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How to Keep Your Home Safe in Victorian Print: Charlotte Yonge's Explosions and Other Domestic Dangers

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In her early novel, *Scenes and Characters; Or, Eighteen Months at Beechcroft* (1847), Charlotte Yonge details a sheltered upper-middle-class nursery and schoolroom as a place of daily occupation and often of boredom. Suddenly, an explosion occurs, complete with a “bright flash and a cloud of smoke” (240). At first sight, this accident seems simply a punishment for the disobedient child who lights a match, but it really exposes the negligence of the elder sisters in charge of the motherless household. This domestic crisis crystallises what the book is about, laying bare domestic mismanagement and thereby interpolating instructions, while forging a more sustained narrative about heroism at home. Heroic action forms a nonetheless unexpected climax of the episodic sketches that, Yonge maintained in retrospect, lack a plot. The explosion, then, reshapes the initial structure, ironically belying Yonge’s statement in the preface that she objects to tales that need “half a dozen murders and an explosion” (ix). Nobody is killed in the accident, it is true, and Yonge even eschews the symbolism of lingering scars. Instead, she addresses inconveniences and compromises, while nonetheless presenting heroic acts as an appropriate subject of domestic narratives. Yonge balances opportunities for being heroic in an everyday setting with a pointedly unsentimental portrayal of daily chores, which are as important as they are dull and indeed “humdrum” (v). While offering these opportunities, however, domestic accidents simultaneously destabilize ideals of the home as intrinsically safe. The seldom discussed functions of such accidents in fiction urge us to recalibrate our understanding of Victorian representations of domestic space as the site of labor, risk, and changing concepts of

their management. Precisely by lingering over the quotidian, Yonge's domestic chronicles dramatize risk-taking and risk-management at home.

<2>Accidents that happen within the home upend the core values of Victorian domesticity, which are premised on its exemption from danger. The culturally pervasive ideal of the home as a place of safety as well as comfort formed a powerful promise. In John Ruskin's much-cited words, in its ideal form, home presents "the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division" (2). Yet, Ruskin swiftly turned this promise into an injunction. Perhaps paradoxically, so that it can fulfil its role as shelter, a household needs itself to be protected: "In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, ... it ceases to be home" (Ruskin 2). If much of the prescriptive material on domestic management agreed that home should be a sheltered (and therefore sheltering) space, practical instructions also acknowledged that its realization involved much work. This elevated homemaking in the culture of the time, and yet domestic labor needed to be largely invisible in order to secure the home as a place of rest, as free from any form of work. In the course of the century, advice books began to proliferate, showing not only that domestic management had to be learnt, but also that its practices could be debated in a competitive market for print-based instructions. By contrast, most fiction sentimentalized homemaking. Victorian novels generally depict it as a form of emotional care, if they do not entirely move hands-on household arrangements behind the scenes. A closer look at domestic accidents in popular fiction, however, constructively complicates the way we commonly think of Victorian domesticity and the role that novels, as the most influential media of the time, played in its construction.

<3>Narratives that, like Yonge's domestic chronicles, detail housework and examine its difficulties reject its sentimentalization. Frequently, they move hazards as well as inconveniences into the foreground. Running a home can be hard and dull, monotonous and repetitive, and at the same time, full of risk. A domestic accident illustrates this risk-factor, while generating an opportunity for heroic intervention, as it does in *Scenes and Characters*. In subsequent novels, Yonge nevertheless cautions against applying such narrative structures to real-life scenarios. A domestic crisis, as facilitated by dangerous accidents or illnesses, does not always work as the expected catalyst. Thus, Yonge recycles the same material in *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) to explore the lifelong aftereffects of an accidental explosion in the nursery. Yonge thereby redefines domestic heroism as daily care, while further developing the overarching theme of domestic mismanagement. Here the explosion results in permanent disability and is, in several interlaced subplots, paralleled by child abuse and a mismanaged epidemic. Aware of their symbolic potential, Yonge

nonetheless grounds her representation of accident and illness in a critical evaluation of household responsibilities. Before examining her most drastic dramatizations of domestic accidents, therefore, I shall first situate their shifting narrative functions among Victorian discourses on accident prevention as part of household work. How were domestic accidents presented in Victorian print and how did fictional representations engage with competing concepts of probability and risk-management, causality and accountability?

Homemaking Hazards: Housework as Risk-Management

<4>What precisely constitutes a domestic accident remains a debated question in studies of risk, injury, and accident prevention today. It is usually established negatively: its definition excludes industrial incidents, railway crashes, something that happens in the streets, during a mountaineering exhibition or in a hot air balloon.⁽¹⁾ For the purpose of this study, then, domestic accidents occur within the precincts of the home, chiefly inside the house or its immediate surroundings (such as the garden), and generally during an everyday occupation, including (but not confined to) routine household tasks. In Victorian novels, injuries sustained at home are most often the results of falls, followed by burns, including scalding by hot water, and poisoning. A quantitative survey of texts through distant reading indicates various patterns in the occurrence of accidents and the injuries they cause. This approach further allows us to trace the rhetorical functions of accidents within a subgenre or cultural development, while prompting us to reconsider both representative and unusual depictions and why we perceive them as such. Yet, as we critically parse the significance of accidents in fictional texts, we need to take into account how these patterns are shaped differently according to the categories into which we divide the accidents. Apart from the type of injury, we may consider the circumstances that surround an accident, the immediate cause, where precisely in the home it takes place, and likewise, the severity of any resulting injury and whether it is long-term. Further, what does a particular accident exemplify, symbolise, or otherwise effect in the narrative? In other words, why is it there? A distant reading can help us notice, first, these patterns, and by extension, any unusual representations. It also helps us to formulate more specific questions. When is an accident more than a plot-device, to remove an inconvenient character or to clear the way for an unexpected inheritance, for example, and even in this case, how does the cause of the fatality affect the representation? Similarly, are particular types of (lasting) injury more likely to operate as characterization devices than others, and how does a differentiation assist our understanding of disability and an ethics of care as part of household duties? How precisely does the representation of domestic accidents differ from references to injury sustained elsewhere? Do certain accidents

serve more commonly as illustrations of failed domestic management? Which accidents exemplify maternal incompetence or act as a punishment rather than as evidence of randomness, risk, or a sense of instability? Or do they exemplify different approaches, perhaps a critique of conventional methods? As authors speculate on causes, comment on chance, or moralize on possible guilt and learning experiences, they might fuel, but also constructively disrupt, simplistic associations. They often do so self-consciously; sometimes with a particular agenda in mind that reveals the various and often contradictory ways in which homemaking as a form of risk-management came to be understood and represented in Victorian Britain.

