Romola's work among the poor. In the titles of the chapters, Eliot is clearly suggesting that Romola is the visible manifestation of the

Madonna. In case anyone missed this comparison, Eliot makes it even more explicit in that latter chapter, when the people of Florence utter praise to the Virgin Mary for ending the siege under which the city had been suffering: "The Holy Virgin be praised!' 'It was the procession!' 'The Mother of God has had pity on us!'" (387). Just a few lines later, the same people say almost the same thing to Romola: "'Bless you, Madonna! bless you!' said the faint chorus, in much the same tone as that in which they had a few minutes before praised and thanked the unseen Madonna" (387). Eliot explicitly draws a comparison between the figure of the Virgin Mary and the character of Romola, suggesting that Romola fulfills that role for the people of Florence.

Not only does Romola become a visible Madonna for the poor people of Florence generally, but also for the novel's primary representative of Florence's uneducated poor: Tessa, Tito's mistress. Some of Savonarola's followers encounter Tessa in the street, and she is wearing valuable jewellery that Tito had given her. They pressure her to donate the jewellery to the Church, but she does not want to. Just when Tessa is most consumed by "confused terror and misery," she is rescued by a woman she takes to be the Virgin Mary but who is, in fact, Romola herself (430). "Suddenly a gentle hand was laid on her arm, and a soft, wonderful voice, as if the Holy Madonna were speaking, said, 'Do not be afraid; no one shall harm you'" (430). As the narrative continues with Tessa's impressions of Romola, it repeatedly describes Romola's "heavenly face" and calls her "the heavenly lady" (430-31). Romola instructs the boys asking for the jewellery to leave Tessa alone, speaking "in a tone of mild authority" (431). Romola is described as "so lovely, and powerful, and gentle" (431). Tessa clearly perceives Romola as a Madonna figure, and the narrative repeatedly describes her in Marian language.

The fourth moment in the novel when Romola is most explicitly identified with the Madonna (in addition to countless small moments when she is addressed as "Madonna" or as a

mother) is towards the end of the novel, when she finds herself in a plague-stricken village. It is in this story that the connections with Marian apparitions are most apparent, for at first, she is actually mistaken for the Virgin Mary. Moreover, the circumstances of Romola's appearance in the village are similar to nineteenth-century Marian apparitions. As Herringer notes, Marian apparitions tended to occur "in areas that were facing a crisis, including social and economic crises, famine, disease, and crises of clerical authority" (509). Romola's arrival in a village devastated by the plague fits this description. Furthermore, her appearance to a village youth recalls Marian apparitions to "the marginalized whom the modern world...was leaving behind" (509). Having found a child alone in a house, his parents dead, Romola enters the village with the baby boy in her arms, like a Madonna and child. The teenage boy who first encounters her believes her to be the Virgin Mary, saying, "It is the Holy Mother, come to take care of the people who have the pestilence" (554). Romola does nothing to disabuse him of this idea, for when he asks, "Who are you?" she replies enigmatically, "I came over the sea" (554). Romola is described several times in this chapter as "the Blessed Lady" (558-62). She gives commands to the people "in a tone of encouraging authority" (557). Even when the people in the village realize that she is not *actually* the Virgin Mary, she continues to wield the authority of the Madonna. Eliot writes, "They were…under a peculiar influence forcing them to obey. The suspicion that Romola was a supernatural form was dissipated, but their minds were filled instead with the more effective sense that she was a human being whom God had sent over the sea to command them" (558). Because of her association with religious figures, Romola has a special authority; they believe she is a divine emissary, so they obey her, even when she tells them to go into the houses infected by plague in order to tend the sick and bury the dead. In

short, Romola has risen to a higher place in their religious hierarchy through her identification with the Madonna.

To cement Romola's identification with the Madonna, she ends the novel as a single mother. Following Tito's death, Romola finds his mistress, Tessa, who has borne Tito's son, and they set up a home together. Romola and Tessa become mothers to the child, whom Romola trains in scholarship. Celibate, mother to a son, Romola continues to bear a strong resemblance to the Virgin Mary even in the novel's epilogue. The repeated identification of Romola with the Madonna in multiple spaces—in Florence as well as the village—suggests that Romola does not merely don the Marian mantle for a temporary time or in just one place, as Nancy Paxton suggests (138). Rather, Romola rises through the Catholic hierarchy to take up permanent residence near the very top, on the rung occupied by the Madonna. The figure of the Madonna allows Romola to wield power and authority in ways she never would have been able to do under the secular patriarchy of her father.

The Tractarian Virgin Mother in *The Clever Woman of the Family*

Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) is most often understood by scholars to be "obviously conservative" and "antifeminist" (Wheatley 896, Fessler 47). This is the result of a reading of *Clever Woman* that understands the plot as punishing female intellectualism and activism while upholding patriarchal control and wifely submission. A closer look at the novel, however, reveals a nuanced critique of pride and self-sufficiency (qualities that are also condemned in male characters in Yonge novels, like Philip in *The Heir of Redclyffe*) and a celebration of female intellectualism and work ethic. In particular, an attention

to religion in *Clever Woman*—and especially to the figure of the Virgin Mary—reveals just how much Yonge values "clever women" and even female independence.

The protagonist of *The Clever Woman of the Family* is Rachel Curtis, an intelligent, active woman of twenty-five who is seeking to do some good in the world beyond the polite philanthropy of ladies. In the first chapter of the novel, in what Audrey Fessler calls "one of the most impassioned and compelling passages that Yonge ever wrote," Rachel bemoans her forced uselessness in the face of all the evil in the world (Fessler 47).

> "Here is the world around me one mass of misery and evil! Not a paper do I take up but I see something about wretchedness and crime, and here I sit with health, strength, and knowledge, and able to do nothing, nothing—at the risk of breaking my mother's heart! … I know that every alley and lane of town or country reeks with vice and corruption, and that there is one cry for workers with brains and with purses! And here am I, able and willing, only longing to task myself to the uttermost, yet tethered down to the merest mockery of usefulness by conventionalities." (Yonge 37-38)

Rachel's criticisms of gender roles situate her among mid-century feminists. Her efforts to make a difference in the world by establishing a charitable school also identify her with the feminist Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, which suffered from the unfortunate acronym S.P.E.W., a blunder Yonge parodies when Rachel names her organization the Female Union for Lace-maker's Employment or F.U.L.E. (Yonge 236). Since Rachel is clearly identified with feminist groups of the time, it is no wonder that scholars perceive the failure of F.U.L.E. and Rachel's subsequent humiliation as Yonge's indictment of feminism. However, this interpretation takes too narrow a view of the novel, focusing too exclusively on Rachel's story

and not enough on a significant supporting character, the novel's real clever woman: Ermine Williams.

