

# PAROLE RUBATE

RIVISTA INTERNAZIONALE  
DI STUDI SULLA CITAZIONE



## PURLOINED LETTERS

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF QUOTATION STUDIES

*Rivista semestrale online / Biannual online journal*

<http://www.parolerubate.unipr.it>

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Fascicolo n. 10 / Issue no. 10

Dicembre 2014 / December 2014

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Autorizzazione Tribunale di Parma n. 14 del 27 maggio 2010

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## RECENSIONE / REVIEW

**Lynn Shepherd, *Tom-All-Along's / The Solitary House*, London, Corsair Books, pp. 320, £ 5,59**

*Tom-All-Along's*, the title of Lynn Shepherd's detective novel, was one of the titles that Charles Dickens considered giving to the novel that is known as *Bleak House*. It is the name of a derelict tenement, the breeding ground of disease and corruption that plays a central role in the novel. *Bleak House* is used as the backdrop to Shepherd's work and Dickens's own beginning is celebrated in her prologue. Following on from Jane Austen in *Murder at Mansfield Park* (2010) Dickens takes pride of place this time.

The main thread of the novel is based on a lesson derived from Dickens, which consists of an investigation conducted within a world in which sin and contagion do not observe the boundaries forged by class and nationality. One of the main aims of the novel is to depict the grim underworld of Victorian London as revealed in the investigation conducted by Charles Maddox, a free-lance detective who is described as having self-reliance and sang-froid. For him, there can be no higher cause than the truth, and he repeatedly comes face to face with the destructiveness of a brutal society. The novel opens with Charles investigating one of the cases he has taken on and inspecting the graves of unwanted newborn babies in a

graveyard, which suggests routine infanticide. Children bear the brunt of a brutal existence, and even Charles feels guilty for the disappearance of his younger sister who was mysteriously taken away. In the Chadwick case which he investigates, he must look for a child who was taken to an orphanage sixteen years before. She was cast out because she was 'with child' at a time when God was regarded as watchful and avenging rather than forgiving. The progress of the Chadwick case gives the reader an insight into the treatment of unwanted babies who were removed to baby farms and whose death was so common that there was not even the slightest concern. This opening sets the tone for Shepherd's depiction of Victorian London.

The reality of life in the 1850s is further supported by a reference to Dickens's popularity when Charles reads an extract from *David Copperfield* to his great-uncle or when we get a vignette of the journalist Henry Mayhew. The novel also makes reference to the interest in Africa or in natural history during the period. The lawyer Tulkinghorn and Charles share an interest in curios, and Tulkinghorn allows Charles to visit his collection which is reminiscent of Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields. We get references to the science of the day and to Erasmus Darwin who is, ironically, seen to be superior to his grandson. Charles, our protagonist, also collects scientific specimens and curios, and is a lover of the British Museum and the Royal Geographical Society.

The main plot of the novel is underway when Charles is commissioned by the lawyer Mr Tulkinghorn to conduct an investigation on behalf of his client Sir Julius Cremorne, a high-ranking man of finance and prime enabler of imperial trade. He must find the author of the anonymous blackmail letters which Sir Julius has been receiving. We understand that this case requires utter discretion. However, Tulkinghorn's client has a secret and Mr Tulkinghorn is prepared to protect his client at all

costs. They would connive to prevent Charles from discovering the full extent of the affair. Charles's investigation leads him down to the Thames waterfront area and its warehouses, to the red-light district Seven Dials, and to the densely populated areas which were once cholera-infected. In his investigation around the city, which takes him to pubs, rat-catching pits, rancid slums or Mayfair, Charles gets beaten up and smeared with muck and filth more than once. He gets help from his great-uncle Maddox, the celebrated thief-taker, who had been his teacher and mentor ever since he was a boy, but now suffers from dementia.

