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Who is Dick Datchery? A discussion of the primary enigmas in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

Johanne Kristiansen¹

Note: in order to follow the logic in this essay, it would be helpful to read a short plot synopsis of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

When Charles Dickens died in 1870, he left his last novel *The Mysteries of Edwin Drood* unfinished. Because the novel was never concluded, a large field of study has emerged, where so called “Droodians” debate how Dickens intended to end his novel. These debates center on three main enigmas, which need to be answered in order to establish how the plot will develop. In this essay, I will discuss these enigmas. I will begin with a short account of what an enigma is, based on the theories of the French critic Roland Barthes, and further suggest why the enigma is of particular importance in this novel. Following this short account, I will proceed with a discussion of the three fundamental enigmas we find in the novel, namely whether Edwin is actually murdered, and by whom, as well as establishing the identities of Dick Datchery and the opium woman, and their function in the plot. The first enigma has received most attention in the early period of speculations, but has eventually become the least obscure mystery of the three. Therefore, I will not devote much time to the discussion of this enigma. The weight of my discussion will be on the second enigma, on the identity of Datchery, and will primarily be based on the theories of Richard M. Baker. The third enigma, concerning the opium woman, will be dealt with in a further discussion of a possible resolution of the enigmas. This discussion will be based on the establishment of Datchery's identity,

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and his role in the plot. After identifying the three main enigmas, I will give my own account of how Dickens might have intended to solve them, based on trends in his earlier works. My argument is that the person behind “Dick Datchery” is the hero of the story. He steps forth as “the man of justice”, a typical Dickensian trait, intent on resolving the mystery, and bringing the case to a close.

The idea of the enigma was developed in a work by Roland Barthes entitled *S/Z*, and elaborated in later works. Barthes links the enigma to two codes belonging to the category of plot, that are the driving forces that create suspense in a story. The codes are the proairetic and hermeneutic codes. These two operate in different ways to create suspense. Whereas the proairetic code is concerned with asking what happens next in a chain of events, the hermeneutic code asks how the different clues are linked together to form solutions (Purdue University). In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, both of these codes are particularly important. Because Dickens died before the completion of the novel, the reader is never given an answer to what happens next, and this strengthens our focus on the hermeneutic code: trying to link together different clues, to find a solution to the enigmas. The years immediately following Dickens' death in 1870 did not spark many speculations on how the novel would end. It seemed quite obvious that Edwin is killed by his jealous uncle Jasper, who then tries to blame the murder on Neville Landless.¹ There was simply no “mystery” to be detected that could incite speculations on a large scale. Later, however, new suggestions were proposed: could Edwin be alive? Had he gone to Egypt without telling anyone? Did he survive his uncle's vicious attack? These questions disrupted the given fact of Edwin's supposed murder somewhat, but the general tendency has still been to consider the first enigma of the novel as quite straightforward: Edwin is killed by Jasper. Instead, focus has been directed towards the second enigma, and the question: who is Dick Datchery?

There are many theories on the identity of the white-haired stranger who comes to lodge across the street from Jasper. In the following, I will base this discussion on the theories of Richard M. Baker, because his article on Dick Datchery sums up some dominant theories on this question, as well as providing a strong argument for who Datchery really is. What most theories seem to agree on is the fact that Datchery is not who he claims to be. The emphasis on his big white hair, contrasting starkly with his black eyebrows, and the way he tosses it around and forgets to wear a hat, definitely suggest that he is wearing a wig. However, beyond this agreement the theories are manifold. One suggestion ties in with the first enigma. It has been claimed that Edwin himself has come out of hiding to spy on his uncle (Baker 205). Baker dismisses this theory by stating that

Jasper, with his fine ear for the intricacies of sounds², certainly would recognize Edwin's voice. Furthermore, Baker argues that Edwin has shown himself to be an honorable and trustworthy young man, and that he consequently would not let his friends suffer in vain over his supposed death. Additionally, he would have fulfilled his promise to return a special ring to Grewgious³ (Baker 207). All in all, Baker provides convincing arguments to prove that Edwin is not Datchery.