Nearly all of Yonge's novels feature at least one disabled character, and in *Clever Woman* it is Ermine Williams, who is confined to a wheelchair after being badly burned in an accident as a young woman. Now approaching middle age, Ermine supports herself by writing articles on educational theory, which are published in the *Traveller's Review*, a periodical she also edits for a time when the main editor is away. Ermine is intellectual and independent, eager, like Rachel, to make a difference in the world. What distinguishes her laudable behavior from Rachel's foolishness is Ermine's greater maturity, wisdom, humility, and patience. Ermine is set up as the female role model in the novel, so perfect that Kim Wheatley repeatedly calls her "saintly" (902, 910). At the very end of the novel, when Rachel and her husband Alick Keith are discussing potential futures for their lively and intelligent daughter Una, they compare her to three different "clever women" in their extended family: Alick's sister Bessie, who was charming and likeable but ultimately selfish, manipulative, and foolish; Rachel, with her "plodding intellectuality" and well-meaning but misguided attempts at philanthropy; and Ermine, whose "intellect and brilliant power [are] no snares, but only blessings helping the spirits in infirmity and trouble, serving as a real engine for independence and usefulness, winning love and influence for good" (547). This conclusion to the novel makes it clear that Yonge is not suggesting that "cleverness" or intelligence in women is bad but rather that it must be used well. Ermine, whose intelligence has made her independent and useful, is the example of how it can be used well. Understanding the character of Ermine is key to understanding the purpose of the novel.

I propose that Ermine is a Madonna figure, and that it is from this identification that she gains some of her power. Like the Virgin Mary, Ermine is perpetually a virgin, even after her

marriage. Like Mary, Ermine has a son (her orphaned nephew, whom she raises). Like Mary, Ermine exercises power over the general public and those who look up to her. Like Mary, Ermine exercises influence over the men in her life, including her husband and adopted son. As a Madonna figure, Ermine takes on some of the power and independence that the Virgin Mary has by moving into Mary's place in the Christian hierarchy.

As is to be expected in a wholesome Victorian novel like *Clever Woman*, the fact of Ermine's virginity is never explicitly stated but rather implied. Through most of the novel, Ermine is unmarried, so her virginity is inferred from the fact that she is good and respectable, qualities Yonge would not attribute to a "fallen woman." The real question is whether or not Ermine remains a virgin after her marriage to Colin Keith. Kim Wheatley offers compelling reasons to think that she does. Ermine resists Colin's courtship, even though she is in love with him, because she feels that she would not make a good wife for him. Her motivations partly derive from a scandal associated with her brother; she does not want to tarnish Colin's good name. However, there is clearly another reason—one associated with her disability. Ermine tells her sister Alison, "A time will come that he will want the home happiness I cannot give. Then he will not wear out his affection on the impossible literary cripple, but begin over again, and be happy" (158). While Ermine's phrase "home happiness" might seem at first to be simply a reference to domestic bliss, the fact that she believes she cannot provide it for Colin suggests it may also serve as a euphemism for sex. This implies that Ermine will not marry Colin because she knows that she could not fulfill him sexually. Ermine's inability to bear children is made even more explicit.[12] At the start of the novel, Colin is the heir to his brother, Lord Keith, who

[12] Some readers may find it hard to believe that burns—even severe burns, such as Ermine has suffered—would make someone infertile. This would not be the first time that Yonge creates medically implausible scenarios in her novels. In fact, in this same novel, Bessie Keith dies by tripping over a croquet hoop, an amusingly implausible scenario which Wheatley calls "bizarre" (896). It is also commented on by Georgina Battiscombe, Clare A. Simmons, and Michelle Beissel Heath.

has no sons (185). In order to maintain the family, therefore, it is necessary for Colin to marry and have sons who can inherit the estate of Gowanbrae after him. Lord Keith visits Ermine to tell her to refuse Colin's offer of marriage because there is "so much depending on his making a satisfactory choice [in marriage]," alluding to the fact that Colin's marriage and children are necessary to keep the estate in the family (187). This all changes, however, when Lord Keith himself marries the young Bessie, who subsequently gives birth to a son before dying herself. Upon their engagement, Bessie says, "I do think Lord Keith will consent to the marriage [of Colin and Ermine] now" (294). After giving birth to her son, Bessie says of Colin, "Ermine must marry him now" (472). Lord Keith's marriage paves the way for Colin's and Ermine's, emphasizing that the objections to Colin's and Ermine's marriage were rooted in Ermine's inability to have children. This is also what Lord Keith writes in a letter to Ermine after the birth of his son Alexander, when he says that the objections to his brother marrying Ermine have been "in great measure removed by the present condition of my family"—namely, the birth of his son and heir (519). All of this makes it clear that Ermine's infertility is one of the main reasons that her marriage to Colin is considered unacceptable. Her comment about "home happiness" and her prediction of Colin's dissatisfaction implies that she is also concerned about his sexual fulfillment, which suggests that more than just being infertile, Ermine cannot have sex at all. As Wheatley argues, this is confirmed by events immediately following Ermine's and Colin's eventual marriage: "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). If one reads between the lines of the subtleties of respectable Victorian fiction, one can infer that Ermine is not only a virgin before marriage but also a virgin

afterwards. Like the Catholic Virgin Mary, who is perpetually a virgin, even after Jesus's birth, Ermine never relinquishes her virginity or the austere purity associated with it.

In addition to being a virgin, Ermine also becomes a mother. When Lord Keith dies, leaving his infant son Alexander an orphan, the baby is adopted by Colin and Ermine. Ermine thus becomes a mother to a son. As Wheatley says, "Little Alexander enables Ermine to stand in as a mother. She therefore keeps the positive associations that attach to sexual purity but also acquires those that attach to motherhood" (909). Ermine is a virgin mother, an unusual combination of characteristics that naturally and strongly associate her with Christendom's most famous virgin mother. Her adoptive son, as the new Lord Keith, is already an important person with a significant role in a position of power awaiting him, inviting comparisons with Mary's son, Jesus Christ. As a Madonna figure, Ermine has both the independence associated with virginity and the power associated with motherhood. Moreover, as Wheatley points out, these qualities combine with her general goodness to make her the most saintly character in the novel: "Ermine's combined status as perpetual virgin, permanent invalid, devoted wife, and adoptive mother befits her role as the true heroine of the novel" (909). The novel's final pages reveal Ermine as the true and most admirable clever woman of the family.

