

The Mystery of Edwin Drood in Contexts

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The range of material in Wendy S. Jacobson's *The Companion to The Mystery of Edwin Drood*¹ helps establish the many contexts within which this book, any book, can be read. It does not, of course, fully set the terms of such contextual reading, the vexed issues of the "new" historicism,² but it does provide much of the raw material, many of the starting points. The series editors' general preface gives the expected scope of "factual rather than critical" annotation: contemporary and topographical actuality; literary allusions, sources, and influences; biographical origins and resemblances; illustrations; significant variant readings. For Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* these take such obvious forms as: Victorian orientalism; the actual Rochester; echoes of Shakespeare (especially *Macbeth*), the Bible, and both serious and popular 19th-century literature; Dickens's mistress Ellen Lawless Ternan; the significance of the cover design for the roles of various characters in the unfinished story's outcome; the relation of the monthly plans, conveniently provided, to the monthly parts; and so on. Rereading *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* with the *Companion* at hand, one would be hard put to find many factual questions left unanswered; the compiler has, however, let herself move on to critical annotation just often enough to make us wish for much more critical commentary, especially on such occasions as the "correction," factually defensible but critically doubtful, of the opening lines from "Cathedral tower" to "Cathedral town."³

The note on Lieutenant Tartar's name shows the *Companion's* overall strengths: "'Tar' is the slang term for a sailor. 'Tartar' is both an old cant name for a strolling vagabond and the term applied to a military valet (Tartar was the school fag of Crisparkle). 'To catch a Tartar' means to tackle one who unexpectedly proves too formidable: perhaps this is what Tartar was intended to be for Jasper. Dickens might also have had in mind the Tartar frigate illustrated on the crockery belonging to Captain Cuttle in *DS 4* (the passage is quoted in the notes to chapter 22, p. 167," (149). The note nods only in not associating "Tartar" with Genghis Khan and the many manifestations elsewhere in the notes of the novel's pervasive orientalism.

¹ Wendy S. Jacobson, *The Companion to The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. (London: Allan & Unwin, 1986); 209 pp.

² David Simpson, "Literary Criticism and the Return to 'History,'" *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Summer 1988): 721-47.

³ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972) 1.

One problem: without considerable help from Cardwell's edition the *Companion* is confused or at best, confusing, on certain passages Dickens deleted from the proofs of the original Number V. The *Companion* comments on three of these "deletions" but does not say that they were restored, probably by Forster, before first publication and retained in later editions, and it even identifies one as "restored by Cardwell (1972)" (153). Moreover, it describes Forster as "reinstating deleted passages from the previous chapter to make up a short new chapter" (163), a statement which, if taken literally by an unwary common reader of the novel and the *Companion*, would of course be nonsense. The re-expanded chapter was actually divided into chapter 20 of Number V and chapter 21 of Number VI, as shown succinctly and precisely by Cardwell's edition (xxix, xxxv, 147), and as Jacobson may have intended, but failed, to indi-

The select bibliography could be even more helpful. Perhaps as a result of the general policy of the series, it is not so much a bibliography to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* as one to this *Companion*, apparently listing all, but only, the material behind the *Companion's* annotations. Thus it includes items incidental to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and omits others that would help our full understanding and appreciation. Granting the need for some selection among Droodiana, it could be done more logically.

One of the many contexts of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* identified in Jacobson's introduction, running through the notes, and collected in the excellent index is the work of Wilkie Collins, especially *The Moonstone*. Jerome Meckier's *Hidden Rivalries*⁴ explores the dynamics of this and other such literary contexts for selected Victorian novelists, above all Dickens. As representative "rivalries" Meckier considers Dickens-Eliot (*Bleak House*, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch*), Dickens-Trollope (*The Warden*), Dickens-Gaskell (*Hard Times*, *North and South*), and above all, Dickens-Collins (*Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Woman in White*, *Great Expectations*, *The Moonstone*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*). Comparing and contrasting the authors in their works, he discovers hidden rivalries based, for the most part, on the evidence of his broad, comparative readings of the plots, characters, and concerns of the works themselves, evidence often suggestive of some relationship between these works, some context they share. Such rivalries are reinforced, when possible, by direct authorial statement and the facts of publication history. Not only are they interesting in their own right, but "whenever one locates a hidden rivalry—revisions of another novelist's themes, characters, or situations—a recurring Victorian anxiety is certain to emerge" (215-16), common concerns surveyed in Meckier's concluding chapter.

How well does all this work, for example, for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, put in the context mainly of the Dickens-Collins rivalry, with side looks to Victorian rivals and forward to Stevenson and Conrad? More specifically, "*The Moonstone* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* demand double vision from the modern revaluator because Dickens and Collins tended to discuss their rivalry figuratively in these novels while also pursuing supremacy through ingenious modifications of each other's key themes and characters" (196). Long associ-

⁴ Jerome Meckier, *Hidden Rivalries* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987); 310 pp.

ated with Collins (and with his brother, Charles, Dickens's son-in-law, who drew the monthly cover before giving way as illustrator to Luke Fildes), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is especially open to Meckier's thesis and illustrates its strengths and weaknesses. As hypocrite, double, gentleman-monster, secret sharer, Dickens's John Jasper is compared very fully with figures from Mary Shelley's "scientist" and monster to Stevenson's and Stoker's, from Collins's many "villains" to Eliot's tragic Bulstrode. Proposed completions of the novel are tested against the demands of hidden rivalry, especially the "review" and reconstruction of the murder at the end. Dickens's orientalism is compared, obviously, with that of Collins's *The Moonstone*. Jasper is also considered as "Dickens's means of discrediting characterizations of the ideal man that were offered for public approval by his rivals among less sensational realists" (187), just as Cloisterham contrasts with the ecclesiastical communities of Trollope and Eliot. And *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* shows how, in the context of their contemporaries, "Dickens and Collins could not help conspiring as they competed" (198), in their "response to the supposedly more psychological realists among their mutual rivals" (199).

And yet, for all my admiration for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*--or perhaps because of it--and even granting the thoroughness of Meckier's arguments and their many insights, I find these rivalries, and their results, less persuasive, less interesting, more distracting even, than Meckier obviously feels I should. Not content to adopt another way to take Victorian novels, another context, he also argues almost obsessively a way Victorian novelists came to make such novels. Although denying--with Meckier--the death of the author, I nevertheless find his approach too bluntly intentionalist: a rhetorical convenience run awkwardly wild. For Meckier every manifestation in a work has its obvious motive in the maker, a motive assumed, asserted, and reasserted as its own evidence, as in the following typical passage: "George Eliot decided it was necessary to articulate again her earlier objections to Dickens's realism while inventing Bulstrode to revise Jasper, thereby removing this recently installed obstacle to her evolutionary philosophy of social change. She discovered that she could graft her rejoinder onto a reworking of prior parody . . . *Middlemarch* reiterates George Eliot's own point of view in the course of a reprise of the parody of *Bleak House* in *Felix Holt*. For the modern reevaluator of hidden rivalries between Victorian novels, this constitutes a double dose or double vision" (201-02). But whether we can, or should, think of mid-Victorian fiction so authorially, so agonistically, or let ourselves write about it so awkwardly, remains for me a problem throughout *Hidden Rivalries*.