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'How differently it came upon her': The Ageing Young Stepmother in Charlotte Yonge's *The Young Step-Mother* and Dinah Craik's *Christian's Mistake*

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This article looks at two domestic novels of the 1860s, *The Young Step-Mother* by Charlotte Yonge and *Christian's Mistake* by Dinah Craik, alongside Victorian vital statistics and family structure in order to argue that fictional stepmothers of the period – even very young stepmothers – are better understood as a portrayal of female middle age. One of the strongest conventions of the nineteenth-century novel is that its protagonist be young, especially if that protagonist is female. This youth convention prevented novelists from putting many aspects of women's lives at the centre of their work; one such aspect was mothering a child past the age of infancy. When critics write about the stepmother in Victorian literature, they usually portray her either as a stereotype (the wicked stepmother of fairy tale) or as a representation of a common nineteenth-century reality. This article shows that a young stepmother-protagonist offered Victorian writers a way to respect the novel's youth convention at the same time as exploring emotions and experiences not typically available to biological mothers until their thirties, forties or even fifties: dealing with the competing demands of infant and adolescent children, for example, or with a daughter's unhappy marriage or son's professional difficulties. Through showing how Yonge's and Craik's novels give mature experience to young women, this article offers a model for finding Victorian representations of age in unexpected places and unexpected bodies.



In January 1866 the *Nation* published Henry James's review of *The Belton Estate*, a new novel by Anthony Trollope. James begins his review by introducing the novel's heroine, Clara Amedroz. 'Like most of Trollope's recent heroines, she is no longer in the first blush of youth', he writes (she is twenty-five, although the review does not mention her exact age).¹ Clara, James implies, is older than the heroines of other novelists (he does not write, 'Like most heroines, she is no longer...'), and older than the heroines of Trollope's early work.² The faintly derisive tone of the review's opening passage suggests that James is critical of Trollope for writing the same story, with the same-age heroine, over and over — as if many other novelists did not produce heroine after heroine who *were* in the first blush of youth (James would himself, of course, go on to be one such novelist). When it comes to the age of heroines, we can infer, 'the first blush of youth' was an unmarked category: a convention so established that it went unrecognized, and repeated departure from it seemed more unimaginative than repeated adherence to it.

Most nineteenth-century heroines are, indeed, seldom older than twenty-one or twenty-two. By the time a heroine is in her mid-twenties, her being so tends to be part of the novel's plot, as in the case of Clara Amedroz, or Helen Graham in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), aged twenty-five or twenty-six, or Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1818), at twenty-seven. The strong convention — almost a requirement — that the heroine of a novel be young facilitates the narration of certain kinds of plots and experiences, while pushing others to the margins or altogether excluding them. Jacob Jewusiak has described the realist novel as enacting a 'temporal compromise' in its pursuit of representing a broad swathe of society: as the number of characters in a realist novel increases, the passage of time allotted to each individual character decreases, with the result that no character is allowed to experience the 'transformations [of] age'.³ If a heroine is young at the beginning of a novel, in other words, she will still be young (or at least youngish) by its end.

Many nineteenth-century novelists incorporated the distinctive experiences and emotions of female middle or old age through their novels' secondary or minor characters: think, for example, of the reckoning with one's husband's or one's own past

¹ Henry James, review of Anthony Trollope, *The Belton Estate* (1866), *Nation*, 4 January 1866, pp. 21–22 (p. 21).

² It is striking that among Trollope's earlier novels are two in which he departs from convention by having elderly male protagonists: *The Warden* (1855) and *Barchester Towers* (1857). It is perhaps more striking still that his break with convention does not extend to the closest thing these novels have to a heroine: Eleanor Harding/Bold/Arabin is young and marriageable in *The Warden* and marries at the end of it. By the time *Barchester Towers* opens, her first husband has died, leaving her young and marriageable once more, and able to remarry at the novel's conclusion.

³ Jacob Jewusiak, 'No Plots for Old Men', *Novel*, 46 (2013), 193–213 (p. 195).

undertaken by, respectively, Harriet Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* (1872) and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* (1853), or of wealthy Miss Matilda Crawley surrounded by expectant relatives in *Vanity Fair* (1848). Other writers, however, found a way to smuggle the plots of maturity into the centre of their novels, not by violating the genre's youth-convention, but by putting their young heroines in roles more commonly experienced by women fifteen or twenty years their senior. This article examines how one such role works in two domestic novels published in the 1860s. *The Young Step-Mother* (1861) by Charlotte Yonge and *Christian's Mistake* (1865) by Dinah Craik both take, conventionally enough, a female protagonist in 'the first blush of youth'. Somewhat less conventionally, both novels begin rather than end with that protagonist's marriage, and the man she marries is a widower considerably older than herself. In each novel the widower has three children by his first wife, with the result that, upon her marriage, the protagonist finds herself immediately plunged into running the kind of household it usually takes years to develop, and that is usually presided over by a considerably older woman.

Before examining the particularities of Yonge's and Craik's young stepmother-heroines, I will situate the stepmother in her nineteenth-century literary context. The most famous fictional stepmother — the wicked stepmother of fairy tales — is a creation of this period. In the first edition of the Grimms' *Children's and Household Tales* (*Kinder und Hausmärchen*), published in Germany in two volumes in 1812 and 1815, the child-protagonists of fairy tales such as 'Snow White' and 'Hansel and Gretel' are sent away from the parental home by an unloving biological mother. Despite the 'Kinder' referenced in the work's title, the Grimms originally intended their collection to be read primarily by fellow scholars. But having realized that the work had found a younger audience, in subsequent editions they presented the tales more explicitly as suitable for children, and adapted them accordingly. One such adaptation was substituting the biological mother with the wicked stepmother so notorious today. In the words of folklorist Maria Tatar, Wilhelm Grimm, more willing than his brother to make changes to the tales, realized that 'most children (along with those who read to them) find the idea of wicked stepmothers easier to tolerate than cruel mothers'.⁴ The first English translation of the Grimms' collection, published in 1823, was of the second edition, so that English-speaking audiences' initial encounter with the tales occurred after many of the bad mothers had been replaced by bad stepmothers.⁵

⁴ Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, expanded edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 36–37.