<5>A triangulation with data gleaned from the study of household manuals, as well as cautionary tales in the periodical press, further underscores to what extent – and to what purpose – the representation in fiction differed and what role changing genre specificities played. Domestic manuals, for example, reference the necessity to safeguard against accidental poisoning by hazardous substances or possible cross-contamination as part of good domestic practices. They preach prevention through household routines, through precision and the right utensils. Thus, practical recommendations increasingly included the promotion of particular products. The first mention of poisoning in Isabella Beeton’s widely-used *Book of Household Management* (1861) dwells on the essential “cleanliness of culinary utensils” to avoid the spread of “poisonous particles” (72). The focus is primarily on food poisoning and the unpleasant side-effects of using the wrong type of pot. The 1888 edition features several embedded advertisements for newly patented utensils, such as “Perkins’ Patent Sanitary Seamless Steel Utensils,” a “new steel” that, the ad promises, is “not liable to be coated with ‘Verdigris, or copper-rust,’” nor is there “any possibility of arsenical poisoning, as with enamelled goods” (67). Subsequent references to poison (eight in total) likewise chiefly concern food safety, although Beeton also provides a “list of the principal poisons, with their antidotes or remedies” (2647). Similarly outlining the ubiquity of hazards around the house, including accidental poisoning through metallic substances (257), *Cassells Household Guide* (1869) lays out “simple rules for the treatment of the slight accidents and emergencies of every day life as are commonly treated without resorting to medical advice” (7). Most household manuals corroborate the inevitability of such risks, even as they instruct their readers how to boost home safety.(2) Accidental poisoning forms part of daily life, largely due to unregulated traditional remedies, adulterated food, and altogether, hazardous household substances that ranged from laudanum to arsenic.(3) Poisoning in fiction is, perhaps expectedly, less likely to be accidental, and not only in sensation novels, although the identification of the genre with poison so quickly became a cliché that the titular heroine of Francis Edward Paget’s parodic *Lucretia, or the Heroine of the*

Nineteenth Century (1868) literalises this association by inadvertently poisoning herself and her companions.(4) When it is not the result of (attempted) murder or suicide, poisoning in Victorian fiction is the sign of a culpable neglect that can be vital to the investigation of domestic ideals and further, as I shall explore here, of concepts of causality and accountability. Whereas sensation novelists frequently depict seeming accidents, domestic, often self-consciously anti-sensational writers such as Yonge deploy accidents at home to expose mismanagement. They are equally concerned with potential calamities, but from the point-of-view of preventing or ameliorating them. To some extent, domestic fiction here shares the rhetorical agenda of domestic advice material, and yet it dramatises changing concepts of risk and its management, of chance and causality, fate and responsibility. We might thus usefully consider reading domestic realism as based around risk-management rather than simply the quotidian details of everyday life.

<6>Domestic accidents in Victorian fiction instigate a re-evaluation of home as a safe space. A careful reconsideration of their dynamic narrative functions consequently also presents us with a new angle on the way in which homemaking came to be conceptualized as risk-management. This enables us to appreciate the complexity of daily domestic life in texts that endorse its centrality and significance while showcasing its inconveniences and hazards. However, whereas domesticity has attracted a considerable body of scholarship, and recent interest in risk has directed critical attention to its textual containment, there has hitherto been no study that explores domestic accidents.(5) Current research has concentrated on industrial spaces, on factory fires, traffic incidents, and railway crashes. Paul Fyfe has shown how urban accidents provided a powerful metaphor as well as a material context through which the Victorians reconfigured understandings of change, causality, and “[w]hat became known as ‘risk-management’” (10). Elaine Freedgood similarly traces “the textual construction of a safe England in a dangerous world” through modern cosmologies of risk (1). In concentrating on a geography of risk, however, Freedgood highlights how the Victorians aimed to present home as a safe space, partly by force of contrast. Danger, these cosmologies promised, could be “banished from the domestic scene and relocated in the world outside British borders” (Freedgood 1). While undermining this promise of home as exempt from risk, conceptualizing a systematic prevention of domestic accidents constituted an attempt to import such risk-management into the home.(6)

<7>A study of accident prevention in nineteenth-century print hence also reveals how and why Victorian writers constructed the home as fundamentally unsafe. This focus inverts easily held assumptions about the way in which representations of domestic space worked across genres. Generally, the public press presented

domestic accidents as endemic to working-class households, but while such reporting supported class-based concepts of home comfort and safety, it also rendered mishaps in middle-class environments more disturbing.(7) It became the project of prescriptive material to teach the required knowledge and skills to identify and neutralize common hazards. Households run without purchased advice, domestic manuals maintained, must necessarily be mismanaged. As Beeton phrased it, what moved her to write her bestselling household book “was the discomfort and suffering which I had seen brought upon men and women by household mismanagement” (n.p.). Evidence that not all Victorian print naturalized or sentimentalized women’s domestic work, such manuals presented homemaking as an anxious, risky occupation. As part of a growing range of self-help material, they promised to prepare you for any emergency, while acknowledging that such an awareness of intrinsic risk was essential to home safety. Although much work has been done on the way these texts scripted domestic labor as “a skilled task in a modern world which increasingly stressed literacy and print-based knowledge” (Beetham 67), recent scholarship has traced how Victorian advice writing cast the home as a space where crisis and catastrophe were imminent. Household books did not simply trade on, but amplified readers’ anxieties so as to sell their own solutions.(8)

