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### Article

## "Glorious uncertainty": Business and Adultery in Charlotte Riddell's *Too Much Alone*

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### Abstract

In the 1860s and 1870s Charlotte Riddell was well-known as the "novelist of the City" of London. *Too Much Alone* (1860), her first narrative foray into the world of commerce and finance, is both a business novel and a novel of adultery. Focusing on how the text configures the emotional regimes of capitalism, this essay examines Riddell's representation of irregular desires and capricious feelings in relation to what she sees as endemic in commercial society: not fraud, but insecurity and uncertainty, whether "glorious" or dreary. The experience of uncertainty, I argue, provides the point of intersection between the two narrative strands of business and adultery. Explicitly addressed to business people, the novel offers a lesson in sentimental education, a type of training in the ability to tolerate the uncertain, repackaged as an intense emotional experience.

... and indeed, dear reader, in strict confidence between you and me, I doubt whether, as a rule, business-people could keep up heart to weather the adverse winds of trade, but for the glorious uncertainty of what the morrow might bring forth.

Riddell, *Too Much* 195

### 1. Introduction

- 1 The dictum "business is business" had several gradations of meaning for Victorian commentators, who denounced commercial immorality just as forcefully as they promoted the benefits of trade. Perhaps the most recurrent connotation concerned the need to keep business "separated from everything else in its performance," as the author of an article that appeared in the 1865 July issue of *Leisure Hour* peremptorily stated. "Don't mix it up with pleasure, nor with your household and domestic duties," the writer advised, "work up to the last stroke of business hours, and then put it by. It gives an additional charm to life when we can divide it and apportion it thoroughly" ("Business" 405). The separation of home and marketplace, private and public, which is here presumed to add charm to life, was advocated in business manuals, commercial biographies, and countless articles that reinforced a normal and normative view of business against a backdrop of malpractices and frauds daily chronicled in the periodical press.
- 2 Victorian novels, of course, provide salient critical commentary about the charms and harms of a life thus apportioned. Charlotte Riddell's *Too Much Alone* (1860) is a good case in point. The novel revolves around a double axis—"business" and "adultery"—and has a dense ideological agenda. A cursory look at the configuration of the story might clarify Riddell's perspective. *Too Much Alone* is a novel of hard facts and uncertain feelings that discusses the commercial uses of the toxic compound cyanogen in the same breath as the subtleties of irregular affections. Maurice Storn, the hero, works as manager and general factotum in a firm located in "the City" and spends his spare time conducting chemical experiments that will eventually yield

substantial financial rewards. He is a champion of social stoicism, a perfect incarnation of the principle that business should not encroach upon home, and therefore makes light of his wife's timid attempts to be more involved in his work and more in contact with the "trade of [his] affections" (8). Not only is trade depicted as a field where "affections" matter, spurring Maurice on to experiment with new compounds and market their applications, but domestic serenity itself is shown to be contingent upon the beneficial influence of business. Had Lina Storn been permitted to become familiar with Maurice's business life, had he consented to let the "shop" enter the parlour, the sanctuary of home would have been protected from the allure of the improper or, more specifically, the temptation of adultery. "Too much alone," estranged from her husband's business interests, Lina succumbs to adulterous fantasies and desires that gain legitimacy as the narrative accentuates their emotional significance. The temptation of adultery is invoked to illustrate that business does not, and should not, stop at the threshold of home: that in the modern city, family life is cognate with business life. *Too Much Alone* guides readers to reject the truism "business is business" and to embrace more malleable forms of integration of home and work, private and public. It does so by mixing genres, engrafting the business novel onto the novel of adultery. The former is self-referentially explained in chapter four, when the narrator, addressing her preferred constituency of readers, argues for the social and cultural relevance of novels that take business life as their main focus:

... business people rarely analyze their feelings, and still more rarely express them in words, and it is perhaps for this very reason that they are the only class in the community who really and truly care to read about themselves. They like to have their feelings, causes of action and modes of thought put into words. A novel about business, about their hopes, anxieties, joys and troubles, throws a new mental light across the page of their life's history; they find everything written there which they have experienced in their own persons, but never dreamt of making a romance about.

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The urgent need to mediate between business people and their feelings motivates the production of novels that, by "turning into poetry the monotonous prose" of bourgeois life (30), offer a space of self-analysis to those who are least accustomed to the "anatomical investigation" of their own hearts, as the narrator explains (31). With this "daring" gesture of self-authorization, Riddell inaugurates her career as the bard of business.<sup>[1]</sup> She identifies a niche in the market, a relatively untapped imaginative territory, and lays claim to its significance. Unlike business, adultery is a much more slippery category: the primacy of adulterous desire in *Too Much Alone* does not receive the same degree of validation. The narrator does not step forward to instruct her readers about the function that a novel of adultery might have, but she does provide adultery with an emotional style<sup>[2]</sup> that differs significantly from contemporary interpretations of what Barbara Leckie defines as "the most bourgeois of transgression" (1).

- <sup>3</sup> Appealing to the pleasures of virtual adultery, Riddell amplifies its emotional resonance at the diegetic level while keeping transgression within prescribed bounds in the unfurling of the plot. In this essay, I will focus mainly on the discourse of the narrator that occupies center stage throughout the novel, especially as regards the representation of adultery. The voice of the potential adulteress is adopted by the narrator in a sequence of interventions that magnify Lina's "emotional navigation,"<sup>[3]</sup> test the limits of the im/proper, dwell on extremes of feeling shared nationwide, and produce a space of legitimacy where the perils of adulterous desire are held in tension with the affective rewards of cross-gender friendship. What might today appear as the intrusiveness of diegesis in this text—prolonged narratorial musings (often tinged with sentimentality), a surplus of free indirect speech, a profusion of rhetorical questions—was arguably a plausible strategy to negotiate the "forbidden but not unspoken" (Leckie 18) topic of adultery. I will also consider how this story of commerce and love configures the interplay of modern affects in the private and public fields. In *Too Much Alone*, the ability to tolerate and manage irregular sentiments comes to identify commercial worth, just as the ability to withstand uncertainty, necessary in business, generates a more clement attitude vis-à-vis the improper. In the world of mixed realities and mixed feelings that Riddell portrays, experiments in affectionate relations do not produce radical results, but they solicit readers to invest in tolerance, to bear ambivalence and to accept the "glorious uncertainty of what the morrow might bring forth" (195).

