

# Of Trilogies and Triangles: Adultery in Arthur Stringer's *Prairie Stories* and Mazo de la Roche's *Whiteoak Chronicles*

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FROM JOHN RICHARDSON'S *Wacousta* (1832) and *The Canadian Brothers* (1840) to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), the Canadian literary archive contains innumerable examples of sequels, trilogies, series, and chronicles — those genres that Gérard Genette collectively refers to as literature “in the second degree” (5). According to Carole Gerson, the popularity of series — the most recognizable of the second-degree genres — “peaked during the second decade of the twentieth century” in English-speaking Canada, as witnessed by the huge and enduring popularity of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne* books (148). Gerson further suggests that, as the infamous battle between Montgomery and her publishers makes clear, one of the primary motivations behind series production has long been economic, with author or publisher (or both) seeking to capitalize on an early success, as indicated by high sales and revenue, by prolonging the initial narratives. Gerson's view of the primacy of economics in series production has become a critical commonplace, corroborated by the work of Terry Castle and Marjorie Garber, among others, but as Genette observes, although a key and perhaps primary motivation, financial gain is not the only benefit afforded by this genre of writing; another, for example, is the ability that autographic series afford their authors of explicitly and systematically returning to a given concern, pushing the parameters of their exploration further with each revisiting. This latter characteristic and its effects on textual reception are the focus of the present analysis.

Dating from roughly the period Gerson identifies as the zenith of series production in Canada, and taking as their central concern the same kinds of sexual dynamics that other contemporary English-Canadian romancers were interrogating, Arthur Stringer's *Prairie Stories* (1915-22) and Mazo de la Roche's *Whiteoak Chronicles* (1927-40) are doubly

representative of the English-Canadian literary scene at the junction between romance and realism in Canadian literary history.<sup>1</sup> Although rooted in the romance tradition, these series prepared their audiences for increasingly explicit treatments of contentious moral issues and of adultery in particular; afforded their authors the liberty to undertake that explorative work; and resulted in a rigorous treatment of the subject that both anticipated and made possible similar thematic developments by realist writers of the era. Given the similarities between the two series, the comparative longevity of *Whiteoak Chronicles*, in terms of critical appreciation and popular reception, reflects, I would suggest, the extent to which de la Roche capitalizes more fully than Stringer on the explorative possibilities afforded by the autographic series. More specifically, by expanding her initial narrative over several volumes (rather than limiting herself to a trilogy) and by beginning with actual rather than threatened adultery, de la Roche can address long-term repercussions of adultery in addition to its immediate effects.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, she is able to offer an apprehension of the adulterous triangle that is more psychologically sophisticated than the one Stringer presents in his work.

Superficially, the similarities between the two series equal — and arguably exceed — the differences. Each series is firmly planted within the romance tradition despite the claims of realism that appeared in several contemporary reviews,<sup>3</sup> and the first instalment of each was an immediate commercial success: two illustrated American editions of Stringer's *The Prairie Wife* (1915) appeared alongside the Canadian version by McLeod & Allen;<sup>4</sup> and de la Roche's *Jalna* (1927) was nothing short of a literary phenomenon, thrusting its author into the spotlight after beating out almost thirteen hundred other entries to win the prestigious Atlantic–Little, Brown Award. In terms of narrative subject, each series focuses on its principal family's domestic relations, and the plots of both unfold almost entirely within the single setting of the homestead (in the case of *The Prairie Wife*) or familial estate (as with *Jalna*). Indeed, the series are similar in their narrative development as well, for despite their focus on family life, both initially tantalize readers with rather than analyze the psychosocial dynamics they invoke.

The strategy of simultaneously presenting and retreating from transgressive subject matter appears early in *The Prairie Wife*, which immediately summons the scandalous figure of “the *Other Man*” (2) but then promptly normalizes the potentially subversive lover: no dark

knight who has swept her off her feet, Chaddie's "other man" is a gaunt, poorly-dressed "broken-down" civil engineer-turned-rancher (5) whom she accepts in marriage not so much because she loves him (she does not) as because the affections of her original suitor, Count Theobald Gustav, collapsed at the same time as her fortunes. Potentially setting the trajectory for a realistic exploration of marital relations, Stringer's rejection of the stereotypical "other" and Chaddie's pragmatic motivations are soon buried under mounds of romantic drivel and bliss, for Chaddie promptly comes to love her convenient husband "with all her heart and soul" (87). Moreover, in a suggestively metafictional summary statement, she offers up their unadulterated happiness as a standard of the inevitable "reality" of prairie life: "There isn't much room for the Triangle in a two-by-four shack. Life's so normal and natural and big out here. . . . Not that Dinky-Dunk and I are so goody-goody! We're just healthy and human, that's all, and we'd never do for fiction" (119-20).

Fortunately for its fictional life, the McKail marriage is not as "healthy" as Chaddie seems to believe, and the arrival of Percival Woodhouse soon reveals that there is room enough for "the Triangle" — and jealousy too — in Chaddie's prairie environs. Duncan's "Tragic" expression upon finding Percy and his wife reading poetry by the fireplace (160), his angry retreat and slamming of the door, and Chaddie's running out after him into the cold without coat or overshoes bring the emotional tensions surrounding this triangular relationship to near histrionic proportions. And lest one love triangle and bout of jealousy is not enough to sustain interest in this narrative couple, Stringer gives Chaddie cause for concern of her own in the form of a Nordic blonde who arrives on the ranch looking for work. Alone in the shack, thinking of her husband in the fields with this other woman, Chaddie starts "wondering if Dinky-Dunk is going to fall in love with Olga" (214) and then, unable to bear her suspicions any longer, rides out stealthily to observe his behaviour. The anticlimactic resolution of this scene — Chaddie finds Duncan and Olga some two miles apart from each other — anticipates a more general anticlimax to the McKails' marital tensions: Olga and Percy, the suspect apexes of what threatens to become a love quadrangle, eventually confess their mutual affection, marry, and move away from the McKail ranch. Thus, although it relies

on the spectre of the adulterous triangle for its narrative tensions, *The Prairie Wife* culminates in a comedic assertion of domestic felicity.