<8>Victorian popular fiction by women writers often employed a remarkably similar rhetorical strategy: to capitalize on anxieties in order to present a viewpoint, a set of ideals (such as Yonge’s religious framework), and even practical household solutions.(9) Just as advice texts often evoked cautionary tales to illustrate points – with household books in narrative form cutting across the genres of domestic novel and manual, reminding us how porous genre boundaries were (Damkjær 8-11) – fiction featured accidents to construct particular anxieties and then demonstrate recommended reactions. Addressing her main target-group of “young girls, or maidens, or young ladies” between fifteen and twenty-five, Yonge straddles didactic moral lesson and practical instructions, while aiming to entertain (“Introductory” i). Often tracing intermarrying families across generations, her family chronicles are particularly well-suited to assert interconnectedness, including long-term consequences. Maia Mcaleavey terms Yonge not only the “most influential Victorian family chronicler” (214), but also a “canny theorist of the chronicle as a genre,” who “uses apology as a strategy to differentiate her narrative mode from the mainstream novel” (218). However, if “Yonge’s chronicles seem to resist plot altogether” (Mcaleavey 219), her increasingly explicit rejection of a single cathartic crisis, by privileging the recurrence of mundane mishaps, shows her consciously engaging with the formats of didactic fiction and, subsequently, also with the different rhetorical affordances of accident in sensation fiction.(10) Looking at

explosions in her narratives allows us to unpack her changing representation of risk and risk-taking at home.

<9>In contrast to either poisoning or falls, explosions seldom occur in a domestic setting, even in sensational writing, where domestic ruptures are designed to shock us.⁽¹¹⁾ Distant reading shows that Victorian fiction mostly features falls, including heavy items falling on someone, accidental (self-)poisoning, and injuries involving fire as a common household hazard.⁽¹²⁾ Clothes can catch fire, and candles should not be left burning, but domestic explosions remain rare. A peculiar exception, Eliza Warren's *My Lady-Help and What She Taught Me* (1877), a household book in narrative form, describes how "some unexploded fireworks" must have got among the firewood for the kitchen, and when the mistress of the household wants to fry a chop, "the pan was tossed on to the floor" (5). Presented as a disturbingly comical anecdote, the accidental explosion only scares the cat: "The tears stood in Mrs. Newton's eyes at the melancholy recital, but her husband burst into an uproarious laugh. 'Bless me, Lottie, you might have blown up the house.'" (Warren 5). Like most instances in the text, the accident illustrates inexperience and the resulting blunders. However, while some of the most comprehensive household books reference gunpowder and paraffin, Yonge's fictional explosions stand out among cautionary and sensational tales.⁽¹³⁾ Even as she depicts household hazards as part and parcel of everyday life, Yonge also validates the task of domestic risk-management. Asserting what she deems most important in domestic life and domestic fiction, she redeploys the representational strategies of didactic fiction to explore concepts of causality instead. Yonge's explosions, therefore, offer an insightful test case of how the shifting functions of domestic accidents express a conscious engagement with domestic risk and its management, while renegotiating ideas of domesticity, causality, and narrative.

"A kind of experiment": Explosive Housework in *Scenes and Characters*

<10>In *Scenes and Characters*, Yonge experiments with ways to narrate the daily lives of middle-class girls for an audience she wants to guide while telling a good story. Yonge had first imagined the characters for a French composition. Renamed, they became her "companions in many a solitary walk, the results of which were scribbled down in leisure moments" (Preface viii). The Mohuns established a recurring family constellation in Yonge's domestic chronicles: among several orphaned or motherless siblings, contrasting sisters juggle personal growth and housekeeping, which the implied reader might need to tackle herself or as her mother's assistant. As Claudia Nelson has pointed out, in Victorian Britain it was presumed that daughters were prepared for this "quasi-maternal role" (110) so that

they could replace their mother in case of illness or – as in so many of Yonge’s novels – death. What pulls the episodic sketches together in *Scenes and Characters* is domestic mismanagement by teenage sisters: “a kind of experiment” (218) that is uncompromisingly declared “an utter failure” by the end of the novel (299). When a brother’s experiment blows up in the nursery, this accident literalises how their experimental system has “quite destroyed” the hitherto “excellent order [of] the household affairs” (211). At first sight, the explosion may operate as a fairly straightforward example of an accident as punishment for a child’s disobedience, but it really acts as a catalyst to unearth what has been going wrong for a while. The parallelism of scientific and household experiments connects domestic management to other sciences, showcasing how neither should be undertaken lightly. Yet, the explosion also facilitates a heroic act that redeems a hitherto unappreciated member of the family. A systematic investigation in the cause of the accident – presented in the form of a domestic court delivering judgement – not only reveals this heroism and contrasts it with the failure of those in charge; it also establishes causality as a main factor.

<11>As a Tractarian novelist, Yonge might preach faith and religious observance, but her plots evidence a preoccupation with and indeed a reliance on causality and accountability that avoids evocations of providence. In several of her novels, the gravity of a seemingly slight negligence or transgression is felt through a chain reaction that resembles a domino effect. A momentary oversight causes lifelong regrets. This may indict carelessness generally, and yet the emphasis is on consequences rather than punishment. Other novelists of the time might have begun to test out emergent concepts of randomness and chance, what Fyfe has termed “accidentalness” (2). It was often pitted against a capitalized Fate, Destiny, or Providence, which as Winifred Hughes has shown, especially in sensation fiction appeared “arcane and vaguely supernatural, transcending probability or doubt,” both to account for coincidences and to express anxieties about a newly perceived instability (22). Yonge advocates domestic duty, and its omission causes – often indirectly – injury and illness.⁽¹⁴⁾ Tracking chain reactions, her narratives present accidents as consequences.

<12>The root cause of the interrelated catastrophes in *Scenes and Characters* is Lily Mohun’s new principle of how to run the household. This experiment is discussed as such when three teenagers are put in charge of the Mohun home: Emily, Lily, and Jane “looked forward to their new offices with the various sensations of pleasure, anxiety, self-importance, and self-mistrust, suited to their differing characters, and to the ages of eighteen, sixteen, and fourteen” (5). They are eager to replace an elder sister, Eleanor, who has kept order since their mother’s death, approximately seven

years earlier. This staggering of maternal replacement has several important functions. It removes loss and grief as themes that might cloud the focus on domestic power and its abuse; it allows Yonge to present sisters failing as mother-substitutes without drawing this common practice into question; and it critiques approaches to mothering without faulting a mother and thereby undermining parental authority in a text for teenage readers. While Emily and Lily are undoubtedly ungrateful as they discuss Eleanor as a “duenna” (12), the text acknowledges that she has flaws. In “fulfil[ing] her daily duties,” Eleanor “became still more of a governess and less of a sister” (4). What Lily perceives as Eleanor’s single-minded stress on “duty, duty, duty” determines Lily that they shall “act on the principle of love, and you will see if [this] government is not more successful than that of duty” (17-8). Yonge works out this experiment in the narrative, yet her exploration of consequences rather than punishment adds complexity to what might otherwise seem a simplistic cautionary tale with a clear-cut moral. Lily might soon realize the limitations of her system, but she is unable to stop what she has set in motion.