⁵ Jack Zipes, *Grimm Legacies: The Magic Spell of the Grimms' Folk and Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 87.

In *The Uses of Enchantment* (1975), psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim argues that the function of the fairy-tale wicked stepmother is less to protect the child from the horrifying possibility of a wicked mother, than to give him a figure onto which he can project the negative feelings he has towards his own mother. Bettelheim subscribes to Melanie Klein's theory, detailed in her 1937 essay 'Love, Guilt and Reparation', that every child will harbour 'hatred and aggressive feelings', as well as love, towards his mother, regardless of the particulars of the mother's behaviour. The Grimms' substitution of the stepmother for the biological mother enables the child to 'manage the contradictory feelings which would otherwise overwhelm him'; it does this by splitting the ordinary, imperfect real-life mother into the perfect, dead biological mother and the wicked, living stepmother.⁶

Where fairy-tale wicked stepmothers provided children with a less destabilizing way of engaging with the complexities of the mother-child bond, imperfect stepmothers in Victorian novels offered adult (or young adult) female readers a way to process mixed feelings about being, or one day becoming, a mother. Victorian culture assumed, no less than ours does today, that a mother's love for her child was overwhelming. Child-rearing manuals of the period frequently warned mothers not to allow devotion to their children to cause them to neglect household or wifely duties.⁷ Fictional stepmothers therefore provided an image of cruel, hostile, or even merely ambivalent motherhood at one remove. Through the wicked stepmothers of Victorian sensation fiction, who desired or even carried out the murder of their stepchildren, readers encountered maternal hatred.⁸ Through the petty or unenthusiastic stepmothers of realist fiction, such as Hyacinth Gibson in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1866), readers could contemplate the possibility of feeling jealous of one's (step)child, even as one tried to secure her future.

The virtuous stepmother, by contrast, offered a model for feminine virtue more generally, arguably even more so than the virtuous biological mother. In an 1858 issue of the religious magazine, the *Christian Repository*, an article titled 'The Stepmother' laments the bad reputation of stepmothers, and salutes their noble work: 'To take the

⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Vintage, 2010), p. 69; 'Love, Guilt and Reparation', in *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, ed. by Roger Money-Kyrle and others, 4 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 1: *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921-1945*, intr. by R. E. Money-Kyrle, 306-343 (p. 306).

⁷ See, for example, [Eliza] Warren, *How I Managed My Children from Infancy to Marriage* (London: Houlston and Wright, 1865), p. 42; and [Sarah Stickney Ellis], *The Mothers of England: Their Influence & Responsibility* (London: Fisher, 1843), p. 252.

⁸ Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *John Marchmont's Legacy* (1863) and Ellen Wood's *St Martin's Eve* (1866) offer two examples of such murderous stepmothers.

place of Mother to the motherless; surely this should awaken gratitude and love on the part of the bereaved circle, and on her own part, the tenderest sympathies of the soul.’⁹ The writer’s description of what it is to be a stepmother is also a description of what it means to embody contemporary feminine ideals of self-sacrifice, duty, and empathy:

With devotion and self-sacrifice, [she] calls up her soul to the exercise of that enduring love and faithfulness which only the mother knows — [she] resumes the hold on the tender hand which the dying parent yielded in death [...] seeking in all things to carry out *her* suspended plans for this life, and above all things to renew *her* desires and *her* exertions for the salvation of their immortal souls. (pp. 172–73, emphases in original)

If a loving biological mother fulfilled one ideal of womanhood because her devotion was supposed to be ‘natural’ and spontaneous, a virtuous stepmother fulfilled another: her actions were dictated by duty and a more general sense of empathy, and she did not allow unruly feelings to get the better of her. It is inevitable, the *Christian Repository* article admits, that a stepmother will often be ‘perplexed and discouraged’; she will not be capable, the writer implies, of loving her stepchildren with the intensity that ‘the [biological] only mother knows’ (pp. 173, 172–73). But in treating the children as if they were her own, and in trying to love them as her own, she offers a model of self-discipline, and of behaviour that is utterly unselfish. Such a stepmother — perhaps especially if young, and if portrayed in the early days of stepmotherhood, adapting to its demands — could train young female readers in the virtues expected of them both before and after having children.

The young stepmothers in *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian’s Mistake* are not perfect, but they are far closer to the virtuous stepmother described by the *Christian Repository* than they are to the fairy-tale wicked stepmother who was, by the 1860s, part of the cultural imagination. Both novels reverse the Bettelheim model, replacing an inadequate biological mother with a devoted stepmother. Nevertheless, in both novels, as in fairy tales, the stepmother serves as a figure for the mother, rather than a figure through which to explore a different kind of female virtue. Bettelheim’s theory of the wicked stepmother identifies a psychological problem (how can the child feel both love and hatred towards his mother? How can a single person — the mother — be alternately loving and withholding?) and presents it with a chronological solution (first there is one mother, then another). For Yonge and Craik, replacing the biological

⁹ ‘The Stepmother’, *Christian Repository*, June 1858, pp. 172–74 (p. 172).

mother with a young stepmother solves generic and narratological problems rather than psychological ones. The chronology of the stepmother, along with the emerging and solidifying conventions of the novel, made stepmotherhood a particularly efficient and appealing way for novelists to explore motherhood, and especially the ongoingness of motherhood. But the experiences of motherhood and stepmotherhood do not map perfectly onto one another, and in using the latter to represent the former, Yonge and Craik offer new ways to conceptualize the human life course. Through representing mature motherhood in the person of its youthful protagonist, the Victorian stepmother novel opens up the possibility that representations of ageing might be separated from a biological itinerary. Reading for non-biological mothering, I propose, has the ability more broadly to detect and defamiliarize ageing's corporal and cognitive phenomena when they occur without conventional timestamps.

