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The Female Professional as Orphan in Charlotte Riddell's *A Struggle for Fame*

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Abstract

In Charlotte Riddell's *A Struggle for Fame* (1883), motherless Glenarva Westley becomes a professional novelist to support first her financially ruined father and then her insolvent husband. This article examines the impact of Glen's father and husband on her development as not only an author, but also as an autonomous person, and reads *A Struggle for Fame* as a novel in which independence, creativity, productivity, and contentment are threatened by emotional and familial commitments. Neither Glen's father nor husband deliberately hinder her professional progress, but the financial and emotional drains they place on her outweigh their attempts at support. The novel concerns the worldly themes of business and professionalism for which Riddell was famous, and some of the particular difficulties encountered by women in the public sphere and the marketplace. It also, however, explores more universal existential anxieties about selfhood and the subordination of duty to oneself to duty to one's family. Significantly, Glen's greatest professional successes are coupled with the deaths of her father and husband, who due to his age and demeanour acts as a father

figure, meaning that Riddell effectively shows Glen to be twice-orphaned, and so twice liberated from family constraints.

Keywords: Charlotte Riddell, women's writing, authorship, family, independence, professionalism

In Charlotte Riddell's *A Struggle for Fame* (1883), motherless Glenarva Westley (known as Glen) works tirelessly to become a professional novelist in order to support her father, who has lost his fortune through poor investments intended to secure Glen's future as an heiress. After years of hardship, Glen is notified of her first major success shortly before the death of her father. This pattern is repeated when, after more years trying to survive the changing and often vicious world of London publishing houses, Glen's husband (who also suffers financial ruin due to poor, but well-intentioned, decisions) dies shortly after she discovers that her tattered career is to be revived. Finally, Glen turns down her childhood, never-quite-sweetheart, Ned, in favour of a solitary life in which, it is implied, her writing career takes precedence.

The following reading of *A Struggle for Fame* presents it as a novel in which independence, creativity, productivity, and contentment are threatened by emotional and familial commitments. Critical responses to the novel have focused on the depiction of Glen's career and her position as a woman in the literary marketplace. Linda H. Peterson, for example, has considered the extent to which Riddell draws on the myth of Charlotte Brontë, as offered in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), aligning Glen with 'Romantic, Brontëan authorship' (108) in order to question 'whether the professional and domestic currents [of author and woman] can, in fact, be reconciled as Gaskell claims' (109). Peterson argues that, because of Glen's final rejection of Ned, 'to this question Riddell gives a less than positive answer' (109). Silvana Colella, working with Peterson's reading, argues that Riddell 'grafts

these myths [of Romantic authorship] onto the narrative of self-help, the great plot of *male* bourgeois life, conferring upon the vocational trajectory of her heroine an aura of economic romanticism' (238; original emphasis); depicted as working doggedly against a 'hostile [...] environment', Glen and her 'achievements' become 'an extreme celebration of autonomy and will power' (237). Due to its autobiographical elements, which draw heavily on Riddell's three decades' experience of the London publishing world, *A Struggle for Fame* has primarily been valued by critics for the way in which 'it provides a rare picture of the era in which celebrity publishers like Tinsleys [sic] dominated the market, Mudie's monopolized the library trade, and writers became subject to the demands of magazine serialization and the triple-decker' (Peterson 106).¹

This essay is informed by these previous studies of the novel, particularly Peterson's exploration of how Riddell depicts the clashes between personal and professional responsibility. However, rather than focusing on Glen's position in the publishing industry, the challenges she faces in the marketplace, or the extent to which she manages to be a good daughter and wife whilst writing professionally, this essay is primarily concerned with the impact of Glen's father and husband (and their deaths) on her development not only as an author, but also as an autonomous person. While critics such as Colella have acknowledged that Riddell does depict 'the affective, emotional price' (236) paid by struggling authors, they have not considered in detail the immense emotional, physical, and intellectual strain that is placed on Glen, and the stultification of her creativity, which is the result of her position as a daughter, and then a wife.

Importantly, her father, Mr Westley, and her husband, Mr Lacere, do not deliberately throw obstacles in Glen's way. Neither man discourages her (although they would prefer her not to write), and both are instrumental in helping her to progress at crucial stages in her career.² Moreover, it is not inspiration or ambition that drives Glen to write, but the basic need to

support her family – support that both men are willing to accept. This is not, therefore, a story of a woman overcoming the interdictions of the men to which society expects her to submit. This is symbolically represented by the fact that in both cases, Glen experiences a significant step in her career shortly before the death of each man, not as a result of it. The real problem is that the financial and emotional drains they place on her outweigh their attempts at support; they do not stop her from working, but they do stop her from doing her best work.