<13>The sudden explosion generates a break in the detailing of everyday life. It is, however, the end-result of traceable causes and effects. To some extent, failure is predictable. Lily’s interest in domesticity is ironically just theoretical as she “thought fit to despise all household affairs” (the actual chores) whereas “Emily’s own views, as far as she possessed any” are “to get on as smoothly as she could ... without much trouble to herself” (19). However, several aspects play together to result in the explosion. Yonge thereby presents decisions about mundane routines as both vital and risky. Not only do the girls spurn advice to get an experienced, older servant, but Lily objects to a more reliable, but plodding and unattractive girl in favor of the interesting-looking Esther because it might be “pleasant to have so sweet and expressive a face about the house” (64). Describing the other maid, Lily crassly remarks that it “would give one the nightmare to see her lumbering about the house” (63). Yonge demonstrates practical implications, such as increased expenses and more workload for themselves: “all the trouble of ... having a young girl” (128). The instruction of young servants formed part of a system of class-based surveillance and control that involved policing behavior, religion, and social ties. As Elizabeth Langland has stressed, running a middle-class household was also “an exercise in class management, a process both inscribed and exposed in the Victorian novel” (8). In *Scenes and Characters*, failure to operate these “mechanisms of middle-class control” (Langland 8) leads to a near-fatal accident. When Esther corrupts the youngest child, Ada, by bribing her with sweets to prevent her from reporting theft, Yonge equates the new maid with gunpowder and other risks to the middle-class home. This dehumanises Esther by reducing her to a source of risk. Yonge scripts Ada’s resulting self-indulgence as a consequence of an unmanaged risk-factor.

<14>If the trajectory from habitual misbehavior to a child in flames follows the structures of typical cautionary tales for children – reminiscent of the girl who burns to death in Mary Martha Sherwood’s *The History of the Fairchild Family; Or, The Child’s Manual* (1818), “The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches” in Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Struwwelpeter* (1845), or the vain child whose locks burn off in Joanna Matthews’s *Violet’s Idol* (1870) – Yonge instead emphasises the policing of potential hazards within the household as part of its management.⁽¹⁵⁾ This avoids painting punishment for disobedience in an abrupt or exaggerated fashion and instead investigates domestic responsibility through long-lasting consequences. Lapses in household management occur in the servant’s supervision, the safeguarding of dangerous substances, and the younger children’s (moral) education. Neglected childcare responsibilities lead to the presence of explosive material in the nursery. A younger brother, Maurice, procures “the dangerous and forbidden purchase,” assisted by Jane, and both their “weak notions of obedience” (236) are traced to mismanagement. Early in the narrative, Emily misses the opportunity to treat a minor accident seriously. Out of carelessness or clumsiness (or a combination of both), Maurice propels a fishing-hook into their cousin’s hand. Maurice, we learn, is regularly absorbed in a new scientific project, and his resulting inattention causes accidents. Although “Emily was inclined to make a serious matter of the accident” (115), she ignores this opportunity to rein Maurice in. Until the moment of the explosion, she remains unwilling “to confess herself unable to keep him in order” (236). The episode of the fishing-hook is also the first mention of an accident in a text replete with mishaps. It introduces preventable injury caused by carelessness as a leading motif. Mentioned in the same conversation as the fireworks for which Maurice later obtains gunpowder, this minor accident foreshadows the subsequent disaster. The chapter also references Maurice’s current experiments with sulphur (117) and Jane obtaining laudanum for him (to cure wasp-stings) even though Emily is warned that “Jane is too young to be trusted” with the housekeeping keys (119). Close attention to the text reveals how Yonge carefully builds up to the explosion by emphasizing how seemingly unrelated causes work together. None of the accidents are really accidental; they are all rooted in the neglect of household management.

<15>The word accident appears a total of eleven times, which is remarkable given the relative brevity of the text.⁽¹⁶⁾ The chapter describing the explosion repeatedly evokes the term, specifically to delink it from concepts of the accidental as something unexpected or coincidental, and to stress complex consequences and accountability instead. Entitled “Charity Begins at Home,” Chapter 21 juxtaposes home duties with unwanted charity, organized by a notorious, fidgety busybody, “that bustling, little, old Miss Fitchett” (238). Yonge here anticipates Dickens’s

memorable chapter “Telescopic Philanthropy” in *Bleak House* (1853), in which Mrs Jellyby’s focus on Africa at the expense of her own family indicts maternal neglect, satirises self-important philanthropists, and critiques Britain’s domestic politics. Yonge generalises the indictment by adding more straightforward signs of selfishness: Emily goes shopping, knowing that “the gunpowder was actually in the house” and wishing “to put the whole matter out of her head, ... in the manner she best liked, ... [with] the horses reluctantly spared from their farm work” (237). Nevertheless, to dramatize the proverbial saying, at the very moment of the accident, Emily subscribes to Miss Fitchett’s charity. We then witness the consequences: the doctor being fetched because “the schoolroom has been on fire” and “Ada is badly burnt” (239). Yonge describes the resulting injury before recounting the accident in retrospect. This narrative sequence highlights consequences, locating the culpability with the absent sister rather than with the little girls at home.

