

AMBIVALENT HIERARCHIES OF INTIMACY IN BLEAK HOUSE

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My lady's maid is a Frenchwoman of two-and-thirty, from somewhere in the southern country about Avignon and Marseilles- a large-eyed brown woman with black hair; who would be handsome, but for a certain feline mouth, and general uncomfortable tightness of face, rendering the jaws too eager, and the skull too prominent. There is something indefinably keen and wan about her anatomy; and she has a watchful way of looking out of the corners of her eyes without turning her head, which could be pleasantly dispensed with- especially when she is in an ill humour and near knives. Through all the good taste of her dress and little adornments, these objections so express themselves, that she seems to go about like a very neat She-Wolf imperfectly tamed. Besides being accomplished in the language- consequently, she is in no want of words to shower upon Rosa for having attracted my Lady's attention; and she pours them out with such grim ridicule as she sits at dinner, that her companion, the affectionate man, is rather relieved when she arrives at the spoon stage of that performance. (Dickens, Bleak House 209)

Dickens' third-person narrator in Bleak House identifies Lady Dedlock's French maid Hortense as a prospective villainess, through the utilisation of a register that renders Hortense grotesque, and repellent in both her appearance and manner. However the narrator also finds the exact origin of Hortense's strange appearance difficult to place accurately, referring to Hortense's "indefinable" anatomy, as well as qualifying the description throughout. It is difficult to understand the exact nature of Hortense because Dickens' characters recreate the difficulty and indecision with which we apprehend people more than they do the actual contours of people themselves (Rosenberg 147). This portrait places Hortense outside any conventional aesthetic of beauty, suggesting that any attractiveness she might have enjoyed may have been subsumed by her secret, terrible life. This emphasis upon something "indefinable" rendering a character repellent is of course manipulated more extensively in Robert Louis Stevenson's depiction of Hyde in his novel Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, where Hyde "gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point" (15). Although only tangential to my argument here, as Stevenson's text comes some thirty years later than Bleak House, this reference underlines both writers' concerns with ambiguity as a means of characterisation and their preoccupation with the concept of the "double" in their writing.

If Hortense is aesthetically defiant and, thus, morally suspect in this initial description of her appearance, then her near deformity underlines her position as murderess-in-waiting, and suggests that her subsequent criminality can be detected by the discerning observer. The narrator's unease before her thus originates in the indelible stain of murder that afflicts her physical presence, despite her apparent poise and self-assurance. Indeed her self-possession must condemn her further, for as the lawyer Pedgitt remarks of female criminals in Wilkie Collins' Armadale, "Whatever other difference there might be among them, I got, in time, to notice, among them that were particularly wicked and unquestionably guilty, one point in which they all

resembled each other. Tall and short, old and young, handsome and ugly, they all had a secret self-possession that nothing could shake” (368). If Hortense’s sardonic exterior barely masks her criminal intent, then Collins’ own investigation of female villainy in the delicious shape of Lydia Gwilt in *Armada* marks a more developed interest into the psychology of the female criminal. For whilst Hortense is seen only from the outside, Collins is more ambitious in the later text. For Gwilt has her own diary, writes letters that are part of the main narrative and has a flawlessly beautiful appearance. Unsurprisingly she dominates much of the novel: “[Gwilt] spoke with a merciless tyranny of eye and voice....Mr Bashwood obeyed her in tones that quavered with agitation, and with eyes that devoured her beauty in a strange fascination of terror and delight” (378). Lydia Gwilt controls her audience through her voice as much as through her devastatingly attractive appearance, and if “all abusers of language are villains” (Bottum 443) then both Lydia Gwilt and Hortense must use language villainously, as they have the ability to silence their listeners through their heavily suggestive vocabulary that twists reality and tramples upon propriety. Their position as social outlaws renders their “script” all the more telling and undermining, as Hortense’s final words to Inspector Bucket concerning Sir Leicester Dedlock and his fallen wife reveal: “Listen then my angel....You are very spiritual. But can you restore him back to life?.. Can you make an honourable lady of her?” (*Bleak House* 799). Bucket can only quietly reprimand Hortense for her truth-saying, with the evasive “Don’t be so malicious,” recognising the limits of his power as the agent of social order. Hortense’s careless admission, “It is but the death, it is all the same” (799), reinforces her arrogant dignity in the face of her inevitable fate, as well as highlighting the ensuing demise of Lady Dedlock herself. Hortense’s idiosyncratic foreign voice renders her therefore both astute social commentator and villainess simultaneously. Hortense challenges Bucket to a verbal duel, and he ironically admits their deadlock, for her cannot fully restore, he can only contain (Auden 154).