Mirroring motherhood

The youth convention of the nineteenth-century novel is not entirely a gendered phenomenon, even if what qualified as young was rather different for men than for women. In *The Way of the World* (1987), Franco Moretti argues that youth is 'both a necessary and sufficient definition' of the modern literary hero, distinguishing him from the hero of a classical epic or Renaissance drama who was typically in the 'middle stage of life'.¹⁰ According to Moretti, this shift of the hero from mature adulthood to youth occurred because the 'dynamism and instability' of modernity demanded a protagonist who was himself dynamic and unstable, but not chronically so (p. 5). The hero of the *Bildungsroman*, because he is young, can and must *lose* his dynamism and instability during his trajectory to adulthood. This process, as depicted in the novel, offers the reader a consolatory fantasy, neutralizing the dynamic, unstable, and revolutionary forces at work in modernity by promising that they will eventually be integrated into the already existing 'emotional and intellectual system' of the establishment (p. 6). One of the central insights of critical ageing studies is that, in Margaret Gullette's formulation, humans are 'aged by culture first of all'.¹¹ The *Bildungsroman* does not select youthful protagonists because older men and women are physiologically either perfectly stable or chronically unstable. Rather, it foregrounds youth because it is a product of a culture that believed youth to be a period of unique event and change. At the same time, the

¹⁰ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. by Albert Sbragia, new edn (London: Verso, 2000), p. 4.

¹¹ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 3.

popularity of the *Bildungsroman* entrenched this belief all the more firmly in culture throughout the Victorian period.

In regarding the *Bildungsroman*, together with its feminized counterpart, the marriage plot, as *the* dominant form of the nineteenth-century novel, Moretti participates in a scholarly tradition extending back to Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*. This tradition posits the novel as a form that is, in Caroline Levine's words, 'good at thinking through individual development' but comparatively bad at representing sustained and collective life.¹² Calling for literary critics to shift their attention from particulars to generalities, from the exceptional to what is repeatable and held in common, Levine suggests that poetry, because of its emphasis on rhythm and repetition, is better able than the nineteenth-century novel to use form to depict 'norms, and routines, including ordinary upkeep, daily labor, and the regular demands of the body' (p. 641). Even critics such as Rebecca Rainof, who has argued that the middle stage of life is more important to the Victorian novel than traditional scholarly accounts recognize, are concerned with the development — albeit a development slower and more inward — of the adult individual, rather than the portrayal of collective life. Importantly for the purpose of this article, the older protagonists on whom Rainof focuses belong to 'types' such as 'the miser, the widow, the bachelor and the spinster': figures who do not have spouses or children, and who exist outside a multigenerational household.¹³ Whatever individual, comparatively late-in-life maturation process these characters undergo is able to take place in part because they are not shepherding the younger generation to maturity.

It has not always been so clear, however, that the focus of the novel is the development of the individual. Domestic novels such as those by Yonge and Craik have lain outside the canon for decades, pushed to the margins by the *Bildungsroman* and the marriage plot. In the 1860s, however, it was by no means certain which kind of novel — the kind that prioritized the individual's progress from youth to maturity, or the kind that foregrounded domestic routines and collective life — would earn more lasting success and admiration. Yonge and Craik were tremendously popular in their day, enjoyed

¹² Caroline Levine, 'Model Thinking: Generalization, Political Form, and the Common Good', *New Literary History*, 48 (2017), 633–53 (p. 639).

¹³ Rebecca Rainof, *The Victorian Novel of Adulthood: Plot and Purgatory in Fictions of Maturity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), pp. 12–13. Admittedly, a widow might well have children, but Rainof herself notes that characters such as Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair* and Eleanor Bold in *Barchester Towers* 'do not offer a more complex, nuanced depiction of widowhood as a state of midlife female *bildung*', unlike (to use Rainof's example) George Eliot's childless widow Gwendolen Harleth (p. 82).

by canonical writers and thinkers as well as the general reading public. *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), arguably Craik's best-known work, and Yonge's first big success, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), were two of the bestselling and most popular novels of the nineteenth century. According to J. B. Priestley, Yonge's novel was *the* most popular, '[leaving] Dickens and Thackeray far behind'.¹⁴ Officers in the Crimea loved *The Heir of Redclyffe*, as did Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris; Tennyson was a keen reader of Yonge, and perhaps of *The Young Step-Mother* in particular.¹⁵ George Eliot and George Henry Lewes had several books by Yonge in their library and, while staying in Italy, bought *The Daisy Chain* (1856) on Anthony Trollope's recommendation, so that Eliot could read it aloud to Lewes in the evening.¹⁶

Many of Yonge's novels, *The Young Step-Mother* included, subsume the elements of *Bildungsroman* and marriage plot in a family saga where there is no clear protagonist, or where the protagonist is in no position to be a *Bildungsroman* hero or a romantic heroine. In these novels we find some of the 'generalizable forms of collective life' that Levine urges us to seek in literature: 'how to organize and distribute the shared labor of maintaining and reproducing bodies, which includes the production and preparation of food; care for infants, the ill, and the elderly; and arrangements of space for shelter and gathering' (p. 640). Victorian readers and reviewers recognized that these novels were more interested in collective life than in the lives of individuals. *The Young Step-Mother* may name a single individual in its title, but a contemporaneous, and not entirely complimentary, review characterizes it as progressing 'by sketching the daily life of a quiet family year after year': 'All the trifling vexations and joys', 'every minor domestic grievance', and all 'the petty annoyances of society in a country town are duly set forth'.¹⁷

¹⁴ J. B. Priestley, *Victoria's Heyday* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 124.

¹⁵ Priestley, p. 124; Ethel Romanes, *Charlotte Mary Yonge: An Appreciation* (London: Mowbray, 1908), pp. 91–92. Francis Palgrave recalled Tennyson reading the novel aloud to him, Holman Hunt, and Valentine Prinsep in 1860, when the four of them were on a walking tour of Devon and Cornwall. On one occasion on that trip, according to Palgrave, Tennyson read on late into the night, alone in his room, until Palgrave heard him cry, 'I see land! Mr Kendal is just going to be confirmed!'. His curiosity satisfied, Tennyson was then able to blow out his candle and go to sleep. See Alethea Hayter, *Charlotte Yonge* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 1996), p. 3. It is hard to believe this account is accurate — *The Young Step-Mother* was not published in book form until 1861, and another of the walkers remembers Tennyson reading a different Yonge novel — but absolute accuracy aside, the story does convey Tennyson's absorption in Yonge's fiction. See also, John Batchelor, *Tennyson: To Strive, To Seek, To Find* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), p. 245.

