

Mortimer Lightwood; or, Seriality, Counterfactuals, Co-Production, and Queer Fantasy

Holly Furneaux

‘Lighthouse Keepers: A poem in two tweets’

We’ll eat chops and tomato sauce, or shrimps with heads, unpeeled
And watch others wrecked as they put off for us.
The voice of society drowned in a greenwood of glancing waves.
Tending the light and you, a monotony of two.

Mortimer Lightwood (@OMF_Mortimer), 3 August 2014.

On Twitter anything is possible. That’s how I felt as a new tweeter using a two-part serial of a maximum of 140 characters to publish my first poem, a paean to the love of Mortimer Lightwood for the ‘friend he has founded himself on’, Eugene Wrayburn.

Birkbeck’s Twitter project to accompany the serial reading of *Our Mutual Friend* month by month takes its place in a long and thriving tradition of readers imagining characters as independent of the pages in which they first appeared. Although this is the kind of fantasy we steer ourselves and students away from in literature classes, Dickens would likely have enjoyed it. He reanimated his characters for his own purposes, most notably in the repeated living-out of Sikes’s murder of Nancy in the animated public readings that shortened his life, and in the resurrection of Pickwick and the Wellers to help sales of *Master Humphrey’s Clock*. Readers from Dickens’s time to our own, including Emily Dickinson and Katherine Mansfield, made creative use of Dickens’s figures, using them both playfully and to fulfil deep emotional needs. For me the opportunity to embody Mortimer Lightwood, my own favourite Dickens character, and a figure who has been central to me personally and professionally, was both a fun and a moving one. I was surprised, given the significance of this character in my own mental landscape, that he appears in a relatively small number of instalments and often as a fairly muted presence within the ‘Voice of Society’ Veneering/Tippins chapters, subjected to Lady Tippins’s grisly fantasies (brilliantly enacted by @OMF_Tippins) about his place within a line-up of her lovers. The project made me realize how vibrantly, for me, the briefly outlined bachelor chambers Mortimer fits out with Eugene — complete with a fully equipped, and never used, kitchen — their boating summers, and lighthouse fantasies have taken on a life of their own.

My embellishments of the Mortimer/Eugene scenes are also with the grain of Dickens's fiction, and serial fiction more broadly. As various scholars have noted, the gaps between instalments encourage the imaginative independence of characters as readers dwell upon the reported activities of their favourites and project possible plot-lines for them. This kind of fantasy work is especially encouraged by Dickens's fiction. As Andrew Miller has recently argued,¹ Dickens's work is deeply concerned with the optative and counterfactual, the conditional alternative possibilities of roads not travelled and choices not made, as so wonderfully articulated in *Great Expectations* (1860–61) by Pip:

That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But, it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it, and think how different its course would have been. Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.²

The Rokesmith/Harmon/Handford plot, which lives out the fantasy 'what if I had died, but could still observe the behaviour of those dear to me?' (hats off to John Rokesmith (@OMF_Rokesmith) for elegant navigation of this identity minefield), perhaps singles out *Our Mutual Friend* as the ur-text of the counterfactual.

In one of the in-person events to accompany the *OMF* online experience, a group of serial readers got together in January 2015, at about the halfway point. We noted how the January 1865 instalment, the ninth part, weaves a web of featured characters' fantasies. In this instalment Dickens finally reveals the Rokesmith/Harmon connection. Having decided that John Harmon should remain dead, the character once known by this name makes his feelings for Bella clear under the alias of John Rokesmith, secretary. A counterfactual intuiting of what Harmon would have done follows:

Ah! What a *different life* the late John Harmon's *if* it had been his happy privilege to take his place upon that ottoman, and draw his arm about that waist, and say, 'I hope the time has been long without me? What a Home Goddess you look, my darling!'³

¹ Andrew H. Miller, "A Case of Metaphysics": Counterfactuals, Realism, *Great Expectations*, *ELH*, 79 (2012), 773–96.

² Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Charlotte Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 72.

³ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 368, emphasis added.

Though Harmon is given the opportunity and resources to live his fantasy life more fully than others, Dickens devotes his narrative energy to imagining alternative existences for many of the characters in this instalment. Jenny encourages Lizzie to use her old skills of seeing alternative lives in the fire to imagine being a lady, a socially plausible match for Eugene, ‘only as a fancy, and for instance’ (*Our Mutual Friend*, p. 343), while Pleasant Riderhood looks at the sky above the ‘reeking street’, and

may have had some vaporous visions of far-off islands in the southern seas or elsewhere (not being geographically particular), where it would be good to roam with a congenial partner among groves of bread-fruit, waiting for ships to be wafted from the hollow ports of civilization. For, sailors to be got the better of, were essential to Miss Pleasant’s Eden. (p. 346)

This particular vision of exotic wealth, and agency over men and their money, clearly recalls Bella’s November instalment imagining of ‘all sorts of voyages for herself and Pa’, picturing herself married to a ‘merchant of immense wealth’ (p. 315). There are clearly gendered arguments to be made about the way in which a male character lives out his own fantasy life and death while the women figures are left dreaming, and all these examples show the ways in which the counterfactual exposes and denaturalizes the assumed life structures of social background and marriage. Both these aspects are discussed by Miller in relation to *Great Expectations*. To extend Miller’s argument, counterfactual possibilities are intensified by the serial form, as readers play out alternative plot trajectories for characters in vibrant ways often not fully superseded by the resumption of the Dickens-authored plot. This process became particularly clear in *OMF* by Twitter as animals and objects took on lives of their own, and Mortimer and Eugene enjoyed a more thorough bromance than that written by Dickens.

In a talk at Birkbeck prior to his article, Miller also gestured towards the queer possibilities of the counterfactual.⁴ He began the talk with George Stanley’s poem ‘Veracruz’, in which the speaker imagines himself in an alternative family:

I wished my father had come back to San Francisco
armed with Brazilian magic, & that he had married
not my mother, but her brother, whom he truly loved.⁵

⁴ Andrew H. Miller, Birkbeck Forum for Nineteenth-Century Studies, 26 January 2012 <<http://www.cncs.bbk.ac.uk/thursday-26-january-2012-a-case-of-metaphysics-counterfactuals-realism-great-expectations/>> [accessed 1 October 2015].

⁵ George Stanley, ‘Veracruz’ <https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/awards/frost_and_shelley/shelley_winners/2006/> [accessed 3 October 2015].

Dickens's fiction, with its many forms of family, encourages this kind of connection. For readers interested in narratives that depart from and go beyond the traditional emphasis on marriages, births, and deaths attributed to the realist novel, the memorable same-sex intimacies of Dickens's work combine with long creative pauses between instalments to provide rich material for queer counter-fiction. Indeed, the wealth of material that Dickens delivers for those interested in the heterotopias of queer boats, boathouses, and lighthouses, suggests that Dickens and his queer readers are co-producers of fantasies that exceed the bounds of the Victorian novel. In appearing as Mortimer I have been in good company, joining a creatively generous community of fellow tweeters, early queer collectors and adaptors of Dickens, and a thriving fan-fiction community who persistently imagine same-sex and multiple hook-ups of a kind intended to 'make Charles Dickens turn over in his grave'. Roll over with pleasure, perhaps.