## 2. East and West Intimacy

- <sup>4</sup> As Nancy Henry avers, Charlotte Riddell was "ahead of her time in seeing the potential of business as material

for fiction" (Rushing 164). Her novels, especially the early ones, contain explicit pronouncements about the importance of representing business realistically: "Every class has found some writer to tell its tale," she declares in *George Geith* (1864), "but I can remember no book which has ever described a shopkeeper as a man, or ventured into that debatable middle land, where talent and energy are struggling from morning to night in dingy offices, in dark warehouses, unknown to the world's eyes, solely because business has never learnt to be self-conscious" (1:143-44). Riddell's creative investment in the business community and, more specifically, in "the pathos of the City, the pathos in the lives of struggling men" (Blathwayt) renders her novels markedly different from other nineteenth-century narrative forays into the world of English commerce and finance. John Reed, Norman Russell and, more recently, Tamara Wagner have perceptively discussed how the fascination with financial speculation "entered the novel genre . . . shaping its development in intricate ways" (Wagner 6). Reed argues that "novels chronicling the rise to business success were commonplace" (183), but Victorian fiction was particularly sensitive to the fraudulent component of financial dealings. Spectacular swindlers, ruthless speculators, and financiers of mysterious origins captured the attention and the imagination of literary men and women throughout the century: "guilty money," as Ronald Michie demonstrates in the book of the same title, was a resilient narrative topic; financial speculation "worked as a theme, a plot device, and a metonymic representation of an increasingly speculative economy and commercialized society" (Wagner 26). Riddell's understanding of what a "business novel" is (and does) includes the customary denunciation of criminal commercial behaviour, but is not entirely defined by this oppositional stance. Rather, her take on business is more attuned to the German "Poesie des Geschäfts," the poetics of business that Gustav Freytag had immortalized in his "romance of the counting-house," *Soll und Haben* (translated into English as *Debit and Credit* in 1857).<sup>[4]</sup> Freytag's novel enjoyed an "exceptional and long-lasting success" (Stark 157) in Germany and was extensively reviewed in the British periodical press, when three different translations appeared within the same year. Like Freytag, and unlike most British novelists, Riddell sought to assign a favourable connotation to business activities.<sup>[5]</sup> Encouraging her readers to perceive the buying and bargaining universe with fresh, unprejudiced eyes, Riddell carved for herself a niche in the crowded market for fiction of the early 1860s by weaving stories that provide a cultural rationale and a symbolic legitimization to business as a quintessentially bourgeois sphere of action. A distinctive feature of her "poetics of business," as I argue in this essay, is also the intertwining of private and public issues, the integration of the intimate and the commercial that qualifies her understanding of Victorian capitalism.

<sup>5</sup> The opening chapter of *Too Much Alone* introduces the reader to the "terra incognita" of the City of London: an "unfashionable locality," situated "on the wrong side of the Monument" (1), where commerce rather than finance defines the spirit of the place.<sup>[6]</sup> Unlike Charles Dickens's "City of the Absent" (230), which is abstract, alienating and depopulated, or John Hollingshead's "City of Unlimited Paper" (2), which is insubstantial and unreal, Riddell's terra incognita is a space of meaningful labour<sup>[7]</sup> that still holds many promises of social mobility, self-improvement and economic success. An "over-built and over-populated town" (1), the City is connoted by architectural as well as social hybridity: "great mansions looking mean and dingy outside" still bear the impress of former grandeur ("wide staircases and massive balustrades and spacious chambers") (3); poverty and wealth co-exist; and the assortment of social types is almost as wide-ranging as the goods traded by City merchants. In this stratified social realm, "East" and "West" meet on more equal ground "over the stream of prejudice which grows so narrow just at that point where the withered banks of pauper gentility and the luxuriant fields of mercantile wealth front and face each other" (73). With the fading of social distinctions, even "the estate of beauty" (9) can be allocated more democratically: Maurice Storn (manager) and Gordon Glenaen (manufacturer) are surprisingly "handsome," their good looks unspoiled by the daily contact with "filthy drugs and abominably smelling chemicals" (9). The hybrid character of the City is also reflected in the blending of business and intellectual passion, hard toil and febrile scientific study that turns chemistry into an all-absorbing occupation. For Maurice and Gordon, it was "the trade of their affections: their warehouses and factories were sun, moon, stars, planets, earth and all to them" (8).

<sup>6</sup> With these credentials, the City becomes a most appropriate setting for the staging of mixed feelings and amorous attachments that are neither blatantly illicit nor unquestionably proper. The conventional marriage plot is dispensed with by chapter five, when Maurice Storn, after years of work and prudent investments, reaps his domestic reward: a very young wife, Lina, the only daughter of an elderly gentleman. While the initial joys of their married life are summarily touched upon and declared uninteresting ("Why should I enlarge upon these things, reader?" 45), the elements of potential discord are paraded, one by one, in a litany of forebodings: "She knew nothing at all of business, and as little of science. He did not care for music—the books they had read were on topics far as the poles asunder. . . . They had no old recollections, no acquaintances in common" (49). Lina is not allowed into the "Blue-Beard's chamber" (47) where her husband conducts chemical experiments and is left to her own scanty resources to find a measure of contentment in her proper sphere.

Predictably, the rest of the narrative is an extended investigation into domestic unhappiness against a dynamic backdrop of exciting discoveries, sudden reversals of fortunes, and enterprising new initiatives that centre on Maurice and his peers.<sup>[8]</sup> Commercial modernity, the narrative seems to imply, happens outside the domestic sphere; the female denizens of the City who experience this modernity only vicariously are left to wonder what their place in life is:

She . . . was now a cipher in the busy world in which matrimony had placed her. She was given her toys as though she had been a child, and expected to amuse herself for the whole of the livelong day. . . . She was to play with these things and never quench the thirst of her active soul with work of any kind—never take part in the labours of those around her . . . never be more than an outsider in the struggle of life—never with the power and the will in her to be of use to attain to a higher position in existence than that of "suckling fools and chronicling small beer."