This early representation of Hortense clearly anticipates the murderous role that she will play later in the novel when the Frenchwoman kills Lady Dedlock’s lawyer Tulkinghorn and tries to incriminate Lady Dedlock for his murder. Significantly it seems that the exoticism and inner turbulence of Hortense, as so carefully delineated here by the narrator, make her subsequent criminality appear inevitable. Indeed there is something distinctly gothic and degenerate about her deathly appearance, which excites the apparently disinterested nature of the narrator’s near anatomical scrutiny of the future murderess. For all the signs of criminality visited upon her physiognomy, there is also the apparent inconsistency of her being compared to a “She-Wolf imperfectly tamed” (*Bleak House* 209). Here, Dickens’ narrator has moved conspicuously from the feline to the lupine, an apparent anomaly that is hardly untypical of Dickens yet one which arouses our curiosity as it is so obviously at odds with the detail that preceded it. For whilst a wolf might easily be associated with violence and hunger, the female of the species is also a creature of nurture, family and community, and Hortense is both a foreigner and childless. The carefully constructed description of Hortense has yielded up this most ambiguous sign. It is to the probable source of this ambiguity that I wish to turn, arguing that far from being a careless anomaly, this is in fact a revelatory hint as to Hortense’s *other* role and meaning in the novel, a hint that the third-person narrator has almost unintentionally let slip in the narrative. In this way the third-person narrator is as haunted by Hortense’s fate and meaning as Esther herself (Westburg 60).

For Hortense’s lack of maternal role could be paralleled to that of her “childless” employer, Lady Dedlock. However the novel reveals that this premise of

childlessness is mistaken and that Lady Dedlock has in fact an illegitimate daughter unbeknown to her. This daughter is Esther Summerson, the novel's first-person narrator. Furthermore, as the dangerous psychological proximity of Hortense to her employer is pivotal to the outcome of the narrative, such a displacement of maternity is remarkable. Indeed, their physical and psychical proximity is, at times, eerily that of the double: thus Hortense haunts Lady Dedlock's face daily in her looking glass, and even dresses as her employer in order to prove Tulkinghorn's suspicions about Lady Dedlock's connection to the dead law writer, Captain Hawdon. She also offers her services to Esther after Lady Dedlock has given her notice from her employ. Therefore this first extended glimpse of Hortense might reveal far more than just her own criminal destiny: it is also imprinted with the fate of Lady Dedlock herself.

If Lady Dedlock's hidden past is scripted upon Hortense's physiognomy, then this is because the latter is inconvertibly connected in the narrator's mind to that of Hortense. Language must therefore testify to this "stain." Esther continues this imprinting device within her own first-person narrative, where her version of Hortense is again noteworthy for its singularity and seeming ambiguity. This problematises Hortense's role in the text further and reveals significant, even provocative, aspects of Esther's personality. This reveals Esther to be rather more than a neutral narrator.

Before turning to chapter eighteen of Bleak House where Esther observes Hortense in a heated exchange with Lady Dedlock, it is helpful to recall John Carey's assertion that:

Bleak House consists of two novels, neither of which Dickens could write. One novel is about illicit love- the guilty secret and murky past of Lady Dedlock. Dickens could not write this novel because the proprieties of his day would not allow him to. Extramarital sex, and sexual sin, were subjects which the Victorian middle-class reading public would only tolerate if they were treated with a high degree of inexplicitness. (174)

Carey's insight lends credence to the third-person narrator's representation of the villainess Hortense as detailed above; hence the "high degree of inexplicitness" in that representation of the French maid and her avoidance of any direct reference to sex. However Esther Summerson's version of Hortense in the later chapter further challenges our assumed knowledge of the Frenchwoman's function in the text, as it generates an ambiguity that cannot be contained merely by the latter's appended exoticism and subsequent criminality. Instead the revised version of Hortense raises questions about Esther's own attitude to sex, to her lost mother Lady Dedlock and indeed to the Frenchwoman as the complex representation of Dickens' text.

Chapter eighteen of Bleak House closes with a curious and brilliant image: Mademoiselle Hortense walking barefoot through the wet grass of Chesney Wold, after she has been publicly humiliated by her employer, Lady Dedlock.