Ermine, in her role as a Madonna figure, wields power. She has two different types of power, both of which resemble power that the Virgin Mary has in Catholic Mariology. First, Ermine has influence over the general public and those who admire her (including Rachel) through her writing in the *Traveller's Review* (also sometimes called the *Traveller's Magazine*). This is akin to the influence that the Madonna has over those who venerate her. This is the type of influence that Romola has over the citizens of Florence and of the plague-stricken village. The second type of influence that Ermine has is the type that Herringer associates with the Catholic

Virgin Mary: influence over the men in her life. The practice of praying to Mary is based on the understanding that, as Christ's mother, she can influence him. Ermine also has extraordinary influence over the men in her life, especially Colin and their adoptive son. Ermine's influence over other people further identifies her with the Madonna and shows why such identification is valuable for her.

Generally confined to her own home because of her disability, Ermine's primary way of influencing those outside her immediate circle is through her writing. Ermine's essays on principles of education are published in the *Traveller's Review* under her pseudonym "the Invalid." Rachel greatly admires the Invalid's writings without at first knowing that Ermine is the author. When Rachel and her sister Grace visit Ermine towards the beginning of the novel, Rachel mentions a recent essay by the Invalid, asking Ermine, "Do you not think it excellent, and quite agree with it?" Ermine replies, "Yes, I quite agree with it," and Grace notices a curious expression on her face, which makes her wonder "whether she could have heard that agreement with the Invalid in the *Traveller's Review* was one of the primary articles of faith acquired by Rachel" (81). Of course, the curious expression on Ermine's face is really because she knows herself to be the author being praised, but Grace's reflection reveals how influential the Invalid's writings are on Rachel. Moreover, Rachel's lack of surprise when she finds that Ermine is also familiar with the essay shows that the fictional magazine is supposed to have a broad circulation, suggesting influence on others in addition to Rachel. Rachel clearly believes that Ermine's essays as the Invalid influence other people, for when she attempts an essay herself, she declares, "I should like to have as much influence over people's minds as that Invalid, for instance" (105). Ermine's influence extends even beyond her own essays when she takes the reins of the entire magazine for a time. She explains to Colin, "The editor of the 'Traveller' is travelling, and has

left his work to me" (166). Colin comments, "What an important woman you are, Ermine" (166). Yonge implies that the *Traveller's Review* and especially the Invalid's essays are widely read and admired, suggesting that Ermine's ideas on education influence many schoolrooms around the country. In this way, she exercises influence over ordinary people whom she does not know personally, just like the Madonna does over ordinary people who venerate her.

The other kind of power that Ermine wields is influence over those who know her personally, especially the men in her life. Ermine certainly possesses a great deal of influence over the young Lord Keith, her adopted son, for she becomes completely a mother to him. In the final chapter of the book, when the boy is a toddler, he leaves a game that he had been playing with the other children and returns to Ermine, saying, "I did not like it, — sit on mamma's knee," as he climbs onto his lap "as one who felt it his own nest and throne" (543). This moment not only shows the intimacy between the mother and son but also recalls images of the Madonna and Child, in which the infant Jesus sits on his mother's lap very much as if it were "his own nest and throne" (543). Raising her nephew gives Ermine the opportunity to put into practice the educational principles that she had previously described in her essays as the Invalid, exercising a great deal of influence over the boy who will one day become the head of the Keith clan.

Ermine also exercises influence over Colin Keith, her suitor and later husband. When he first comes to the town of Avonmouth and meets Rachel, he calls her "a detestable, pragmatical, domineering girl" (167). Ermine defends Rachel, saying that Rachel reminds her of herself: "I feel for her longing to be up and doing, and her puzzled chafing against constraint and conventionality" (168). Although Colin initially dismisses this as generosity on Ermine's part, he later begins to see the good qualities that Ermine had perceived in Rachel: "There is something in that girl, I perceive, Ermine," he tells her later. "She does think for herself, and if she were not

so dreadfully earnest that she can't smile, she would be the best company of any of the party" (169). Ermine suggests that he might make a point of getting to know Rachel in order to provide her with an intellectual match who can "help her to argue out some of her crudities" (169). Colin does as Ermine suggests and thereafter purposely seeks out Rachel for conversation. This is one example of Ermine's influence over Colin, whose opinion on Rachel gradually reverses as he learns to see past her annoying quirks and to respect her. Ermine's influence over the men in her life, in addition to her influence as the Invalid, allows her to direct many of the goings-on in Avonmouth without ever leaving her own home. The irony of her character is that, though physically disabled, she is one of the most powerful characters in the novel. Ermine's identification with the Madonna gives her an unusual degree of power for a woman, an affordance of occupying such a high place in the religious hierarchy.

Yonge came from a religious tradition that typically held the Virgin Mary in higher regard than other Protestants did. As previously noted, John Keble wrote quite explicitly about Mary's high place in the Christian hierarchy. Herringer explains, "Anglo-Catholics were especially interested in encouraging women's spiritual roles within the Established Church—for example by introducing sisterhoods—which makes it unsurprising that they praised the faith they believed Mary had demonstrated as the mother of Jesus" (14). In other words, Anglo-Catholics had a high view of Mary, and this was connected with their high view of women's roles. It would make sense for Yonge to link Ermine's importance in her community with Mary's importance in Christ's life and in the Christian faith. Yonge's use of the Madonna figure in *Clever Woman* is no surprise, given her background with Anglo-Catholicism. One might wonder why she was not more explicit. I would propose two main reasons. First, she was aware of the strong antipathy to the veneration of Mary that existed in many Protestant minds. Keble himself refrained from

publishing "Mother Out of Sight" in his lifetime because of other people's objections to what seemed to them to be "Romish" influence (Herringer 1). By keeping her allusions to the Madonna implicit rather than explicit, Yonge is following his example. The second reason that Yonge would have avoided explicit invocations of the Virgin Mary is her adherence to the Doctrine of Reserve. Most fully articulated in Isaac Williams's 1838 tract "On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge," the Doctrine of Reserve was a key part of the Oxford Movement. In her *Musings over the Christian Year* (1871), Yonge writes that the Doctrine of Reserve was about avoiding "all irreverent display and analysis of either holy things or private things" (90). One of the examples she gives of the Doctrine of Reserve is the Bible's omission of a description of "the most wonderful moments that earth has seen—the moment of the resurrection of our Lord, and the meeting between Him and His holy Mother" (91-92). Because she regarded the Virgin Mary as holy, Yonge would have been loath to be explicit about the Madonna in her fiction. She makes Ermine a Madonna figure by making her a saintly virgin mother with power over people both in and out of her immediate circle, but she refrains from more explicitly identifying her with the Madonna.