Following de la Roche's portrayal of infidelity in *Possession* (1923) and of adultery and bigamy in *Delight* (1926), *Jalna's* triangles are more blatant than *The Prairie Wife's*, involving actual adultery in addition to vague marital suspicions and jealousies.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the inaugural text alludes to many of the sexual transgressions and conflicts that provide the subversive subtext to the *Whiteoak Chronicles* series as a whole: Maurice's premarital infidelity to Meg, Alayne's untimely love for Renny, and Eden and Pheasant's affair. In the process, it reveals various narrative and psychological repressive strategies that de la Roche and her characters employ in relation to sexual desire, strategies that in *Whiteoak Chronicles* take the place of the anticlimactic resolution of marital suspicion in *The Prairie Wife*.

One such strategy — a recurrent one in romances of the day — involves locating the adulterous threat in characters who are, in clear and often literal ways, “others” in relation to the narrative principals. *The Prairie Wife* employs this device in that its other woman is a literal foreigner; *Jalna* perfects it, gradually moving from a literal to a metaphorical understanding of outsider until members of the Whiteoak family themselves become aliens. Thus, in *Jalna*, culpability for the principal sexual conflict — comprising the two inter-related triangles of Eden, Alayne, and Renny on one side, and Piers, Pheasant, and Eden on the other — is subtly directed to the two outsiders in the love complex. In the case of Pheasant, the ignoble circumstances surrounding her birth relegate her to the margins of the narrative community and render her too inferior in status to be on a par with the Whiteoak clan, with its pretensions to moral superiority. With her father unwilling to extend the purview of his own status to his illegitimate daughter and with a congenital inheritance of “bad blood” from her mother (285), Pheasant becomes an involuntary agent of discord, succumbing to Eden's temptations when Piers fails to “sav[e] her from herself” (286).

For her part, Alayne is even more explicitly an outsider, coming from a different social position, a different ideology, a different country altogether. Even though she anticipates a warm welcome, having received Meg's congratulatory letter of invitation, Alayne fancies herself another “Ruth — ‘amid the alien corn’” as she travels toward *Jalna* (137), and her feelings of estrangement are not ungrounded. Because she is unable

to appreciate the Whiteoaks' homogenizing impulse and the tenacity with which they cling to each other and their way of life, Alayne always remains on the outside, where she falls easy prey to the family's surveillance. Thus, Finch, the uncles, and, later, Meg, as well, all perceive the shift in Alayne's affection from one brother to another that precedes Eden's seduction of Pheasant. Yet while so observant of Alayne, no one seems to notice that Eden is, in fact, the first to pull back, retreating every morning to the summerhouse after a honeymoon at Jalna more easily measured in days than weeks.<sup>6</sup> By suggesting that Eden's affair with Pheasant is a retaliatory one, and by obscuring the possibility that the shift in Alayne's affections is itself reactionary, the narrative effectively inculpates Alayne for her husband's infidelity, thereby characterizing the source of this sexual complex as foreign.

The narrative further sequesters the Whiteoak family from the adulterous affair by constructing two of the Whiteoaks who are most involved in the affair — Eden, through his philandering, and Finch, through his discovery of it — as atypical Whiteoaks, who inherit their predominant propensities from their mother rather than from the father they share with Renny and Meg. Eden's poetic sensibility, setting him apart from his boisterous brothers and tyrannical grandmother, is repeatedly derided by Piers and, more importantly, by Renny, "Chieftain" and principal representative of Jalna (97). For his part, Finch is, in many respects, even more anomalous than Eden, with his nervous sensibility bringing him to the brink of hilarity at the most inopportune times and with his failure — unique among his brothers — to excel at any sport or subject translating into such a poverty of currency in the Whiteoak economy that not even Wakefield, his much younger brother, has any respect for him at all. Moreover, despite the temporary prominence that the principal sexual conflict affords them, both Eden and Finch return promptly to the narrative margins, Eden literally disappearing from Jalna and Finch facing metaphoric disappearance in the departure of the only person who sees and understands him: Alayne — herself an outsider.

In addition to the strategy of characterizing threats to Jalna's stability as originating from outside the Whiteoak ethic, de la Roche employs a stylistic repression of subversive elements. An example of this latter strategy is her description of Finch's discovery of Eden and Pheasant in the woods, with the fragmented fluster and imagistic nature of the

younger brother's reaction providing a syntactical correlative to his internal upset:<sup>7</sup>

Oh, they were wicked! He could have rushed in on them in his rage, and slain them. It would have been right and just. They had betrayed Piers, his beloved brother, his hero! In imagination he crushed in on them through the hazel bushes, trampling the ferns, and struck them again and again till they screamed for pity; but he had no pity; he beat them down as they clung about his knees till their blood soaked the greensward and the glade reverberated with their cries — (309)

The vivid, even sadistic, vengeance fantasy that the discovery of his closest brother's betrayal inspires in Finch suggests his difficulty internalizing the trauma of this familial dysfunction that, for Finch, doubles as an epistemological crisis, for although it is in his nature to be perceptive and to investigate peculiarities in his environment, he is not well equipped to handle the revelations his investigations bring about. Unable to redress the "injustice" he finds, he retreats to a surreal and violent mental space where he can right the wrongs he uncovers. Existing solely in the realm of the imaginary, however, Finch's retributive actions fail to produce the catharsis he requires, leaving him "dazed" in a state of complete impotence (309). Yet in terms of the narrative's account of the lovers, Finch's presence does result in a curtailing of their intercourse, interrupting their abandon and alerting them to the possibility of discovery. Moreover, his introduction into the scene deflects attention away from the transgressive lovers and refocuses it, through his righteous indignation, on notions of propriety and morality.