<16>The repeated discussion of the accident further underscores causality. First, the omniscient narrator retraces what has happened “[i]n the meantime,” clarifying that Emily’s vague instructions about sealing a letter set off a train of events. Whereas boisterous, but honest, Phyllis suggests they use a wafer “since they were under strict orders never to touch fire or candle” – “strict orders” inherited from Eleanor’s rule – Ada freely interprets the instructions: “that permission to light a candle was implied in the order” (239). The perspective then shifts to Phyllis, who “heard a loud explosion and a scream, saw a bright flash and a cloud of smoke” (240). Probably one of the most sensational scenes in Yonge’s writing, this explosion enables Phyllis’s heroism:

A light in the midst of the smoke made Phyllis turn, and she beheld the papers on the table on fire. Maurice’s powder-horn was in the midst, but the flames had not yet reached it, and, mindful of Claude’s story, she sprung forward, caught it up, and dashed it through the window.
(241)

“Claude’s story” links this heroic moment at home to similar actions in the Empire, while making an important point about inspiration and education through narratives. Earlier, an elder brother, Claude, tells Phyllis a story about a fire irresponsibly lit among gunpowder. While the parallelism illuminates Emily’s irresponsibility, this account also provides Phyllis with the necessary knowledge of what to do. In contrast, Maurice’s hypothesis that the vibration produced by Phyllis “bouncing into the room ... caused the powder to ignite” discredits his supposed cleverness and faults the elder sisters for basing their judgement of Phyllis on his spurious speculation on “inflammable matter” (242). Making Phyllis believe that she “blew

up Ada,” he even turns it into “a lesson against rushing about the house” (242), while the reader is aware that without her, the “whole place might have been blown to atoms” (245). Although Yonge blames Emily’s indolence and Ada’s self-indulgence, she here rejects this trajectory of exaggeratedly punished character traits in favor of investigating causality. Several attempts “to inquire into the manner of the accident” (244) see the “accident ... again talked over” (247), with wild speculations about “how it happened” (248). The family court carefully distinguishes “the history of the accident” from “the immediate cause of the accident” (251). The chapter “The Baronial Court” contains an “investigation” into “the circumstances” that clears Phyllis of any blame and exposes those left in charge (251-2). As the retrospective retracing of the chain of events foregrounds causality, her quick-thinking reaction serves as a humiliating contrast to their failure. Phyllis alone stands unscathed, with her boisterousness redefined as “great presence of mind” (253).

<17>Generally, Yonge tames her boisterous heroines, while dwelling on their struggle to fit into the roles assigned to them in conservative middle-class families. As Talia Schaffer has remarked, the “real drama of all of Yonge’s novels is the way that her characters initially fight the ideological vise their author is inexorably closing upon them, and how they subsequently adjust to the cruel necessity of embracing this paradigm” (246). Phyllis, perhaps because she remains a child in the text, is exempt from this trajectory. Instead, her action proves the possibility of domestic heroism, as her “wish ... to save somebody’s life” comes true (177). Claude discusses several incidents with her of how “little girls have sometimes done it” by saving a “little brother from drowning” or waking “the people when the house was on fire” (177). In presenting such an incident, Yonge makes an important point about domestic heroism and the subject of domestic narratives, and inadvertently perhaps, celebrates the unappreciated, undomestic girl. Instead, not taking action can be dangerous, and as Yonge assures boisterous girl readers, the domestic sphere might offer a field for action, even heroism.

<18>The parallel scenes of a family court sitting in judgement hence let us trace how Yonge redeploys the familiar structures of didactic children’s literature. In a similarly systematic inquiry into her lack of action, Emily is unable to “offer any excuse for [her] utter failure,” committed out of “wilful indolence and negligence,” and consequently she is “deposed” as the mistress of the household (299). Lily’s rejection of her flawed system is more complicated, but underscores Emily’s condemnation. After forgetting a promise to a dying child in the neighbourhood, Lily turns to housework with renewed energy. With Lily tackling chores as a penance, Emily “grew more selfish and indolent” (212), so that by the end of the novel she

embodies a warning, whereas Yonge attempts to pull the narrative strands together by announcing Lily as “the heroine of this tale,” who has learnt – somewhat gruesomely through a child’s death, another’s crime (Esther’s theft), and Ada’s injury – “the danger of being wise above her elders” (316). This sudden assertion of Lily’s conversion and, by implication, her position as “the heroine of this tale,” feels tagged on. As quiet domestic heroism, her self-sacrifice to shield Emily’s indolence is altogether a failure, overshadowed as it is by Phyllis engaging the gunpowder. Yonge establishes home as a space for heroic action, utilizing an accident to facilitate this opportunity. Simultaneously, she presents homemaking as a serious undertaking and a potentially risky business, in which inaction as much as carelessness can have devastating consequences. In later novels, she further domesticates heroism to identify household tasks themselves as a way to achieve it.

**“So cruelly exaggerated by consequences”: Causality and Accountability
in *The Clever Woman of the Family***

<19>In *Clever Woman*, Yonge similarly juxtaposes two explosions, but in relegating both to the prehistory, she places additional emphasis on the aftermath. Long-term consequences determine the treatment of numerous accidents and illnesses in the text. A seemingly insignificant mishap involving a carelessly tossed away match causes lifelong suffering and regret; a badly chosen domestic servant commits child abuse, while facilitating fraud; systematic mistreatment in a mismanaged charity turns it into a breeding-ground of disease; stumbling over a croquet-hoop results in the death of a pregnant woman, while her child is born prematurely; and to what extent a self-opinionated young woman’s homeopathy brings on a child’s death is left vague, addressed by a court that literalises the less formal judgement scenes of the earlier novel. The explosions simultaneously generate a framework for contrasting forms of heroism to negotiate fulfilling roles for women. In Yonge’s worldview, these roles are firmly located in the domestic sphere, but they may comprise a larger community of care, and they may prove, Yonge maintains, the possibility of heroic action within reach of her readership.

<20>Although critics have debated whether the titular clever woman refers to one, two, or more protagonists in the text,⁽¹⁷⁾ Rachel Curtis epitomises the overeager, overconfident, intellectually ambitious heroine who is ultimately domesticated. In search of a more active mission than “constantly bestowing ... sanitary tracts” (101) and dabbling in homeopathy in her amateur “dispensary” (54), Rachel establishes an industrial school for girls, but is duped by a swindler. Exploited as child laborers, the girls contract diphtheria, which spreads to Rachel and her relatives. Whereas death by proxy to achieve character transformation constitutes a standard plot-device

in Victorian fiction, Yonge here highlights accountability. If Lily, in *Scenes and Characters*, forgets to deliver a household remedy, Rachel takes a much more active role, first, in causing a child's exploitation, and, then, in dosing her with experimental substances. Driving home her culpability, it is mercilessly announced that "[i]f that army doctor had not come in time to see the child alive, they could not have chosen but to have an inquest, and no mortal can tell what might have been the decision about your homoeopathy" (406). Rachel's "most narrow escape there" (406) spells out the dangers of her experiments. The sudden announcement brings about the literal downfall of a self-defined strong woman, "hitherto ... so superabundant in strength," who always "despised fainting ladies": "It seemed as if nothing else had been wanting to make the humiliation and exposure complete." (407) Similarly, her testimony against the swindler Mauleverer is so incoherent as to be useless. Instead, his arrest is effected through a young child, who can produce much clearer evidence of a different fraud, committed in the prehistory.