Conclusion

Protestant poet Robert Browning, who mocked Marian devotion in his 1873 poem *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country*, was a friend of Eliot's and famously praised *Romola* as "the noblest and most heroic prose poem" he had ever encountered (qtd. in LaPorte 164). What many people do not know is that this was merely Browning's opinion of the first part of *Romola*. In November 1863, he wrote to novelist Isa Blagden, "I told you what I thought of the two first volumes of Romola: as honestly, I add now that I was much disappointed in the third & last" (*Letters*).

Browning's disappointment in the latter portions of Eliot's novel may well have to do with its explicit Marian flavor, considering Browning's own distaste for the cult of Mary. Controversy over how one should view the Virgin Mary was important not only to Victorian religion but also to Victorian literature.

Browning was not alone in his mixed feelings about *Romola*; Yonge also took issue with Eliot's depiction of religious figures in the book. In February 1885, Charlotte Yonge wrote to Gertrude Mary Ireland Blackburne, a journalist and contributor to Yonge's magazine *The Monthly Packet*, that the quality of George Eliot's art diminished over time, as the influence of Christianity faded. "*Romola* fails—the book, I mean—because she had no religious power left wherewith to appreciate Savonarola, and so made him political. Of course Tito is one of her terrible successes" (*Letters*). Yonge finds Eliot's religious characters in her later fiction unrealistic and artistically unviable, while she admits that her irreligious characters (like Tito) are well-written. Because Yonge's own fiction was a product of her own personal faith, and characters like Ermine were created as role models for personally religious readers, she fails to perceive what religion means for Eliot. Eliot was not personally religious at the time that she wrote *Romola*, but she had a high regard for the role religion played in society. Therefore, religion in *Romola* functions more as a social structure than as a matter of personal experience. Toward the end of the novel, as Romola's trust in Savonarola begins to fade, she maintains the power associated with the Madonna. This suggests that for Eliot, the affordances of religious structures to empower women and improve the world do not have to end when personal faith ends. Eliot may have been unable to accept the supernatural claims of orthodox Christianity, but she had a great deal of faith in the power of people to produce positive change in the world. This

is the version of religion that we see in *Romola*: even without personal faith, Romola continues to fulfill the role of the Madonna and thus improve the lives of Tessa and her son.

In *The Clever Woman of the Family*, Yonge critiques efforts at social reform divorced from personal faith, as Rachel's disastrous attempts at philanthropy demonstrate. However, she still creates a very similar kind of character to Eliot's Romola: a virginal woman raising an adopted son, training him in knowledge and goodness. It is striking that Eliot and Yonge, who had quite different personal beliefs and made different lifestyle choices with regard to religion, would show religion functioning in similar ways in their literature. Yonge may critique Eliot's religious characters, but she is actually creating very similar characters in her own books. The similarities in the way that religion functions in Eliot and Yonge demonstrates the importance of tracing the movements and effects of religion—analyzing its function—rather than getting caught up in religion as identity or even religion as personal belief. Despite Eliot's and Yonge's differences in identity and belief, religion often functions in very similar ways in their novels. Both Romola and Ermine exert influence in their communities by donning the mantle of the Virgin Mary. Both Madonnas make the world around them a better place by their presence in it, and both Madonnas exercise a degree of power by their association with the Virgin Mary—power they would not have gained through the secular structures in their different worlds. In both fifteenth-century Florence and nineteenth-century Avonmouth, a Christian hierarchy that places Mary near the very top enables these women to harness some of that power. In both times and places, the prevailing cultural norm was for men to have power and for women to be subordinate. The secular hierarchy was patriarchal. Although some aspects of the religious hierarchy were also patriarchal (exclusively male priests, for example), other aspects were more empowering to women, namely the high place of the Madonna.

As Adams has contended, virginity can be read as submission to strict patriarchal sexual codes for women, but it can also be read as independence from men. Describing Romola's time in the plague-stricken village, Adams writes, "The heroine now belongs to herself alone (this is an older and alternative understanding of virginity, associated with the great goddesses), and she determines her own actions and allegiances, free from involuntary ties" (178). Virginity does not always represent the same thing, then. It may be used to oppress women, or it may liberate them. In the introduction to this dissertation, I showed that marriage may also give women power. This shows that certain forms, like the bounded whole of marriage, do not always have the same effects. In one situation, marriage may be more empowering, while in another situation, singleness may be more empowering. This is essentially the same point that Caroline Levine makes throughout *Forms*: forms that may seem to be simply oppressive, like bounded wholes or hierarchies, may actually turn out to be liberatory or progressive when they intersect with other forms in unique ways. Lauren Winner also makes a similar claim when she says that Christian practices may have both positive and negative effects, which are inextricably bound up in each other. In this chapter, I have examined two novels in which the gender hierarchy, which affords more power to men than women, intersects with the Catholic hierarchy, which affords a great deal of power to one woman: the Virgin Mary. I assert that these novels show how the Madonna's power can actually be harnessed by ordinary women, subverting the gender hierarchy. As Levine maintains, although hierarchy is the form most associated with injustice and oppression, even this form can be empowering for women under certain circumstances.

It has been well-documented that Christian structures, forms, and doctrines have been used to oppress women in various ways, from excluding women from positions of authority in the Church to obliging them to submit to abusive marriages. However, this is not the whole story.

It is the contention of this dissertation that some Christian structures, forms, and doctrines may also be empowering to women. It may be tempting to write off the whole of Victorian Christinaity as one, big patriarchal system, but to do so is to miss the ways that real Victorian women negotiated their world and their faith. Victorian women were almost all religious, and many of them found in their faith sources of power and freedom. George Eliot and Charlotte Yonge constitute particularly interesting examples because while Yonge was personally religious and Eliot was not, they both portray religious structures and forms, including the figure of the Madonna, as potentially empowering for women. Both authors understood what so many modern critics miss: Christian forms are full of affordances that women may use to their own advantage.

Conclusion

The contention of this dissertation has been that the Victorian novelists George Eliot and Charlotte Yonge both envision religious forms as empowering and liberating for women. My claim is significant because the liberating affordances of religious forms have not often been acknowledged by literary scholars; the general assumption in the field of Victorian literary studies (and many other subfields of English) is that all religion more or less exerts a patriarchal force and that Victorian Christianity stands as a representative example—if not an especially egregious case—of such a force. It has been my aim to complicate this understanding of religion and religious forms by examining the many different ways in which religion is seen to function in nineteenth-century realist fiction. Of course, I have not performed a primarily historical analysis, which would examine the lives of real women in the nineteenth century, but a literary analysis, which examines the lives of fictional women in novels.