We passed not far from the house, a few minutes afterwards. *Peaceful* as it had looked when we first saw it, it looked even more so now, with a diamond spray glittering all about it, a light wind blowing, the birds no longer hushed but singing strongly, everything *refreshed* by the late rain, and the little carriage shining in the doorway like a *fairy carriage* made of silver. Still, very steadfastly and quietly walking towards it, a *peaceful figure* too in the landscape, went Mademoiselle Hortense, shoeless, through the wet grass. (Bleak House 312; emphasis added)

Esther's narration surprises us almost as much as Hortense's distinctive reaction, for the tone and register of Esther's narrative convey an overriding sense of harmony and integration, which appears to be apparently at odds with the discordant events that have preceded Hortense's damp walk through the grass of Chesney Wold. The reader rather expects the events to be narrated in terms of the French maid's feelings of rejection and hostility reinforcing the third-person narrator's view of Hortense as a mere villainess-in-waiting. Furthermore, in view of Hortense's later murderous role in the novel, this peculiar narrative accent upon the serenity of the walk seems curiously at odds with her eventual criminality and textual function, so that this elected emphasis must reveal a particular and unexpected narrative on the part of Esther, an investment that is not immediately or obviously apparent. This is further problematised by the fact that Esther's retrospective narration in Bleak House endeavours to veil this actual retrospect and physical distance from the events in the main body of the text, through Esther's consistent attempts at chronological integrity. Indeed the moments when Esther breaks the frames of continuity are very clearly delineated and offer a certain ironic commentary upon the past. However, in this episode Esther does not offer any commentary outside of the representation of the events themselves; this raises questions about Esther's actual reading of Hortense's final significance within her first-person narrative.

It could be argued that the power and marked sensuality of Esther's representation of Hortense in this episode emanates primarily from Esther's first (and penultimate) meeting with her estranged mother, Lady Dedlock, an event relayed earlier in this chapter, but profoundly affecting Esther's narrative register and voice in the rest of the chapter. Also it secretes aspects of this encounter that can never be presented or admitted explicitly in the narrative, being symptomatic of the recurring predilection for displacement and emotional surrogacy in Bleak House. If Hortense is an "outlaw" in the novel, then perhaps this function is more intimately considered within Esther's own autobiographical narrative. Esther's translation of Hortense's strange act of retaliation must alert the reader to a version of Esther that has not been previously foregrounded- one which is rejuvenating as it emphasises the sensual and draws attention to a possible sexual geography in the text that we have failed to anticipate, let alone expected to confront within the constraints of Esther's self-consciously virtuous narrative. This peculiar episode indirectly accommodates Hortense as a member of the narrative community, in so far as Esther positions Hortense within her narrative as a member of the narrative community, rather than being a mere tool and villainess, therefore challenging any temptation on the reader's part to relegate Hortense to the level of mere functionality in terms of the detective plot.

Esther narrates her version of the events of Bleak House from a retrospect of seven years, a perspective that involves acts of narrative reconstruction and re-

evaluation, as well as being delivered through the manipulation of a past tense that affects both immediacy and ingenuousness. If this is so, the Esther's description of her encounter with Lady Dedlock must on some level reflect both her knowledge of her mother's true identity as well as her own emotional investment in this knowledge, whilst also obscuring this pivotal information in order to preserve the chronological integrity of the text. And if passion by its very nature can be seen as disruptive as it breaks with imposed decorum, then passion in the world of Bleak House seems emphatically destructive as it is rendered illicit, secretive and finally of course unlawful. It is this unlawful aspect of passion that dramatically unites Hortense and Lady Dedlock against the sterile stagnancy of the lawyer, Tulkinghorn, and adds conspicuous irony to the manner of his violent death, a bullet through his rusty, obsolete heart. Tulkinghorn's concern to police the text, and rid his elected domain of chaotic, feminine impulses, originates in his desire for absolute control and cognition. Thus he employs a register of unswerving insinuation and threat. Passion is to be silenced through his unstinting pursuit of the law. This denial of passion is thwarted on a narrative level by the surreptitious deployment of displacement and surrogacy by Esther, who obliquely aligns herself with her mother Lady Dedlock through the repeated trope of likeness and misrecognition: a device dependent for its effectiveness upon the enigmatic figure of Hortense herself. The criminalities of passion are movingly encoded within Esther's first-person narrative. Esther's first encounter with Lady Dedlock is problematic as she has to narrate this meeting as though unaware of its emotional significance, a silence that would suggest that any reflective aspect to this chapter must have found its mode of expression through a more covert device than an aside, a device that Esther deploys occasionally in her narrative in the rest of the text. The intimacy of her meeting with Lady Dedlock, whom she knew to be her estranged mother at the moment of writing, has been displaced elsewhere. This illegitimate investment in transference, with its provoking effects upon Esther's narrative, affiliates her secretly with her mother and by implication, as will be revealed, with the figure of Hortense.