¹⁶ William Baker, *The Libraries of George Eliot and George Henry Lewes* (Victoria: English Literary Studies, University of Victoria, 1981), p. 121.

¹⁷ 'The Young Stepmother', *Morning Post*, 4 December 1861, p. 3.

It is notable, however, that these novels, no less than *Bildungsromane* or marriage plots, do often still have young protagonists, even when societal dynamism and instability is not the writer's prime concern, and even though the repetitive acts of 'maintaining and reproducing bodies' are hardly the preserve of youth. This posed a problem for writers wishing to put at the centre of their novels experiences and emotions incompatible with adolescence or very early adulthood. Motherhood, arguably the paradigmatic labour of 'maintaining and reproducing bodies', was one such experience. This was especially the case for the mothering of any child older than an infant: by the time a woman had a child old enough to have formed a character of his own, and old enough for her interactions with him to form the basis of a plot, she had aged out of being heroine material. For Yonge and Craik, a stepmother offered a solution to this difficulty of writing motherhood. A stepmother need only be old enough to marry in order to be placed in a maternal position towards multiple children of different ages, who could be as young as an infant or — depending on the age of her husband — as old or older than the stepmother herself. Albinia and Christian, the heroines of Yonge's and Craik's novels respectively, are both closer in age to their stepchildren than to their husbands: Albinia's three stepchildren are eleven, twelve, and thirteen when she becomes their stepmother (she herself is twenty-three when she marries), and while Christian's stepchildren are younger, her husband is more than twice her age.

The first few chapters of *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian's Mistake* are strikingly similar. In both cases the protagonist, newly married, meets her stepchildren for the first time and finds them variously unprepossessing and variously ill behaved. (There are hints, both to the reader and to the protagonist, that the husband's first marriage was unsatisfactory, and that his first wife neglected her maternal duties.) The question that drives the opening chapters of both novels is whether the stepmother-protagonist can undo the damage wrought by the biological mother and endear herself to, and improve the tempers and behaviours of, her new stepchildren. A secondary question is how Albinia and Christian will negotiate the demands and expectations of the biological mother's interfering female relatives. (In both cases, the female relatives battle to maintain their authority over the dead first wife's children, as well as over her newly remarried widower.)

These are questions that emphasize rather than elide the distinction between stepmother and biological mother (a biological mother is not often, for example, in the position of having to undo the damage done by a previous mother figure). In both *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian's Mistake*, the stepmother quickly wins the affections

of her youngest stepchild, but the older two children remain strongly resistant, and her interactions with them are distinctively stepmotherly. By ‘distinctively stepmotherly’ I mean that these interactions highlight the fact that another woman has (poorly) raised the children and/or the stepmother’s ignorance of her stepchildren’s history. They demonstrate the stepmother trying to impose a new regime, or they emphasize the mediated nature of the stepmother–stepchild relationship by requiring the stepmother to seek the approval, opinion, or knowledge of the father before making a domestic decision. They feature the stepchild grieving for his former life or reminding the stepmother that she is not his mother. It seems to the reader of the tense first few chapters of the two novels that bringing about the happy union of stepmother and stepchildren will be the work of the whole novel, just as it takes a whole novel to unite the hero and heroine of a marriage plot.

In fact, in both Yonge’s and Craik’s novels, the stepmother, through her kindness and goodness, and with the help of a timely illness that strikes the oldest son and makes him dependent on her love and care, overcomes her stepchildren’s hostility speedily, in both narrative and chronological terms. From this point on, interactions between the two stepmothers and their stepchildren have little to do with the role of stepmother, and instead focus on the character, behaviour, or situation of the child: Albinia and Christian struggle with a sullen child or a deceitful one, or worry about their stepchildren’s education, poor health, or romantic opportunities. The extent to which both Albinia and Christian shift to occupying the position of mother is indicated by the lack of self-consciousness with which the children come to refer to their stepmother as ‘mamma’, following an initial reluctance to do so.¹⁸ In *The Young Step-Mother*, the similarities between good mothering and good stepmothering are further emphasized by the fact that the protagonist goes on to have two biological children, whom she loves and worries over no more than (and indeed, sometimes less than) her stepchildren. After the first few chapters, the distinction between stepmother and mother is all but forgotten, and Yonge and Craik can use their young stepmothers to explore mature motherhood.

One might argue that Yonge’s and Craik’s use of a stepmother rather than a mother to explore maternal experience has less to do with the youth convention of the novel

¹⁸ The complicated emotions attached to a stepchild calling or refusing to call his or her stepmother ‘mamma’ (or an equivalent title that might equally be bestowed upon a biological mother) are a common feature of nineteenth-century novels involving a new stepmother. Examples include Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*, Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848), and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*.

than with the feelings and expectations surrounding motherhood in the nineteenth century that I discuss above. Such an argument is a version of Bettelheim's reading of the fairy-tale wicked stepmother, in its suggestion that a culture that idealized, and idolized, mothers and motherhood would prevent writers from portraying biological motherhood in any light other than a glowing one. Natalie McKnight points out how often mothers are absent in mid-Victorian fiction, attributing this to the 'contradictory and impossible expectations' and emotions surrounding motherhood during the period: mothers are 'better left out of the story', she suggests, 'because of the confusion and antipathy they inspire'.¹⁹ But this reading of the absence of mothers in Victorian fiction does not take into account how many motherless characters are fatherless too. Scholars of the orphan-protagonist in Victorian fiction agree that novelists used the figure of the orphan because of the plots and symbols he facilitated rather than from a desire to avoid the depiction of motherhood and/or parenthood more generally.²⁰ And while there are indeed many motherless protagonists in Victorian fiction, there is also no shortage of cruel, negligent, domineering, weak, ambivalent, or otherwise imperfect biological mothers: Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House* and Mrs Copperfield/Murdstone in *David Copperfield* (1850); Mrs Hale and Mrs Thornton in *North and South* (1854); Lisbeth Bede and Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (1859) and Mrs Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*; and Isabel Carlyle in *East Lynne* (1861), to name only a handful. There was clearly not a taboo about representing imperfect mothers in Victorian fiction; indeed, the scarcity of protagonists with two good parents suggests that perfect or even highly competent parenting is unable to produce the kind of plots we find in novels.