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Riddell pictures the "busy world" of commerce as the fascinating field of action, where masculine passions and interests are given free rein, while intimating that the same passions and the same interests dwell in the hearts of middle-class women or wives. The "power and the will . . . to be of use" is arguably one of the few traits that Lina and Maurice have in common. Modernity does not really stop at the threshold of home; the inhabitants of the domestic sphere are animated by the same desires as their male counterparts, the same wish to take part in the struggle of life that propels, in Riddell's understanding, the march forward and upward of her bourgeois heroes.

- 7 Lina's unhappiness is the prelude to a City story that revolves around adulterous desire. In the late 1850s, adultery was anything but invisible in English print culture, as Barbara Leckie argues:

Between 1857 and 1914, the representation of adultery was neither invisible in the English novel . . . nor invisible in other cultural formations. Instead it was part of a rapidly growing discursive economy in which representations of adultery were both vigorously prohibited by reviewers and readers and actively promoted in the daily journalistic documentation of divorce trials. On the one hand, an attempted censorship, on the other hand, an extraordinary proliferation of discursive activity.

13

Riddell contributes to this "discursive activity" by assigning to adulterous desire a prominent place in her novel, indulging in the representation of both the emotional suffering and the emotional freedom experienced by the parties involved. Like other novels of adultery in the English tradition—Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), for instance—*Too Much Alone* expatiates on the "attraction of impropriety" (Leckie 149) while eschewing the representation of sexual guilt. When Lina finally decides to elope with Herbert, the news of her husband's commercial demise conveniently intervenes to prevent her own fall. Like Isabel Gilbert and other English heroines, Lina does not faithfully replicate Emma Bovary's trajectory.<sup>[9]</sup> Interesting, however, is how Riddell adapts adulterous desire for "home consumption" (Leckie 141), making it not only visible in the English context, but also plausible as a modern temptation to which many of her female contemporaries surrender. In Riddell's own words: "God help us—there are such struggles as these going on at many an honest man's fireside in England; a byplay of affections, sentiments, quivering pulses, sleepless nights and wretched days, such as he, snoring in his comfortable easy chair, never dreams of noticing" (86).

- 8 Leckie identifies a number of repeated strategies through which English novelists negotiated the perilous moral territory of extra-marital love. First of all, "adultery was translated not as a question of passion, but as a question of epistemology" (14). Focusing on the perspective of the deceived party, English novelists replaced Flaubert's "poetry of adultery" with an epistemological quest, the search for clues and signs by which adulterous acts can be detected. Secondly, central to the representation of irregular desires is the figure of the female reader. The addiction to reading that Emma Bovary and Isabel share is the precondition of their attraction to temptation. As Leckie concludes, in *The Doctor's Wife* "Braddon conflates adultery and reading and focuses her considerable narrative energies on the indictment of reading. In this context, she does not need to represent adultery because reading carries all the passionate force and moral suspicion of adultery" (141). Finally, Leckie associates some of the formal innovations introduced by novelists later on in the century with the patterns of divorce court documentation, emphasizing the interconnection between different types of discourses.

- 9 Written in the aftermath of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act and pre-dating *The Doctor's Wife* by a few years,

*Too Much Alone* arguably draws on the same contemporary debates that inspired Braddon and rendered adultery "sensational, scandalous *and* legitimate" (Leckie 110).<sup>[10]</sup> However, Riddell's narrative strategies differ substantially from the ones Leckie discusses: the addiction to reading has no part to play in her story; the focus is not on the betrayed party, but on the desiring female subject; the search for truth, the epistemology of adultery, is turned inward, as readers learn about Lina's "emotional navigation;" and finally, the narrative places significant value on cross-gender friendship. Riddell's interpretation of adulterous desire is bound up with her unprejudiced view of commercial society, the democracy of business, and the potential for change inherent in the modern, urban environment in which her characters dwell. The city setting allows for the exploration of what Riddell calls "east and west intimacy" (154) in ways that would be more difficult to imagine in a provincial town or a rural area where tradition and continuity set the moral agenda. Lina's dislocation to the City from her isolated country home renders her susceptible to new influences: "She was pleased as a child might have been with the panorama of active life perpetually changing before her eyes" (51). Like Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, Lina is energized by the encounter with the frenetic activity of the modern city and with the social mixture of people residing or working there. The flexibility of social conventions allows her to come into contact with a variety of new acquaintances, including Herbert Clyne (the impoverished heir of an aristocratic family) with whom she is free to spend time, to explore the City's most secluded nooks, and to converse about its venerable history. A shared appreciation of this antiquarian past constitutes the initial basis of their friendship, further strengthened by Herbert's sympathy with the plight of a young woman destined to inaction and dissatisfied with her lot.

- <sup>10</sup> Riddell narrates the dawning and development of reciprocal feelings of affection in terms that ensure both the respectful compliance with propriety and the expression of irregular desires. While nothing in Lina's and Herbert's social behavior betrays their intense feelings—"Herbert never said a word to Lina Storn during these long conferences that all the world might not have listened to" (180)—the narrator focuses insistently on the inner struggles and emotional turmoil that Lina experiences:

Can you not feel, as you sit there arguing out that little question of departed love, with your own conscience, something at the very bottom of your heart reproaching and warning you? Don't you know as well as I do, that it is not memory alone, but anticipation, which is sending the blood oftener into your face, and making your pulse throb faster, and causing you occasionally to tremble and turn cold?

