The Romance of Mystery and the Mystery of Romance: Charlotte Smith's Ethelinde, Wilkie Collins's "I Say No," the McGuffin, and Narrative Closure (Article)

K. A. KALE

In this article, I argue that Charlotte Smith's novel *Ethelinde* (1789) is structurally similar to Wilkie Collins's novel *"I Say No"* (1884). As a consequence, *Ethelinde* highlights similarities between two of the great genres of formula fiction: the romance and the whodunit. Further, I shall argue that the twentieth-century theory of the McGuffin can complicate generic conventions by showing how a driving narrative force can evade clear categorization as either a McGuffin or not. This case study reveals how performing a careful reading of these two historical novels may problematize the narrative certainty usually identified with formula fiction.

Norris J. Lacy defines the McGuffin as "something—a person, an object, an event—the primary purpose of which is to motivate the characters and therefore the plot, whether or not that 'something' possesses any implicit significance. . . . As long as the characters think something is important, and that 'something' propels the plot, we are dealing with a McGuffinization."[1] My analysis in this article features how two novels negotiating (sometimes incipient) generic conventions pairs fruitfully with the intellectual uncertainties of the McGuffin, which is at once the driving force of the narrative and a person, object, or event of fungible meaning. For instance, the secret papers in a spy film have meaning because characters care about the end of a story. McGuffins do something to the plot, but their "implicit significance" is subjective. While Lacy analyzes the medieval romance genre, his analysis very much coincides with the quixotic theme of this special issue.[2] It was as a reader of chivalric romances that the titular protagonist of *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) problematized the certainty of the narratives in the "real" world around him; moreover, his pursuit of the knightly life of chivalry is another potential example of a McGuffin.[3]

Lacy continues: "The episodic construction [of the medieval romance] does require an initial motivating force, an object or event that underlies and propels the plot development. And that motivating force constitutes a McGuffin when its use to animate the plot is as least as important as, or more important than, its intrinsic value."[4] This definition implies that there may in theory be problematic cases where the status of an objective as a McGuffin or not is unclear—there may be a subjective dispute about the objective's intrinsic value. In this paper, I will show that *Ethelinde* indicates how a problematic case might arise in a more striking form, in which the classification of an objective as not merely a plot motor depends on whether the text that contains it can be read as a deconstruction of the text's notional

---

1. Norris J. Lacy, "Medieval McGuffins: The Arthurian Model," *Arthuriana* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 53–63; 54.
2. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "medieval prose romances," https://www.britannica.com/art/romance-literature-and-performance/Medieval-prose-romances for a comprehensive definition of medieval romance so as not to confuse it with the romance as defined later in this article.
3. Miguel De Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Charles Jarvis, ed. E. C. Riley (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).
4. Lacy, "Medieval McGuffins," 63.

genre. Lacy's article also indicates that a plot objective classified is a McGuffin may be either resolved or unresolved within the text and that a resolved plot objective either may be a McGuffin or it may not. This leaves open the question of whether a major plot objective can be left unresolved without being a McGuffin. Initially this possibility appears to be a contradiction in terms, but *Ethelinde* indicates how it could arise.

Standard definitions of the whodunit and romance genres show their similar focus on revealing, respectively, a culprit or partner at the conclusion. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines a detective story as a "type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed."[5] *Oxford Reference* defines a whodunit as "a story or play about a murder in which the identity of the murderer is not revealed until the end."[6] A whodunit is a specific kind of detective story. Although *Oxford Reference* states that the term *whodunit* dates back to 1930, the definition is satisfied by many earlier stories, and in the present article, the specific term *whodunit* will be used to include these examples for brevity, even though technically this analysis will be anachronistic. While not mentioned in the cited definitions, the whodunit will typically first have intellectual closure (the identity of the culprit is revealed to the reader) and then moral closure (either the culprit is punished or else reasons are given why he should not be punished). The present article, for simplicity, takes the position that there is only a single murderer. Romance Writers of America define a romance as consisting of "a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending."[7] All three of these genre definitions involve two criteria: one relating to the subject of the narrative and the other to the pleasures of closure. The term *deconstruction* is used in this article in the sense of the first meaning in the *Cambridge Dictionary*: "The act of breaking something down into its separate parts in order to understand its meaning, *especially when this is different from how it was previously understood*."[8] The two early novels *Ethelinde* and *"I Say No"* call into question the generic boundaries of the romance and whodunit genres, respectively, even before those boundaries were solidified, and so they are not typical deconstructions. These anachronisms and atypical uses of terms, which might be considered reductive in another context, are justified here because the approach will be formalistic and not historical or cultural.