Critics have noted the ‘formulaic’ repetition of the meeting of ‘literary success and familial sickness or death’ in *A Struggle for Fame* (Peterson 112).³ This essay draws attention to the fact that there are much more substantial parallels between Glen’s relationship with her father and her relationship with her husband than just the timing of their deaths. Lacere, due to his age and the lack of sexual attraction on Glen’s part (he appears ‘quite elderly’ to her), is very much a father figure (Riddell 179). Riddell attaches Glen to two men who drain her time, energy, and emotions even as they try to support her, clearly love her, and are loved by her. This essay therefore sees Glen as effectively twice-orphaned before she is given the chance to turn down a suitor, Ned, choosing not to place herself under male ‘protection’, or obligation, again, and thus declaring her independence, which leaves her more content than she has been at any point previously.

A Struggle for Fame is about a woman who fights to earn a living at a time when it was still expected (in the middle and upper classes) that women would be supported by their husbands. Glen represents, in this sense, the many Victorian women (including other famous authors such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood) for whom these expectations were simply ridiculous, and who had to work to support not only themselves and their children, but also their husbands. The novel is especially rebellious, in that it is about a woman who ultimately chooses the life and freedom of a spinster in a society where such a position was usually seen as a cause for pity. Riddell takes things even further, as Glen’s frustrations and

difficulties go beyond specifically gendered problems, and allow for an exploration of more universally existential anxieties about individuality, selfhood, and creativity. Glen's moments of true creative realisation occur when she is alone, in solitary natural settings, which she is very rarely able to enjoy because of her familial commitments. Glen is, as Colella asserts, a heroine of the self-help movement, but Glen's ultimate victory is not as a champion in the literary marketplace (although she does achieve this), but as a woman who has found a physical place, and the mental space, which will allow her to explore her full creative potential. I also agree with Peterson that at the end, in her rejection of Ned, Glen is turning her back on the myth of the Brontëan authoress who can balance the roles of woman and writer. This novel is not, however, just about Glen becoming an author, but about the psychological damage that is inflicted by personal, especially familial, ties. While this is a novel about the literary profession, as well as business, financial hardship, and other worldly themes for which Riddell was famous, it is also a depiction of duty to oneself being subordinated to duty to one's family and of the demands of emotional responsibilities as well as practical ones. The ending, ultimately, is a romantic fantasy of selfhood and solitude.

I. Daughter and Father: Parental Support

From the start, Glen's father, Mr Westley, is a rather hopeless individual. He loses his fortune because he takes 'shares in a venture which was to make him a millionaire, and Glen an heiress' (86). Unsurprisingly, the 'Monster Bank for the North of Ireland' fails, and the pair are forced to leave the family home and move to a cottage by the sea (86). Upon leaving Glenarva (after which she is named), Glen blossoms in their new home, and befriends the vicar's six sons (one of whom is Ned), with whom she goes on reckless adventures. Mr Westley, however, cannot reconcile himself to his loss and lives with 'the memory of trouble behind and the expectation of trouble in store' (88). This is the first of several occasions in which Glen and her father's

health or happiness are opposed: Glen has ‘a colour to her cheeks and a light to her eyes’ and ‘when out with the boys [...] laughed as loud and as long as they; but all idea of laughter died within her when she looked at her father’s sad face and drooping figure’ (88).

Despite their growing poverty, and his own ill health, Westley does nothing to prepare Glen for a time when she may have to support herself. As one character puts it, if something happens to her father, Glen will be an ‘orphan – penniless, forlorn, ignorant of the world, unfitted both by education and temperament to battle with it’ (115). Westley cannot even bring himself to tell Glen the true state of their affairs. It is only by accident that, when she is ‘about fifteen’, she learns that it is ‘quite certain that sooner or later she would have to earn her bread’ (88). In contrast to her father’s passivity, Glen immediately wonders, ‘What could she do? If she had been a man there were fifty things to which she might have turned her attention; but being only a woman, which way would be best, or indeed possible, for her to face the world?’ (88). Glen’s decision to become an author is a ‘resolve which changed the whole of a life which otherwise might have been passed as governess, or companion, or wife to some poor curate or struggling country practitioner’ (91). The women in Glen’s village have ‘long previously’ decided that the latter option is most feasible, because if ‘Miss Glen [...] was to get married’, then her father ‘could live with her’ (93). Glen’s devotion to her father actually hinders their plans, however, because (as she tells the curate Mr Dufford, who proposes to her) she will not marry in part because she ‘never intend[s] to leave her father’, insisting that ‘Papa and I are going to stay alone together always’ (105). Glen also feels responsible for their financial troubles, because ‘it was for [her] sake he lost everything’ and so is compelled to try to make things better (86). This contrast between the active daughter with her ‘tireless energy and her dogged industry’, and the passive father who, ‘regarded as a soldier in the battle of life, [...] was but a poor feeble creature’, will continue until Westley’s death, even though Glen’s ‘energy’ and ‘industry’ will start to look rather tired (198).