While a historical study might introduce new ways of seeing the lives of Victorian women, a literary analysis offers something different: a new understanding of the Victorian religious imagination. Eliot's and Yonge's novels undoubtedly reflect, to a certain extent, the world in which the authors lived; we can, therefore, learn something about Victorian England from reading these novels. But more than that, they reflect the ways in which these authors thought—the possibilities they envisioned for the world. Eliot and Yonge both portrayed their own work as creative, not merely representational. Anna Kornbluh offers a similar theory of realist fiction. Contrary to the understanding of realist fiction as mimetic (as an imitation of the real world), Kornbluh understands realist fiction as constructive (as a blueprint for what could be). Both Eliot's and Yonge's own reflections on writing fiction reflect this understanding of realism: that writing realist fiction is the process of teasing out a thought experiment. Writing

realist fiction is world-making. Strikingly, considering their different religious identities, both Eliot and Yonge imagine worlds in which religion creates opportunities for women, including platforms for public speech, paths into the public sphere, and positions of authority and influence.

My reading of Eliot's and Yonge's novels, and in particular the comparisons that I draw between them, also challenges previous scholarly assumptions about the value of these novels. George Eliot has long been highly regarded by literary critics because of her perceived secularism. If, as twentieth-century critics tended to assume, the novel is an inherently secular genre (and this view is by no means uncommon even today), then Eliot becomes the quintessential novelist by being secular. From Basil Willey's *Nineteenth-Century Studies* (1949) and Rosemary Ashton's *The German Idea* (1980), which emphasize Eliot's relationship with German higher criticism, to U.C. Knoepflmacher's *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* (1965), George Levine's *The Realistic Imagination* (1981), and Suzanne Graver's *George Eliot and Community* (1984), Eliot has long been celebrated as a secular writer, forging a new path out of the darkness of religiosity. This makes her, as Colin Jager puts it, one of "the brave souls who pointed toward our secular modernity," one of the examples of exceptionalism and secularism that later literary scholars often held up as beacons of (secular) modernity (2). Jager's point is that the field of literary studies has often framed itself as a triumphalist history of the secular, the story of how religious myths gave way to secular novels. Today, however, many literary scholars are calling for a reevaluation of our relationship to the religious and the secular. This reevaluation extends even to those quintessentially secular writers like George Eliot. Scholars like Simon During and Ilana Blumberg have argued that Eliot's fiction may, in fact, be more religious than has hitherto been assumed. I follow these latter scholars by pointing out the ways

in which Eliot's fiction embraces religion, but I also take it a step further by comparing Eliot to the overtly religious Yonge.

While Eliot was being praised for being secular, Yonge was being criticized or ignored for being religious. Alethea Hayter notes that introductions to early-twentieth-century editions of Yonge's books often apologized for the religious tenor of the book (55). In 1944, Q.D. Leavis venomously accused Yonge of "living only in the ignorant idealization projected by an inhuman theory" (qtd. in Hayter 55). This "inhuman theory" is, of course, Leavis's description of Anglicanism. The religiosity of Yonge's fiction was a barrier between her and scholars, and for many years, Yonge's work failed to receive much critical attention at all. Understanding the novel as inherently secular both raises supposedly irreligious writers like Eliot onto pedestals and consigns explicitly religious writers like Yonge to oblivion. My dissertation intervenes by showing that Eliot and Yonge actually depict religion in similar ways. This shows that Eliot's work is perhaps not as secular as had previously been assumed, and it shows that Yonge's religion may not be as problematic as had previously been assumed. Rather than using religion to bolster her own conservative views on gender, Yonge often imagines religion functioning more as a feminist force than an antifeminist one.

It is easy to see why Victorian Christianity has been understood as being overwhelmingly oppressive to women. Certainly, many Victorians articulated sexist claims and perspectives, which they often justified on religious grounds. Various atrocities were committed against women in the name of religion, including requiring women to remain with abusive husbands because of Christian teachings about wifely submission and the sin of divorce. These facts, which are so horrifying to feminists, may seem to represent the entire picture of Victorian

Christianity, so we stop looking. To many scholars, Victorian Christianity is most easily dealt with (and dismissed) as a simple, patriarchal monolith.

As I have worked to add nuance and complexity to this picture of Victorian Christianity by pointing out the liberating possibilities in religion, I have found Caroline Levine's formalism to be particularly helpful. By tracing the forms that religion takes in the lives of women in Eliot's and Yonge's novels, I have been able to show how the affordances of these forms often created opportunities for women. To see how Levine's theories help illumine the feminist possibilities of religion, take my example from Chapter Two, in which I show how the network of the Church empowers Ethel May. The structure of the Church of England—and perhaps, especially, its connectedness and its ability to reach into every home and hamlet—may seem like an imposing, threatening institution. How are women supposed to escape from oppressions committed in the name of religion if the Church has Sunday schools and curates in every village, which are all connected to one another and to a centralized authority structure? However, when one applies Levine's form of the network to the Church of England, it allows one to consider the various affordances of this form. The affordance of movement across boundaries—the ways in which the form of the network collides with the form of the bounded whole—makes it apparent *why* Ethel is able to achieve a degree of comparative freedom in her philanthropy work. It is because of the Church. Specifically, she is able to venture into the public sphere and accomplish her goals because she is working under the aegis of an institution that takes the form of a network. The precise mechanisms that give Ethel this freedom come into focus when Levine's theory is applied.

This dissertation provides an example of how Levine's formalism can be applied to realist novels. Since the 2015 publication of Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy,*

Network, the book has received a lot of attention from literary scholars, many of whom are eager to embrace her approach to form. I count myself among these scholars who find Levine's conception of form exciting. It encompasses the unique purview of literary studies—literary form—as well as the political structures that give our work real-world relevance. Like Levine, I care deeply about social justice and equity, which is why I read literature through a feminist lens. I also think that realist fiction has something unique to offer beyond just being a window into a historical moment; as Kornbluh demonstrates, its unique offering is that it is a blueprint for how things could be or could have been. Levine's theory of forms offers a way to connect the political issues that matter to me and to many literary scholars with the unique affordances of literary genres like the realist novel. My dissertation builds on Levine's work to make this connection, showing how the realist novel creates new possibilities in the religious lives of women.