The final dash that concludes the description of Finch's vengeance fantasy, indicating the break in his thought and his transition into a temporary mental catatonia, marks another manifestation of *Jalna's* stylistic repressions. Participating in a tradition extending as far back as Sarah Fielding, Eliza Fenwick, and Jane Austen, de la Roche uses the dash at this moment of textual crisis as a typographical representation of that which cannot be articulated verbally.<sup>8</sup> Its function in this respect becomes still more manifest when Finch tries to tell Piers what has happened:

"What the devil is the matter with you?" asked Piers, coming around to him. "Have you had a fright?"

Finch caught his brother by the arm and repeated: “In the wood — making love — both of them — kissing — making love —”

“Who? Tell me whom you mean. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Piers was impatient, yet, in spite of himself, he was excited by the boy’s wild words.

“Eden, the traitor!” cried Finch, his voice breaking into a scream. “He’s got Pheasant in the wood there — Pheasant. They’re wicked, I tell you — false as hell!”

Piers’ hand was as a vice on his arm.

“What did you see?”

“Nothing — nothing — but behind the hazel bushes I heard them whispering — kissing — oh, I know. I wasn’t born yesterday. Why did they go so far away? She wouldn’t have let him kiss her like that unless —” (310-11)

Generally indicative of Finch’s inner turmoil, the dash here more specifically represents the fragmentation of his cognitive and linguistic abilities — a fragmentation that both symbolizes and attests to his sense of the irrevocable destruction of his family’s unity. Unable to synthesize his findings into a cogent narrative, Finch’s account is consequently marked by several syntactical breaks, represented by the dashes that appear within the sentences. The final dash, which replaces a period and consequently leaves the clause incomplete, appears as further proof of Finch’s distress.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it ultimately foregrounds the text’s reticence about the moral dilemma it presents, most notably by raising the question, at the end of the passage, of what it means for Pheasant to allow Eden to “kiss her like that” (311). In other words, through this stylistic strategy, de la Roche effectively effaces the thought content represented by Finch’s “unless—” by not specifying the extent to which Pheasant is culpable — aware and agential — in the escalation of her affair to actual adultery.

The result of these halting textual silences, in conjunction with the displacement of the adulterous threat to people and places outside the core of the Whiteoak family, is an obscuring of the motivations for and consequences of the adulterous liaisons that *Jalna* presents. While the text capitalizes on its sexual conflict as the source of the moral and psychological tensions that drive the narrative, it uses both the conflict itself and the tensions it produces as an occasion for titillation rather than as an entry point into a sustained interrogation of the repercussions of infidelity. Indeed, in the brief denouement that brings the romance

to its close, Pheasant reappears in the family circle, renewed with the “wistful energy of a growing child” and an overwhelming happiness, despite her sense that her joy is inappropriate (343).<sup>10</sup> As mentioned above, Eden simply disappears, fleeing from Jalna and the upset he has helped set in motion and taking with him — at least in Piers’s eyes — no small part of the blame for what has happened as well as the threat of its recurrence. Finally, with Alayne’s departure imminent, whatever threat to family unity and stability she may pose is similarly defused. The departures of these two characters thus function analogously to the joint departure of Olga and Percy in *The Prairie Wife*, making the return to domestic harmony probable, if not inevitable.

While present-day readers might regret the facile and even implausible restoration of heteronormativity at the conclusion of both *The Prairie Wife* and *Jalna*, the warm reception — critical and financial — that both books met upon their publication indicates that their authors had struck a balance between the scandalous and the ordinary that not only resonated with contemporary readers but that, indeed, left them eager for more. Not surprisingly, both authors obliged: Stringer’s trilogy traces a gradual escalation of intensity from the groundless suspicions of *The Prairie Wife*, to the veritable threat posed by Lady Alicia Newland and Peter Ketley in *The Prairie Mother* (1920), to the full realization of the adulterous threat in the character of Alsina Teeswater in *The Prairie Child* (1922). Likewise, of the five succeeding volumes in the *Whiteoak Chronicles*, three revisit the Eden-Pheasant affair at length,<sup>11</sup> in the process illustrating how the same act of infidelity can engender diverse responses and consequences.

Like Alayne and Pheasant in *Jalna*, Lady Allie in *The Prairie Mother* is an outsider, notwithstanding her vaguely defined cousinly relation to Duncan. She makes Chaddie uncomfortable from the start, the mere mention of her name in conversation inspiring feelings of suspicion and animosity in the romance’s protagonist, who silently denigrates her ladyship’s status while Duncan waxes apprehensive on his loss of her fortune. Lady Allie’s alienation of Chaddie, displacing her at Casa Grande and enlisting Duncan as her ranch manager, thus requiring his constant attendance at the large house and, by extension, his perpetual absence from the honeymoon shack where Chaddie remains; her shady past as reported by her waiting maid; and her *modus operandi*, which, according to Chaddie’s ranch hand, is akin to behaviour that had got



women “ridden out o’ Dawson City on a rail more times than once” (224) all mark her as different from — and more morally suspect than — the kind of woman normally encountered on the Prairies.

While Lady Allie is clearly an outsider from the start, Lady Allie and Chaddie contrast most sharply in the way each woman capitalizes on the agency she commands in her romantic life. Duncan forms the apex of the principal love triangle, bringing Lady Allie and Chaddie into unhappy proximity as rivals for his attention, but each woman is herself the apex of a secondary triangle — a triangle in which Duncan represents merely one of the possibilities the women could choose to pursue. Despite Lady Allie’s insinuations to the contrary, Chaddie never loses sight of her husband, evading Peter Ketley’s romantic attentions even while drawing support from his friendship. When his declaration of love brings matters to a crisis, she rejects his proposals and insists he relinquish any hope he might have of changing her mind: “It’s no use,” she tells him, “as I told you before, I’m one of those neck-or-nothing women, one of those single-track women, who can’t have their tides of traffic going two ways at once” (242-43). Lady Allie, on the other hand, chooses her alternate lover, Colonel Ainsley-Brook, in preference to Duncan. With her own personal history proof of the precariousness of the marriage state,<sup>12</sup> Lady Allie’s decision to marry the Colonel appears as a drastic response to her romantic disappointment with Duncan — one that suggests a change in her own understanding of the relation between romance and marriage. In any event, with Lady Allie sending Duncan away and with Chaddie summoning him to her side, the women’s respective choices ultimately determine Duncan’s in a way that their prior and “paleolithic” (210) battle of words could not. Thus, in both Lady Allie’s marriage to the Colonel and Duncan’s reconciliation with his “true blue” wife (353), *The Prairie Mother* repeats the closing gesture of *The Prairie Wife* by suggesting that domestic happiness follows from marital fidelity.