<21>The paralleled trials bring the overarching investigation of different forms of heroism to a closure. Yonge uses the format of the court scene to pass judgement on Rachel's errors and to give additional force to the redefinition of cleverness by exploring accountability. Whereas one trial shows how even a little girl can be "the saving of us" if she is "the sweetest little clear-headed thing," pinning down the culprit with her testimony (397), the other publicly declares Rachel's humiliation: "Here was she, the Clever Woman of the family, shown in open court to have been so egregious a dupe that the deceiver could not even be punished" (387). As Valerie Sanders has pointed out, "Yonge humiliates Rachel both on practical and intellectual grounds" (65). Throughout the text, Rachel's blunders signpost the redefinition of heroism. Thus, Rachel theorises on the self-sacrifice of an officer, reported to have died while removing a live shell from a tent of wounded, without noticing that she is talking to him: "Captain Keith, the veritable hero of the shell, had been lectured by her on his own deed!" (288). In a parallel humiliation, Rachel inadvertently patronises a published author, citing Ermine Williams's own work to her, while boasting about unpublished attempts. As early reviewers already remarked, Ermine is the "young lady [who] is evidently intended to sit for the portrait of a *really* clever woman" (489). She embodies quiet heroism as much through her anonymous publications as her physical immobility.

<22>The disabled writer who gets married and successfully raises adopted children is indisputably one of Yonge's most interesting characters – an intriguing representation of disability and what Schaffer has termed "Yonge's ethics of care system" (*Romance's Rival* 278). In fact, critical discussion of the novel has foregrounded women's work, disability, and care communities, yet as we recalibrate

this focus to explore the accident (as the cause of the depicted disability), this recalibration forces readers to ask questions about how domestic fiction uses disabled bodies – especially disabled female bodies – to forward risk-management guidelines for Victorian households. In *Clever Woman*, an explosion at home enables a powerful exploration of disability and care communities.(18) Yonge details the realities of caregiving while nonetheless harnessing symbolic potential.(19) Ermine unobtrusively accomplishes work from home that contrasts with Rachel’s noisy blunders; Ermine’s sister Alison develops an otherwise untapped talent as carer and, further, paid governess, expertly handling her charges during the diphtheria epidemic; raising their niece together, they form an alternative family. Simultaneously, Yonge stresses the tedium of physical pain and mental distress, as well as the burthen of caring. But how does the accident matter in this representation? While its retrospective depiction delinks domestic heroism from fast-paced scenes, lifelong adjustments prove resilience and yet act as a warning. A household accident can, in one moment, permanently disrupt several lives. The first mention occurs in a discussion of “the invalid Miss Williams” that revolves around both her and her sister’s “countenance” (79). While Ermine’s appearance suggests a past injury rather than illness – “accident, I should say” (79) – her sister bears the marks of possible culpability, which complicates the understanding of “accident.” Alison has “a look as if some terrible wave of grief and suffering had swept over her ere yet the features were fully fixed, and had thus moulded her expression for life” (85). Contrasting accounts then address Alison’s self-blame and atonement through caregiving. Alison herself frames this history in the form of a confession: “I burnt her. ... You ought not to be kind to me without knowing about it. It was an accident of course, but it was a fit of petulance. I threw a match without looking where it was going” (90). An “accident of course,” it nonetheless implies a general injunction about teenage self-control: its immediate cause is a fourteen-year-old’s “naughty fit” (90). Ermine’s version of “that unlucky story” unpacks the circumstances:

It is just one of the things that gets so cruelly exaggerated by consequences. It was one moment’s petulance that might have caused a fright and been forgotten about ever after, but for those chemicals. Ah! I see, she said nothing about them, because they were Edward’s.
(94)

Causality reframes the impact of a single mistake “cruelly exaggerated by consequences”: “one moment’s petulance” completes a train of events set in motion by previous oversights. Ermine acknowledges that if she “had not been in a foolish, inattentive mood,” she would have “taken [Edward’s] dangerous goods out of the way” instead of leaving “parcels for his experiments, gun-cotton and the like,” in the

nursery (94). As the eldest sister of motherless siblings, Ermine would have been responsible for their safety as part of domestic management. As Yonge skirts the issue of how boys' experiments endanger the home and are defended by sisters who suffer for them, she instead traces the explosion to omitted housework.

<23>Yonge presents accidents both as the result of a train of events and as the nonetheless avoidable cause of long-term aftereffects. Far from condemning scientific work at home, Yonge charges the domestic manager with the necessary safety measures. This responsibility might boost the importance of this role, yet we can also see how Yonge supports the privileging of men in the family, which means condoning their dangerous hobbies at others' expense. In Edward Williams, Yonge rewrites Maurice Mohun, developing the disobedient schoolboy into a fully-fledged scientist.⁽²⁰⁾ Whereas Maurice defies domestic authority, Edward is clearly not aware that his parcels have arrived when his sisters blow them up. Yonge traces the accident to a lapse in risk-management as if it were part of routine domestic labor to consider explosive material around the house: "We had all been so long threatened with being blown up by his experiments that we had grown callous and careless, and it served us right!" (94) Edward subsequently succeeds as a scientist, although because of failed intervention in his "peculiarities" (527), he is so absorbed in chemistry that Mauleverer easily dupes him. Innocently accused of fraud, Edward flees to the Ural Mountains, where "he lives on experiments" until his "removal from domestic life, and from society" renders him altogether unfit for home life (526-7). If the man of science gets safely exported overseas, this might remove danger, but it is also registered as a loss to England. Yonge presents Edward as the victim of women's failure to keep the house sufficiently in order to allow his experiments and business to prosper.