The reasons behind Glen's decision to write are important. The idea, which seems to be 'conceived under the spur of the moment', is actually the result of the fact that 'during the whole of her young life there had never been a time when to every look and tone of nature she failed to respond with the deep sympathy of an imaginative and poetical temperament' (89). While this explains her choice of profession, the motivation to begin writing has all to do with supporting her father and herself. Until their financial situation drives her to it, Glen's creativity is not something she desires to share with the world, or even to channel into concrete stories. Once she decides to become a professional writer, she has ambitious hopes of restoring her father's 'shattered fortunes' (90) and assumes that 'if I could once have anything published, I am sure I could make money – heaps of it' (111). Glen's reaction, when told by the publisher Mr Vassett that she may produce something good 'in the course of a few years' shows that her immediate concerns are practical and financial: 'Years! and she had thought to commence making money that week, that day, that hour!' (48).

Mr Westley is supportive of Glen's literary ambitions, although he is 'not stricken dumb with delight at the prospect of his daughter entering herself in the race for fame' (115). In general he does not have a particularly high opinion of her talents, simply hoping that she can 'make a few pounds a year by her pen', but 'he never really thought, save for a few wild moments, his daughter had it in her to do great things' (199). He accompanies her on her first visit to Mr Vassett and explains that while Glen 'is very young yet; still, I fancy what she has written possesses some merit' (47). While not particularly energetic in his encouragement, he certainly does not stand in her way.

On their arrival in London, Mr Westley begins 'cheerful and in good spirits', but Glen is homesick, and her health suffers because they cannot afford equivalents for the 'milk new and pure, the butter straight from the churn [...] the fish fresh from the sea' that she is accustomed to in Ireland (121). Glen has 'lost even physical energy', is 'weary in body and sick at heart',

and even worse, she experiences writer's block – 'the trees were not more bare of leaf or bud than Miss Westley's once active mind of an idea' (122). The constant rejection from publishers that Glen faces also takes its toll on her, as 'with a dreary persistency' she 'carried a bundle or manuscript from publisher to publisher, only to meet with "No," worded in a hundred different ways, but still pronounced with unmistakable decision' (122). The combination of physical and psychological stresses that come with life in London begins to tell 'upon a nervous system never before really put upon its trial', and she finds herself fearful and anxious (233). Whilst, as Colella notes, 'the move to London opens up opportunities for self-realisation unthinkable in the isolated, rural setting of Ireland' (235), it does not allow for the full development of Glen's creative and autonomous self.

Glen's career goes through numerous stages, too many to detail here, but it is important to note that, throughout the novel, Glen's creativity is released to its fullest when she is away from London. At one point, Glen and her father move to Middlesex, to 'a small cottage [...] remote from London' where 'her imagination took root in this fresh soil' (224). At this point Glen's writing reaches a new level, which she finds alarming at first: 'plots and characters [...] came almost unbidden; but her difficulty was to mould them into shape, to fit the different pieces of her puzzle together, so as to form an intelligible whole' (225). The narrator explains that 'the reason she found writing now so hard was not because any virtue of genius had departed from her, but because the discipline which alone could make her writings worth reading had begun' (225). And yet, at the same time as her abilities are growing, the family is becoming poorer and poorer, and her father's health is deteriorating; 'at last a mortal ailment [has] fastened upon him', although Glen does not realise it (226). Added to this, 'all this time Glenarva herself was not very well' and 'often depressed' (228).

At this point, Glen's career is beginning to look more promising, with two publishers agreeing to take her work, and yet she wonders 'why do I not dance and sing with delight?'

(229). One explanation is that Glen is exhausted and jaded from her efforts:

If these good things had come to Glenarva at Ballyshane [...] the girl would have gone mad with joy; but now, though she was glad and thankful, she did not feel elated [...] The first meagre course of success was announced, but its advent had been so long delayed the girl's eager appetite was gone. (227)

However, another ‘reason, if she could have known it, perhaps was that she did not herself believe in the success which had come’ (229). And indeed, when Glen discovers that her friends in Ireland have found out that she is writing, she retrieves the manuscript from the publisher because she is concerned that the novel, in which ‘she had introduced her own relations’ will be recognised, despite her pen name (232). A third reason for Glen’s lack of happiness is implied. She still hopes that she will ‘be able to make [her father’s] future better than his past had been, to get all those good things for him in the days to come he had been forced to do without through the many long days that were past’, but the occasional ‘unreasoning terror’ she feels at night implies that she knows the true state of her father’s health more than she can consciously admit, and it is taking an emotional toll on her (229).