In contrast to the comedic frame of the first two books in the trilogy, the final volume, *The Prairie Child* (1922), opens with Chaddie’s discovery of Duncan’s infidelity and ends with the dissolution of the McKail marriage. The adulterous other in this volume, Alsina Teeswater, leaves Casa Grande after Chaddie finds her and Duncan “with their arms about each other” (4); but unlike the removal of Peter Ketley and Lady Allie in *The Prairie Mother* or of Olga and Percy in *The Prairie*

*Wife*, Alsina's retreat from the scene does not engender a restoration of familial harmony. Rather, as the title of this last volume suggests, the children — and especially “Dinkie” — take centre stage in a play on Chaddie's affections that leaves Duncan feeling jealous of his eldest son and excluded from the circle of family intimacy. Though both hover on the margins of the McKail family, neither Gershom Binks, the man who replaces Alsina as community teacher, nor Peter Ketley, who corresponds with the family before secretly purchasing and returning to Alabama Ranch, produce the sustained drain on Duncan's authority and security that his own son effects.

Given Chaddie's early observation that “you can't burn the prairie over twice in the same season” (*Prairie Child* 4), along with the external threats to their marriage the couple has overcome in the past, Duncan's sense that his hold on his wife has become subordinate to that of their children assumes especial prominence as a likely cause for the marital disintegration the book describes.<sup>13</sup> Whereas in *The Prairie Wife* Chaddie fetches Duncan from his solitary smoking in the stable, insisting that “no baby is ever going to come between me and you” (268), in *The Prairie Child*, Chaddie begrudgingly admits that her children have done exactly that, to the detriment of her marriage: “I suppose I *have* given most of my time and attention to my children. And it's as perilous, I suppose, to give your heart to a man and then take it even partly away again as it is to give a trellis to a rose-bush and then expect it to stand alone” (14). With her metaphor missing the gravity of her actual situation, Chaddie's qualified acceptance of responsibility here joins with Duncan's frustration at being reduced to “a retriever for a *crèche*” (*Prairie Child* 19), helping to create textual sympathy for Duncan, whom, as Victor Lauriston puts it, “though we can't quite like . . . , we cannot bring ourselves entirely to blame” (151).

Nor can we bring ourselves entirely to blame Alsina Teeswater. Even more than Duncan, this “other woman” garners textual sympathy, which is no small feat given that *The Prairie Child*, like the earlier volumes, employs first-person narration, with Chaddie being both seer and scribe. Yet despite her reasons for resenting Alsina, Chaddie concedes from the start that the young teacher had not “been merely playing with fire” and that her obvious attachment to Duncan was “almost dignifying” in its transparency (4). Similarly, when Alsina resurfaces at the end of the book, asking Chaddie rather audaciously whether she will step

aside and allow the divorce suit to proceed unopposed, Chaddie sees in her rival “an air of honesty” and a genuine desire to explain “both her predicament and her motives” (353). Her sensitivity to the other woman’s situation leaves Chaddie feeling an odd sense of commiseration for the woman who, by her own admission is, in her relationship to Duncan, as powerless as Chaddie herself and who, Chaddie remembers, “might some day sit eating her pot of honey on a grave” (354). With narrative sympathies divided between Chaddie, Duncan, and Alsina, *The Prairie Child* would seem to respond to one of Chaddie’s early criticisms regarding characterization in popular fiction — namely, that it typically puts people “so strictly into two classes, the good and the bad” (*Prairie Wife* 119). While the *Prairie Stories* trilogy does not confound such distinctions altogether, it does acknowledge the moral ambiguities and complexities of quotidian domestic life.

It is the presence of such extenuating circumstances in *Prairie Stories* that complicates and nuances Stringer’s treatment of adultery in ways that see the trilogy move beyond the scope of individual fictional studies of the subject dating from that period. In the process, the trilogy also addresses a principal shortcoming of contemporary fiction, as Chaddie perceives it — namely, that it misleads with its structure of beginning, middle, and end:

How different is life from what the fictioneers would paint it! How hopelessly mixed-up and macaronic, how undignified in what ought to be its big moments and how pompous in so many of its pettinesses!

I told my husband to-day that Popsy [their daughter] and I were going back to Casa Grande. And that, surely, ought to have been the Big Moment in the career of an unloved invertebrate. But the situation declined to take off, as the airmen say.

“I guess that means it’s about time we got unscrambled,” the man I had once married and lived with quietly remarked. (*Prairie Child* 364)

Notwithstanding her repeated disavowal of a relation between life and literature, Chaddie has a hard time accepting that “modern life never quite lives up to its fiction” (*Prairie Child* 7) for she long nurtures the wish “to live with [Duncan] like a second ‘Suzanne de Sirmont’ in Daudet’s *Happiness*” (2), and when she finds she cannot, she is perplexed and disappointed by the banality of her failure.

Her disappointment in this respect foregrounds the disjunction between the stories she would have liked her life to imitate and the

manner in which it actually unfolds. That her final confrontation with Duncan should end like T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," "not with a bang but a whimper" (99), is almost as difficult for Chaddie to accept as the actual breach it signals — not because she is flighty and histrionic at the end of the trilogy but because, after all the upset and outrage of less consequential moments in their marriage, the quiet acquiescence and passive indifference that characterize this last meeting make its very finality elusive. Chaddie is unable to react "like the outraged wife of screen and story, walk[ing] promptly out of the door and slam[ming] it epochally shut after [her]" (*Prairie Child* 6), and she is left, as a result, without the sense of closure she thinks she requires.