Far from having to use a stepmother in order to portray, non-controversially, maternal dissatisfaction or neglect, Victorian novelists not infrequently portrayed stepmothers as restorative figures whose presence could compensate for previous bad mothering and/or parenting. The conclusion of *Jane Eyre* (1847) not only provides Mr Rochester with a wife and son but also Adèle with a loving stepmother and a half-brother: a whole and happy family unit after the single-parent household she experienced first with her mother, and then (albeit unknowingly) with her father. Barbara Hare's entry into the Carlyle family in *East Lynne* overlays the shame and grief of the family's past with the stability of upper-middle-class domestic routine. In both

¹⁹ Natalie J. McKnight, *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), p. 18.

²⁰ See, for example, Cheryl L. Nixon, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood, and Body* (London: Routledge, 2011); Laura Peters, *Orphan Texts: Victorian Orphans, Culture and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); and Duyen Xuan Nguyen, 'Orphans, Immigrants, and Empire: Making and Unmaking Identity in the Victorian Novel' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University, 2015).

cases the stepmother makes the home and its inhabitants respectable, according to the values that the novels share with their implied readers.²¹ Jane ensures that ‘a sound English education corrected in great measure [Adèle’s] French defects’, while Barbara’s bourgeois good sense replaces Isabel Carlyle’s aristocratic fragility and neurosis.²² Albinia and Christian ultimately fulfil a similar role: they enter their new husbands’ homes and restore them to order, so that the children therein can experience the loving strictness and Christian values that constitute a satisfactory upbringing. If anything, the stepmother figure allowed authors to add interest (through the events surrounding her entry into the family, and the adjustment period that followed) to what might be an otherwise dull portrayal of good mothering.

Another possible, and more straightforward, explanation of why Albinia and Christian are stepmothers rather than mothers is that there were, simply, a lot of stepmothers and stepfamilies around in the mid-nineteenth century. Just under one-fifth of marriages that took place between 1846 and 1880 contained at least one party who was remarrying.²³ Victorian marriages were more often terminated by the death of the husband than the death of the wife, yet rates of remarriage for widowers were significantly higher than rates of remarriage for widows.²⁴ The field of vital statistics was only just emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, pioneered by statisticians such as William Farr and William Ogle, and there is no data showing how many widowers remarrying during this period had children from a previous marriage (and therefore how many of these remarriages produced stepmothers).²⁵ Nevertheless, we can assume that the number was significant. One of the biggest causes of mortality for women was childbirth. More importantly, the mean age of marriage for a bachelor during the mid-to late nineteenth century was around twenty-six, and the mean age of remarriage for men was in the early forties. It seems reasonable to conclude that a widower marrying

²¹ My reading of the stepmother’s function here is indebted to Deborah Wynne’s *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), in which she argues that *East Lynne* dramatizes the triumph of the middle class over the aristocracy and expects its readers to rejoice in this triumph (p. 70).

²² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 519. Admittedly, in *East Lynne* Barbara’s jealousy towards her stepchildren prevents her from bonding with them, and from noticing the sickness of the oldest. But the novel ends with her declaration to her husband that her jealousy is fading, and that she ‘constantly pray[s]’ to be able to ‘love [his children] and care for them as if they were my own’. Her husband’s reassurance that ‘every good thing will come with time that we earnestly seek’ is an assurance to the reader, too, that we leave the Carlyle children in good hands. See Mrs Henry [Ellen] Wood, *East Lynne* (London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 471.

²³ Great Britain, Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, *Marriage and Divorce Statistics: Historical Series of Statistics on Marriages and Divorces in England and Wales, 1837–1983*, p. 22, Table 2.1.

²⁴ Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), pp. 157–58.

²⁵ *Vital Statistics: A Memorial Volume of Selections from the Reports and Writing of William Farr*, ed. by Noel A. Humphreys (London: Offices of the Sanitary Institute, 1885).

in his forties would have had children with a first wife he married some fifteen years earlier.²⁶

But the youth of Albinia and Christian suggests that Yonge and Craik are not primarily concerned with the accurate depiction of a typical upper-middle-class nineteenth-century family set-up. In the second half of the century, the mean age of a spinster marrying a widower was between thirty-one and thirty-three. Albinia and Christian are twenty-three and twenty respectively, much closer to the average age of a spinster marrying a bachelor. (In the first half of the 1860s, when both novels were published, this age was 23.8.)²⁷ Their husbands, however, are close to the average age of a remarrying widower, and the fact that each of them has three children from a previous marriage (rather than simply one baby) further suggests that Yonge and Craik use a stepmother-protagonist because she offers a way to explore a wider variety of maternal experiences and challenges than a mother-protagonist would have done, while still respecting the novelistic convention that demanded a young heroine.

Parental functions

A young stepmother is not merely a more conventional heroine than an older biological mother, but also a more efficient one, allowing for the portrayal of several different stages of motherhood in a significantly condensed period. Jacob Jewusiak has noted the Victorian novel's reluctance to represent ageing as a slow and regular process, preferring instead to depict sudden traumas or sicknesses that 'speed up the aging of its characters'.²⁸ Through the chronology of the stepmother, *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian's Mistake* likewise bring about a kind of speeding up, albeit one that is familial rather than physical. Albinia, because she goes on to have two biological children, experiences in the ten years covered by the novel what it would take a solely biological mother more than twice as long to experience: what it is like to be a mother to infants, toddlers, children, adolescents, and men and women in their early twenties. The events of *Christian's Mistake* unfold over the course of only six months, but during this time Christian can be a mother to children of three different ages as soon as she marries. The condensed timeframe of the stepfamily can also generate tensions and

²⁶ *Marriage and Divorce Statistics*, p. 24, Table 3.1. Of the marriages that took place between 1846 and 1900, in which one party only was remarrying, around twice as many were between a widower and a spinster than between a widow and a bachelor.