Glen’s success and Mr Westley’s health continue to be placed in contrast to each other when they return to London after the interlude in Middlesex. He appears markedly healthier but, although ‘so far as her father was concerned, Glen felt happier; [...] her own prospects were far from bright’ (238). This statement comes at the start of a chapter which sees Glen’s first novel published to terrible reviews, followed by a series of rejections and a humiliating interview with a dubious reviewer from the *Times*. Later, when her father descends into his final illness and Glen nurses him for several months, she takes a novel ‘to a great house’ as she is in need of money (254). It is when her father has taken a fatal turn for the worse and she has called for a doctor that the ‘acceptance of the novel’ is received in the post: ‘Great heaven! She had waited all these years for this – and it came *then!*’ (255; original emphasis). Ironically this

chapter is called ‘Success’, and at the start of the next one, Glen informs Ned that in the months since her father’s death she has ‘made enough to live on this year’ (258). Later we are also told that ‘since her father’s death she had written a new novel, which Mr Vassett published almost before the ink was dry, and sold another to one of the great West End houses’ (285). Although Glen’s first big break comes before her father’s death, the months following it see numerous improvements in her financial and creative position.

Mr Westley is a loving and beloved father, but the description of Glen’s physical and mental state during the last months of his life – the trudging from publisher to publisher, the unacknowledged anxiety about her father’s health, the damage to her own health as she adjusts to life away from the Irish coast – show a distinct impact on her creativity and her happiness. The move to London, taken because of Mr Westley’s unwise actions, and his daughter’s determination to improve their lives, threaten to crush Glen’s spirit and nascent genius.

II. Wife and Husband: Repeating the Pattern

After Westley’s death, Glen returns to Middlesex and once again benefits creatively from being in ‘the lonely country’, away from London (257). She becomes fascinated by the ‘east window’ of the church she attends, which is ‘a triumph of art and a specimen of splendid colouring’ (257).⁴ Here, an ‘idea [takes] root in her mind’ (284) which will become her first true artistic and critical success: *Ashtree Manor*. Significantly the idea for the novel is planted between the death of her father and her marriage, although she writes it shortly after being married. It is when Glen announces to her husband, as well as a friend and her brother-in-law, that she is going to ‘write a novel about stained glass’ that Riddell makes a direct connection with Charlotte Brontë and Gaskell’s *Life*:

They all laughed at the idea. ‘Not a very likely subject’, remarked the visitor

[...]

‘We shall see’, answered Mrs Lacere determinedly, and though she did not, like Charlotte, ‘go on cutting more bread and butter’, she proceeded to pour out more tea, while the talk she had interrupted flowed back into its former channel.

(287)

As Peterson notes, this is a ‘pivotal’ scene which demonstrates how the newly married Glen is ‘distracted by domestic life and unnerved by sceptical comments from her in-laws’, and which Riddell clearly wrote while ‘thinking of “Charlotte”’ (109–10).

While Brontë is clearly a ‘real-life predecessor’ of Glen and her attempts to strike a balance between the professional and the domestic (Peterson 105), Riddell makes another connection between Glen and a real-life author when talking about *Ashtree Manor* itself. The lack of ‘love and twaddle’ in the novel is:

an innovation sure to be unpopular with her own sex, who are, after all, the public for whom a novelist has to cater. Ladies and boys were then the audience to whom all authors, who wished either for ‘praise or pudding’, or both, felt it wise to appeal.

Times in that respect are not much changed; even to this present day the novelist who rings but the changes of one eternal song – the loves of lovely woman – the beauty of lovely woman – the unselfishness of lovely woman [...] – the lovers of lovely woman – will be the most popular. Where, for example, George Eliot counted her thousands, the *Family Herald* counts its tens of thousands! (289)

Riddell’s reference to Eliot is fitting here, as the stories of ‘lovely woman’ the narrator refers to are essentially the ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ (full of ‘noble, lovely, and gifted’ heroines [Eliot 443]) that Eliot protested against in 1856 (just after Glen arrives in London). Eliot had died in 1880, and her reputation as a serious novelist who passed away ‘in the full time of her fame and the ripe maturity of her brilliant genius’ would still have been in many readers’ minds (Anon., ‘George Eliot’ 255).⁵ Glen’s motivations so far have been financial, but

Ashtree Manor gives the first real indication of her potential as a great and “serious” author, and although it is ‘a book certain never to be popular amongst the many’, it is ‘a book, nevertheless, which was talked about, and made a mark’ (290).

Importantly, *Ashtree Manor* is not only conceived at a point in her life when she is “between” father figures (Westley and Lacere) and away from London but written in the early days of her marriage when her husband insists that Glen should only ‘think of publishing [...] for your own pleasure. Do not trouble yourself now about money or money-making; leave all that to me’ (286). This is ‘an injunction it is only fair to add Glen obeyed most literally for a time’, and the novel is written in one of the few moments in her marriage that she is not harassed by financial worries (286). Unlike her previous writing, ‘the greed for gain or applause was not on her when she began her task, and she finished it, not for the sake of writing, but because she had something to say, and could know no rest till it was said’ (289).