This work also contributes to a growing body of research demonstrating the nuances and complexities of Victorian religion in relation to literature. I participate in the "religious turn" in Victorian studies, a move to take religion seriously and to examine Victorian religion with an eye for nuance and variation. Far from being a simple, monolithic thing, Victorian religion was varied and complex, as is reflected in the literature of the period. While it may seem that the overwhelming ubiquity of Christianity compared to other religious or irreligious perspectives means that Victorians all thought alike on religious issues, the fact is that religious questions formed the basis for impassioned debates that concerned not only scholars and clergy but ordinary people. As J.B. Priestley points out, by the 1850s, religious debates were the hot button issues of the day: "For years now—indeed, ever since the Oxford or Tractarian Movement began in the 1830s—theology and doctrinal differences had provided news, together with quarrelsome tracts and angry letters to *The Times*, for educated readers" (122). In light of the degree of

complexity and controversy that characterized religious issues for the Victorians, it is appropriate that scholars are beginning to pay more attention to these nuances. This dissertation builds on and contributes to ongoing conversations about religion in literature, characterized by the work of such scholars as Kirstie Blair, Ilana Blumberg, Lori Branch, Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, F. Elizabeth Gray, Amy M. King, Mark Knight, Charles LaPorte, Timothy Larsen, Emma Mason, Joseph McQueen, and Cynthia Scheinberg.

I am particularly indebted to the approach of Emma Mason, whose work on Christina Rossetti and Tractarian ecology complicates assumptions about the ecological perspectives that Christianity engenders. Today, conversations about the relationship between Christianity and ecology are often overshadowed by the climate change denial of many conservative American evangelicals, making it easy to assume that Christianity is inherently anti-environmentalist. In *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (2018), Mason challenges this assumption by investigating how Christina Rossetti's Tractarian faith informed her ecology: "It is sometimes a surprise to modern readers that many Victorian proto-environmentalists were Christian. This is in no small part due to a mainstream critical refusal to attend to the specifics of the history of Christianity and ecology" (2). Mason disrupts assumptions about the relationship between Christianity and politics by pointing out that Tractarianism was actually quite politically progressive (40), even feminist (53-54). I continue Mason's work by showing the feminist affordances of Christianity, including (in Yonge's novels) Tractarianism specifically. I agree with Mason that it is necessary to attend to the nuances and details of Victorian Christian theology rather than simply dismissing it all as regressive. Within the field of Victorian literary studies, the recent increase in attention to religion must continue; religion is more complex than many modern readers might think, and it merits further study.

If I am being perfectly honest, one of my ulterior motives in making the arguments I am making is to attempt to persuade my readers to read something by Charlotte Yonge if they have not or to read more of her work if they have already perused something by her. By studying Yonge's novels alongside George Eliot's, I aim to show that Yonge's work stands up to the same type of analysis that is applied to Eliot. Eliot is one of the most studied Victorian authors and deservedly so: she is also one of the best. But Yonge's novels, which have been much more neglected, also provide material for interesting and fruitful analysis. Without a doubt, there is an enormous gap between the amount of scholarship on Eliot and the amount of scholarship on Yonge. Searching three major databases of academic journals, one finds 2,337 peer-reviewed journal articles on Eliot or her works published since 1960; in the same period of time, just 103 articles on Yonge and her works were published.[13] There are almost twenty-three times as many articles on Eliot as Yonge. However, scholarship on Yonge is soaring in a way that scholarship on Eliot is not. Although just twelve articles were published on Yonge in the thirty years between 1960 and 1990, ninety-one articles were published in the following thirty years, from 1991 to 2021. More than half of all articles on Yonge have been published since 2010; by comparison, less than a third of all Eliot articles have been published since 2010. As figure 1 shows, the number of articles published each decade on Eliot is steadily increasing; this means that there were more articles published in the 2010s than in the 2000s and more articles published in the 2000s than in the 1990s. The

[13] The numbers reported in this section, including those in figures 1 and 2, were derived from searches performed on February 23, 2022 in three databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, and MLA International Bibliography, in which search tools were used to limit the search to peer-reviewed academic journal articles with either the author or the title of one of their works listed as a subject. Search tools limiting results by publication date were used to determine how many articles were published within certain years.

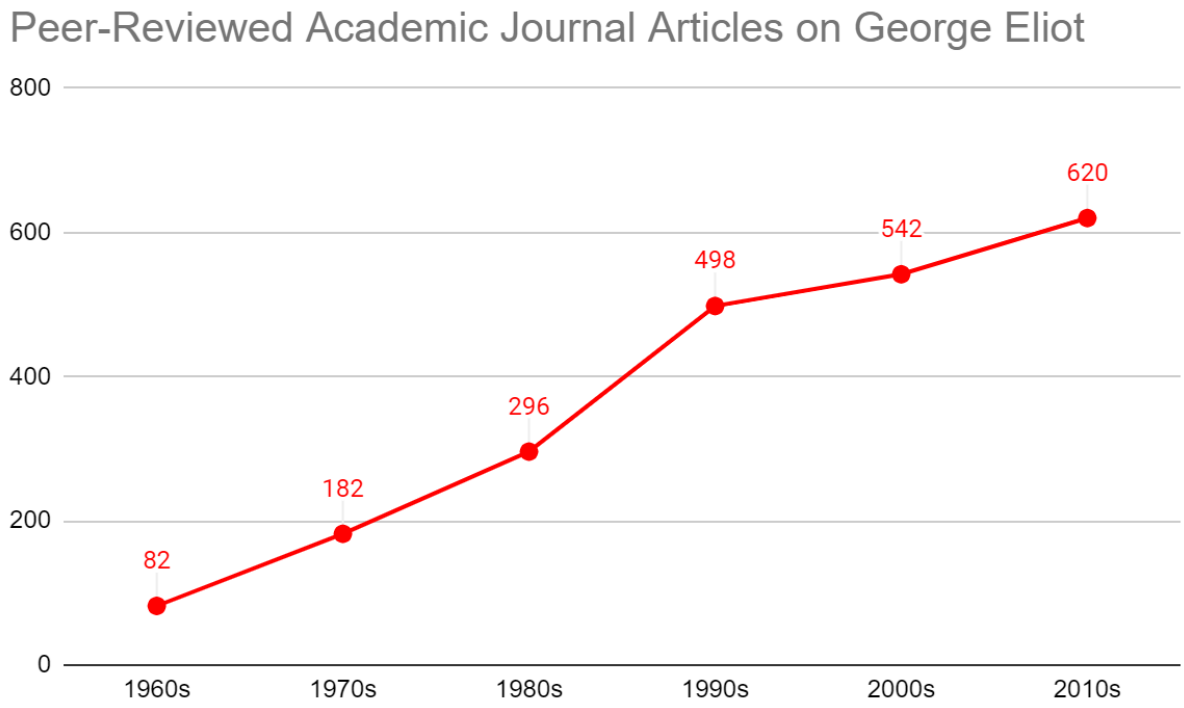

Fig. 1. Graph showing the number of peer-reviewed academic journal articles on George Eliot and her works published each decade.