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Here the narrator's voice hijacks Lina's, carefully balancing censorship and consensus, (self) reproach and the thrills of anticipation. The ideological pull of the former is offset by the emotional appeal of the latter. This paragraph is a good illustration of the rhetoric employed throughout the novel to sustain a sense of inherent ambivalence, an atmosphere of doubt in which moral judgments are temporarily suspended. Protracted till the very end, the uncertainty produced by Lina's hesitancy is magnified in the narrator's discourse, a discourse dotted with question marks and oscillating between imperative and exhortative modes. The temptation of adultery does not inspire serpentine plot twists or sensational episodes. Rather, it is constructed as a discursive event to which the narrator's voice lends authenticity and legitimacy, ensuring that readers perceive its full emotional impact.<sup>[11]</sup>

- <sup>11</sup> The tension between expression and prohibition was a dominant feature of public debates about adultery and divorce in the late 1850s.<sup>[12]</sup> The same tension informs Riddell's novel; the existence of a "net of wrong feelings" (116) in which Lina and many of her contemporaries are caught is openly acknowledged while, at the same time, the narrative strives to find sanctioned forms of expression for the kind of "emotional refuge"<sup>[13]</sup> that cross-gender friendship provides:

And besides, there is not the slightest use denying it, the stolen cup was sweet. So felt Herbert Clyne, so felt Lina Storn, as he sate [sic] talking, she listening by the winter fire. . . . He was confidential—she sympathizing. . . . Mr. Clyne had nothing to keep from Mrs. Storn. Uncommunicative to the rest of the world, he opened his heart to her like a scroll, and read out every feeling and anxiety just as it came uppermost. . . . He had such a knack of enlisting her sympathies in his narrative, such a frank, unreserved way of telling his troubles, such an easy pleasant flow of small talk about the places he had seen and the people he had met, that Lina could not chose but listen.

181-82

Many pages in this novel are devoted to similar descriptions that mitigate the erotic edge of adulterous desire with the less threatening sweetness of the "stolen cup" of friendship. The sensuous component of this

relationship is not denied, especially with reference to Lina, whose thoughts hover uncertainly between the pure and the impure ("she had a vague sense that it was sinful to quiver at the sound of Mr. Clyne's voice, to shrink and tremble at his touch, to be lonely when he left her, nervous when he returned" 116). However, Riddell seems also interested in exploring the nebulous region of cross-gender friendship, a region that is perhaps more difficult to chart than adultery itself. There is no conventional idiom by which to name the affective possibilities of friendship between the sexes, a relation that is often perceived only as a prelude to something else, a stage in the progress towards acceptable or illicit forms of love. As Victor Luftig avers, the challenge for mid-Victorian authors was "to define heterosexual friendship as a *presence*—to declare what it was, rather than to have to admit what it was not": in other words, to write "a story about "friendship," rather than a story in which friendship cedes ground to something more natural, more visible, more socially sanctioned" (24).

- 12 In *Too Much Alone*, the temptation of adultery and the unnamable rewards of extramarital friendship are held in tension as the reader becomes familiar with both possibilities before the story reaches its "socially sanctioned" closure. Indeed, considering the prominent position assigned to the friendship between Lina and Herbert, and to the emotional ground that they secretly share with the reader, one could argue that adultery is the narrative convention invoked to signify a relationship that would otherwise be difficult to imagine. Riddell locates heterosexual friendship in a grey moral area, where affectionate relations are emotionally legitimate but socially suspicious. Readers are frequently reminded that Lina and Herbert enjoy their "platonic intimacy" or "dangerous friendship" (285) in a most innocent way: "Mrs Storn was friend and sister, confidante and adviser, all in one. Not a proper relationship for a married lady and a single man, I grant you . . . but still in our case most innocent" (289-90). Protestations of innocence such as this reinforce acceptable moral standards, while suggesting that the improper has more than one shade of meaning. The "bye-play of affections, sentiments, quivering pulses" (86) is meticulously scrutinized by a narrator that might be unable or unwilling to "represent friendship as a *presence*" (Luftig 24) but is determined to keep its rewards in the foreground. What is improper at one level feels proper at another.
- 13 Revealing in this respect is the impasse in which Lina finds herself when she tries to act honourably and to confide in her husband. The intimacy with Herbert, "a thing to be felt rather than seen," cannot be put into words, described, or confessed because this act of translation would imply a re-naming of friendship in terms of adultery. Riddell understands this impasse as a conflict between emotional freedom and lack of female agency:

She held a stake in the game of life, and yet still never had a fair chance of taking the cards into her own hands, and playing them out as she would. Without telling her husband all, without confessing that though Mr. Clyne had never offended the dignity of her matronhood by word, or look, or tone, still she cared for him as it did not befit Maurice Storn's wife to care for anyone, there was no help nor protection to be expected from that quarter; and unless she took the initiative with Mr. Clyne, and made a step along the road of love, which is forbidden to all women, married or single, she could scarcely have got rid of him.

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*Too Much Alone* openly enlists the reader's sympathy for Lina and her predicament: she has the "power and the will in her to be of use" but no legitimate way to act; she has the freedom to be emotionally emancipated but not to articulate her feelings or fears; she is entitled to appreciate the pleasures of friendship as long as they remain unnamed and undisclosed. Her inner turmoil is directly related to the lack of female agency in the social and public sphere. The desire for adultery, as Leckie explains, often indicates that there is not only "something wanting in the middle-class women's life in general," but also "someone wanting"; this desire is "the indication of an emerging agency, very much alive and awake, only waiting to be felt and detected like the undercurrent of the body it ignites" (153). Lina's "emerging agency" appears near the end of the narrative when adverse circumstances—Maurice's bankruptcy—force her to take matters into her own hands. The temptation of adultery is promptly replaced by a more practical aspiration to do and to act that brings satisfaction in the midst of tragedy: "It was a new thing for Mrs. Storn to have to be up and doing. . . . It was new for her to be at once miserable and busy; yet the change proved beneficial" (301). Thus, the narrative naturalizes commercial ruin by emphasizing its beneficial influence on private morals. Lina's potential fall is averted by introducing a collapse of greater magnitude that restores agency to the female subject. The allure of friendship, on the other hand, however fragmentary and ill-defined, still lingers, informing the final scene and more generally the characterization of virtuous commercial behavior. *Too Much Alone* does not advocate innovative forms of intervention for women in the public sphere, nor does it make subversive claims about irregular desires. Rather, it tests the limits of the proper in order to find a plausible use for unregulated sentiments and capricious passions.