Logan-Lacere has been supportive of Glen’s writing prior to their marriage. Like Westley, he is instrumental in helping her achieve some of her earliest publication opportunities, not because he sees the ‘fire of genius’ in her, but because he feels ‘heartily sorry for [Westley] and his daughter’ when he sees how much they are struggling on their arrival in London (185). He decides that he will not ‘disillusion the girl at once’ and ‘say what he thought about the absurdity of her writing’, but instead will ‘do what he could to help her’ (185). Similar to Westley, Logan-Lacere believes that ‘Glen would be far happier [...] if she laid aside her manuscripts as a child lays aside its toys which have pleased it for a while’ (189). The men’s failure to tell Glen their concerns about her chosen career are at once signs of support, and indications of their inability to assert themselves.

That Westley and Logan-Lacere are ineffective and weak, rather than judgemental and imposing, at once allows and necessitates Glen to pursue her chosen career. It also means that from the age of fifteen she is working, with few respites, to support men who, by Victorian

convention and expectation, should be supporting her. Nevertheless, Logan-Lacere is very much a father figure to Glen. When he proposes she ‘[looks] at him with the anxious, questioning look a child’s face wears when it trustfully turns to its mother for a solution of all perplexing doubts and difficulties’ (246). Their relationship is decidedly unromantic, and Glen will later regret that ‘the glamour of wooing’ did not ‘preface [his] proposal’, largely because he is too nervous and restrained (245). She comes, however, to learn that he has ‘the tenderest heart that ever throbbed’ (179). While this tenderness may endear Logan-Lacere to Glen, it also leaves him open to being taken advantage of by others and is a partial cause of what become severe money troubles. Early on in the novel the narrator comments that Glen’s mother was ‘a very good lady, whose married life had been but one long anxiety’, and it soon becomes clear that Glen has followed in her footsteps (87).

Soon after *Ashtree Manor*’s publication, things start to go ‘very badly indeed’, and although Logan-Lacere is ‘doing a very fair business’, his ‘incomings and outgoings failed utterly to meet’ (324). Their financial worries arise in part because Glen’s husband shares her father’s tendency to make bad financial decisions with good intentions. His bankruptcy finally occurs (towards the end of the novel) because a ‘provincial firm’ he has been working with has ‘steadily purposed that when it suited their own convenience they would step into Mr Logan-Lacere’s shoes and tell him calmly to walk barefoot out of the business he himself had made’ (332). Even before this disaster, however, Logan-Lacere’s good nature and bad business sense means that money is a growing worry. He has four female dependents, the ‘narrow-minded, prejudiced, selfish’ (251) Misses Lacere, who are ‘hangars-on [who] lacked the will to exert themselves in any common useful way to earn their bread’ (330). He also has a ‘speculative brother-in-law’ who repeatedly gets involved with ‘rotten ventures’ for which Logan-Lacere inevitably ends up paying (327). Glen realises with horror that ‘it is not Mordaunt Logan-

Lacere I have taken for better or worse, but *the whole family*' (291; original emphasis), and that this will 'keep them poor for the whole of their lives' (327).

Also significant is the emotional strain that is placed on Glen by her relationship with her in-laws. The Misses Lacere are not just financial drains, but 'their ideas weighted her down to earth' and their own idleness 'exercise[s] a depressing, almost stultifying effect' (325). Glen also finds her relationship with Logan-Lacere's brother-in-law to be 'a miserable experience, one bad for soul and body, which left ineradicable traces on Glen's face and mind' (292). Colello comments that the scenes where Glen provokes (through sarcasm) her in-laws are included for 'no particular reason' as they 'add nothing to the progression of the story' (239). However, the anxiety, frustration, and depression that Glen feels in connection with her husband's relatives contributes to the difficulty she has writing at this time, and they may also be a key contribution to her final evolution into a solitary figure. After all, the septet that Glen was part of as a child when she ran with the six vicar's sons was certainly more pleasant than the toxic one she now finds herself in (with the four Misses, her husband and his brother-in-law), but if she did accept Ned at the end of the novel, she would once again be taking on a large extended family.

Faced with the struggling business, and her husband's desperate attempts to make enough to bear 'the daily drain demanded by two families and a speculative brother-in-law', Glen spends large amounts of her time helping him with administration and gets through 'a mass of correspondence' for him (327). These 'periods of bitter trial and anxiety' actually bring Glen and Logan-Lacere closer together, and Glen finds happiness in 'doing her poor best to help a sadly overweighted man' (327).⁶ Even though Glen is now 'a successful author', her assistance with her husband's business means that she gets 'into the habit of doing her work by fits and starts; weeks and weeks elapsed without a single line being added to the novel; she allowed every social, domestic, and business matter to take precedence of her own legitimate

employment' (329). By prioritising her husband's business over her own work, Glen fails to focus on her own ability to earn money.