The strange and strikingly memorable action of the French woman walking through the wet grass of Chesney Wold is tenderly informed by Esther's earlier encounter with her mother, Lady Dedlock. Initially it appears surprising that Esther is so fascinated by Hortense's shoeless walk, drenched as it is in a vocabulary that is evocative, lyrical and as such would appear at odds with Esther's ostensibly conventional and inhibited nature. Furthermore, if, as Allon White argues, Hortense's reaction to her rejection by Lady Dedlock is a "terrifying act of self-control" (104-5) and repression, then Esther's representation of this act of mortification seems curiously inappropriate, discrediting, therefore, the value of her ordinarily astute observations both prior to this episode and after. Furthermore, White's interpretation seems to overlook the distinctly erotic aspect to Hortense's walk, an aspect communicated by Esther through the latter's chosen focus upon such images as the abandoned shoes and the choice of the very wettest grass. Indeed it seems that Hortense's act of retaliation is less an act of mortification and more an act of sexual defiance and pleasure. Esther's narrative seems to recognise this through the telling choice of focus, and Esther's perspicacity is made apparent. For as Lady Dedlock favours a younger, prettier maid over Hortense, so Hortense seeks solace in very visibly transgressing the social mores and codes of a society in which she is an outsider- by virtue of her gender, nationality and even, perhaps, sexual inclination. This event is thus a critique of the French woman's relationship with her mistress and also, as will be shown, a meditation by Esther upon her feelings for her lost parent.

Esther is covertly identifying with Hortense because she is safe to do so, even in retrospect.

Hortense's act of defiance is very public in its display of passion. This underlines the direct congruence between Hortense's emotion and her display of this emotion, a display that significantly plays upon her foreignness as a cultural stereotype, renders her behaviour as seductive performance and gives dramatic public voice to that which Victorian propriety demands to be silent elsewhere in the text: namely the expression of passion. This passion of Hortense is reinforced by the small chorus of observers at Chesney Wold who pronounce their verdict on Hortense, that she is "mortal high and passionate" and that she might even fancy the grass to be blood. The singularity of Esther's account of Hortense, however, with its surprisingly serene register, privileges the fascination and difference of this significant other, allowing Hortense a dignity that supersedes any pejorative or limited reading offered by the observers at Chesney Wold. Esther does not collude with the objectification of Hortense and her reaction; instead Esther emphasises her own attraction to Hortense and illuminatingly accommodates it through her narrative register. Her description brilliantly arbitrates for the reader meaning from the confluence of describer and described. It is suggestive of an implicit congruence of desire between two women.

On a more immediate level of course, the Frenchwoman's action can be translated as a rebellion against all that the ancient house of the Dedlock's might signify, configuring her as a figure of impending nemesis, whose pointed rejection by her mistress will culminate in the ultimate act of unlawfulness and transgression: the murder of Tulkinghorn and the shattering of the Dedlock structure. This reading would also satisfy our unresolved curiosity as to why Lady Dedlock should have employed such a tempestuous servant in the first place. For Lady Dedlock's apparent choice of maid would in reality be no choice at all, as Hortense would be her private nemesis, encapsulating all Lady Dedlock's passionate and sexually profligate past. Therefore Lady Dedlock's initial toleration of Hortense must be reformulated as loathing as the former senses her own impending entrapment within the labyrinthine machinations of Tulkinghorn and her guilt-ridden past. This pointed dismissal of Hortense seems couched in the language of romantic entanglement and barely veiled sexual codes. The sheer exhibitionism of the whole episode is especially striking as it involves the normally contained and enclosed Lady Dedlock and as such is revelatory and arresting.

As it drove up, we saw that there were two people inside. There alighted from it, with some cloaks and wrappers, first the Frenchwoman whom I had seen in church, and secondly the pretty girl; the Frenchwoman with a defiant confidence; the pretty girl confused and hesitating.

“What now?” said Lady Dedlock. “Two!”

“I am your maid, my lady, at the present,” said the Frenchwoman.

“The message was for the attendant.”

“I was afraid you might mean me, my Lady,” said the pretty girl.

“I did mean you, child,” replied her mistress, calmly. “Put that shawl on me.”

She slightly stooped her shoulders to receive it, and the pretty girl lightly dropped it in his place. The Frenchwoman stood unnoticed, looking on with her lips very tightly set....

“I am sorry,” said Lady Dedlock to Mr Jarndyce, “that we are not likely to renew our former acquaintance. You will allow me to send the carriage back for your two wards. It shall be here directly.”

But as he would on no account accept this offer, she took a graceful leave of Ada- none of me- and put her hand upon his proffered arm, and got into the carriage, which was a little, low, park carriage, with a hood.