numbers in the graph are not cumulative.[14] Eliot seems to be increasing in scholarly popularity. However, a comparison with figure 2, which shows the same data but for Charlotte Yonge, reveals a marked difference. While both Eliot and Yonge are gaining in popularity among scholars, Yonge has a much steeper upward trajectory. Between the 1990s and the 2000s, for

[14] This is one reason that I have not included the 2020s in the graph. Because the current decade is not yet over, there are significantly fewer articles published in the 2020s than previous decades—just 117 on Eliot and three on Yonge so far. Including the current decade in the graph would show a significant drop, which might imply that both authors are losing popularity, but actually this is because we are only two years into the decade. If 117 articles are published on Eliot every two years for the rest of the decade, the 2020s would have 585 articles on Eliot, a slight drop from the 2010s. If three articles are published on Yonge every two years for the rest of the decade, the 2020s would have fifteen articles on Yonge, also a drop from the previous decade. I explain these apparently low numbers by surmising that some recent articles are not yet available on the databases. Because of these factors that skew data on very recent articles, I have chosen to use 2019 as the last year taken into account in the graphs.

example, articles on Eliot increased by just 8.84%, while articles on Yonge doubled in the same period. Similarly, between the 2000s and the 2010s, articles on Eliot increased by 14.39%, while

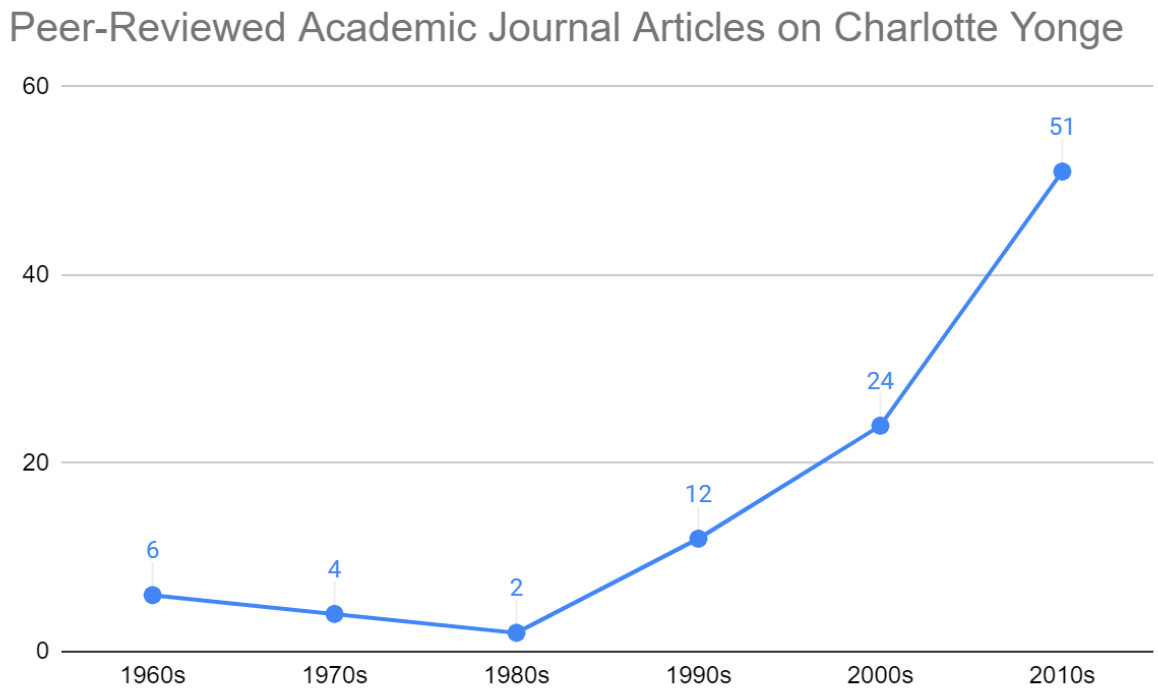

Fig. 2. Graph showing the number of peer-reviewed academic journal articles on Charlotte Mary Yonge and her works published each decade.

articles on Yonge increased by 112.5%. These numbers show us that while Yonge still does not enjoy the degree of scholarly attention accorded to Eliot, she is enjoying much more scholarly attention than she did forty years ago. I applaud this increase and enjoy participating in it! I urge my readers, especially those who study Victorian novels or Victorian religion, to consider roles which Yonge's work might play in their research. She was, after all, one of the most popular and influential novelists of the Victorian period and arguably the most popular and important religious novelist of the period.

Yonge is also emblematic of a larger group of Victorian women writers who wrote religious fiction and poetry, whose work was neglected in the early twentieth century because of

patriarchal canon development and in the later twentieth century because of a distrust of religion by many feminist critics. As F. Elizabeth Gray, Charles LaPorte, Emma Mason, and others have pointed out, it is imperative on feminist grounds to take seriously religious literature of the Victorian period because much of it was written by women. Victorian women were, in general, more religious than Victorian men. As Lydia Murdoch shows, not only did women attend religious services in greater numbers than men, religion was also an important part of what it *meant* to be a woman in Victorian England (40). Religiosity, morality, and spirituality were important components of Victorian conceptions of femininity; many women found their identity in their faith. It comes as no surprise, then, that women were also more likely to write religious poetry and fiction than their male counterparts. Taking women seriously, then, requires taking religion and religious literature seriously. Gray's examination of women's religious poetry demonstrates how women contributed to theological conversations. In her words, "To abstain from engaging critically with Christian-themed poetry is to surrender the most salient literary position from which women could speak" (26). Religion granted women a platform from which to speak publicly, as we saw in Chapter One, and it similarly provided them an avenue from which to write with authority. Yonge had an influential voice in the religious conversations of her time because she wrote literature. As a feminist, I am convinced that Yonge's literature, as well as other religiously-themed literature of the period, must be read and studied with as much scholarly rigour and respect as literature with less religious content.

My Story

At the end of his book *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (2019), Mark Knight tells his own story of faith and how it relates to the book. Because of the personal

dimension of Evangelicalism, Knight finds it particularly pertinent to disclose his own personal investment in his research. We are, after all, personally invested in the books we study and the arguments we make—more personally invested than we might care to admit. As an example of how scholars might be personally affected by the books we read, Knight mentions Jo, the poor street urchin in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53), recounting how a colleague had told him that while we as literary scholars might cry while reading about Jo's death, "it would not do to admit this in our public scholarship. And we would risk sounding even more gullible and naïve were we to start talking about the difference those tears had made to the way we think about our lives" (163). I have certainly cried while reading Eliot's and Yonge's novels (as another fictional Jo—Louisa May Alcott's heroine in *Little Women* (1869)—also does while reading *The Heir of Redclyffe*), and at the risk of sounding gullible and naïve, I admit that these novels have changed the way I think about my life. As they change the way I think about my life, my life also changes the way I think about the novels. My research and personal life thus exchange influence in a symbiotic relationship that I find fruitful on both ends.