²⁷ Dinah Craik herself married in 1865, when she was thirty-nine; *Christian's Mistake* was the first novel she published after her marriage. Her mother, to whom Craik was very close, had also married unusually late, when she was past thirty.

²⁸ Jacob Jewusiak, *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 120 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 21.

conflicts that form the basis of a plot, or at least of various storylines: jealousy between stepchildren and biological children; the stepmother's struggle to deal with going from having no children to having three at once, or with the different demands of infants and adolescents; the negative influence that a deceitful or disobedient teenager might have on her young half-siblings. All these situations demand a negotiation of resources and/or the difficulty of having too many individuals, with disparate needs and personalities, in close quarters; they offer good testing grounds for establishing Levine's 'generalizable forms of collective life'. In *The Young Step-Mother and Christian's Mistake*, the maintenance of bodies and the 'arrangements of space for shelter and gathering' are complicated further by individuals outside the immediate family, some of whom are 'ill' and 'elderly': the first wife's female relatives in both cases and, in *The Young Step-Mother*, a whole array of other relatives, quasi-relatives, and relatives-by-marriage (Levine, p. 640). The bounds of the family are elastic, but finite resources mean they cannot be infinitely so.

A stepmothered family facilitates the representation of simultaneous stages of motherhood, and the resultant stretching of resources, especially those of time and attention. But there was an extent to which this simultaneity did represent a common reality for biological mothers of the period. Obviously, a biological mother could not be a newly-wed and a new mother at the same moment without incurring the disapproval, or at the very least the raised eyebrows, of society; more obviously still, sixteen years of biological motherhood must pass before a biological mother has a 16-year-old child. But families in the Victorian period were large, and women who married in the 1860s had an average of more than six children.²⁹ It was therefore not remarkable for a woman's oldest child to be a teenager while her youngest was a baby, or for her to be thinking about the marriage prospects of one child while imparting the rudiments of education to another. The most visible family of the period offered a model of this kind of household: the Princess Royal (Queen Victoria's first child) and Princess Beatrice (her last) were separated by seventeen years, with the former marrying less than a year after the latter was born (*Fig. 1*). A stepmothered family was therefore an efficient, but not an unrealistic representation of biological motherhood and family life. When Albinia, having just given birth to her first biological child, is unable to pay attention to him because of her intense worry about the waywardness of her teenage stepson,

²⁹ Michael Anderson, 'The Social Implications of Demographic Change', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950*, ed. by F. M. L. Thompson, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), II: *People and Their Environment*, 1–70 (p. 38); and R. I. Woods, 'Approaches to the Fertility Transition in Victorian England', *Population Studies*, 41 (1987), 283–311 (p. 289).



Fig. 1: After John Jabez Edwin Mayall, *Queen Victoria with Her Family*, 1860s, albumen carte de visite, 5.6 × 8.6 cm. © National Portrait Gallery, London. [CC BY-NC-ND 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

we can see this not as an exploration of the dangers and difficulties of simultaneous stepmotherhood and biological motherhood, but as a portrayal, through the figure of the stepmother, of the competing demands that existed for the many women whose childbearing period spanned a decade and a half or more.

Charlotte Yonge's personal and imaginative lives, as well as her literary output, were profoundly shaped by her experiences of life in a family even larger than Queen Victoria's. Although an only child until she was almost seven, when her one sibling was born, Yonge spent her childhood summers in Devon with her mother's half-sister, who had ten children. She cherished this lively environment, referring to it as 'the bliss of cousinland'.³⁰ Back in her quiet family home in Hampshire, she would entertain herself by making up stories about 'an imaginary family of ten boys and eleven girls who lived in an arbour' (Coleridge, p. 59). The stepfamily in *The Young Step-Mother* (husband, wife, and five children) looks small and compact by comparison with Yonge's Devonian cousins, and by comparison with two of Yonge's best-known novels, *The Daisy Chain* (eleven children) and *The Pillars of the House* (1873) (thirteen). But the mothers of both these large families, far from being the protagonists of their novels, die almost as soon

³⁰ Christabel Coleridge, *Charlotte Mary Yonge: Her Life and Letters* (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 63.

as the novels begin: the youth convention of the novel meant that such a family, with a necessarily middle-aged mother, was not for Yonge an appropriate vehicle through which to explore motherhood.

Structurally, the Victorian stepmother replicates the nuclear biological family: the stepmother steps into the vacancy left by her husband's first wife, thereby returning the family structure to what it was before the mother's death and forestalling other possibilities of familial arrangement. As family historians have stressed, Victorian families often *were* arranged in alternative ways, with Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall noting that though 'specific categories of age, gender and function were seen as necessary to staff a family', those could be filled biologically or non-biologically, with many 'men and women act[ing] as educators, sponsors or even "pro-parents" (taking over parental functions) to many youngsters beside or in addition to their own', in part because of high mortality rates. Women especially 'often helped to bring up nieces, nephews and younger siblings and cousins who lived in their household'.³¹

The transferability of 'parental functions' in such a household, as well as the ability of parental functions to be distributed among multiple individuals, makes it a less than ideal environment in which to portray the lifelong and ongoing experience of motherhood. In *The Daisy Chain* there is never any suggestion that Mr May will remarry after the mother of his eleven children dies. Instead, the practical and emotional work previously performed by Mrs May falls to the oldest daughter, Margaret. But as Margaret becomes more of an invalid and her sisters Flora and Ethel grow older, they first start to share with Margaret and then take over from her the responsibility of caring for the household and their younger siblings. Rather than assigning family members fixed roles that replicate the nuclear family, the Mays divide up tasks and responsibilities according to gender, age, abilities, and character — all of which, aside from gender, change as the years pass. Family structure is shown to be flexible, with tasks that must be performed rather than roles that must be filled. This is quite different from *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian's Mistake*, both of which present it as entirely suitable that, as soon as Albinia and Christian enter their new families, they should permanently and fully take over the role of mother, not because they are kinder and wiser than the female relatives who have been caring for the children hitherto (though they are), and not because they are the appropriate age to mother these children (they are not), but simply because they are married to the children's father.

³¹ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 322, 341.