In the place of the restoration of domestic stability that marks the conclusions of the first two volumes in the trilogy, *The Prairie Child* ends with an image, not fully tragic, of Chaddie "waiting" (382) — for her divorce to go through, for Peter to leave and return, for Dinkie to mature and realize his potential. It is a poignant reminder that the end of a romance is not the end of a life nor even, perhaps, the end of the story. Thus, while *Prairie Stories* elsewhere reinforces the relation between domestic and marital happiness, in the moral ambiguity and comparative open-endedness attached to this final image, *The Prairie Child* anticipates later novels such as Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (1941) and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974), which take their narratives beyond the point of infidelity, disillusionment, and, at least in the latter instance, marital dissolution.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas *Prairie Stories* begins with petty suspicions and does not present actual adultery until the final volume of the series, in the affair of Eden and Pheasant (both married), the first volume of the *Whiteoak Chronicles* presents a paradigm of adultery that the subsequent books amplify and explicate. The double nature of this paradigm means that de la Roche is able to trace different trajectories from the same initial transgression, thereby suggesting more explicitly than Stringer that neither the marriage nor the real story need end with the adulterous act. More broadly, by taking an instance of actual adultery as an initiatory premise, de la Roche has time and space to move beyond the underlying moral and social concerns that mark Stringer's trilogy. She is, therefore, able to undertake a more rigorous exploration of the psychological implications of marital infidelity than her predecessor, to realize more fully than he the thematic and stylistic possibilities that such psychological

subtleties can bring to an extended work of fiction, and to consider more explicitly than he the issue of moral responsibility.

One trajectory that de la Roche explores is reconciliation, and through her study of this line of action in Piers and Pheasant's relationship, she suggests that, while difficult to tread, this avenue is nevertheless a fruitful one to follow. Although he brings Pheasant back to Jalna the night Finch discovers her with Eden, Piers struggles for a long time with a memory of his wife's adultery and brother's betrayal that is at once hauntingly unreal and indelibly vivid. Lying with Pheasant on a calm and peaceful night, he reflects,

Why was it that at times like these Eden's face should come out of the darkness to trouble him? First as a pale disturbing reflection on the sea of his content, like the reflection of a stormy moon. Then clear and brilliant, wearing his strange ironic smile, the blank look in his eyes, as though he never quite clearly knew why he did things. Piers shut his own eyes more tightly. He clenched his teeth and pressed his forehead against Pheasant's shoulder, trying not to think, trying not to see Eden's face with its mocking smile. He tried to draw comfort from her nearness and warmth. She was his! That awful night when Finch had discovered the two in the wood together was a dream, a nightmare. He would not let the dreadful thought of it into his mind. But the thought came like a slinking beast, and Piers's mouth was suddenly drawn to one side in a grimace of pain. Pheasant must have felt his unease, for she turned to him and put an arm about his head, drawing it against her breath. (*Whiteoaks of Jalna* 50-51)

With no form of redress available to him, having forgiven his wife and being unable to enact vengeance on his absent brother, Piers involuntarily and repeatedly relives the trauma of their combined infidelities. Characteristic of obsessive thought patterns, his attempt to bar "the dreadful thought" from his mind only leads to its escalation, as Piers moves from an imagistic fixation on "Eden's face with its mocking smile" to other more disturbing mental pictures — in this instance, those of Eden and Pheasant's coition.<sup>15</sup> That from his perspective these latter visions are purely fictitious renders them no more volitional or any less damaging. Indeed, as de la Roche foregrounds with impressive psychological accuracy, Piers's mental distraction here culminates in physical distress, thus attesting to the depth of his psychic wound.

Pheasant is similarly haunted by her adultery. Years later, a conversation with Aunt Augusta about marital bliss triggers a memory of Eden that follows the same pattern as the bedtime panics Piers suffers in the immediate aftermath of the affair. Beginning as an indistinct apparition, “shadowy, like a figure in a dream,” that intrudes on her happiness, the image of Eden that Pheasant carries solidifies around his “veiled, half-sad smile” (*Master of Jalna* 26), just as Piers’s vision moves from “a pale disturbing reflection on the sea of his content” to the “clear and brilliant” image of “[Eden’s] strange ironic smile” (*Whiteoaks of Jalna* 51). The thought of that peculiar smile induces in Pheasant a body memory — “the touch of his hands” now “branded on her soul” (*Master of Jalna* 26) — just as it inspires in Piers imaginary visions of the consummation of their betrayal. Finally, the recollection of that past contact generates in Pheasant a physical reaction — a shudder signifying unease sufficiently intense to inspire an imaginative murdering of her seducer and a hastened return to the safety offered by her husband and children — just as knowledge of that contact results in physical pain for Piers and the need to turn to his wife, who draws him closer toward herself. That Pheasant should still experience this thought cycle some seven years after the affair suggests the extent and duration of her suffering, and the passage’s culmination in her vehement wish that Eden remain away forever gestures toward the complexity of her retrospective understanding of her infidelity: in addition to accepting her guilt for having “almost wrecked her life with Piers” (*Master of Jalna* 26), Pheasant comes to accept that rather than representing a coming together of equals, her adulterous affair involved manipulation and exploitation insofar as Eden took advantage of her especial vulnerability to sexual attention, represented elsewhere in the series by references to her bad blood.