### 3. Business, Friendship and Tolerance

- 14 The mid-Victorian discourse on business was fraught with moral issues. Commanding front-page attention in the periodical press were recurrent financial crises, fraudulent transactions, dubious speculative schemes, and plain, old-fashioned stealing, all of which were dire reminders that the wealth of the nation was often purchased at the cost of rampant immorality.<sup>[14]</sup> Even if commerce was regarded as less deplorable than financial speculation, the distinction between honest dealing and rogue trading needed to be reinforced constantly. Riddell's novels provide many examples of downright villainy and as many parables of commercial flexibility and open-mindedness. Mr. Stewart, in *Far Above Rubies* (1867), is a prudent speculator who takes the rough with the smooth in his financial undertakings and remains an honest man of business; Luke Ross, Mr. Monteith and Mr. Turner, in *Austin Friars* (1870) understand cooperation to be as necessary as competition in the business world and therefore put up with Austin's unfair dealing in order to save their credit. Riddell finds much to admire in the kind of personality that is better equipped to bear the mixture of good and bad, of vice and virtue, as well as the ups and downs that characterize the life of the market: a personality capable of dwelling in the uncertain without giving way to despondency. In *Too Much Alone*, John Matson embodies this quality in a paradigmatic way: "I am a tradesman myself though almost on the bottom rung of the trade ladder –[he admits] and I know both the virtues and the sins of my class" (89).<sup>[15]</sup> In the section of the novel in which his life-script intersects with Lina's, the narrator divides her attention equally between the exposition of commercial and financial technicalities and the description of Matson's and his wife's powers of endurance. Matson is a chemical agent, an intermediary trading goods at a profit, who has to fight a daily battle with the uncertain:

... there was not the slightest difficulty about getting credit—the real battle was to keep it. Somehow, rise as early as he would in the morning—work as late as he liked at night—save as much as he could—John Matson never felt he was nearing the lee side of fortune by even a solitary point in the wind. . . . Mr. Matson found himself compelled to use one man's money to pay another man's debt . . . and then both husband and wife lay awake at night wondering how the dreaded acceptance was to be met. And yet still the pair never repented marrying—still they were both happy and cheerful—still Mary kept her looks and John his cheerfulness.

191-92

The chapter from which this quotation is taken has a seemingly ironic title: "The pleasures of trading on nothing." But there is no mocking of the pretense to trade on nothing. Riddell does not replicate the customary recitation of the dangers and ills of an overblown credit system that leads investors to ruin. Rather, she underscores how the couple learns to cope with risk, to accept insecurity and manage anxiety—a steep learning curve, to be sure, but one that will prove profitable at many levels:

"Tomorrow might bring orders," the wife always in her hopefulness suggested, and the husband at her bidding was always ready to believe; and indeed, dear reader, in strict confidence between you and me, I doubt whether, as a rule, business-people could keep up heart to weather the adverse winds of trade, but for the glorious uncertainty of what the morrow might bring forth. The wear and tear of struggling forward would be too much for any mind, but for the thought that any minute may smooth the onward road. Even when a man is trotting at the rate of twelve miles an-hour down the hill, he never knows but that something may turn up to turn him. . . .

It must have been some alternation of feeling of this kind, which preserved John Matson from utter wretchedness, as he pursued the tenor of his almost uniformly disastrous way.

195-96

Faithful to her self-appointed mission, Riddell describes the "alternation of feeling" that accompanies the exercise of instrumental rationality. The pursuit of self-interest is not just a question of industriousness, calculation, and efficiency, at least not in Riddell's novels, where capitalism qualifies as a literary topic precisely by virtue of its emotional resonance. An adaptable and elastic mind-set seems to be required to bear the instability of the market. John Matson emerges from the experience of trading on nothing with a better understanding of his aspirations and a keener sense of the complexities of modern life. Armed with first-hand knowledge of what Walter Bagehot famously described as the "delicacy" of the credit system,<sup>[16]</sup> Matson is well equipped to detect Lina's secret uneasiness and her fondness for Herbert, offering sympathy and understanding in a tactful manner. He is prepared to give her credit:

Early days those for John Matson to jump to conclusions about the east and west intimacy . . . early days for him

to guess so much from so little; but still, after all, it was merely a notion—a thought—a fear which never revealed itself in any way, unless a more earnest desire to help Lina by every means; to give her information about her husband's profession; to aid her studies, and create an interest in her mind for experiments, could be called the revelation of a pity too deep for words; of a knowledge at once of the strength and the weakness of a nature which was fully understood only by one who had no business to have comprehended anything at all about the matter. ( )

154-55

Among the various characters paraded in this novel, the most efficient interpreter of Lina's malady is a businessman on the rise. It is the particular position he occupies in the world of work and the knowledge he has gained therefrom that render him suitable to sympathize instinctively with Lina's private troubles, invisible to the rest of the community and only vaguely sensed by Lina herself. It takes a modern subjectivity, the novel implies, trained in the arena of commercial combat and accustomed to deal with uncertainty, to understand intuitively Lina's dilemma and to respond to it in a non-censorious way. This connection between the intimate and the commercial works both ways; adultery is a test not only of Lina's strength of character but also of commercial probity. Those who are blind to her predicament, unable to read the signs of discontent, and ill-equipped to imagine her desire will turn out to be dishonest in their business dealings. Gordon Glenaen has "a very strict and good notion of what a woman's morals ought to be" (97) and is therefore incapable of even surmising the working of irregular desire. But he is unperturbed by "laxity in commercial affairs," (97) as his fraudulent behaviour will ultimately confirm. There is no correspondence between commercial dishonesty and domestic treason; they do not feed off each other in the ideological agenda of this novel. More pertinent is the analogy between the experience of uncertainty in the public realm and its homologue in the private or intimate sphere.