However, as things get even worse, Glen begins to apply herself as she did with her father, and she resolves to 'give an amount of time and attention to authorship she had never before attempted' (335), in order to try to 'pay for household expenses – take rent, taxes, tradesmen's bills, servants' wages off her husband's shoulders' (336). The difference now is that Glen is a known author who is desirable to publishers, and she 'through a period of very hard work' actually is able to generate an income in a way that she never could for Westley: 'It is not given to many men to pass one whole year into which no pecuniary trouble enters, and yet it was just such a reprieve Glen had brought her husband' (363). In this way the novel implies that a traditional prioritising of the man's business and money-making ability is not always the best course. For a while, Glen has succeeded in doing for her husband what she failed to do for her father – saving him from hardship and supporting him through her writing.

Glen's productivity does not continue, however, because at this point in the novel (having become a celebrity author) she gets drawn into 'the full swing of general Society' (355) and allows 'success' to turn 'her brain' (365): As a person whose inspiration is drawn from quiet, lonely, rural places, Glen does herself

no good, morally, physically, or intellectually. [...] At the end of a year, what was left for all those wasted hours, in which she ought to have been building up and fortifying her literary reputation, save a confused memory of luxury and perfume [...] and the knowledge she had brought no single great thought, or original idea, or high aspiration out of the turmoil? (365)

At this point it is not striving to support her husband that leads to problems, but the fact that the social whirl she is in begins to take its toll: 'she often felt as though her brain refused to answer to the calls she made upon it – as though there were some closed door between her

thoughts and the power which enabled her to give expression to them' (378). Her health, and her ability to write, continue to deteriorate until she is taken to bed with a 'dangerous illness' and 'her new serial *was suspended*' (380; original emphasis).

As well as offering a moral warning to other aspirants to fame, Glen's illness marks a new downturn in her fortunes as a writer. The death of one of the partners of her publishing firm leaves her to be bullied by the remaining partner until she is finally forced to quit and search for work elsewhere. This leads to her lowest moment as an author when, after asking for her previous titles, an editor replies, '*I never heard of one of them*' (396; original emphasis).⁷ At just this time, Mr Logan-Lacere falls ill, and his business associates enact their plan, which leads to his financial 'ruin, utter and complete' (391). Unfortunately, Glen has put 'most of [her earnings] into the business' (372) and the couple do not even have her savings to fall back on. She finds herself with 'sickness in her home; poverty; persons dependent on her who had never even thought of trying to be useful, and an utter impossibility of procuring work' (397).

By including this fall, Riddell sets the stage for the pattern to be repeated again and for the last time. Unexpectedly, Glen's works receive a positive review written by another author bitter at the same firm that mistreated her. This quickly leads to a new book serialisation which allows Glen to fulfil her desire of getting 'away from London for ever, to rest heart and brain and body in some remote region where she had not suffered and spent her strength for nought' (398). In the 'small house' they rent, Glen once more works 'fiercely' in order to raise her and her husband out of poverty and has 'never been so happy before' (399). She grows even closer to Logan-Lacere, whom she now has 'to herself' (the fate of the dependent relatives is never explained), and she writes a 'work of love, into which Glenarva put her whole strength and soul and spirit' (399). In this happy environment Glen produces 'chapter after chapter of a book which charmed the public, and delighted those for whom she worked' (400). Yet even at this

point, when Glen is ‘out of all worlds, save that bounded by her small domestic horizon’ she hopes to ‘become once more re-established in popular favour’ (400). But while she wants ‘fame’, she wants it ‘merely for the sake of the only man, besides her father, she had ever cared for; she wished for money for nothing save to purchase him the poor luxuries he never even thought of desiring’ (400). This stage of the pattern ends in the same way as Mr Westley’s. Just as she is praised by her editor, who promises that ‘money must follow fame’, and just as they are preparing to move into a new farmhouse that Logan-Lacere is greatly looking forward to, he dies unexpectedly and ‘once again Fame had crossed the threshold hand-in-hand with Death!’ (402) Glen has managed to do for him what she wished to do for Mr Westley, helping him through difficult times by her pen. Having achieved this, however, she is left alone.

III. Glen and Ned: Breaking the Pattern

Ned, Glen’s childhood friend, the eldest of the vicar’s six boys and Glen’s would-be love interest, is a recurrent and supportive force in Glen’s life, and there is a lot in the novel that could lead us to assume that he will be her final, maybe her true, love; he is clearly in love with her from an early age. However, Glen’s final rejection of Ned is important as it marks her final step towards creative, social, and financial independence. While readers may want, or at least expect, Ned to marry Glen, there are plenty of hints throughout the novel that he is not suitable for her. While many of his comments can be read as poking fun at his childhood companion, essentially trying to get a rise out of her, much of what he says has an underlying sincerity and indicates a lack of sympathy and understanding concerning her career choices. For example, when Ned reads one of Glen’s early novels he offers this judgement:

I considered it good on the whole – good, that is, for a girl. Of course, women can’t be expected ever to know anything of life. [...] What *can* a woman know of life? How is she to get to know it? I’ll be bound I have seen more of London since I came

over last month then you during all the time you have lived in it. (259; original emphasis)

Ned values his masculine, public forms of experience over Glen's (he assumes) more domestic ones, and does not ask for confirmation of this, even though Glen has, at this point, lived in several parts of London, and seen much of it walking alone between publishing houses. A later book, one of her best, he describes as 'morbid' and 'unhealthy' and says he would prefer her to produce 'a womanly sort of tale about flowers and children and happy lovers' (293).