While acknowledging the difficulty Piers and Pheasant face in reconciling themselves to the affair, the *Whiteoak Chronicles* series nevertheless insists that reconciliation between spouses is a viable option, even in the wake of an adulterous affair. In doing so, the books implicitly provide practical advice to facilitate the rebuilding of marital stability by suggesting the usefulness of subordinating thoughts of the past affair to the more immediate exigencies of domestic relations. For example, after returning “with . . . greater ardour” to her familial role (*Master of Jalna* 27), Pheasant refocuses her attention on her husband and her life with

him and demonstrates new confidence and cognizance of the sexual dynamics around her,<sup>16</sup> suggesting that her affair has made her more wary of, and consequently less susceptible to, the seductive intentions of others. From an innocent child, she matures into a competent wife and mother, evincing a balance between passionate and maternal love that neither Alayne nor Clara Lebraux manages to strike, with “passion dominat[ing] maternity” in the former and “sexual love [being] overshadowed by maternal” in the latter (*Whiteoak Harvest* 103). The fact that Pheasant’s relationship is the most successful of the three suggests that this balance is an integral part of domestic contentment and thereby produces a comparatively realistic contrast to the extreme passions that typically characterize relationships in the romance genre.

For his part, Piers holds Eden solely responsible for the affair, showing a willingness even to aggravate the nature of his brother’s offense insofar as he concerns himself less than the rest of the family with the question of whether Alayne had driven Eden away by her blatant attachment to Renny. Ironically, Piers’s animosity and hardness toward Eden facilitate his forgiveness and acceptance of Pheasant, and whether the former causes or results from the latter, Piers’s decision to foster his relationship with his wife in preference to that with his brother marks him as unique within the Whiteoak clan. His subsequent decision to move his family out of the ancestral home, first renting and then purchasing the neighbouring Lacey cottage, reinforces his singular commitment to his wife and children, indicating the extent to which he has diverted his attention away from the maintenance of inherited familial relationships and toward the fostering of present and future ones of his own making. Given that Piers and Pheasant’s marriage is the most companionable and stable relationship *Whiteoak Chronicles* presents, these gestures on Piers’s part would seem to suggest that de la Roche had a more thorough understanding of normative familial relations than critics traditionally have acknowledged.<sup>17</sup> Couched as it is in a context of unconventional intimacies and peculiar sleeping arrangements, Piers and Pheasant’s marriage is, after the affair with Eden, conventional in both its fidelity and integrity, and exemplary in its balance of conjugal and parental love.

The post-adultery success of Piers and Pheasant’s marriage reflects a contemporary conservatism that saw forgiveness and abnegation — even in the wake of adultery — as the price of protecting the stability of

the Canadian marriage institution from the destructive possibilities of divorce.<sup>18</sup> Juxtaposing this model is Alayne's marriage to Renny, which is predicated on her prior separation from Eden. Emerging as it does from the ashes of Eden's affair with Pheasant, Alayne's second marriage never manages to rise above the confusion, hurt, and betrayal that issue from Eden's infidelity. In this respect, its difference from the marriage of Piers and Pheasant construes the trajectory of divorce and remarriage as less satisfactory than that of reconciliation — a point the juxtaposition of Piers and Renny makes still more evident. The far less supportive husband of the two, Renny, justifying Eden's infidelity and tormenting Alayne by blaming her for it, conveniently detracts attention away from the fact that his early passion for her had been as inappropriate as hers for him. In the process, he is able, albeit subconsciously, to assuage his guilt by vindicating himself along with the brother he has wronged and to mask his impropriety behind the moral confusion and uncertainty to which he contributes. Meanwhile, Alayne must navigate that space of moral confusion, trying to reconcile her own sense of having *been* wronged by Eden with Renny's insistence that she had, in fact, *done* wrong by him.

Ironically, the *Whiteoak Chronicles* books collectively exculpate Alayne through Renny's self-serving and hypocritical condemnation of her, setting the responsibility for the sexual disorder at Jalna squarely on his shoulders. Although Alayne would willingly move beyond Eden's affair, as Piers and Pheasant do, Renny's repeated efforts to engage her in conversations about her ex-husband create an overlap between her two marriages that allows the negative patterns of the one to carry over into the other. The repetition of destructive male infidelity (in Renny's affair with Clara Lebraux) and excessive female contrition (in Alayne's willingness to excuse her husband and condemn herself) does not, of course, replicate exactly the initial marriage. The passion that characterizes the second marriage, which was absent in the first, and Renny's unwillingness to relinquish control over his wife, compared to Eden's indifference, mean that the repetition here is effectively revisionist: the recurrence of patterns marks an escalation in emotional upset and a widening of the psychological schism that emerges between the spouses. When compared with Piers and Pheasant's ultimate liberation from the past, the intensification of the initial adulterous dynamics in Renny and Alayne's marriage supports the underlying conservatism of the Jalna



series regarding marital stability while, at the same time, broaching a profeminist critique of the misuse of male power.

In the final book of the *Whiteoak Chronicles*, the descriptions of Alayne's obsessive thinking delineate even more explicitly than the previous texts the inter-relation of domestic discord, psychological disorder, and improper masculine agency implicit throughout the series. Similar to Piers's in kind, if not in degree, and consequently impossible to dismiss as a peculiarly feminine form of neurosis, Alayne's fixations originate in and are exacerbated by Renny's betrayal of her trust and manipulation of her conscience. Most immediately, they derive from his affair with the widow Lebraux; thus, in their initial manifestation, they centre on the adulterous relationship, with Alayne thinking for "hours . . . of nothing but the fact that Clara . . . had lain in his arms, as she herself had lain" (*Whiteoak Harvest* 42). When her first obsessive episode escalates into auditory hallucinations, Alayne tries "with all the strength in her" to banish the "licentious" thoughts from her mind (42). Instead of conquering them, however, she succeeds only in displacing them, as thoughts about her first marriage and Eden's infidelity stand in for those concerning her second experience of a husband's adultery. Her repeated rehearsal of Renny's claim that, at the time of Eden's affair, she had been "far more provocative toward [him] . . . than Clara Lebraux has ever been" (43) reinforces her initial negative identification with Clara as a surrogate who has lain with Renny in her stead. Later, when thinking about her unborn child, she imaginatively identifies with Minny Ware, the woman with whom Eden runs away, "pictur[ing] herself as dying" delivering a daughter who, like Minny's, would arrive at Jalna motherless (212).