Having established the key genre definitions, I shall now provide background on the context and structural elements of the novels in question. Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) was a Victorian sensation novelist who is known primarily for early works of detective fiction—*The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868; subtitled "*A Romance*").[9] Charlotte Smith (1749–1806) led a difficult life but still managed to publish ten novels.[10] Lisa Ottum

5. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "detective story," accessed November 10, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/art/detective-story-narrative-genre.

6. *Oxford Reference*, s.v. "whodunit," accessed November 10, 2023, https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803122345287;jsessionid=4FEBCAD7699047819C54006E63EB544B.

7. "About the Romance Genre," Romance Writers of America, accessed November 10, 2023, https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx.

8. *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "deconstruction," accessed November 10, 2023, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/deconstruction; emphasis added.

9. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. H. P. Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. J. I. M. Stewart (London: Penguin, 1986). For further background on Collins, see Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (London: Bodley Head, 1951); Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991); Melisa Klimaszewski, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Hesperus Press, 2011); Peter Ackroyd, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Chatto & Windus 2012); and Andrew Lycett. *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation* (London: Hutchinson, 2013).

10. Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

refs to *Ethelinde*, Smith's second novel, as one of the author's "more obscure" works.[11] Despite *Ethelinde*'s relative neglect, I argue that it nevertheless potentially demonstrates structural resonances with, if not influences on Collins's *"I Say No."* Primarily, each novel involves the author in a potential dilemma about the closure of the work. *Ethelinde* features two potential suitors for the titular heroine, both of whom are morally and psychologically well-suited for her, leaving her in a quandary. *"I Say No"* features a murder with two suspects but no conclusive proof against either of them. The expected closure of a romance is marriage (or at least a "happily ever after"); the closure of a whodunit is revelation followed by either punishment or forgiveness.

The approach used in this article is similar to Dennis Porter's in *The Pursuit of Crime* (1981), in which he analyzes individual texts in terms of their underlying structures rather than their historical, cultural, or biographical contexts.[12] But while Porter considers the structural functions of the various actors in the detective story (detective, false detective, witnesses, suspects, and false suspects), my analysis will use the structural functions of the rake and the old maid characters for the examination of the romance plot, and it will use the generic conventions of intellectual and moral closure during the analysis of the whodunit. Marriage and solving a crime are at the centers of the romance and whodunit genres, respectively, and *Ethelinde* problematizes certainty within the romance genre in a manner which is also characteristic of the whodunit *"I Say No."* Many later whodunits are about bafflement rather than uncertainty, in the sense that while there is a limited pool of suspects, it is initially unclear how any of them could have committed the crime, and thus the question of how the murder was carried out takes precedence over the question of who did it. In contrast, *"I Say No"* presents a stark situation in which there are only two suspects; either of them could obviously have committed the murder, each of them is implicitly pointing the finger of blame at the other, one of them is lying, and the only question is which one.

By including exactly two plausible suitors, *Ethelinde* shifts the reader's focus away from assessing the individual merits of each man and toward the structural problem of uncertainty—which suitor will ultimately succeed? This shift foreshadows the whodunit, where the strength of evidence against the suspects is more important to the detective plot than examining each suspect's character. In the romance, the protagonist is always invested in understanding the suitors' characters. With only one suitor, a romance would concentrate on obstacles to the desired union, whether internal, such as psychological barriers, or external, such as financial issues. Similarly, in a detective story with one suspect, the interest lies in seeing how the case is built rather than identifying the culprit, making it a discussion of constructive proof rather than knowledge.

I shall now begin my detailed analysis of *Ethelinde*. There are three structurally important points: first, the introduction of another potential suitor; second, his apparent death; and third, his resurrection from the ranks of the apparently deceased. The book begins with the introduction of the first hero, Sir Edward Newenden, who is married to another woman but attracted to Ethelinde. As the narrator observes, "her Ladyship [Lady Newenden, Sir Edward's wife] beheld with great apparent indifference the preference which Sir Edward sometimes too evidently gave to the society of Ethelinde."[13] At this stage, the reader's natural expectation is that Lady Newenden will be disposed of, either through death or divorce, to allow the marriage of Sir Edward to Ethelinde. The text exploits Lady Newenden structurally, by presenting her as an obstacle to the closure of the marriage plot, and thus also by

---

11. Lisa Ottum, "'Shallow' Estates and the 'Deep' Wild: The Landscapes of Charlotte Smith's Fiction," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 249–72; 250.

12. Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

13. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 11.

foreshadowing her possible removal as that obstacle. The introduction of the second hero, Montgomery, leads readers both to question their expectations about Lady Newenden's fate and to wonder how Smith will resolve this structural dilemma: the heroine cannot simultaneously be married to both heroes, even if Lady Newenden dies. When the second hero of *Ethelinde* is presumed dead later in the book, readers are more inclined to believe in his death because the narrative drive seems to dictate it. Sir Edward says: "The information that [news]paper contained, my Ethelinde, is unhappily too true. When I received your letter, I made enquiry at Paris. The accounts I have from thence leave no doubt."[14]

In addition to breaching the implicit compact between the author and the reader by contradicting supposedly unassailable evidence of Montgomery's death, the hero's subsequent resurrection negates the potential function of the book as a complicated marriage plot. Just before Montgomery reappears in the novel, and a few pages after the reader is told of Lady Newenden's death,[15] Sir Edward proposes marriage to Ethelinde.[16] She refuses because of her love for Montgomery: "The tenderest affections of mine are buried in the grave of Montgomery. Every hour in its passage convinces me that it will be ever impossible for me to recall them to any other object."[17] Thus Ethelinde would potentially have remained unmarried if the report of Montgomery's death had been accurate. *Ethelinde* also features two characters who, for different reasons, do not intend to marry: an old maid and a rake. They perform similar functions in that they oppose the structural closure of the conventional marriage plot, just as Ethelinde's sentiments do. These two characters are Miss Newenden and Lord Danesforte.

Miss Newenden, Sir Edward's sister, is introduced as a counterpoint to Lady Newenden: "the indolent apathy of Lady Newenden was not disturbed by the boisterous vivacity of her sister-in-law, who, occupied almost entirely by the stable or the kennel, considered her Ladyship as a pretty, insipid doll, whose mind was a mere blank, and whose person was fitted only to advantage the feminine fineries which she herself despised—her own dress being usually such as was distinguished from that of man only by the petticoat" (4). At one point Miss Newenden declares ("in a sharp tone and quick manner"): "Look ye, Sir Edward. . . . I know nothing of love, nor of the fine sentimental stuff [that] sets half the people in the world to make fools of themselves."[18] Later she criticizes her brother's passivity in the face of his wife's provocations in terms that cast a light upon her own character: "He was so much in an habit of bearing her insolence and caprice, that I thought he would never have grown restive let her have done what she would. I dare say that all this rearing and kicking, will end in his being quiet again, and submitting to the curb as gently as ever. Ned was always *as soft hearted as a girl*; and has no notion of taking the bit between the teeth and setting off, as I should have done long ago, if I had been jaded by such a vain, ill tempered, proud doll."[19] The narrator adds that Miss Newenden "never had the least notion of checking whatever she had a mind to say, lest it should hurt the feelings of another."[20] And Sir Edward tells Montgomery, "My sister, though without the slightest disposition to do wrong, is not only singular and absurd in her pursuits, but thinks in a manner peculiar to herself ; while other women at her time of life, for she is not yet thirty, solicit the function of some older woman; or take the utmost care to observe a punctilious decorum in their company and manners, Miss Newenden has determined to live her own

14. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 561.
15. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 565.
16. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 574.
17. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 575.
18. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 329.
19. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 375; emphasis added.
20. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 376.

way, and to associate with men, as well as rival them in field sports."[21] Similarly, the text reveals of Lord Danesforte that "his houses, his equipages, his horses, his mistresses, his dinners, were the theme of the day,"[22] but "marriage was no part of his scheme of life."[23]

Thus Miss Newenden lacks interest in marrying because she has no amorous interest in the opposite sex, and Lord Danesforte lacks interest because he is so attracted to women in general that he does not wish to attach himself to any one in particular. These two character types are not uniquely to be found in *Ethelinde*. Charlotte Lennox's *Euphemia* (1790) features "the fearless huntress Miss Sandford, who, at the age of forty-five, declares her fixed resolution never to marry, though an Endymion were to court her; and boasts of her wonderful art in keeping men at a distance";[24] and Charlotte Smith's *Celestina* (1791) includes Captain Thorold, who "from having indulged himself in the cruel vanity of extensive conquest, was incapable of any lasting or serious attachment."[25] However, the presence of the old maid and the rake in the same novel, and one in which the author has chosen to focus on the question of uncertainty in the marriage plot by including two plausible suitors for the heroine, reinforces the possibility of a lack of closure.[26]