While Glen remains affectionate towards Ned, and he will always remind her of their happy childhood adventures, when she meets him for the first time in London (before her marriage when they are both in their late teens) he has 'grown strangely tall and manly since they were boy and girl together', and his new 'manner [...] had now a something of masculine strength and power added that struck Glen as almost unpleasant in its careless determination' (259). Just before this, Glen remembers that 'his upper lip' was once 'smooth as her own' (259), indicating her prizing of a time when their genders did not mark differences of ability or experience. Glen is never portrayed as less physically capable or brave than her companions when she is a girl; she goes on exactly the same adventures as them and there is 'no place they went to that they did not desire her company' (88). The man Ned becomes, contrastingly, reminds her every time he sees her that his masculine experience is somehow more than her feminine one. Nor would he like Glen, now she is older, to share his experiences – in the same conversation he claims that 'the sooner a girl marries the better' (261), and later he warns her husband 'to keep her well in hand' (265).

In the final chapter, thirty months after Logan-Lacere's death, Ned visits Glen and finds her 'more like the Glen of his earlier remembrance than she had seemed when last they met.' She refuses to speak about her dead husband and 'might never have been wife or widow for all the mention she made of it' (404). While Glen's silence on the one hand indicates that it is too

painful a subject to discuss, it also hints at a reversion to a time before marriage. The words with which she rejects Ned – ‘*I am not going to marry you or anyone else*’ (405; original emphasis) – also support this, as she made the same claim many years ago when rejecting the curate Mr Dufford. She is effectively positioning herself as a spinster, rather than a widow. And while she insists to Ned, ‘there was but one man in the world for me, and I married him’, she also says that she is ‘content’ and that ‘if I could, I would not bring my dead back to life’ (406). This adds extra poignancy to the moment when Ned leaves, taking a boat across the river (faintly echoing their childhood games), and Glen feels ‘almost as though she were looking on one dead’ (407). She is certain she will never see him again because ‘the words he had spoken must needs separate them as friends’; by trying to claim her, he has lost her (407).

While Peterson effectively reads Glen as a version of the Brontëan author, the plot of the novel can also be usefully contrasted with Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) which ‘celebrates feminine mythology and female independence, [but at] its closure unsettlingly traps its two heroines inside the very romance plot conventions it has been contesting’ (Lepine 121).⁸ Riddell does the opposite – Ned is the conventional “happy” ending which should be imposed on Glen. But she says no. Like Glen with *Ashtree Manor*, and like Riddell herself with her novels of the city, *A Struggle for Fame* has ‘love merely occupy the same position [...] that it does apparently in the lives of most of those with whom we come in contact’ (289). This ending takes it further, though, and removes romantic love from Glen’s future in a way which proves frustrating for Ned, for fans of romantic fiction, and for the *Athenaeum* reviewer who commented that ‘some readers may fairly ask whether “A Struggle for Fame” is a novel at all’ because ‘the practice of great novelists [...] has settled that a novel is a love story, and there is no love story in “A Struggle for Fame”’ (Anon., ‘Novels of the Week’ 202).

Colella argues that with her solitary ending, ‘Glen attains the future she wished for minus the affections that would make it more stable’ (238). Yet it is difficult to see what is unstable

about Glen as the novel closes. Shortly before Logan-Lacere's death, the narrator comments that, although life is difficult at the moment, 'through devious and thorny paths God Almighty was leading her to the peace He alone can give' (399). And indeed, Ned and the reader leave Glen alone in a place which gives 'her tossed spirit peace' (405).

IV. Conclusion: A Life of her Own

A Struggle for Fame is a fascinating text in terms of its depiction not only of the oppression experienced by women in a strictly gendered society, but also in its exploration of the binds and obligations of individuals within familial and professional networks, and in its depiction of genius held down by social and emotional chains. Riddell's traditional three-volume novel (which by the 1880s was a tired and struggling genre), written well into the later stages of her career, shares themes with the work of Kate Chopin who, writing ten years after Riddell is often seen as a forerunner of modernism. Like Glen, Chopin's female protagonists often find themselves hindered in their development as human beings by the ties of familial and social responsibility.