Culminating in her metaphoric self-annihilation, these peculiar sympathies for her husbands' extramarital lovers trigger in Alayne an identity crisis that suggests how fully Renny's constant pricking of her conscience has confounded her moral principles and undone her sense of self. More generally, arising after her divorce and remarriage, they suggest a subconscious anxiety in Alayne regarding the legitimacy of her second marriage — a suspicion, perhaps, that her position in relation to Renny is not so unlike that of Clara Lebraux or that of Minny with Eden. By inscribing the primacy of first marriages, such a suspicion on Alayne's part subtly reinforces the preference for reconciliation first suggested in the series through Piers and Pheasant's relationship.

Implied preference for reconciliation aside, in the instance of Alayne and Renny, the *Whiteoak Chronicles* is highly attuned to power dynamics that might complicate attempts at reconciliation. Thus, in addition to confounding her sense of self, Renny's continual chastising of Alayne for her past conduct inspires in his wife an excessive sense of guilt — both for driving Eden away by her attentions to Renny and for driving Renny away by her refusal to relinquish control of her modest savings. Ultimately, her contrition makes Alayne and Renny's reconciliation possible, but theirs is a reunion notably different from that of Piers and Pheasant. Whereas the latter results in an egalitarian balance of power and division of labour, the former marks a return to a dynamic of male dominance. Renny still wields undue power and influence over his wife, likely because his reunion with Alayne is based on her disproportionate sense of guilt regarding his affair. Insofar as Renny's avoidance of responsibility in this respect imitates his abdication of accountability for the circumstances involving their neo-adulterous relationship when Alayne was married to Eden, there is little reason to expect the second stage of the marriage to be any more ordered or mutually satisfactory than the first. This poor prognosis reinforces still further the *Whiteoak Chronicles's* preference for the post-adultery trajectory followed by Piers and Pheasant while raising the additional issue of male culpability.

In the larger context of the series as a whole, Renny's mistreatment of Alayne's sensitivity functions as an extreme manifestation of the pattern of exploitative masculinity de la Roche's men repeatedly demonstrate: Eden, in his treatment of Alayne and Minny; Renny, in his treatment of Clara and Alayne (and Lulu in *Young Renny*); Maurice, in his early treatment of Meg; Finch, in his treatment of Sarah Court; and to a lesser extent, de la Roche suggests, Piers, in his treatment of Pheasant (*Finch's Fortune* 142). In the *Whiteoak Chronicles*, such misuse of male power typically results in domestic discord and regularly involves some form of sexual betrayal or exploitation — one that usually and hypocritically juxtaposes male infidelity with (often paranoid) male jealousy. More broadly, in the social context in which de la Roche's series appeared, such misuse of power reflects and supports concerns of female moral reformers who, in the opening decades of the twentieth century, inculcated “males . . . as the main culprits in sexual disorder” and agitated for “a single standard of sexual morality” to protect the integrity of the institution of marriage in Canada (Valverde 30). Thus, de la Roche

would seem to expand on the critical commentary of adultery Stringer provides in *Prairie Stories*, stressing more rigorously than her male predecessor the particular culpability of men in domestic disorder in general, and adultery in particular.

In their treatments of such a morally contentious sexual problematic as adultery, these series by de la Roche and Stringer illustrate some of the representational strategies that were employed by both romance and realist writers as sexual desire assumed increased prominence in English-Canadian letters during the opening decades of the twentieth century. More remotely, their treatments of the subject gesture toward the sustained and explicit considerations that would later occur in such bona fide adultery novels as Ross's *As For Me and My House*. Generically, however, it is their points of divergence that render them most instructive as case studies of a particular moment in Canadian literary history. By presenting and interrogating the repercussions of a single instance of double adultery, de la Roche capitalizes on the possibilities afforded by the autographic series more fully than does Stringer, who, because of the two false starts that preface the instance of actual adultery that finally appears in *The Prairie Child*, is not able to consider the causes and consequences of such moral disorder at as great a length or in as much depth.

Whether contemporary readers noted the difference in rigour or valued *Whiteoak Chronicles* more favourably than *Prairie Stories* as a result is difficult to determine with certainty. Evidence suggests that, at the very least, de la Roche's works disillusioned readers about the social and legal realities of their day in ways that Stringer's did not, in some instances even inspiring fans to lobby for legislative changes.<sup>19</sup> What is more, while both authors fell out of favour with audiences, and especially with critics, as the century unfolded, de la Roche has enjoyed a longevity denied to Stringer: scholars treating her work outnumber those addressing his at a ratio of roughly three to one,<sup>20</sup> and the book sales of the Whiteoak saga exceeded 12 million copies by the time they fell out of print in the 1970s. Indeed, with XYZ Publishing releasing new editions of several Jalna books in recent years, the legacy of *Whiteoak Chronicles* not only endures, it seems poised to extend well into the twenty-first century.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Prairie Stories* is meant to connote the three prairie family romances that Stringer published from 1915 to 1922, which were subsequently collected and published as a one-volume trilogy. Although the following discussion often refers to the trilogy as a whole, citations will come from the individual books: *The Prairie Wife* (1915), *The Prairie Mother* (1920), and *The Prairie Child* (1922). By *Whiteoak Chronicles*, I mean the first six books of the Jalna series (*Jalna*, *Whiteoaks of Jalna*, *Finch's Fortune*, *The Master of Jalna*, *Young Renny*, and *Whiteoak Harvest*), which were collected and published as one volume, entitled *Whiteoak Chronicles*, in 1940. Again, citations will reference the specific books from which they are drawn.

I should mention at this point that critics and publishers vary in how they discuss the Whiteoak saga, with some using the narrative chronology and with others using the order in which the texts were actually published. I follow the latter practice, which means I treat *Jalna* as the first volume in the series even though, for example, *Young Renny* predates it in narrative time.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Givner and Ruth Panofsky both argue that the decision to add the fourth and subsequent volumes in the Whiteoak saga was de la Roche's own and, in fact, contradicted the inclinations of her publishers; see, respectively, page 73 of "Letters to the Editor" and page 177 of "Don't Let Me Do It!"