“Come in, child,” she said to the pretty girl, “I shall want you. Go on!”
(Bleak House 311)

Unsurprisingly in such a repressive world, the choice between the susceptible, youthful Rosa and the worldly, antagonistic Hortense favours the former and confirms the economic and social power enjoyed by Lady Dedlock as the acceptable alternative to passion. Hortense’s rejection by her mistress is consummately articulated through Lady Dedlock’s ostentatious benevolence towards Rosa and her strategic indifference to the Frenchwoman. Lady Dedlock attempts to humiliate Hortense through her playful teasing of the unworldly Rosa. There is an arch sexual undercurrent to this exchange that Esther’s narrative apparently colludes with, as she repeatedly positions Rosa as “the pretty girl”; a reference which reinforces the conventional aspects of Rosa’s attractiveness, and accentuates the individuality and passion of Hortense. So Lady Dedlock attempts to rid herself of her sexual nature as reflected in Hortense and opts for a new role as legitimate protectress of her virginal protégée, Rosa. If there were an unresolved sexual component to Lady Dedlock’s relation to her haughty French maid, then the violence that follows this dismissal would again accentuate the unlawful as a primary aspect of passion and would elide Hortense’s villainy as a murderess, with her villainy being linked to her palpable sexuality. The latter eventuality of course sheds an interesting perspective upon Esther’s own relationship with her darling Ada. Esther’s understanding of the Frenchwoman’s feelings of rejection stems from her own feelings of secret attraction to Ada. Once again it is worth noting that it is Esther who renders the scene suggestive through her narrative filter, and Lady Dedlock’s “I shall want you” is as playfully seductive as any accomplished tease could be. Lady Dedlock’s language is here as duplicitly villainous as that of Hortense, and just as loaded sexually.

It is also interesting that Hortense’s rejection is mirrored by Lady Dedlock’s apparent indifference to Esther, who is ignored by Lady Dedlock when her companions are both graciously acknowledged. This parallel surely allies the

Frenchwoman with the narrator and raises questions about Lady Dedlock's seemingly perverse intent. The care and tact bestowed upon Esther by Lady Dedlock earlier in this excursion to Chesney Wold have metamorphosed into purposeful unconcern. This exchange emanates from an oblique awareness of connection between Lady Dedlock and Esther that at this time remains intuitive and therefore susceptible to displacement. Lady Dedlock's attitude to Esther underlines her ambivalence towards both maternity and sexual desire, and reinforces the insurmountable differences that separate both parent and child. Hence Esther's need to preserve her fascination with Hortense's passion through this unusual act of recollection, suggesting that the extraordinary quality of this event is dependent upon some secret truth that supports her autobiography. She suffuses her narrative here with a lyrical, sonorous vocabulary, underlining the balance between Hortense's emotion and its expression that mirroring the hidden passions of others tears apart the veil of hypocrisy that surrounds relations at Chesney Wold. As the narrative voice is Esther's, the tranquillity which ensues from this display is engendered by her construction of the Frenchwoman as the accumulative sign of earlier occurrences in this visit, which Esther cannot speak of directly, but which are made manifest through displacement.

Esther's account of her first visit to the environs of Chesney Wold is relayed in a register of unexpected richness and pleasure, which stands in contrast with the sterile, rain-sodden accounts of the Dedlock mansion, delivered by the third-person narrator. The latter's lugubrious version of Chesney Wold echoes the focalised sentiments of the permanently bored Lady Dedlock herself. Furthermore, Esther's vocabulary conveys images of fertility and abundance, reacquainting the reader with the home of the Dedlocks, notably from a more positive point of view: a perspective that is dynamic rather than static, embracing Eros rather than Thanatos.

This sense of rejuvenation in the narrative originates on one level in the youthful hopefulness of Esther herself, who as narrator and ostensibly disinterested witness of new experiences contrasts sharply with the studied ennui of Lady Dedlock herself. It is also possible to argue that just as Elizabeth Bennett's appreciation of the Pemberly Estate is enmeshed with her emerging affection for Darcy, so Esther's recollected enjoyment of Chesney Wold is suffused with her hidden affection for her mother and, by implication, for the secret relationship that may have existed between Hortense and Lady Dedlock. In other words, Esther's evident pleasure in relating her excursion to Lincolnshire is primarily predicated upon her retrospective knowledge of Lady Dedlock's true identity and perhaps a hidden sexual congruence between her mother and herself. This transforms Esther's anecdotal narrative into a poignant act of testimony. This poignancy is tangibly recorded through the level of care by which Esther recollects all the subtle details of her encounter with her estranged mother. This meeting with Lady Dedlock is conflated with the change in the weather, which acts as a highly resonant barometer of the affecting, emotional situation: indeed their encounter reads as the cathartic outcome of this reviving battle of the elements. The linguistic register once again supports this perspective.