Miss Newenden does eventually—and unexpectedly—marry, but like the resurrection of the second hero, this development undermines the theme of the book. *Ethelinde* sacrifices thematic unity for the sake of surprising the reader on these two occasions. If it had not done so, it would have had a lack of resolution in the main marriage plot, together with a collection of three different reasons for opposing the closure of such a plot. Thus *Ethelinde* hints at the possibility of an alternative romance text, one that defies convention.[27]

My earlier publication on *"I Say No"* further illuminates the structural parallels between romance and mystery plots by revealing a mystery with two suspects but no proof against either of them, analogous to the hypothetical alternative version of *Ethelinde* with two suitors for the heroine but no marriage.[28] At the end of *"I Say No,"* one of the two suspects dies of natural causes, and the article argues that this death can be construed as an extrajudicial retribution by the constructed author, which also serves as a means of identifying the murderer through the generic convention that the culprit is always punished unless specific reasons are given why he should not be. This argument crucially relies upon the reader's knowledge of the fictionality of the text, since the real world does not have a convention which ensures that murderers are always identified. Thus in *"I Say No"* we have knowledge of the criminal's identity but no constructive proof, and the novel is not merely a mystery without a solution but a deconstruction of the nature of the mystery plot.[29] The

---

21. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 419.
22. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 30.
23. Smith, *Ethelinde*, 31.
24. Charlotte Lennox, *Euphemia*, ed. Susan Kubica Howard (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2008), 192.
25. Charlotte Smith, *Celestina*, ed. Loraine Fletcher (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), 178.
26. A deconstruction of the marriage plot is not the same as a criticism of the social institution of marriage. The latter could be achieved straightforwardly by portraying a number of dysfunctional marriages. For example, Norman Page's introduction to another Wilkie Collins novel, *Man and Wife* (1870), states: "What begins, then, as a novel about the validity or invalidity of a particular form of marriage turns into one that radically questions the institution of marriage itself, and in particular what it entails for women." Norman Page, introduction to *Man and Wife,* by Wilkie Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), *xi–xii.*
27. This is the text which would have been written if Smith had chosen not to have Miss Newenden marry and had also chosen to end *Ethelinde* before the revelation that Montgomery was still alive, thus leaving Ethelinde unmarried. In this alternative text, Ethelinde's marriage is the (unfulfilled) plot objective whose status as a McGuffin is debatable, and the reasons for this ambiguity are discussed at the end of this paper.
28. K. A. Kale, "Yes and No: Problems of Closure in Collins's *'I Say No,'" Wilkie Collins Society Journal* (1998): 44–46.
29. *"I Say No"* is also another example of a text in which the status of a plot objective (in this case, to find the identity of the murderer) as a McGuffin is debatable.

imperative for moral closure (the murderer must be either punished or explicitly forgiven) leads to the satisfaction of intellectual closure (the murderer must be identified) rather than the other way around, as in a conventional whodunit.[30]

The alternative text hinted at in *Ethelinde* has an open ending which involves no marriage for the heroine.[31] *"I Say No"* suggests a different kind of open ending within the romance genre. As a hypothetical example of this kind of open ending, consider Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) with a revised conclusion consisting of a letter from William Price to a fellow naval officer in which Price mentions casually that his sister Fanny has been married, but he does not mention to whom.[32] Then the reader would not know whether Fanny has married Edmund Bertram or Henry Crawford. This hypothetical alternative ending yields a closure which is formally the opposite of that in *"I Say No"*: in the first case, the closure of the romantic plot is known to the characters but not to the reader; in the second, the closure of the whodunit plot is known to the reader but not to the characters.

