

## Dickens in Confusion?: Discrepancies in the Dénouement of *Martin Chuzzlewit*

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In the first paragraph of Chapter 4 of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, we are told that Pecksniff, after seeing Old Martin at the Blue Dragon, withdrew to his own home, and remained there three whole days. . . .’ But in the very next paragraph we read: ‘During the whole of this interval, he haunted the Dragon at all times and seasons in the day and night. . . .’

(p. 43).<sup>1</sup> As Michael Slater observes in his Notes, this is ‘an oversight on Dickens’s part’ (p. 792), for the two statements obviously contradict each other. Comparable minor errors can be seen in other passages, too. Margaret Cardwell points out, for instance, that the ‘goldfinch’ (p. 296) in Sweedlepipe’s shop is later transformed into a ‘bullfinch’ (pp. 713, 764). She also notes that ‘Insertions and deletions in manuscript and on proof can result in occasional minor discrepancies when related passages are not revised to correspond’: for example, a reference to Pecksniff’s turning red when Charity hints at his designs on Mary Graham was deleted in proof, but a few lines later he is described as ‘colouring again’ (p. 448). Those errors, she suggests, stemmed from ‘speed of composition and improvisation in small matters’.<sup>2</sup> Inconsistency of another order has recently been detected by John Sutherland. He has found a chronological anomaly which involves Martin leaving England in winter and, after one year’s stay in America, coming back in summer. Sutherland argues that ‘These anomalies witness less to any carelessness on Dickens’s part, than to his Shakespearian confidence in making the elements do whatever it is the current mood and dramatic needs of his narrative require them to do.’<sup>3</sup> There are thus various discrepancies in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but those occurring in the dénouement seem hitherto to have escaped the notice of all commentators on the novel.

In Chapter 49 Martin and John visit Mrs Gamp, having agreed to approach Chuffey through her since she is nursing him: they wish to get confirmation of what Lewsome revealed to them about the death of Anthony Chuzzlewit. They find that Mrs Gamp has an appointment with Jonas ‘Tomorrow evenin’ . . . from nine to ten’ (p. 715), and decide that Martin, playing the role of Mrs Harris, should go with her and confront Jonas. Then in Chapter 50 Martin, full of indignation, visits Tom ‘the next evening’ (p. 716). I draw attention to this phrase, for I believe it is another instance of Dickens’s oversight.

Important events in the climactic chapters are Jonas’s arrest and Pecksniff’s

punishment. It appears from the above ('Tomorrow evenin'') that the former takes place on the day after Martin and John visit Mrs Gamp. On the night of Jonas's arrest Old Martin, we are told, refuses to see his grandson 'until tomorrow' (p. 748) at Temple Bar. It follows that Pecksniff is chastised there the next day. Putting these events in chronological order we have: (1) Martin and John's visit to Mrs Gamp, (2) Jonas's arrest the next day, (3) Pecksniff's punishment the day after that.

Now, let us assume that Martin's angry visit to Tom in Chapter 50 takes place 'the next evening' after his visit to Mrs Gamp, as the narrative has it. This, then, is the evening of the day on which Jonas is arrested. A little later in the same chapter (p. 723), Tom and Ruth are described as having their breakfast the next day—that is to say, the day of Pecksniff's punishment—after which Tom goes out to his work at the Temple, and there he meets Old Martin, who reveals himself as his employer. This, however, is impossible.

One recalls that it is not—as was originally planned—Young Martin, but instead Old Martin who comes with Mrs Gamp to Jonas's house. The change is explained in Chapter 52: Old Martin 'had sent for John Westlock immediately on his arrival; and John, under the conduct of Tom Pinch, had waited on him' (p. 748). Presumably what happens is that after John informs him of Mrs Gamp's appointment with Jonas, Old Martin decides to go there himself instead of his grandson. There is, however, this difficulty: in order to participate in Jonas's exposure, Old Martin must employ Tom to get in touch with John; in order to be able to do so, he must first reveal himself to Tom. Accordingly, if the revelation occurs on the day of Pecksniff's punishment, as assumed in the preceding paragraph, then there is no time for Old Martin to get involved with Jonas's arrest, which by then has already taken place!

This contradiction could be resolved if, going back to the starting point of my discussion, we correct 'the next evening' in Chapter 50 to 'the same evening'. This, however, would give rise to another difficulty. The occurrence of 'the next' rather than 'the same' is not simply a mistake due to haste: perhaps Dickens had a good reason for writing 'the next evening'. When the enraged Martin visits him in this chapter Tom is understandably perplexed by the sudden burst of anger of his friend. To be sure, a hint is dropped: Martin says, 'I *cannot* believe . . . that it would have been in your nature to do me any serious harm, even though I had not discovered by chance, in whose employment you were' (p. 719)—though it is odd that Tom does not immediately ask Martin to make this remark clearer. At any rate, the explanation of Martin's behaviour is held back until Chapter 52: at Temple Bar, after Pecksniff's chastisement, Martin says, 'Oh, Tom! Dear Tom! I saw you, accidentally, coming