Running parallel with the narrative of Charles's investigation is Hester's narrative, reminiscent of Esther's narrative in Dickens's *Bleak House*. Like Esther, Hester knows that she is not clever. Like her, she is presented in scenes from her girlhood, with a gullible sentimentality which she seems unable to overcome. Dickens's Mr Jarndyce becomes Mr Jarvis in Shepherd's novel, the guardian who takes Hester in as a boarder at the Solitary House, another title Dickens had considered for his novel. Hester's voice is managed in a way that makes her appear as an unreliable narrator who is remarkably unable to decipher the signs around her. For instance, she is unable to identify the role of the "gentlemen who visited [her] mother".<sup>1</sup> She is also unable to explain what happens when one of the women attending her mother "took something away wrapped in a coverlet that [she] never saw again".<sup>2</sup> She is an impressionable character who is committed to doing good deeds and self-sacrifice, duty and diligence, but her self-righteous tone and sentimentality are dealt with ironically. Hester's narrative is rife with indecipherable signs which put the reader on the alert. A number of undefined illnesses affect the young women at the Solitary

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Shepherd, *Tom-All-Along's / The Solitary House*, London, Corsair Books, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 35.

House, whose idyllic setting is enigmatic. Suspicion is raised about an unexplained deed committed by Mr Jarvis.

The novel includes ghastly descriptions of murdered people and the reader is not spared the gory details. Charles realises that Tulkinghorn has employed him to find the writer of the anonymous letters solely for the purpose of having him killed. Charles decides to find out exactly what Tulkinghorn does not want him to know. He endeavours to track down Sir Julius Cremorne, a regular visitor to the whores of the Argyll rooms. The murders are obviously connected, and Charles manages to link them to similar occurrences of gratuitous cruelty. Charles finally comes face to face with the murderer and Shepherd creates a spectacular scene in which they fight in Tulkinghorn's gallery. The connection between the two narratives finally falls into place through the discovery of a so-called 'lunatic asylum' in which young women are incarcerated for the sordid convenience of men like Sir Julius, a discovery which reveals Hester's narrative. The novel comes full circle when the reader is explained how unwanted babies were disposed of and when Charles discovers Hester's true identity.

In her carefully plotted novel, the narrative voice adopts god's eye point of view and, coming to the fore, even tells the reader what Charles misses. The closeness of the narrative voice spans the gap from 1850s' London and gives the book an immediate feel. As the author puts it, she looks at the 19<sup>th</sup> century from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective. The novel has two narratives which end up feeding into each other, and combines themes from two Victorian novels which the novelist admires. In her acknowledgments, the author expresses her admiration for Dickens's *Bleak House* and indicates that she has "interleaved [her] own mystery with the characters and episodes of his novel".<sup>3</sup> Her novel includes a number of characters –

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, p. 355.



whether central or peripheral – from Dickens’s novel, such as the lawyer Tulkinghorn, the policeman Inspector Bucket, a Miss Flint who mirrors Dickens’s Miss Flite, or Clara, who reminds the reader of Ada. The protagonist Charles practices firing his pistol at a shooting gallery which, as in Dickens, is run by a trooper. Lady Dedlock gets a mention: she has some knowledge that may allow her to discover Tulkinghorn’s secret, but she has a dire and shameful secret of her own. There is a clear intersection between Shepherd’s novel and Dickens’s in the scene where the crossing sweep Jo is questioned by Charles after being brought to the shooting gallery by a compassionate surgeon. Jo saw the murderer whom Charles is trying to track down, and this would explain why Jo was told by Inspector Bucket, in both novels, to ‘move on’. With the mention of Anne Catherick and the Baronet Sir Percival Glyde who married a young girl for her fortune, Shepherd also gives a nod at Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*. In fact, Shepherd explains that her own novel is located in a ‘space between’ these two novels whose time frames run parallel to each other. Material from both novels is woven into her book which never becomes close to a pastiche because her plot and characters have a distinctness of their own. Finally, she has used John Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* as a basis for her own immediate London scenes. The book has been carefully researched and contains mentions of real historical figures. Shepherd also acknowledges John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as a reference point for her work.

While not indispensable to an understanding of Shepherd’s novel, knowledge of Dickens’s *Bleak House* provides moments of recognition for the reader who is engaged to participate in a process in which one book inspires the other. The characters are given distinctive voices, and Charles’s domestic life is developed through his connection with his great-uncle Maddox and his relationship with the black servant Molly. The novel

successfully fuses old-fashioned slang in some of the dialogues with a modern narratorial voice, and uses a quickening pace to deal with a wide range of themes such as blackmail, murder, corruption, prostitution, mutilation and madness. Shepherd brings the reality of Victorian London revealed by Dickens into the cold light of day.

SYLVIE GAUTHERON

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*Parole rubate. Rivista internazionale di studi sulla citazione /  
Purloined Letters. An International Journal of Quotation Studies*