A difference between the Collins and the Smith deconstructions is that *"I Say No"* spotlights the fictionality of the text, whereas *Ethelinde* spotlights the similarity in function between the old maid and the rake in the specific context of the marriage plot. Porter's analysis of *The Moonstone* demonstrates that this novel is structurally complex for two reasons : first, the various individual roles in the whodunit genre (detective, false detective, suspect, false suspect, witness) are split between multiple characters; and secondly, many of the characters fill multiple roles. My analysis of *Ethelinde* benefits from being viewed as an analogue of Porter's: two character types which are not staples of the romance genre (the rake and the old maid) and which do not have specific functions within that genre are nevertheless present in this special case and serve the purpose of generic deconstruction.[33] Another difference between the Collins and the Smith deconstructions is that by not having any intellectual closure on the diegetic level, the text of *"I Say No"* leads the reader to consider an extradiegetic argument in which the traditional order generally found in the whodunit of intellectual closure followed by moral closure is reversed. In contrast, the text of *Ethelinde* invites the reader to consider the possibility that the traditional romantic closure of the marriage plot (the heroine is married at the end of the book) might be replaced by aesthetic closure (the heroine remains unmarried but the fiction has artfully included three characters with different reasons for not marrying). This consideration has the function of putting vicarious romantic fulfilment in opposition to intellectual satisfaction. Since the romance genre has only one potential type of closure (the romantic fulfillment of the heroine), interchanging the order of two different types of closure (as in *"I Say No"*) is not possible.

"I Say No" presents a mystery which is apparent both to the characters and to the reader and a solution which can only be perceived by the reader, and only if they acknowledge the fictionality of the text and the existence of generic conventions. *Ethelinde* and *"I Say No"* both challenge the incipient conventions of what would become the two great genres of formula fiction.

I conclude by discussing the relevance of *Ethelinde* to the theory of the McGuffin. *Ethelinde*, as it stands, is a romance in which the final objective of the heroine's marriage is clearly not a McGuffin. However, the marriage plot in the alternative text (with the heroine,

---

30. A mystery without a solution could very easily be created by taking any conventional whodunit and truncating it by excising the chapter with the solution and any succeeding chapters. However, lack of closure does not in itself make a deconstruction.

31. In the actual novel, Ethelinde does marry Montgomery once she discovers that he is still alive.

32. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. June Sturrock (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2001).

33. A rake could of course be present in any romance as one of the suitors, but in this case, his unwillingness to marry would only serve to disqualify him as the specific "murderer" of the romance (the future spouse) and would not deconstruct the genre.

the rake, and the old maid all unmarried) could be reasonably classified as either a McGuffin or not. On the one hand, as the heroine has remained unmarried, the heroine's marriage must be regarded as merely a device to set the train of events in motion. On the other hand, the specific nature of the heroine's final predicament (caught between her feelings for two lovers), together with the presence of two characters on the fictional canvas whose function is to oppose the closure of the marriage plot for different reasons, indicates that the purpose of the text is not closure but deconstruction. Thus, even though the nominal initial purpose of the narrative (the heroine's marriage) has not been achieved, the final point of arrival is more important than the journey. If the purpose of the destination is to question the motivation for the journey, one cannot argue that this motivation is merely a fungible device for setting the journey in motion.

The structural parallels between *Ethelinde* and *"I Say No"* lead to the question of whether the latter novel could be similarly analysed in terms of McGuffin theory. The answer is both yes and no. The reader who is unwilling to accept the fictionality of *"I Say No"* is faced with a mystery which has no solution and, consequently, has to accept that the mystery is a McGuffin, a device to justify the associated investigation. The reader who is willing to accept the fictionality of the text, together with the associated generic conventions, has a solution to the mystery, and consequently, this mystery cannot be a McGuffin. Thus, different readers could legitimately disagree about the status of the mystery. It is not about an issue of subjective judgement, as it would be in many other cases—the importance of the potential McGuffin to the reader—rather it is about the philosophical question of whether or not the reader is willing to suspend their disbelief in the fictionality of the text. However, since the second way of reading *"I Say No"* yields a solution to the central enigma of the text, in this case the text does not involve a non-McGuffin that lacks closure. So the answer could be "yes"—as in the alternative version of *Ethelinde*, the main plot driver can reasonably be classified as either a McGuffin or not. Yet the answer could also be "no": *"I Say No"* does not, in either reading, include an example of an unrealized objective which is not a McGuffin.

In this article, I have shown how an analysis of *Ethelinde* in conjunction with *"I Say No"* highlights the structural similarities between the romance and the whodunit. It has also shown how the potentially open-ended nature of Smith's text illuminates the theory of the McGuffin. It has done so by suggesting an example of a plot objective for which definitive classification as either a McGuffin or not is philosophically impossible, and if it is classified as not a McGuffin, it counterintuitively remains unresolved at the end of the text.