here. Forgive me!’ (p. 761) That is, aware that his grandfather has a room there, he thought Tom was secretly working for the old man. In fact, Dickens has been carefully preparing for this development: in Chapter 48, shortly before he and John call on Mrs Gamp, Martin, who ‘had no lodgings yet’ in London, ‘succeeded, after great trouble, in engaging two garrets for himself and Mark, situated in a court in the Strand, not far from Temple Bar’, and then he ‘walked up and down, in the Temple, eating a meat-pie for his dinner’ (p. 702). Is Martin supposed to have seen Tom entering the Temple then? It must be so, if we substitute ‘the same evening’ for ‘the next’. He sees Tom, figures that he is working for his grandfather, then goes with John to Mrs Gamp, and visits Tom, all in the same evening. But this is hardly likely. Considering that it is dinner time when Martin is walking up and down in Temple Bar, Tom would have gone home already—according to Fips, Tom’s working hours are ‘from half-past nine to four, or half-past four, or thereabouts’ (p. 579)—or at least he would have come out of the Temple, rather than gone into it (Martin says, ‘I saw you coming here.’). Moreover, it is surely very strange that there is no indication of the disturbance this must have caused in Martin, when he visits Mrs Gamp with John soon afterwards. What all this seems to suggest is that when Dickens wrote the phrase ‘the next evening’, he was primarily thinking of this particular narrative thread and allowing time for Martin to see Tom coming to the Temple in the morning, the day after his visit to Mrs Gamp.

There is another small discrepancy in the dénouement. Consider the last two paragraphs of Chapter 50, just after Old Martin has revealed himself to Tom:

‘Close the door, close the door. He will not be long after me, but may come too soon. The time now drawing on,’ said the old man, hurriedly: his eyes and whole face brightening as he spoke: ‘will make amends for all. I wouldn’t have him die or hang himself, for millions of golden pieces! Close the door!’

Tom did so, hardly knowing yet whether he was awake or in a dream. (p. 727)

Old Martin is clearly expecting Pecksniff at any moment, while Tom is completely baffled by his behaviour. (The time is about half-past nine, given Tom’s working hours.) As a matter of fact, there is a number division at this point, so readers of the serial, like Tom, were left in suspense. In the next (and the last) instalment, Jonas’s arrest occurs in Chapter 51, and at the beginning of Chapter 52 we are told that ‘Old Martin’s cherished projects . . . were retarded, but not beyond a few hours, by the occurrences just now narrated’ (p. 747). This refers back to the ending of Chapter 50,

the passage quoted above, but does not accord with the rest. It should be recalled that Pecksniff's chastisement takes place the day after Jonas's arrest, at about 'ten o'clock' (p. 751). The delay then is not a matter of a few hours but of one whole day. Poor Pecksniff is held up by the plot machinery for twenty-four hours and when he is finally allowed to come to the Temple, he is caned by Old Martin! (Further slighting this brilliant creation, Dickens does not bother to explain how Pecksniff makes his appearance there conveniently just after all the others have gathered.)

When he was working on the last instalment, which required his 'utmost exertions' (Letter to Mrs Gore, 11 June 1844), Dickens must have been confused about these details under the heavy pressure of bringing the complicated plot to a dénouement. In dealing with Jonas's arrest and Pecksniff's punishment, and in picking up the narrative thread involving Martin's mysterious anger against Tom, the novelist seems not to have realised that he had concentrated too many crucial events into a very short span of time. Also, in the final chapters Dickens appears to be concerned not so much with the titular hero as with his grandfather. This is reflected, for example, in his utter indifference to the manner in which the change of plan regarding Jonas's exposure is relayed to Young Martin. It may be that since Dickens was mainly interested in the precipitation (in the manner of God suddenly asserting Himself and overthrowing all evil) of Old Martin's 'amends' and punishment of the two chief villains, the precise chronology of events was very much a secondary consideration.

In his edition of Dickens's 'Working Notes' Harry Stone writes:

Unlike the trial titles, which are abundant, the extant working notes for *Chuzzlewit* are meager. They consist of four early sheets of trial names (the fourth list associated with Number II) and two sheets of condensed memos, one for Number IV and one for Number VI.<sup>4</sup>

These are the only things that survive, but that does not necessarily mean that there was nothing else. The accepted view, however, is that Dickens started making use of Number Plans with the next novel, *Dombey and Son*, and the discrepancies I discuss here may offer corroborating evidence in support of such a view. Even though he took pains, as he says in the Preface to the first edition, 'to keep a steadier eye upon the general purpose and design of the novel' (p. xli), Dickens was most probably working without detailed Number Plans at this stage.

It is a tribute, at any rate, to Dickens's ability to sweep the reader along with his powerful narrative that nobody has noticed this particular confusion in the dénouement

in the more than one hundred and fifty years since the novel's first publication.

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<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent references to *Martin Chuzzlewit* are to the Everyman Paperback edition (London: Dent, 1994), edited by Michael Slater.

<sup>2</sup> See Margaret Cardwell's Introduction to the Clarendon edition of the novel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. xlv-xlvii.

<sup>3</sup> John Sutherland, *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Stone (ed.), *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 19.

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