<24>The parallelism between Rachel's and Edward's experiments establishes a distinction that roughly runs along gender lines, and yet Yonge's ambiguous representation of men's roles in the household complicates a simplistic allocation of culpability and repair work. If Edward constitutes a risk, Colin Keith, Ermine's future husband, is an expert in household repair. Previously on his Colonel's staff, he continues to advise Rachel's recently widowed cousin Fanny Temple, and he subsequently establishes a home for Ermine that covers all her needs. That his military experience trains him to put households to right resonates with Beeton's notorious comparison of "the mistress of a house" with "the commander of an army, or the leader of any enterprise" (1). Yonge thereby highlights the importance of order and control in domestic management. Yet, while the identification of the managerial with the martial ties in with this promotion of housework, what does it mean that domestic disasters are embodied in one man and household repair in another? *Scenes*

and Characters shows women mending accidents caused by mismanaged servants and affecting children, but *Clever Women* additionally transposes these issues to a male register. Several critics have noticed Yonge's alteration of domestic norms in her representations of caring men, such as male characters tending to infants and young children, and the way she promotes men's emotional expressions. Thus, it has been remarked that "Yonge's most motherly characters can, in fact, be male, and her good men tend to have traditionally feminine, emphatically domestic characteristics" (Wagner, *Victorian Baby* 181 n. 41; "Home Work" 110-14). Elizabeth Juckett argues that men functioning in the "'angelic' role reserved for women in the Victorian separate spheres ideology" emblemize "Yonge's feminization of the Christian hero" (130). Kim Wheatley, by contrast, asserts that Rachel succeeds only in establishing a workable charity school once she has accepted "both masculine and divine guidance" (895) after her marriage to Colin's cousin, Alick Keith. Male assistance here associates men with charity and domestic detail, but also with order and authority. Ultimately, moreover, domestic repair needs to include the control of risks that male members of the household might import. Edward exemplifies the limit of this policing, and thus he fails to be reclaimed.

<25>What redeems Rachel is an unrelated accident that allows her to display a mastery of management in response to a specific domestic crisis: premature labor and childbirth. Yonge thereby reinstates the narrative potential of accidents to enable heroic action. In this case, heroism rests in a combination of quick thinking and quiet care. Briefly, while heavily pregnant, Alick's sister, Bessie, stumbles over a croquet-hoop in an otherwise clear-cut use of an accident to spell out moral instability. In a twist of the classic false step and resulting fall, Bessie becomes entangled in the hoop while talking to an erstwhile lover. Yonge scholars have disputed the verisimilitude of Bessie's accident, arguing that if her injury is severe enough to cause her death, it would not have been possible for her to have a living child.⁽²¹⁾ The main impact is indisputably symbolic. Since emotionally manipulative Bessie embodies misuse of "cleverness and ingenuity" (510), her death expunges a potential feminization of these qualities that Yonge rejects: "such cleverness as that is a far more perilous gift to woman than [Rachel's] plodding intellectuality could ever be." (547) Simultaneously, however, the baby's survival is "testimony to Rachel's effectiveness" (499), now that she has abandoned her experiments with homeopathy. In the final chapter, "Who is the Clever Woman?," the thriving toddlers parented by Rachel and Ermine showcase how intellectual women can be good mothers, just as this closure celebrates adoptive parenting as well as a disabled protagonist's romance-plot. Domestic responsibilities delimit their field of action, but their influence encompasses the entire community.

<26>Yonge advertises domestic heroism that chiefly comprises preventing harm through accident prevention. This risk-management includes avoiding household experiments, while policing potential hazards from social or scientific change. The rewriting of the same material clarifies her growing insistence on undemonstrative tasks. In *Scenes and Characters*, Phyllis jumps forward, shattering a window in throwing out the powder-horn. In *Clever Woman*, a similar explosion engenders lifelong endurance and atonement. Proof of the self-control that Alison learns from the accident, her uncompromising discipline when assisting in a painful procedure saves the lives of children sick with diphtheria: “Miss Williams’s firmness saved him [Rachel’s nephew]” (376). Symptomatic of Yonge’s conservative outlook, this nonetheless startles readers more familiar with Dickens’s satire of the Murdstones’ sadistic “firmness” in *David Copperfield* (1850). Yet, as Rachel and Alick continue their discussion of heroism, they connect Alison’s (self-)discipline and the storming of the charity institution by Rachel’s hitherto meek cousin Fanny, with their slippery use of pronouns identifying both as heroines: “‘Oh, she has been the heroine!’ ‘In the truest sense of the word,’ he answered. And Rachel looked up with one moment’s brightening at the old allusion” (376-7). Their agreement on heroism brings them together, while conveniently spelling out Yonge’s definition. In contradistinction to Rachel’s initial impulse to achieve a more active position in the world, Alison has become a governess out of financial need, and Fanny is “prompted by the pitiful heart yearning over the mysterious wrongs of the poor little ones” (336). As a mother of six, she is also able to distinguish between systematic abuse and household accidents when a child’s black eye is supposedly the result of her having “fallen while playing on the stairs” (318). As Sanders remarks, Fanny’s “training as a mother” enables her to notice “that the children are being ill-treated, evidence that Rachel had missed” (65). Fanny’s practical knowledge hence empowers her to act in this emergency. Sometimes, however, daily heroism may simply mean keeping it together for others, to put up with social obligations, such as an ill-timed dinner party, even though it feels “‘like being in the middle of an explosion, without knowing what stands or falls.’ ‘And lobster salad as an aggravation.’” (352) The example may be ludicrously banal, but Yonge is indeed serious about suggesting that such compliance is necessary, even as she acknowledges how annoying, even painful, it can be.

