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John Cloy  
*University of Mississippi*

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TWO ALTERED ENDINGS—  
DICKENS AND BULWER-LYTTON

John Cloy

*The University of Mississippi*

Charles Dickens's decision to alter the ending of *Great Expectations* has met with almost universal disapproval. A direct result of advice from Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the changed conclusion has been referred to with varying degrees of distaste. Edgar Johnson termed it a "tacked-on addition," while earlier George Gissing had used stronger language—"Lytton's imbecile suggestion." Although Bulwer's exact words to Dickens have not been preserved, they were convincing enough to persuade the younger novelist to make a substantial alteration. Bulwer so "strongly urged the revision" and "supported his view with such good reasons" that Dickens decided to follow his counsel—and added that the "story will be more acceptable through the alteration."<sup>1</sup>

Various critics have supplied reasons why Bulwer was moved to give Dickens such a suggestion.<sup>2</sup> Others simply place Bulwer in the camp of Mrs. Grundy and he is often referred to as a "sentimentalist." Indeed, he did have an almost uncanny knack for perceiving what the reading public wanted and providing it.

Although Bulwer had undoubtedly by this point (of counseling Dickens) developed a critical position in regard to fiction writing, his position was directly shaped by earlier literary experiences, primarily that of the Eugene Aram controversy. When Bulwer published *Eugene Aram* in 1832, this Newgate novel (based on the sensational trial and hanging of a self-educated linguist for murder in the eighteenth century) became an enormous popular success. There had been several other literary works dealing with the Aram theme since the scholar's execution in 1759 (the "best"-known was Thomas Hood's "The Dream of Eugene Aram" in 1829), but Bulwer's novel became the most successful. Critical opinion was not so generous, however. Although the book did receive some positive attention, the majority of notices it inspired were negative, if not scathing.

Bulwer had acquired the enmity of a number of critics, including Thackeray and the group at *Fraser's Magazine*. He was subsequently attacked by a wide array of critics, usually on the pretext that the novel was morally unsuitable since its subject was a convicted murderer. The publication of "Elizabeth Brownrigge: A Tale" (a parody of *Eugene Aram*) was especially humiliating. Probably written by members of the hostile *Fraser's* clique (although sometimes attributed to

Thackeray<sup>3</sup>), the book contains a letter explaining that the author borrowed a copy of *Eugene Aram* from a washerwoman to help in learning the art of composition in that genre.<sup>4</sup> Bulwer's publication of "A Word to the Public" in 1847, an attempt at defense of his critical principles, was largely unsuccessful.

*Eugene Aram* went through two editions (1832 and 1840) with the critical hounds harrowing Bulwer at every step. By the time of the third edition (1849), Bulwer, hypersensitive to adverse criticism,<sup>5</sup> was in a state verging on nervous collapse from overwork and the stressful years of controversy he had endured. At this point Bulwer decided to alter the ending of his own novel. In the preface to the 1849 edition, he states that, after re-evaluating the facts of the case, "I have convinced myself" that Aram is only guilty of robbery and innocent of the actual murder for which he was convicted.<sup>6</sup> As Tyson notes, this idea is hard to swallow and was certainly an effort by Bulwer to stop the critical onslaught,<sup>7</sup> even though his grandson, the Earl of Lytton; apparently believed his grandfather's explanation of the change.<sup>8</sup>

This alteration did in fact achieve the desired effect, and critics dropped the condemnation of *Eugene Aram*. Bulwer had in effect been pursuing a realist bent in this novel, although the character himself is romanticized. Aram commits murder, and, despite his qualities as a scholar, is tried, convicted, and executed (as is consistent with the events of the actual case). Bulwer's changing of the conclusion of the book can be construed as the movement toward a form of romanticism that ignores largely the facts of the incident. Yet the so-called "shift" in critical position directly results from outside factors, whether or not Bulwer admitted it to anyone—including himself. The change is coerced, and therefore not fully valid.

When Bulwer subsequently read the proposed conclusion to Dickens' novel and was compelled to voice objections, he envisioned adverse critical reaction (however misplaced his concern) if Dickens were to follow his story realistically to its logical conclusion (that the novel should end with Pip a sadder, wiser, and more mature man, sans Estella). Bulwer was still affected by the treatment he had received concerning *Eugene Aram* and over-reacted accordingly. Dickens's original conclusion to *Great Expectations* was in no way as objectionable as the earlier ending of *Eugene Aram*, yet Bulwer foresaw potential problems and advised his friend to make changes that would prove more critically acceptable (i.e. safer). Bulwer's recommendation is more than an offering at the shrine of Mrs. Grundy; it stems from an expedient adopting of a more conventional critical stance, which he in

172            DICKENS AND BULWER LYTTON

turn urged upon Dickens. Unconsciously taking the path of least resistance himself, Bulwer was ready to impose it on his friend.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (Boston, 1875), 2: 369.

<sup>2</sup>Edwin Eigner has stated that Bulwer had developed a critical perspective which made unhappy endings unpalatable to the reading public. "Bulwer-Lytton and the Changed Ending of *Great Expectations*," *NCF*, 25(1970), 104-107. David Paroissien, in his introduction to Part III of *Selected Letters of Charles Dickens* (Boston, 1985), pp. 290-291, maintains that Bulwer's stance sacrificed realism to a more romantic position within which the author is allowed freedom to manipulate the substance of his characters.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Whibley, in *William Makepeace Thackeray* (New York, 1903), p. 27, and Ernest Boll, "The Author of Elizabeth Brownrigge: A Review of Thackeray's Techniques," *SP*, 39(1942), 79-101, both make cases for Thackerayan authorship of the piece.

<sup>4</sup>Nancy J. Tyson, *Eugene Aram: Literary History and the Typology of the Scholar-Criminal* (Hamden, Conn., 1985), pp. 96-97.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Sadleir, *Bulwer: A Panorama* (Boston, 1931), p. 252.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Works of Edward Bulwer-Lytton* (New York, n.d.), 5: 414.

<sup>7</sup>Tyson, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup>Victor Lytton, *The Life of Edward Bulwer, First Lord Lytton* (London, 1913), 1: 389, n 1.