Compression and simultaneity

Albinia's and Christian's experience as stepmothers comes to replicate the experience of motherhood — although, as I have argued, in a compressed form that makes the stepmother a particularly convenient vehicle for novelists. Sometimes, however, this compression is so dramatic that it becomes a variety of experience in itself, rather than simply an analogue of the experience of motherhood. When Christian's youngest stepchild asks what he should call her, and her husband replies 'mamma', Christian is

startled, but conscious of a pleasant thrill at the sound of the new name, coming upon her so suddenly. [...] *How differently it came to her from the way it comes upon most women* — gradually, deliciously, with long looking forward and tremulous hope and fear.³²

The customary nine months of gestation and anticipation are compressed into the few short weeks of Christian's betrothal (the first point at which she realizes that she will become a stepmother). The infant babbling, that gradually solidifies into discrete, recognizable words and names, is replaced by a child who is able not only to call a woman his mother, but to ask what he should call her. Compressing time in this way changes its emotional content, or the object on which the same emotions are focused: Christian, even if 'thrill[ed]', is 'startled', taken aback by delight rather than registering a slow crescendo of expectation. Like the biological mother, she experiences 'tremulous hope and fear', but about whether her stepchildren will love and accept her, rather than whether she and her children will survive the dangerous months of pregnancy and babyhood.

Here the experience of stepmotherhood seems less like the experience of motherhood than like the experience of the reader of Victorian novels. Victorian novels, too, skip over the period of gestation and bring on motherhood 'suddenly', often with nothing more than an allusion to a female character feeling unwell, or not participating in social events, preparing us for the arrival of a baby a couple of pages later. This tendency is significant not for the novels' use of euphemism (Victorian euphemism for pregnancy and childbirth was not confined to the novel) but for the speed, in narrative time and usually also in story time, with which euphemistic reference to pregnancy is followed by the presence of a baby. The earliest clues that Yonge gives us to Albinia's first pregnancy, for example, are references to her looking 'fagged and unwell' (which could equally well be attributable to the exhaustion of monitoring her disobedient stepson,

³² [Dinah Mulock Craik], *Christian's Mistake* (New York: Harper, 1871), p. 48, emphasis added.

the context in which she is so described) and ‘not feeling well enough’ to endure the strained tedium of an evening with her husband’s first wife’s mother and sister.³³ A few pages later, at the end of a chapter, Albinia is described as ‘disheartened and worn out [and not] equal even to going to take off her walking things’ (p. 73). Again, this is plausibly the result of the combined frustrations of her stepson and relations-in-law — until the next chapter opens with Albinia’s stepdaughter eager to see ‘dear, dear mamma, and the darling little brother’ who has been born in the time and space between the end of the last chapter and the beginning of the present one (p. 74). Even a reader attuned to the euphemisms for pregnancy has fewer than ten pages to adjust to the baby’s introduction to the narrative. There is no indication at all of Albinia’s second pregnancy until it is already over, and we learn that she is ‘feeling the delicious repose of refreshed nature, [...] a little pale, a little weak, but with a sweet happy languor, a soft tender bloom’ (p. 237). A few lines later, we hear that a christening is imminent.

The compressing action of the stepmother novel is experienced more generally by both its protagonist and its reader, beyond the particular absence or radical acceleration of gestation. Novels frequently compress and accelerate time more generally, jumping several days, months, or even years from one paragraph or chapter to the next. While it is true that novels can also dilate time, spending a paragraph or page on a single moment, the time management of a novel overall is usually one of compression: most novels cover a longer period of time than most readers take to read it.³⁴ The serial publication of many Victorian novels, which forced readers to extend their reading time to at least six months, and often as many as eighteen, might at first seem as if it would undo the compressing action of a novel, by bringing the duration of reading closer to the duration of the narrative. In fact, by standardizing the former, serial publication emphasized the distinction between the two durations. Laurel Brake has described serialized novels as ‘time-released texts’, existing in and through time in a way that novels published before or after the age of serialization did not. Each instalment was released into the world stamped with the date, and interacting with the other time-bound material (advertisements, reviews, essays, illustrations, editorials) contained in the issue.³⁵

³³ [Charlotte Yonge], *The Young Step-Mother; or, A Chronicle of Mistakes*, 6th edn (London: Macmillan, 1874), p. 66.

³⁴ There are many exceptions, of course, at the extreme end of which are single-day novels, such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses*, but I suggest both that there were fewer exceptions during the nineteenth century, and that even if we look beyond the nineteenth century, the novels that dilate time overall are in a minority compared to those that compress it.

³⁵ Laurel Brake, ‘Writing, Cultural Production, and the Periodical Press in the Nineteenth Century’, in *Writing and Victorianism*, ed. by J. B. Bullen (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 54–72 (p. 66).

Yonge's novels were unusual for the sheer length of time over which they were serialized. *The Young Step-Mother* was published in the *Monthly Packet*, the Christian magazine edited by Yonge, between 1856 and 1860. Four years is a long time for a reader to live with a novel, especially when the reader is young (the intended readership of the *Monthly Packet* was girls in their teens and early twenties), and this extended timeframe must have heightened the way in which story time diverged from reading time.³⁶ Many readers would have started *The Young Step-Mother* when older than Albinia's pre-teen stepchildren and ended it with the stepchildren older than them. The original readers of the novel experienced ten years of story time in four years of real-world time, rather as the stepmother experiences a longer period in mothering time than in real-world time: during the ten years that Albinia is a stepmother, and then also a biological mother, she (step)mothers children of every age from newborn to fully adult. In *Christian's Mistake*, we hear that in the first two weeks of Christian's marriage she has 'grown ten years older — was a matron, not a girl' (p. 43). As in the case of Albinia's euphemistic 'unwellness' discussed above, Christian's sudden ageing can be attributed to the stress of dealing with her troublesome stepchildren and the even more troublesome female relatives of her antecedent, but it also serves as a reminder of the metaphorical ageing caused by her marriage to a widowed father. By assuming the role of mother to three children, she is performing the role of a woman ten years older than herself.