- 15 Educating readers about capitalism implies forging the right personality capable of responding to what Riddell sees as endemic in commercial society: not fraud, but insecurity and uncertainty, whether "glorious" or dreary. *Too Much Alone* offers a lesson in sentimental education addressed to those segments of the middle classes more exposed to precariousness.<sup>[17]</sup> It does so by placing significance on ambiguous narrative situations that provide a symbolic space for the exploration of conflicting forms of sentiment. As the narrator capitalizes on the navigation of feeling, filling up entire chapters with the scrutiny of emotions, readers are called upon to review their own liabilities and expectations:

Which are the most vulgar? Which the most narrow-minded? Take the merchant's absorption to business; was it worse than [Mr. Clyne's] mother's devotion to society? . . . Was the East-Ender's love of money to be considered more ridiculous and snobbish than the country lady's slavish admiration of birth? . . . Was there not just as much intelligence, or more, amongst the traders as amongst the gentry?

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Riddell's ideal reader is supposed to refrain from judging new wealth by the standard of old prejudices, learning, instead, how to appreciate the social and cultural hybridity of middle-class workers that are still in the process of adapting gentility to their own needs.<sup>[18]</sup> Similarly, Victorian readers are expected to gauge Lina's mixed feelings as precisely that, a mixture of pure and impure. Just as in the world of economic transactions virtue does not come unalloyed, so too in the domestic sphere marital virtue is the solid precipitate in a solution that contains 'right' and 'wrong' in equal proportions: "Right and wrong, she had lost sight of them both," observes the narrator in one of her numerous glosses on Lina's wavering behaviour, "Floating away down that perilous stream, she neither turned her eyes to the right nor to the left, but listlessly she drifted on" (265). The sentimental and moral gambling that this novel encourages at the diegetic level, counterbalanced by a more prudent investment in conventional wisdom at the level of plot, performs a significant cultural task.; Constantly kept before the reader's eyes, in amplified rhetorical proportions, the representation of the im/proper in the chemistry of adultery provides a kind of training for the conscience of Victorian readers—a schooling in the ability to tolerate ambivalence and to question the postulates of gentility. "Gambling and reading," writes Gillian Beer, "are both acts of desire whose longing is to possess and settle the future, but whose pleasure is in active uncertainty" (284). In *Too Much Alone*, the adultery plot invites readers to make predictions about alternative outcomes, to calculate possibilities, and to accept the kind of "active uncertainty" that is inscribed in Lina's story. However, it is not so much the reader's "presaging endeavour" (Beer 279) but the ability to dwell in the uncertain that this narrative cultivates—an ability shaped and honed through the act of reading itself.

- 16 The ending of the novel brings this process to completion. Riddell pushes the limit of plausibility to make room for a "symmetry that does not often occur in actual life," as Geraldine Jewsbury noticed.<sup>[19]</sup> Neither of the characters involved in the adulterous plot dies; there is no harsh punishment for Lina, nor indeed for Herbert, even after their passion is made manifest. Instead, the novel offers friendship—different versions of it—as the



utopian by-product of socially disruptive behaviour. Herbert Clyne, who at the onset of the story is a man without qualities, waiting to inherit the title of baronet, gains a valuable bourgeois prize: a profession of his own. The amorous involvement with Lina and the friendship with men of business whom he learns to respect produce efficient results; he becomes a good doctor, albeit in a distant colony—not the most prestigious of professions at mid-century but one regarded by Riddell with less suspicion than aristocratic titles. Maurice Storn, on the other hand, pursues his career in the world of chemical manufacturing, experiencing all sorts of upheavals that strengthen his capacity of endurance. But never once does he suspect that something riotous is going on at home. His trust is immaculate—or he is too busy to pause and think. The grand finale of this novel is orchestrated so as to show that the threat of adultery is instrumental to the reformation of the man of business *cum* husband. The narrative does not culminate in the scene of reconciliation between husband and wife, when the secret is revealed and forgiveness accorded without reservation. Replete with sentimentality and potentially a fitting closure, this episode is only cursorily glimpsed at: "What passed between the pair during the interval that followed was never repeated by either" (314). The narrator makes sure that confession and pardon coincide in one brief sentence and then moves on with the remainder of the story.

- 17 The real "conclusion" imaginatively ties up the loose ends of friendship. Riddell hangs on to the allure of the improper till the last pages, where it is contained within a domestic setting over which a new kind of authority presides. In a gesture of proactive tolerance, Maurice organizes a final meeting between Lina and Herbert, making sure that they are left alone to properly settle their own accounts. This scene of reconciliation, unlike the preceding one, is generously detailed: Herbert's eyes are "dim with the memory of hopes, sinful though they might be—blasted."

Dim with the agony of a heart that had erred in loving her; but that still, throughout all time, and changes and chances, could never love another . . . Dim for a moment, but he did not show Lina that film; and it was only by an indescribable softening of his voice, by a tone which touched the old chord in Lina's heart that she knew what he was thinking of. Going over the old tragedy again . . . pacing over, step by step, the whole of the road that they had trod together, looking fearfully forth into the future which he knew he must travel alone. The whole thing came and passed through Herbert's mind in a moment, and was reflected by the strange sympathy of old in Lina's heart.

367-68

Once again, the narrator insists on the sense of communion and wordless intimacy that still prevails even if the novel has by now declared it wrong. But the focus of attention has shifted; it is Maurice's enlightened reactions that readers are expected to notice: his benign awareness of Herbert's desire, his newly found perceptiveness and, above all, the offer of friendship to a rival in love welcomed "as though he had been his son or his brother" (369). "It was one of those rare occasions in life on which men speak all that is in their hearts freely and without reserve—when words are uttered and resolutions made which, though they may never be spoken of afterwards, are not forgotten, but influence the life and the conduct thenceforth for ever" (369-70). The cordial handshake that seals this emotional moment of masculine bonding exculpates Lina completely.<sup>[20]</sup> Her temptation has proved productive: a reformed husband who feels and acts democratically, a repentant lover who is now prepared to take his part in the struggle of life, and a renewed home where family life and business life are no longer at variance. Victorian novels, some of them at least, have a marked problem-solving inclination.