In Chopin's 'The Dream of an Hour' (1896), the protagonist Mrs Mallard, on news of the death of her husband, experiences an exhilarating rush of freedom: 'There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature' (260). In Chopin's most well-known work, *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier begins 'to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her' (16). Significantly, both of Chopin's characters die at the end of the story: Mrs Mallard dies of shock (and, implicitly, disappointment) at the news that her husband is not dead after all; Edna

famously walks into the ocean and swims until her strength fails her, rather than ever ‘again [...] belong to another than herself’ (*The Awakening*, 89).

At the end of *A Struggle for Fame* Glen asserts her autonomy and not only in relation to women’s duties and social expectations. She moves into a farmhouse of her individual choosing, not into the one that she had picked out with her husband. Her new home is ‘a quiet, dreamy place’ and ‘her small domain’ (405). Riddell, unlike Chopin, imagines a scenario in which her heroine is able to find a level of independence that leaves her ‘content’ and able to live in the world (406). We know, from snippet flashes forward throughout the novel, and from the final paragraph which refers to ‘when [Ned] reads notices of her books’, that Glen continues to write (407). She tells Ned about ‘her home, her life, her books, her interests, her means, her friends’ – placing an emphasis on her personal possession of these things and also indicating a certain fullness to her existence (404).

A Struggle for Fame also looks forward to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Glen learns that she must take her writing seriously, value it more than domestic and financial cares, and make space for it if it is ever to be fulfilling as well as profitable. By the end of the novel Glenarva, through loss and death, and even more through hard work and choice, has managed to craft not only a room, but a life of her own.

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Notes

¹ Riddell travelled, as a young Irishwoman in reduced financial circumstances, to London (although with her mother, rather than father) in order to write. She also had to write to support her husband '(an inventor and small businessman), who declared bankruptcy in 1871' (Henry 194). For a succinct overview of Riddell's biography and her literary career, the parallels to Glen's experiences, and an explanation of some of the *roman-à-clef* elements in the novel see (Kelleher 118–24). Peterson reveals some more connections between Riddell's

own struggles to balance her domestic and professional life (110) and offers some alternative models for Glen's male counterpart in the novel, Bernard Kelly (106–7).

² As Colella points out, Lacere 'values [Glen's] needle-work more highly than her manuscripts, which he does not even bother to read' (237). It is a running joke in the novel that even the most loving and supportive person will quail at the prospect of reading an author's manuscript.

³ Kelleher notes that the significant deaths/career progressions that happen at similar times reflect Riddell's own experience (124). Peterson proposes a 'cynical reading' in which the 'ending betray[s] Riddell's guilty desire to free herself from domestic responsibility by killing the father and the husband who held her back from literary fame' (112).

⁴ The Biblical passage portrayed in the stained-glass window is telling for a book about a heroine who spends much of the time labouring to help men whom she puts on a pedestal: 'the woman washing our Lord's feet with her tears' (Riddell 257).

⁵ Unlike Eliot, Glen does not try other types of writing than novels (it seems she writes short stories early on, but all her publications are novels), or consider any of the other less creative positions associated with the press and literature and becoming more available to women such as 'printers, proofreaders, illustrators, and editors' (Palmer 3). This is a significant departure from Riddell's own experience, as she herself edited the *St James's Magazine* in the 1860s. As Beth Palmer explains, '[t]he newly combined and (to women) newly available role of author-editor was a position that could influence the ways in which fiction was shaped, produced, and consumed. Being an author-editor was of necessity public and interactive. It gave women writers control over the dissemination of their work; it provided status, contacts, and remuneration' (3). Palmer's *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies* focuses on Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, and Florence Marryat as author-editors in the 1860s–70s. Glen comes to London in 1855, and

her story takes place during the rise of these literary superstars, but this is a level of control that Glen never achieves or even considers, and she remains very much at the mercy of the whims of publishers whose assessment of the value of her work is only partially influenced by its quality.

⁶ Glen's inability to fully understand her husband's business affairs helps to keep them in financial difficulties. This is a significant deviation from the plot of Riddell's earlier *Mortomley's Estate* (1874) in which the heroine, when faced with her husband's bankruptcy and subsequent nervous breakdown, learns the ins and outs of his business and manages to save her family from poverty before succumbing to the effort it has taken and dying (quietly and happily) of an unspecified illness. Long-term readers of Riddell may well have had this possible outcome in mind when, just before Lacere's death, Glen is actually concerned what would happen if she died.

⁷ There is not space in this essay to examine the highs and lows of Glen's interactions with publishers, but it must be acknowledged that they also place extreme pressure on her in a way that is not always conducive to her producing her best work. For more discussion of Glen in the publishing industry see Kelleher.

⁸ Anna Lepine reads Rose Yorke's single future as 'an alternative ending to *Shirley*' which counteracts (somewhat) the sense of 'marriage as a seemingly inevitable conclusion' and argues that Brontë 'sought and developed an alternative "happy ending" for the spinster' (121–2).