<27>Yet, given this emphasis on domesticity and domestic heroism, why feature an explosion? Explosions that occur at home, indoors in middle-class dwellings, are after all extremely rare in Victorian fiction. The spontaneous combustion in *Bleak House* externalises the toxicity of the system and how it – slowly, rather than explosively – consumes itself from within. In Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), the popular assumption that experiments must mean explosions

is just a joke. An “old lady” recalls how she “used to attend scientific experiments when [she] was a girl at school,” which “invariably ended in an explosion;” she fails to be convinced “that an explosion was not included in the programme on this occasion” (416). Subsequently, in his anti-vivisectionist novel *Heart and Science* (1883), Collins concludes the evil scientist’s defeat with his secret laboratory going up in flames. This explosion contributes both to the formation of the “mad scientist” and of a now equally classic lab scene. Yonge arguably participates in the changing representation of science and the scientist, negotiating the daily challenges of having them at home. Without vilifying them, she shows how they add to domestic responsibilities. Most importantly, however, explosions literalize the explosive nature of experiments in household routines. Yonge is certainly opposed to any deliberate risk-taking at home, from new principles in childcare to the vaguely evoked homeopathy. In *Scenes and Characters*, the nursery in flames remains first and foremost a particularly drastic way to expand cautionary narratives; *Clever Woman* tones this down to foreground consequences, dwell on the aftermath, and domesticate heroism. Ultimately, “that unlucky story” of the past helps to show that it does not need an explosion to enable heroism at home. Yonge describes an explosion to prove that domestic fiction can do without one, but thereby also highlights underestimated hazards at home.

Notes

(1) Scholarship on Victorian concepts of risk has focused on these aspects. Compare Freedgood, *passim*.(△)

(2) Tarr and Tebeau discuss nineteenth-century household books as the link between the role of women as homemakers and accident prevention, yet in listing antidotes, these manuals also accepted the inevitability of home accidents (198).(△)

(3) Beeton (1861) references food adulteration 11 times; the 1888 edition includes 24 instances. Cassell recommends unadulterated milk for children, but also advises how plum-pudding may be “‘lengthened’ (some would call it ‘adulterated’) with carrots” (28). Warren details how “verdigris” needs to be understood as poison (20-1). Laudanum and arsenic are usually listed as household substances marked “poisonous.”(△)

(4) Paget trades on the condemnation of sensation fiction as poison. Seemingly accidental poisoning is at the centre of several sensation novels.(△)

(5) Scholarship on Victorian domesticity is extensive and covers a range of approaches. Armstrong stresses how the household “had to be governed by a form of power that was essentially female – that is, essentially different from that of the male and yet a positive force in its own right” (19); Langland describes how “the managerial function of the bourgeois housewife” contested any simplistic “ideology of domesticity” (16). For recent directions see Damkjær, Regaignon, Wagner, *Victorian Baby*. Studies of sensation fiction have explored domestic violence, but the role of seeming accidents to cover up crimes requires further attention. For a discussion of accidents in working-class households see Holmes, “Death” and “Penny Death.”(△)

(6) Freedgood focuses on a geography of risk, although her discussion of Nightingale’s *Notes on Nursing* acknowledges how Nightingale’s discussion of “‘handsome’ and ‘comfortable’ homes [as] breeding grounds for disease” subverts the “domestic ideology that secured the home within the unassailable precinct of a separate sphere” (60-1). On railway accidents see also Harrington.(△)

(7) Compare Holmes’s study of police reports and coroners’ inquests, including the press’ eagerness in the reporting of such inquests (“Death”).(△)

(8) Seminal research on household books includes Attar and Beetham. Regaignon locates the rhetorical origins of maternal anxiety in advice books to explore the cultural formation of this anxiety “as part of the cultural and political dominance of the (White) middle classes” (13). Wagner explores a “bewildering market of childrearing instructions in print,” which also included “product-oriented publications that mimicked the format and style of the self-help manual” (*Victorian Baby* 107, 146).(△)

(9) Wagner traces how Wood trades on maternal anxieties both to create sensation and to promote her own solutions (“Sensational Nursery”).(△)

(10) Several critics have teased out Yonge’s selective use of sensationalism (Sturrock; Wagner, “Transatlantic”).(△)

(11) Sensation novels are more likely to feature explosions, but as in Collins’s *The New Magdalen* (1873), they tend to occur outside the home, often abroad. Fires are more common, and in both Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861) and Wood’s *St Martin’s Eve* (1866), it remains questionable whether the resulting deaths are accidental.(△)

(12) Falls chiefly occur offstage, often in the prehistory to account for permanent disability. Examples range from Benson in Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) and Philip Wakem in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) to the first-person narrator of Yonge's *Chantry House* (1886). Whereas Peepy Jellyby's absurdly comical descent down the stairs in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) condemns parental irresponsibility, in *Ruth* and "Lizzie Leigh" (1855), Gaskell rejects the persistent link of household accidents to maternal failure. For poisoning see above.(△)

(13) Cassell references explosions as the result of inadvertently ignited gunpowder (154) and malfunctioning paraffin lamps (164). Newspaper reports mention exploding paraffin lamps, but as Holmes points out, "[f]ew lamp accidents were actually a result of an explosion. When the newspapers referred to an explosion involving a lamp, they were usually referring to the 'flare-up of the spilt oil'" ("Penny Death" 139).(△)

(14) Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856) opens up with a carriage accident that kills a mother of eleven, and this sets off a chain reaction that cascades through the novel and several sequels. *A Catalogue of Mistakes* is the revealing subtitle of *The Young Step-Mother* (1861), which details several accidents and near-accidents.(△)

(15) The English translation of Hoffmann's tales, *The English Struwwelpeter*, was published in 1848. Most tales warn against playing with fire; others punish a different character trait (such as vanity in *Violet's Idol*). In Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839), one of the children inadvertently starts a fire and is punished by having to sleep in the burnt nursery.(△)

(16) Published in a single volume, the text contains twenty-seven chapters, approximately 300 pages.(△)

(17) Sanders contrasts Rachel Curtis with Ermine Williams and Fanny Temple (65-66), whereas Wheatley refers to "the three clever women" (904), Rachel, Ermine, and Bessie Keith, suggesting that they are triangulated within a structure in which several "characters ... are versions of each other" (902).(△)

(18) Holmes argues that Yonge "upends the disabled woman's role in melodrama" and thereby "represents disability and mutual dependency as pervasive social goods" (*Fictions* 51-52). See also Schaffer's work in *Romance's Rival* and *Communities of Care*.(△)

(19) Schaffer critically unpacks "the physical work of care" to theorise caregiving, "showing that care communities can license a different way of imagining care

beyond the ministering angel” (*Communities* 14-15). Yonge’s novels often detail caregiving as hard work and a burthen. It can be a laudable duty, but it rarely is sentimentalised.(^)

(20)Yonge develops Maurice in sequels to *Scenes and Characters*. Like Edward, he moves his experiments overseas.(^)

(21)Wheatley draws on this debate in her discussion of death in the novel.(^)

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