<sup>3</sup> See the review of *The Prairie Wife* in the *Nation*; see the reviews of *Jalna* in the *New Republic*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Saturday Night*, and *Saturday Review of Literature*. Even more so than *The Prairie Wife*, critics commended *The Prairie Child* for what the *Literary Review* called "its vivid and realistic pictures" (740). Likewise, critics were willing to see subsequent instalments of the Whiteoak saga as continuing in *Jalna's* "realist" vein, with the *Canadian Forum's* Jocelyn Moore describing de la Roche, in 1932, as "a realist . . . like Callaghan and Grove" (380). That these works could be mistaken as realist texts underscores the extent to which the boundary between romance and realism was still in flux in the 1910s and 1920s; it further suggests, I would argue, that the distinctions between the two modes are of degree rather than kind.

<sup>4</sup> The two American firms were The Bobbs-Merrill Company and New York's A.L. Burt. While London's Hodder & Stoughton did not immediately publish their own edition of *The Prairie Wife* for English audiences, they did publish the second book, *The Prairie Mother*, the same year as the North American editions were released. Moreover, following the success of that second novel, they issued their own octavo edition of *The Prairie Wife* in 1921.

<sup>5</sup> Whereas I interpret the narrative's ellipses regarding sexuality as a literary strategy that allows de la Roche to suggest what she cannot assert, Faye Hammill, focusing largely on the affair of Renny and Alayne, interprets those silences to mean that the affairs are only "potentially" adulterous, "remain[ing] unconsummated until they can be legalized through divorce and remarriage" (84).

<sup>6</sup> While latent from the first book onward, Alayne's culpability in Eden's affair becomes more apparent as the series unfolds, particularly in *Whiteoaks of Jalna* and *Whiteoak Harvest*.

By the time of the latter volume, Alayne herself seems to have forgotten that Eden had pulled away first, willingly accepting the blame the rest of the family — and Renny especially — places on her shoulders.

<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, de la Roche returns to and refines this technique in *Whiteoak Harvest*, where she uses it to convey similar distress in Alayne in the aftermath of Renny's affair with Clara Lebraux.

<sup>8</sup> See Kozakewich et al.'s "Editing Jane" for a synopsis of use of the dash in the late eighteenth century.

<sup>9</sup> In some editions of the novel, the distinction I am here noting appears typographically as a difference between short (internal) and long (final) dashes.

<sup>10</sup> On her return to the family, Pheasant is, ironically, accepted more fully than she had been on her first arrival, as witnessed by the grandmother's acceptance of her kiss, in the closing lines of *Jalna*, as "good" and generative of a new vitality (347).

<sup>11</sup> Of the two books that do not touch on Eden and Pheasant's affair, one is set abroad, focusing on Finch's sojourn in England (*Finch's Fortunes*), and the other, *Young Renny*, precedes the affair in narrative time.

<sup>12</sup> Her waiting maid tells Chaddie that Lady Allie had no choice in her relocation to Canada: "she'd 'a' been co-respondent in the Allerby and Crewe-Buller divorce case if she'd stayed where the law could have laid a hand on her" (*Prairie Mother* 214-15).

<sup>13</sup> In a contemporary review, the *Springfield Republican* focused on the "distasteful" triangle that emerges around the mother-son relation, claiming the "conventional" triangle that the romance depicts is, in comparison, "negligible" (7).

<sup>14</sup> Colin Hill argues that Ross's indebtedness to Stringer is far more direct than the trend of narrative development that I am tracing here, citing a number of correspondences between *As for Me and My House* and *Prairie Stories* as proof of Stringer's specific influence on Ross's work.

<sup>15</sup> See Daniel M. Wegner's influential study *White Bears and Other Unwanted Thoughts* for a particularly succinct and readable psychological account of obsessive thought patterns.

<sup>16</sup> In *Whiteoak Harvest*, for example, Pheasant is quick to recognize the nature of Renny's relationship with Clara Lebraux, yet she refuses to be troubled by her knowledge. The threat that her brother-in-law's wandering could pose to the familial stability serves largely to refocus Pheasant on Piers and to renew, yet again, her admiration of and devotion to him.

<sup>17</sup> Joan Givner, for example, interprets the *Jalna* novels as proof that de la Roche "had very little understanding of heterosexual relationships or of sexual habits between married couples" (*Mazo de la Roche* 88).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Poppet Smith's "Are Broken Marriages Cost Paid for Peace-at-Any-Price Policy?" which stresses the importance of forgiveness and compromise in successful marriages, and Ann Foster's "'Other' Man or Woman is Not Always the Cause of Divorce," which sees the trebling of the Canadian divorce rate between 1935 and 1945 as more disturbing than any individual instance of infidelity brought about by, in this case, marital estrangement resulting from war.

<sup>19</sup> Givner reports that the *Jalna* novels strongly influenced the moral and ethical stance of readers, with fans responding to the peculiar (and legally suspect) relationships of various characters not with disapprobation, as de la Roche's publishers feared, but rather with letters "protesting the laws and suggesting that they be changed" (3).

<sup>20</sup> Scholarship on de la Roche includes Ronald Hambleton's *Mazo de la Roche of Jalna* (1966); Dorothy Livesay's "Getting It Straight" (1973); Douglas Daymond's "Whiteoak Chronicles" (1975); Dennis Duffy's "Mazo de la Roche" (1982); Sherry Klein's "The Damnable Plot" (1988); Joan Givner's *Mazo de la Roche* (1989); Daniel Bratton's "The

Wildman in the Whiteoaks" (1996); Ruth Panofsky's "'Don't Let Me Do It'" (1995) and "At Odds" (2000); Faye Hammill's "The Sensations of the 1920s" (2003); and Lorraine York's *Literary Celebrity in Canada* (2007). In contrast, apart from Victor Lauriston, whose 1941 study is more platitude than criticism, Colin Hill and Clarence Karr stand virtually alone in writing about Stringer's *Prairie Stories*.

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