#### 4. Conclusion

- 18 Writing for the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1865, Anne Ritchie compared Riddell's modern "heroines" to their more cheerful "grandmothers," finding the intense soul-searching of the former rather extreme but not unnatural. "Does the modern taste demand a certain sensation feeling, sensation sentiment," writes Ritchie, "only because it is actually experienced?" (630). The answer to this question is unclear; Ritchie seems to consider the "analysis of emotion" (637) in the novels under review (*Too Much Alone* and *George Geith of Fen Court*) both realistic and slightly exaggerated, but she attributes to this analysis and to Riddell's expressive narrative style the power of creating and sustaining a particular "bond" with the reader:

The sympathy between the writer and the reader of a book is a very subtle and strange one, and there is something curious in the necessity for expression on both sides; the writer pouring out the experience and feelings of years, and the reader, relieved and strengthened in certain moods to find that others have experienced

and can speak of certain feelings, have passed through phases with which he himself is acquainted.

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Ritchie's review delivers good insights on the relation between the search for consensus and the "telling" of emotion. In *Too Much Alone*, a great deal of mulling over wayward feelings is necessary to calibrate the internal angle from which both "business" and "adultery" are perceived. I have been arguing that this novel constructs adulterous desire not as a stimulus to sensationalistic plot twists, but as a discursive event that demands closer scrutiny, for its implications are far-ranging. Riddell's style of narration, with its balancing of expression and prohibition and its propensity to embalm ambiguity in long sentences, carries part of the educational message, guiding readers to accept the uncertain—repackaged as an intense emotional experience. The ideal addressees of this novel, the "business people" explicitly invoked in chapter four, are presumed to be immersed in the same world of instability and insecurity in which John Matson and Maurice pursue their nonlinear career paths. In Riddell's view, this is the most problematic and contradictory aspect of Victorian capitalism: uncertainty is "glorious," inspiring, and progressive as well as disheartening and unsettling. Hence the tendency of this novel to valorize characters who learn to cope with all sorts of unstable situations, including adulterous desire. Matson's tactful intercession and Maurice's open-minded disposition ensure that transgression is adequately contained. The ending is predictable, but the process whereby it is reached is not. This process involves a dynamic integration of private and public, the exploration of affective possibilities and forms of intimacy associated with friendship, and a remapping of the symbolic boundaries of the City of London—a hybrid social realm with great narrative potential, a mixed milieu where the material traces of physical trade have not yet been wiped out by the abstractions of finance.

- 19 The Victorian critique of finance and speculation has garnered much scholarly attention in recent times, so much so that there is a risk of overemphasizing the impact of finance and prematurely identifying mid-Victorian capitalism *tout court* with the "financialization" (Ziegler 435) or "bankerization" (Houston 7) of the economy. "Even if the average Victorian," Garrett Ziegler admits, "never conferred with a broker or was taken in by a speculator, he or she would have been quite conscious of the world of the Exchange, especially during the tumultuous 1850s" (434). My contention is that the average Victorian would have been far more conscious of the less mysterious and more concrete world of commercial enterprise that sustained British "personalized capitalism" (Rose 61). In other words, the depersonalized, abstract economy to which literary and cultural critics frequently refer is a metonymic representation of a more varied and complex whole. Riddell's novels—especially the early ones—tap into this variety, interrogating a dimension of Victorian capitalism that is ostensibly normal: the everyday running of small firms, the common concerns of business, the life of the market in-between periods of frantic crises. A fair amount of symbolic work and narrative negotiation is necessary to make even such normality acceptable. No matter how pro-business Riddell's novels purport to be, they spell out a whole thesaurus of unease, a lexicon of male and female discomfort that Victorian readers, as Anne Ritchie suggests, might have found rather useful.

## Note biographique

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## Notes

- [1] As Ina Decker writes, "Der erste City-roman der Autorin war sowhol in Bezug auf Tematik als auch auf Struktur ein gewagtes Unterfangen" (87). *Too Much Alone* is the first in a series of novels about commerce and City life that Riddell produced over a period of about forty years. In the late 1860s, her reputation as the "novelist of the City" was well established, but her popularity declined sharply soon after her death in 1906. In recent years, Riddell's narratives have attracted the critical attention of a few scholars: see Henry, "Ladies do it?" (127-131); Rebecca Stern (107-13); Linda Peterson (151-70); and Margaret Kelleher (116-31).

