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 **Realism and Parable in Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe***

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Realism and Parable in Charlotte Yonge's  
*The Heir of Redclyffe***

*Susan E. Colón (bio)*

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"[T]he parable of actual life led [...] into the higher truth."

—Charlotte Yonge, *More Bywords*

Critics writing in the vein of the "ethical turn" in literary studies have fruitfully explored the ethics of reading, including how narratives construct ethical relationships with readers. Andrew Miller's provocative and important *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* uncovers the ways the realist novel's exploration of epistemology and perspective serves an ethical aim. The Victorians saw ethical action as following from one's perception and interpretation of people and situations, so the novel's experiments in third-person and second-person perspectives contributed to the formation of ethical consciousness. In this view, the novel became a sort of therapy for the ethically problematic paralysis of the will that followed from the Victorian period's generalized skepticism about what one can know of others, the world, and even oneself. The principal component of this therapy is perfectionism, or self-improvement by the imitation of an exemplary other. For Miller, Victorian novels are characteristically perlocutionary: "successful only if [they] prompt a response" (17).

Curiously, the criticism of the ethical turn has not yet addressed itself to the narrative subgenre of parable. Miller suggests that perfectionism, the **[End Page 29]** Victorian drive for ethical self-improvement, entails not the reproduction of stable moral codes, but rather the confrontation of those who are under such codes with "a therapeutic awakening, their eyes and hearts unsealed, themselves unlaced from the convenient harness of rules made in the past and made by others" (98). Such a therapeutic awakening from conventional morality is, I contend, the signature achievement of parables. In fact, a brief consideration of the traits of parables—generally given as riddling paradox and reversal encompassed in a mundane realistic narrative (**Champion 16**)—reveals strong correspondences with Miller's understanding of the ethics of reading. The unexpected reversals which are a salient feature of ancient and modern parables induce skepticism toward conventional paradigms of moral conduct and human nature. Parables are the ultimate

perlocutionary literary form: their riddling quality demands interpretation, and their interpretation usually entails the reader's sudden awareness of his or her own ethical limitations. The interpretation of the parable is made complete when the parable's reader or hearer responds to the command to "go and do likewise."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the basic ethical function that Miller ascribes to the Victorian *bildungsroman* is aptly and economically captured in the parable.

Parable-in-literature studies in the past have typically been undertheorized and dogged by misconceptions. In most cases, literary critics use the term "parable" quite loosely as a synonym for allegory, exemplary tale, or fable. In what follows, I take the biblical parable form as the model for a theory of the genre of parable that is both more specific and more encompassing than these casual usages: more specific because the parable's defining feature is a particular ethical relationship with the reader, and more encompassing because, as I see it, this relationship can be established in genres that are quite unlike the brief fables, allegories, and exemplary tales with which parables are commonly associated. Specifically, I will argue that nineteenth-century realist novels, in spite of their length, verisimilitude, and multi-plot complexity, can be parables. In particular, I will examine the case of Charlotte M. Yonge's hugely popular novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). This novel is both a retelling of a biblical parable—Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18—and a modern parable in its own right. In fact, viewing the novel through the generic lens of parable resolves the most persistent problems critics have raised about this text, including the tension between didacticism and realism and the widely unpopular ending. To understand this novel, I argue, **[End Page 30]** we must grasp its indebtedness to the biblical model of the parable genre, and we must historicize Yonge's specifically Tractarian rendering of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican.

Charlotte Yonge (1823–1901) was the leading novelist of the...

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