It was grand to see how the wind awoke, and bent the trees, and drove the rain before it like a cloud of smoke...and while thinking with awe of the tremendous powers by which our little lives are encompassed, to consider how beneficent they are, and how upon the smallest flower and leaf there was already a freshness poured from all this seeming rage, which seemed to make creation new again.

“Is it not dangerous to sit in so exposed a place?”

“O no, Esther dear!” said Ada, quietly.

Ada said it to me; but *I* had not spoken....

Lady Dedlock had taken shelter in the lodge, before our arrival there, and had come out of the gloom within. She stood behind my chair, with her hand upon it. I saw her hand close to my shoulder when I turned my head. (Bleak House 308-9; emphasis in original)

Esther’s emphasis upon creation and freshness has obvious parallels with the serenity of her later description of Hortense’s walk. It also dramatically frames her first real encounter with Lady Dedlock, a frame perhaps all the more significant as an act of reediting, as this would reinforce Esther’s unspoken desire for testimony. Lady Dedlock enters Esther’s world as an almost disembodied and primal voice, emanating from the hidden recesses of Esther Summerson’s blighted childhood. The question, “Is it not dangerous to sit in so exposed a place?” ironically summarises Lady Dedlock’s own position and fate. Its arch tone signals both its authenticity as being the voice of Lady Dedlock, as well offering Esther a condensed and timeless declaration of maternal care and intimacy: the fact that her mother’s voice should be so exotically located seems a perfect wish fulfilled. If there are any uneasy parallels between Esther’s sexual proclivities and those of her mother, then Ada’s warm denial of any danger acts as a form of reassurance for her friend. Once again villainy is being re-inscribed as a form of sexual transgression, and is linked to a very real fear of detection for some unspoken crime.

The tenderness of this carefully recorded intimacy, with its very specific rendering of the physical proximity of Lady Dedlock, transmits a power that is sensual and even erotic: keenly aware of the physical presence of the other, when that other is a desired other. This marked degree of specificity reveals a profound need on the part of the narrator, to preserve the exact co-ordinates of the meeting for prosperity, a need that highlights the retrospective poignancy of the situation. The excitement generated by Ada’s misrecognition of Lady Dedlock’s voice for Esther’s, is communicated through Esther’s newly prominent sense of self, embodied in the emphatic first-person pronoun: “Ada said it to me; but *I* had not spoken” (Bleak House 308). On a literal level this is true, on a figurative level it is not, as there is a secret duplication of Lady Dedlock’s concern with that of Esther.

The palpable intimacy of this meeting is tragically reprised at the end of the text when Lady Dedlock’s death is countenanced first as a form of displacement: “I saw before me, lying on the step, the mother of the dead child. She lay there with one arm creeping round a bar of the iron gate, and seeming to embrace it.” This is then painfully corrected by Esther’s revised admission, “And it was my mother, cold and dead” (Bleak House 868-69). The child is thus resurrected at the cost of her mother; there can be no commingling of their lives in such a rigid and judgmental society as that represented in Bleak House. The delicacy and concern of Lady Dedlock’s pointed question to Esther as Chesney Wold- “I have frightened you?”- are mirrored in the ministering register of Esther’s discovery of her dead mother. Esther’s apparent

misrecognition of another for her mother is agonisingly narrated in terms that attempts to ward off the inevitable revelation of her death. This re-inscribes the palpable intimacy of chapter eighteen, whilst preserving the chronological integrity of Esther's narrative. "she lay there who had so lately spoken to my mother. She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature. She who had brought my mother's letter, who could give me the only clue to where my mother was" (868). "Mother" is actually repeated six times in the entire paragraph, invoking a sense of acute distress that cannot be owned directly even in retrospect. However the incantatory aspect to the narrative privileges an intimacy that transcends the crippling limits of Victorian propriety. This intimacy is stoically and hesitantly presenced by default, as Esther is unable to give any utterance to her grief beyond the stark evasion of "I proceed to other pages of my narrative" (869), which she repeats twice after her account of her mother's death and can never go beyond within the confines of her public narrative. Esther's dignified and respectful silence concerning her mother's death, excepting this point of the narrative, suggests that her grief has been inscribed in a private, concealed manner elsewhere in the text and that its expression remains implicit. This containment of intimacy heightens the pathos of Esther's licensed recollections of her mother, and encourages the recurring predilection for displacement within the exigencies of her first-person narrative. This predilection for displaced or surrogate intimacies in the narrative notably encompasses Esther's marked attachment to Ada, and of course the singular representation of the villainess Hortense, give enduring and moving testimony to Esther's passionate affection for her estranged mother.