- [2] Emotional style—writes Dewight R. Middleton—is the normative organization of emotions, their indigenous classification, form of communication, intensities of expression, context of expression, and patterns of linkage with each other and with other domains of culture.
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- [3] William Reddy uses the metaphor of “navigation” to indicate “the fundamental character of emotional life” (129). Navigation refers to “a broad range array of emotional changes, including high-level goal shifts” (122).
- [4] *The British Quarterly Review* depicted Frytag’s novel as “a sort of apotheosis of that important and rising section of German society. Here we have for the first time, we imagine, a real romance of the counting-house” (Rev. of *Soll und Haben* 156).
- [5] The anti-industrial and anti-business bias of much Victorian culture has been the object of discussion among historians and literary critics since the early 1980s (see Martin Weiner, Neil McKendrick, and James Raven). Weiner mentions Dickens’s “bitter portrait of the entire commercial upper class in *Our Mutual Friend*” (34) and his “disgust with the creed of economic success” (34) in *Dombey and Son* (1848) and *Little Dorrit* (1857) as symptomatic of a widespread attitude of cultural antipathy towards industrial modernity. Mid-Victorian authors were unanimous in condemning the negative repercussions of financial speculation, but some of them (notably women) wrote eloquently about the bourgeois virtues of commercial society. Dina Mulock Craik’s *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) is a good case in point. Elizabeth Gaskell provides an elaborate legitimization of the heroism of the man of business in *North and South* (1855). Riddell’s business novels take these reflections one step further, articulating an explicit defence of the business vocation as a respectable and democratic life-script, one that offers more opportunities to a greater number of people.
- [6] This characterization of London is in tune with the findings of historians. Michie argues that in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, finance did not dominate the activities of the City (“Development” vii). Only by the beginning of the twentieth century did finance move to centre stage. The gradual emergence of London as a global financial centre did not occur at the expense of the commercial sector, but in addition to it. On the historical accuracy of Riddell’s description of the chemistry industry, see Decker (88-91).
- [7] Garrett Ziegler claims that Dickens and Hollingshead described, and in a way anticipated in their writings the transition of the City from “a place for meaningful life” to “a place for meaningless and suspect work” (441)—work is meaningless and suspect inasmuch as it is associated with the “economy of finance” (436).
- [8] Narratives of failed marriages were not unusual at mid-century (see Leckie, chapter three, and Stern, chapter four). Less conventional, perhaps, is the amalgam of family and business life that adds a different angle to the topic of conjugal unhappiness.
- [9] Whether narratives that configure adultery as a possibility rather than a textual reality should still be classified as novels of adultery is a moot point. In her reading of *The Doctor’s Wife*, Tabitha Sparks suggests that Isabel’s rejection of Roland’s offer and her refusal to comply with the “expectation of infidelity” (203) inscribed in the sensation genre produce a re-alignment of the narrative along sentimental lines. Half way through the story, Braddon switches genres, sidestepping the representation of adultery and opting for a conclusion that reaffirms a sentimental lesson: “wisdom achieved by suffering” (204). However, according to Leckie, even if *The Doctor’s Wife* does not contemplate the consummation of adulterous desire, the novel contributes substantially to redefining the categories of perception through which adultery is rendered visible. In other words, explicit infidelity need not be a *sine qua non* ingredient of the *English* novel of adultery. Only by expanding the historical description of what came to be discussed under the rubric of “adultery” in English print culture can one redress the conventional view that “the representation of adultery was not relevant to the development of the English novel” (Leckie 19). In *Too Much Alone*, adultery remains a central concern throughout the narrative precisely because the possibility of its consummation is left open till the very end, thus allowing for the exploration of wayward sentiments, strong emotions and alternative forms of affectionate relations. It might be useful to compare Riddell’s novel to Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848). Both texts give prominence (albeit in different ways) to the commercial milieu, but in Dickens’s novel the subplot of Edith’s adultery functions as further confirmation of the interconnectedness of domestic and financial treason.
- [10] Chapter six in *The Doctor’s Wife* is entitled “Too Much Alone.” Braddon might have had Riddell’s novel in mind, as her observations on the lack of communication between City men and their wives in chapter ten also suggest. Another parallel could be drawn between Archibald Carlyle, in Mrs. Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), and Maurice Storn, both much absorbed in their own professional pursuits and therefore unable to perceive the domestic unhappiness of their respective wives.
- [11] Although in this paragraph Riddell clearly imagines a female “you,” the assumed reader of her City novels is often masculine and a member of the business community. As she declared in an interview: “I always find that when a City man once begins my novels he reads the whole of them, and many business people in the country write to me about them. I fancy I must have a certain sympathy with City men, their lives and hopes and struggles, for they have always spoken to me very freely about their affairs, and so to a great extent I have learned a great deal from them” (Blathwayt). “City men” and “business people” are programmatically the ideal addressees of her novels. However, as Patricia Srebrnik writes, “the most important ideological function of Riddell’s writing [is] not merely to chronicle the lives of social and professional groups whose activities were rarely described in detail in Victorian fiction, but to discuss those activities from the point of view of middle- and lower-middle class wives and working women” (76). In *Too Much Alone*, the appeal to readers of both genders is inscribed in the very structure of the narrative, which revolves around private and public issues that are explicitly seen as deeply interconnected rather than separate.

- [12] It was also a feature of the Victorian discourse on emotions (see Gesa Stedman).
- [13] Here I refer once again to the useful terminology devised by Reddy, who defines "emotional refuge" as "a relationship, ritual, or organization (whether informal or formal) that provides safe release from prevailing emotional norms and allows relaxation of emotional effort, with or without an ideological justification, which may shore up or threaten the existing emotional regime" (129).
- [14] On the deeply disturbing criminal side of Victorian capitalism see George Robb, Geoffrey Russel Searle, Stern, and Mary Poovey.
- [15] As Decker notices, Matson is the author's "spokesperson," (128) especially as regards the positive reassessment of business.
- [16] Discussing the system of trade based on borrowed money, Bagehot wrote: "But in exact proportion to the power of this system is its delicacy—I should hardly say too much if I said its danger. Only our familiarity blinds us to the marvelous nature of the system. There never was so much borrowed money collected in the world as is now collected in London" (20).
- [17] Patricia Srebrnik suggests that "Riddell's novels gained an audience by expressing both the everyday emotional reality and the more fanciful desires of newly emerging socio-economic groups, and especially of women within these groups" (78).
- [18] On the relation between gentility and middle-class culture see Linda Young and F.M.L. Thompson.
- [19] Another reviewer, Anne Ritchie, describes the finale in *Too Much Alone* as "a sad sort of twilight that seems to haunt one as one shuts up the book" (632).
- [20] On the function of homosocial desire and male bonding in literature, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick's revision of the erotic triangles that René Girard analyzes in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1965) emphasises the gender asymmetries in Girard's model, and brings to the fore the role of the female figure within erotic triangles: "the sexually pitiable or contemptible female figure is a solvent that not only facilitates the relative democratization that grows up with capitalism and cash exchange, but goes a long way—for the men whom she leaves bonded together—towards palliating its gaps and failures" (160). The type of masculine bonding that Riddell imagines in the conclusion of her novel, however, does not presuppose the woman as victim or as "pitiable" figure. The friendship between Herbert and Maurice becomes possible only after Lina's agency has been fully restored in the economic as well as domestic sphere.

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