One reason why, in scholarly circles, we might be unwilling to admit the ways in which our personal and professional lives intersect is that scholarship is supposed to be objective. Like a scientist conducting experiments and recording the results, our work is understood as being an unbiased search for truth. In more recent years, however, scholars in the humanities have begun to point out the myriad ways in which our thinking is always biased. Each of us is positioned in a particular body, in a particular place, in a particular time, with particular experiences, and all of these things shape how we see the world, other people, and our research. Even as we work to fight the harmful biases that have been instilled in us by a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist society, we must acknowledge that we cannot expunge all biases from our psyches. We

cannot remove all lenses and see the world or the books we study in a purely objective way. We are always affected by our positionality. In the interests of honesty, integrity, and good faith, all we can do is articulate our positionality, laying our biases on the table.

When addressing religious topics, as I am doing throughout this dissertation, it is particularly taboo in academia to shift into a more personal gear. As Lori Branch has recently pointed out, scholarly culture seeks to elevate itself above what we might perceive as the unintellectual squabbles and perspectives of religion, but in doing so, this culture ritually reinscribes its own secular orthodoxy. Branch suggests that literary scholars need to break free of the silencing bonds of our self-satisfied distance and acknowledge religion where it exists: "We are all already talking and teaching about religion and secularism implicitly; I'm suggesting we begin to do so explicitly" (8). I am persuaded by Branch's argument, and I agree with Knight and Mason that the personal aspects of religion have something valuable to offer to intellectual work.

With all of this in mind, I choose to relate my own story of faith, feminism, and my motivation to make this argument. The religious lives of women is not simply a matter of objective, academic inquiry for me; it is my own life. I am a white, middle-class American woman who was raised in a conservative Evangelical Christian home. I attended a Christian university, where I double majored, earning degrees both in English and in Biblical and Theological Studies. My theological education led me to question some of the religious beliefs and practices with which I had been raised as I realized that they were not the only Christian perspectives. The anti-Catholic prejudice that had been instilled in me began to melt away as I discovered that on many points, the Roman Catholic Church held to the same doctrines that Christians had always believed since the time of the Church Fathers, while American Evangelicals held to doctrines that had been invented in the last couple hundred years by Western

theologians. When I realized that conservative Evangelical ways of thinking were not the only Christian ways of seeing the world, I began to explore other Christian faith traditions. During my first year of graduate school, I attended Catholic mass for a year while also attending an Evangelical church.[15]

Around that same time, my mother gave me a copy of Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865); it was the first of Yonge's novels I had ever read. While *Clever Woman* itself did not have a significant impact on me at the time, it did lead me to read other Yonge novels, which did influence me. Although, as I have explained, I was already drifting in a more high-church direction, Yonge's fiction certainly encouraged me to continue on that path. Yonge depicts pious Tractarians as good people who also find meaning and satisfaction—and often happiness, too—in their lives, which are characterized by a commitment to the Church, self-reflection, humility, and sacraments. Yonge certainly wrote for the purpose of persuading her readers toward a Tractarian version of Christianity, and in my case, she was at least partly successful. When I began my PhD program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I began attending a Presbyterian church, which, compared to the Evangelical churches I had attended in the past, seemed very high-church because there was a set liturgy that included elements spoken aloud by all the congregants in unison (e.g. the Lord's Prayer), and they sang hymns accompanied by a choir and organ. In Seattle, I also became involved with a group of Christian graduate students called the Graduate Christian Fellowship, where I made friends who were of various high-church traditions, including an Anglican and a Lutheran. My Lutheran friend

[15] Some readers may wonder whether my questioning of my upbringing ever led me to question Christianity generally or explore non-Christian religious or irreligious perspectives. As an intellectual, I certainly considered arguments for and against Christianity, and I have always enjoyed learning about other religions, but I never seriously considered giving up my Christian faith entirely. Based on both external evidence and personal experience, I am deeply convinced in the basic tenets of the Christian faith—in particular, the existence of a good God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For this reason, while I have been in doubt about what *kind* of Christian I wanted to be, I have never doubted that I wanted to be a Christian.

eventually became more than a friend, and when we got married, I converted to Lutheranism. I feel very satisfied now with my membership in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, which has a high view of the sacraments and a traditional liturgy. I emotionally and intellectually embrace this tradition in part, I am sure, because of the influence of Charlotte Yonge.

Thus far, I have told the story of my faith, but at the same time that I was shifting from an Evangelical faith to a more high-church Christianity, I was also shifting from the conversative view of gender with which I was raised to a feminist perspective. My feminism started at university, when I read Sanda M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). These texts, along with other feminist texts that we read in my first literary theory course, opened my eyes to the continued existence of the patriarchy and the continued oppression of women, even after women's suffrage. When I became a feminist, I began to feel resentful about aspects of my religious upbringing that I felt perpetuated sexism. I began to realize that girls' and women's Bible studies in which I had participated almost always covered the book of Esther, the book of Ruth, or Proverbs 31 (about the ideal wife). Were these the only parts of the Bible that pertained to women? Were rigorous theological conversations considered too challenging for women? Was wifehood the one vocation that mattered for women? Like many women in the Victorian period, I found freedom and empowerment in high-church traditions, which tend to provide the same kind of religious education to all people, and which value "feminine" virtues like humility and gentleness in all people. While I have experienced the sexist sides of religion, I have also experienced the empowering sides. My own experience with faith and feminism impells me to examine the ways in which Victorian women writers—even irreligious ones like George Eliot—also might have

depicted religion as liberatory. I cannot deny that my motivation to make this argument is, in part, personal, even as I have worked to make arguments that will be persuasive to all readers.

Both George Eliot and Charlotte Yonge believed that they could influence their readers to be better people through their novels. Not all literary scholars would be ready to admit how much we might take fiction like this to heart, but Eliot and Yonge were not completely mistaken in their goals for their writing. They sought to create blueprints for how the world could be, and many of their readers—even those of us who make it our career—follow their blueprint to build a world that is, perhaps, a little more sympathetic and humble. But the influence goes both ways. Eliot and Yonge are obviously not affected by what scholars say about them now that they are dead, but their novels, as they live in the cultural imagination, are affected by what we say about them. In particular, the way citizens of the twenty-first century conceive of these novels is shaped by how they are discussed. As literary scholars, we have volunteered to take the lead in shaping conversations about literature, so it is also our responsibility to shape those conversations responsibly. Eliot and Yonge wanted to make good people of their readers. Let us also be good readers of their novels.

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