Above, I showed that stepmother time operates through simultaneity as well as compression: a stepmother can be a mother figure to a teenager and a baby (the latter perhaps her biological child) at once. This simultaneity draws attention to the simultaneous existence of different phases of motherhood that characterized the experience of many Victorian biological mothers. But there are ways in which the simultaneity of stepmotherhood, through its *difference* from the simultaneity of motherhood, opens up narrative possibilities. A woman who, like Queen Victoria, is a biological mother simultaneously to a baby and a teenager has had previous experience of mothering a baby (because the teenager was once a baby). A new stepmother who has a teenage stepchild and an infant stepchild, by contrast, is newly in the position of mother to both. Furthermore, at the very moment she becomes a stepmother, she also becomes a wife, with all the various social, sexual, and domestic obligations that entails. For all that *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian's Mistake* portray many everyday acts

³⁶ Kristine Moruzi, "Never read anything that can at all unsettle your religious faith": Reading and Writing in *The Monthly Packet*, in *Charlotte Yonge: Rereading Domestic Religious Fiction*, ed. by Tamara S. Wagner (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 76–92 (p. 77).

of motherhood, they also draw attention to the difficulty of performing those acts while still finding one's feet as wife to a man one hardly knows, or learning what it is like to mother a toddler at the same time as learning to be mother to a teenager. Albinia struggles first to grasp the extent of, and then to reform, Mr Kendal's passivity and melancholy. Christian, an example of the 'model heroine', defined by Ian Watt as 'devoid of any feelings towards her admirer until the marriage knot is tied', must learn to love her husband at the same time as learning to care for his children.³⁷ When Albinia and Mr Kendal have an evening to themselves early in their marriage, the latter is 'unusually tender and unreserved' and the former feels herself to have 'never [...] spent a happier evening'; their time together is 'even better than what she had used last year to picture to herself as her future life with him' (pp. 66, 67). Albinia married her husband partly because the responsibility of caring for his three children appealed to her sense of moral duty and desire for ennobling work, but in this moment we see (and she sees) what this responsibility has cost her. Though she loves her stepchildren as soon as they become her stepchildren, she is happiest when alone with her husband or experiencing the phases of marriage and life that are usually expected to precede, rather than coexist with, motherhood. If stepmotherhood is something that can bring a husband and wife closer together by accelerating the 'natural' or expected stages of a marriage (so that they find themselves co-parenting several children as soon as they are married), it is also something that can interfere with those stages, preventing husband and wife from attending to one another.

Later in the novel, when the Kendal family is invited to a dance, Albinia's response is described in terms more suited to a schoolgirl: like her own stepchildren, she 'appreciate[s] a holiday to the utmost' (p. 194). At the dance she does not chaperone her stepchildren in the manner of the middle-aged wife and mother whose position she usually occupies, but rather acts like the young woman she is, moving 'with bounding step and laughing lips, [...] more exhilarated every moment, exchanging merry scraps of talk with her partner or bright fragments as she poussetted with pair after pair' (p. 200). Her blithe forgetfulness is reproached by her older brother ('I don't approve of parents and guardians losing themselves', he tells her) and has negative consequences

³⁷ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 161. Watt takes Samuel Richardson's Pamela Andrews to be the original version of this heroine. Both before and after *The Rise of the Novel*, however, many critics have pointed out that Pamela *does* seem to have sexual and/or romantic feelings towards Mr B. before marriage. The same cannot be said of Craik's heroine, whose words and actions indicate no sexual or romantic interest in her husband, and whose lack of such emotions is often explicitly stated by the narrator. Indeed, the relationship between Christian and her husband is striking for its absolute lack of sexual chemistry.

(her 17-year-old stepson makes advances to a woman three years older than him, and below him in social status), and we see the inherent incompatibility of Albinia's different roles (p. 202). Until the end of the novel, when she is no longer a bride and when her age and temperament more closely correspond with her duties and responsibilities, Albinia moves between her different roles, all of which are equally new to her: by turns she is bride and stepmother, young woman and matron. For the stepmother, the phases of marriage and life that are usually assumed to follow one another sequentially happen (or can happen) all at once.

For a novel to move back and forth between the past and present of a single individual is more often associated with modernist exploration of consciousness than with Victorian domestic realism. And in the most literal sense, *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian's Mistake* are strictly chronological, moving forwards week by week and month by month. We know that Christian is dogged by thoughts of the past, but the narrative never describes the contents of those thoughts other than as thoughts. If Albinia finds herself overwhelmed by thoughts and sensations from her pre-married life, we never hear about that life. The complicated interplay of different real and imagined times in the quotation above ('even better than what she had used last year to picture to herself as her future life with him') is presented as the narrator's own observation about Albinia's past, rather than the observation of Albinia herself. By showing Albinia feeling and acting as a married stepmother to three adolescent children one moment and an excitable young woman the next (and while she is, in both those moments, both married stepmother *and* excitable young woman), Yonge finds a way to represent a literal version of what stream of consciousness allowed later novelists to represent figuratively: the coexistence of different phases of life within a single day or hour. Through this coexistence, the stepmother-protagonist challenges the idea of time and experience as orderly, regulated, and sequential. In doing so, she prompts us to notice elsewhere the trick she enacts in her novel. The disorderliness of time, the unregulatedness of the human lifespan, mean that we can find the emotions and experiences of age in unexpected places and unexpected bodies: physical frailty, loneliness, the regret of a wasted opportunity, or the delight of a returning opportunity previously imagined wasted, are associated with old age, but they need not be restricted to it.

The two novels I examine in this article are barely concerned with old age. Albinia has become a step-grandmother by the time *The Young Step-Mother* ends, but Yonge refuses for her the grandmaternal role. Albinia's stepdaughter, who has moved abroad,

sends her baby son back to England to be raised permanently by Albinia: the novel ends with its heroine on the brink of repeating the middle stage of life rather than moving into the experiences associated with later maturity. *Christian's Mistake*, too, leaves Christian in the position of mother, surrounded by children. If we want to find representations of older age, we must look elsewhere. But *The Young Step-Mother* and *Christian's Mistake* can teach us how to look: by concealing one aspect of maturity — extended motherhood — in the body and experiences of a young woman, they show us that, even in the youth-obsessed Victorian novel, the full range of the human life course might be hiding in plain sight.