Another theory is that Datchery is an entirely new character, introduced late into the plot. Baker disregards this theory by claiming that Dickens did not usually introduce a character at such a late stage in the plot. There are other theories about Datchery's identity in Baker's article, suggesting that Tartar or Neville could be the white-haired stranger, but Baker shows particular attention to one striking theory by J. Cumming Walters, who claims that Datchery is no one other than Helena Landless, Neville's beautiful sister (Baker 209). Walters suggests that she has both motive and opportunity to transform herself into Datchery. She would want to incriminate Jasper in order to clear her brother's name, and also save her friend Rosa from Jasper's aggressive courtship. Regarding opportunity, Walters points to the fact that she used to dress like a boy, and had even tried to chew off her hair in an endeavor to escape from a violent stepfather (Baker 211). She certainly has the fire and drive to pull off the the act of Datchery, and Walters also shows how her presence in Cloisterham (as Datchery) corresponds with her absence in London, and vice versa. Walters backs up his theory with a physical description of Helena, for instance her black eyebrows, long hair beneath the big wig, her feminine air corresponding to Datchery's tossing of hair and feminine curtsy to the Mayor, etc. What Walters seems to have neglected, however, is the improbability of Dickens positioning a woman as the main agent of resolving the mystery. Dickens had come a long way in his portrayal of women with his character Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*, but the leap from Bella to Helena as the hero of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* seems an improbable, though compelling, notion. Furthermore, Baker dismisses Helena as a candidate partly based on her lack of insight into the legal profession, which Datchery shows great control over. Over the course of his article, Baker arrives at the conclusion of Mr Grewgious as Datchery. Grewgious has the insight into the law that Helena lacks, and his legal proceedings resemble those of Datchery. One example is that in the course of the novel, both Datchery and Grewgious need to rent accommodation, and their approach is very similar. Furthermore, they both keep score, checking off from a list in a methodical way. Also, Grewgious has a motive: he wants to protect his ward Rosa, who he loves almost as a daughter, and to retrieve his beloved ring, which he had asked Edwin to give to Rosa. Grewgious is

characterized as a man of justice, and thus it is fair to assume that he would want the murder case to be resolved. He does not believe Neville to be guilty, but is instead suspicious of Jasper, because he had fainted in front of him when realizing that he had killed Edwin for no reason.⁴ Thus, as a man of justice, he cannot allow an innocent man to be hanged for a crime committed by another. Based on striking similarities between Datchery and Grewgious, Baker provides a valid suggestion to the solution of the second enigma.

In the following, I will give an account of how I anticipate the enigmas to be solved. Here, the third enigma of the opium woman will also be discussed. I base my assumptions on probability; on the expectation that Dickens to a large extent would have followed the pattern of his earlier works. Much research on *Drood* take as a given fact that the resolution of the enigmas must be based on earlier tendencies in his writing. As we have already seen, Baker's dismissal of Datchery as an entirely new character rests on this very assumption. However, it is important to keep in mind that it is not a given fact that the plot will develop according to earlier structures. We see an example of this in the "Boffin-twist" in *Our Mutual Friend*, where Dickens tricks his readers into believing that Boffin has become evil (Mundhenk 41-42). This twist was something new; Dickens did not usually trick his readers in such a way. In any case, whatever we may claim is only speculation, because we will never know how Dickens intended the plot to unravel. Nevertheless, in this essay I write from the assumption that Dickens had intended to follow old patterns of construction. Working from this assumption, it is important to look at earlier novels to find central themes and plot developments that are typical of Dickens. From these I have chosen to focus on Dickens' later tendency towards the structure of the mystery novel, and the positive focus on mature, often eccentric, characters with a highly developed sense of justice.

First of all, I think the plot will develop further into becoming a detective, or mystery, novel. Some critics have suggested that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is not a mystery novel, but rather a sort of psychological novel, on the lines of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. According to this view, the focus in the rest of the novel will be on Jasper and the study of the criminal mind, and not primarily on the solution of the murder case. However, taking into account the title of the novel and the dominant mystery element in novels like *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, it is highly probable that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in fact is a mystery novel. In fact, the second half of *Bleak House* is structured as a detective plot, where inspector Bucket tries to solve the mystery of Tulkinghorn's death. Arguably, the second half of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is also structured as a detective plot.