Hortense may have had an origin in the figure of Mrs Maria Manning whose murder of her ex-lover, Patrick O'Connor, led to her execution with her husband at Horsemonger Gaol in 1849. Dickens was amongst the thirty thousand witnesses who watched this double hanging, one of the most notorious public executions of the nineteenth century. His horror at the barbaric levity of the spectators encouraged both journalistic protest and personal nightmare. Three years later, Dickens wrote:

In connexion with which dismal spectacle, I recall this curious fantasy of the mind. That, having beheld that execution, and having left those two forms dangling on the top of the entrance gateway- the man's, a limp, loose suit of clothes as if the man had gone out of them; the woman's, a fine shape, so elaborately corseted and artfully dressed, that it was quite unchanged in its trim appearance as it slowly swung from side to side- I never could, by my uttermost efforts, for some weeks, present the outside of that prison to myself (which the terrible impression, I had received obliged me to do) without presenting it with the two figures still hanging in the morning air. (The Uncommercial Traveller 434)

Maria Manning was as defiant in the manner of her self-presentation for her execution as she was acting out her volatile courtroom persona. Dickens' appreciation of her elaborate dress sense, and sexual artifice, which transcended even the limits of her squalid death, obviously haunted him and challenged him aesthetically as well as morally. For, if Manning's execution left unresolved the author's most appropriate imaginative response, then Dickens' creation of Hortense in Bleak House could be read as his re-assimilation of Manning's effect upon him through his narrator Esther. This continues the elaborate investment in displacement and satisfies Peter Ackroyd's

argument that, in Bleak House, Dickens is “writing a novel about last things” (673). For Dickens things were only ever finished, never finished with.

Returning to Hortense’s walk once again, it is possible to argue that Esther renders Hortense an unexpectedly tranquil and peaceful figure, as the latter is a partially licensed evocation of Lady Dedlock’s transgressive sexual past, licensed of course because Hortense was a foreigner and was, in a sense, outside the sexual constraints of this particular society and laws, epitomised in the passionless and sterile figure of Tulkinghorn. This suggestion of license might be further qualified as being partial, as there is a certain obscurity surrounding Hortense’s relationship with Lady Dedlock that the text cannot presence in any direct way. Their mutual hostility and barely suppressed anger towards each other might be termed illicit in the way that Miss Wade’s feelings for Tattycoram are illicit in Little Dorrit and those of Helena Landless are illicit for Rosa in The Mystery of Edwin Drood. This possible eroticisation of Hortense’s relationship with Lady Dedlock is further complicated by the repeated trope of surrogacy and displacement in the text. What does Tulkinghorn see when he is murdered? What unlawful passions are in operation at his death? Does he recognise Hortense or does he believe that Lady Dedlock is the murderess? For, in murdering Tulkinghorn, Hortense was endeavouring to extract a multifaceted revenge. She replays Tulkinghorn’s earlier subterfuge yet subverts it, implicating Lady Dedlock yet also fulfilling the latent desire of her mistress to destroy the primary agent of Lady Dedlock’s unhappiness in the text. If there is an anarchic subtext to their relationship, then there is a bizarre realignment of the mistress and maid through this act of murder, revisiting their earlier masquerades, where the interchangeability of their disguised appearance embroils them further and further within each other’s destiny. Thus their relationship is rendered conspiratorial in its intense ambivalence, symbolically consummated in blood. And if the hostile dynamics between maid and mistress contain any covertly lesbian attraction, then the drama and manner of Tulkinghorn’s demise would cathartically endorse this possibility, reinforcing the strong sexual aspect of Maria Manning’s execution of Patrick O’Connor through a single bullet to the head (Pugh 253-59).

Esther is also implicated within this complicated trope of surrogacy and murder, as she knows of the lawyer’s danger to her mother and recognises her own *misrecognition* as her mother by Mrs George on Tulkinghorn’s staircase. Thus, identity and culpability blur into self-revulsion and terror as Esther comprehends all too well her own role as the reluctant spectre of Lady Dedlock’s harmful past:

[M]y echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost Walk; that it was I, who was to bring calamity upon the stately house; and that my warning feet were haunting it even then. Seized with an augmented terror of myself which turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything, retraced the way by which I had come, and never paused until I gained the lodge-gate, and the park lay sullen and black before me.

(Bleak House 570-71)

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[Mr George] was observing...my height and figure, which seemed to catch his attention all at once.

"Tis curious," said he. "And yet I thought so at the time!"

My guardian asked him what he meant.