If I am correct in supposing the second half of the novel to develop as a detective plot, my further argument is that Datchery will solve the crime. As Baker, I propose that Hiram Grewgious is behind the mysterious Dick Datchery, and as such he is also the hero of Dickens' last novel. His status as hero is based on the fact that he is the driving engine, the active agent, who makes sure that the wicked Jasper is convicted for his crimes, instead of the innocent Neville Landless. I have so far discussed two important enigmas, and come to the conclusion that Edwin is murdered by Jasper, that Grewgious is Datchery, and that he will solve the mystery. What I have not suggested is *how* he will solve the case, which could be said to be a conditional enigma, based on the supposition that I have come to the right conclusion regarding the first two enigmas. This fourth enigma ties in with the third enigma, which I have not yet discussed, namely the role of the opium woman.⁵ She has attracted attention from critics, who wonder what role she has to play in the continuation of the plot. My argument is that she functions as a key witness to Jasper's crime, and that she will provide an important clue to Datchery in solving the mystery. In the end of the first half of the novel Datchery comes into contact with her, and shows her much attention. It is probable that she will relate to him the fact that Jasper has threatened to kill someone called "Ned". Datchery, being Grewgious, will know that "Ned" is Jasper's nickname for Edwin. Thus, the third enigma is solved: the opium woman is a witness who will provide information for Datchery, in the central fourth enigma: how Datchery will solve the murder case.

Another witness who is important in this case is Deputy, a young boy who lurks around the Cloisterham cathedral. Datchery incidentally comes into contact with him, and it is probable that Deputy will lead him to Durdles, an alcoholic who knows everything there is to know about the cathedral and its crypt. To understand the importance of Datchery talking to Durdles, I will give a short account of an important scene in the novel. One night, Jasper asks Durdles to give him a tour of the cathedral. He is especially interested in the crypt. However, on their way to the crypt, Durdles points out a pit of quicklime. This is only commented briefly on, and not much elaborated upon. However, it is of crucial importance. In the Victorian period it was a common thought that quicklime would dissolve all other materials than metal. In other words, it is highly probable that Jasper has dumped Edwin's body in the limepit after the murder, and expected all traces of him to disappear. After Edwin's disappearance, his watch and metal pin are found in the river. Jasper must have known that metal would not be dissolved by the quicklime, and did not want any clues to trace Edwin to the limepit. However, he has overlooked one crucial thing: Edwin was still carrying the

ring he had received from Grewgious, when he was murdered. In the light of all this, the solution to the mystery emerges. When Datchery makes contact with Durdles, he will be told about the night when Durdles showed Jasper the limepit. His suspicions towards Jasper will increase, and when investigating the pit he will find the ring. Because Datchery is in reality Hiram Grewgious, he will of course recognize the ring, and know that Edwin was carrying it on the night of his murder. This will ultimately tie Jasper to the murder of Edwin Drood.

After now having established the fact that the novel is a mystery novel, and speculated on how Datchery will solve the crime, I will argue why I think Grewgious is the one who will solve the mystery. Grewgious' characteristics – his shambling walk, angular form et cetera – have been held against him as proof that he cannot be the man behind Datchery, who seems to be in full control of himself. If he is not Datchery, then he is not the hero either. Datchery is the hero, because he is the one who will bring justice to Neville, and punishment to Jasper. However, based on Baker's strong arguments, I argue that Grewgious is indeed Datchery, and he is also the unconditional hero of the novel. His eccentricity, which was put forward as a reason why he is *not* the hero, only strengthens the claim that he is Datchery and, by extension, the hero of the story. I base this on a dominating theme in Dickens' authorship, namely the favoring of older and eccentric heroes, exemplified by John Jarndyce in *Bleak House*. Dickens has a tendency to promote mature characters of high moral values and an outstanding sense of justice. We find this in characters such as Betsey Trotwood and Mr Brownlowe, who both could be said to be the heroes of *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, respectively. What makes Jarndyce stand out in this respect is that he, in addition to being of high moral character, is quite eccentric. He talks about the “East wind” when he is distressed, and throws a piece of cake out of the window when we first meet him. He is nonetheless the clear hero of the novel, showing morals, self-sacrifice, and operating like a measure of right conduct to guide those around him. The fact that he is eccentric only seems to increase his charms, and when he really needs to be steadfast he steps up to the plate. Arguably, this can be said of Grewgious as well. Portrayed outwardly as eccentric, this only adds to his charms of being an honorable man seeking justice, and wishing to protect a girl he holds dear. Grewgious and Jarndyce share many characteristics, and it seems that Dickens favored such characters. This points strongly to a conclusion that Hiram Grewgious is Dick Datchery, and that he is the hero of the story, by solving the mystery and securing justice.

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