"Why, sir," he answered, "when my ill-fortune took me to the dead man's staircase on the night of his murder, I saw a shape so like Miss Summerson's go by me in the dark, that I had half a mind to speak to it."

For an instant, I felt such a shudder as I never felt before or since, and hope I shall never feel again. (766)

If Esther is the literal and metaphorical reanimation of Lady Dedlock's suppressed past, then Mr George's apparent misapprehension of Esther on Tulkinghorn's stairs is, on an intuitive level, correct. For Esther is irrevocably connected to Lady Dedlock; by implication, Hortense; and through the repeated trope of surrogacy, she is the Dedlock's ghost as well. Little wonder that the susceptible Jo suffers profound confusion as to which lady was the original visitor to Tom-All-Alone's; a mistake that involves Esther, Hortense and of course Lady Dedlock herself, all of whom return to haunt and disturb the precarious equilibrium of the starving child. In such a labyrinthine world of displaced desire, Esther's appreciation of Hortense's ostentatiously liberated walk that flouts Victorian decorum subtly suggests a daughter's empathy with her tormented mother Lady Dedlock and with Hortense herself. This empathy cannot be articulated in any other way, for if Esther was to know her mother in any explicitly realised manner, then Esther would be Lady Dedlock and face ruination like her mother and her dangerously efficient maid, whose behaviour Esther intuitively understands despite the constraints of her necessarily "seemly" and virtuous status in the novel (Carey 183-84).

The strategic positioning of the memorable stroll through the grass upstages the drama of Esther's earlier meeting with Lady Dedlock, yet evokes Lady Dedlock's theatrical departure through the magical and crystalline image of the "fairy carriage" (*Bleak House* 312). This choice of register conveys Esther's pride in her exotically placed mother, and bestows upon their meeting a timeless and suspended quality, preserving the allure of Lady Dedlock and rendering her for this moment inviolate and safe from society's clutches. This is the gift of Esther's narrative, offering her mother a magical, fictional identity from which to escape the bloodless imposition of the law, and also preserving for herself an image of her mother that deflects from the sordid horror of Lady Dedlock's death. Indeed the very clarity of this episode's representation, accentuated as it is by the deployment of crystalline images, renders the event almost as an object in itself, through Esther's poignant shoring up within the memory of its unique significance in her life. For if Esther can secretly and repeatedly return to this transforming memory of her lost mother, then this event can take on a talismanic significance. It can protect the integrity of Esther's intense feeling for Lady Dedlock, as it is an image of transcendence and power. It is also excitingly enmeshed within Hortense's very public display of unashamed passion, which by the same token must act as a talisman too, and will ensure that Esther will not compromise her secretly passionate nature by marrying her guardian Jarndyce. She will also maintain her passionate friendship with her "angel" Ada, a relationship that remains undiluted by time or marriages and seems more necessary for Esther's emotion well-being than her legitimate heterosexual relationship with Woodcourt (Ingham 127). This contrasts with the stultifying union of Lady Dedlock with Sir Leicester, and ensures that Esther

will survive and thrive, where her estranged mother could not. If this chapter therefore reveals a necessary hiatus in the repetition of the same, it is due to Esther's recognition of her dangerous similarity to her mother, and her mother's surrogate, Hortense. In recognising this, she can subtly disrupt this pattern and avoid the disastrous consequences of unmanageable desire.

Hortense, in walking barefoot towards the ancestral home of the Dedlock's, underlines the imminence of nemesis. And, after all, if Hortense is a figure of nemesis for her mistress, then Lady Dedlock is also a figure of nemesis for Hortense, their obscurely illicit liaison existing beyond Dickens' prescribed narrative boundaries of sexual decorum and certainly beyond the limits of what Esther could be expected to know in any explicit way, if she is to maintain her role as innocent Victorian heroine. A further irony also emerges from Tulkinghorn's bloodless arrogance, preventing him from recognising that his own impending annihilation is inescapably entwined within the fates of Lady Dedlock and Hortense. His refusal to countenance passion in any personal way extinguishes any imaginary facility that would recognise its dangerously unlimited power over others including himself. Tulkinghorn's relentless pursuit of Lady Dedlock prevents his recognition of her maid's more ambivalent feelings for her mistress, and this ensures his poetically just assassination by a single bullet through the heart, an ironically passionate occurrence. Esther's act of narration is thus an act of consummate assimilation and tenderness, which stresses the duality between the unlawful nakedness of passion and the lawful denial of such passion. This renders Hortense's spirited walk through the wet grass of Chesney Wold an elaborately complex sign for Esther, which can be finally translated as an act of compassionate remembrance for her mother, the enigmatic Lady Dedlock.

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