



The Darkening Glass

Paul Doherty

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Mathilde of Westminster must face a dangerous foe in the third novel in Paul Doherty's acclaimed series.

March 1312 and England is divided. Edward II is in conflict with his barons over royal favourite Gaveston, and Queen Isabella is momentarily pregnant with the first union of Plantagenet and Capetian blood.

Meanwhile, rebel Robert Bruce prowls the Scottish border seeking advancement.

Mathilde of Westminster senses a challenge for the throne is imminent. When the great Earls step up their campaign, the King and Queen are forced to flee to a fortified priory in Tynemouth, now vulnerable to the Scottish marauders on land and Bruce's allies at sea.

With threats all around, the royal party can only despair when one of their camp is murdered. Will Mathilde be able to find the perpetrator before the King loses control of the throne?

The Darkening Glass Details

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From Reader Review The Darkening Glass for online ebook

Petra says

I don't really like this particular series from Paul Doherty. I find the Hugh Corbett books a much better read.

Kathryn says

The Darkening Glass by Paul Doherty, published in 2009, is the third novel in Doherty's murder mystery series featuring Mathilde ('of Westminster'), a French physician who joins the retinue of Isabella of France and travels to England with her when Isabella marries Edward II in 1308. All the novels are narrated in the first person by Mathilde herself in old age, sometime after 1358 (as she mentions that Isabella is dead and - GAH - buried next to Roger Mortimer at the Greyfriars in London. No, she wasn't! The way Doherty keeps repeating this myth in his novels despite knowing perfectly well it's not true really irritates me). The first novel is set at the time of Isabella's marriage and arrival in England in 1308, the second a few months after this as Edward's barons try to get Piers Gaveston exiled, and Darkening Glass in 1312, covering the period of Piers' return from his third exile and his murder.

Darkening Glass is typical Doherty, and no doubt will please his legions of fans with its vivid depictions of fourteenth-century life, glimpses into power politics and a juicy whodunit. For me, there's too much description in Darkening Glass and in Doherty's novels in general; this is a matter of personal taste, but I find the pace of the novel too slow and I get a strong sense of déjà vu from his previous novels - Doherty seems to recycle a lot of his descriptions of street scenes, clothes, feasts and so on. I don't want to give away the novel's plot, but much of it hangs on Doherty's theory that Edward II has lost interest in Piers Gaveston, who is bitterly jealous of Isabella's pregnancy and her influence over her husband, aware that he is losing the king's favour, and blackmailing Edward in desperation. Unfortunately I don't come anywhere close to believing this, so much of the novel didn't ring true to me and therefore I found it very hard to enjoy it.

Doherty's author's note at the end of the novel says that Edward II's reaction to Piers Gaveston's murder was "strangely muted. He called Gaveston a fool, and only much later did he kindle his angry hatred against the earls....". That made me blink rapidly. Edward very nearly went to war against Piers' killers the earls of Lancaster, Warwick and Hereford in the summer of 1312, and the Vita Edwardi Secundi says "having summoned his counsellors, he enquired from them what should be done about these things, although he had already decided to destroy those who had killed Piers." Other chroniclers comment on Edward's desire for revenge and on the utter rage he felt towards Piers' killers. Yes, what Edward said in public, as recorded by the Vita, might sound callous - but (assuming the words are accurately recorded) to me they're a sign not of indifference but of deep shock and horror - focusing on how a terrible event can have happened before the trauma of losing a loved one has had time to sink in. Anyway, actions speak louder than words, and it's perfectly obvious that Edward II adored Piers Gaveston, felt deep grief and rage at his death, yearned for revenge, and cherished Piers' memory for the rest of his reign. Although Doherty's take on events of 1312 is original and fresh, and his portrayal of Piers' death is moving, it's too far removed from reality for me.

Doherty also claims in his author's note that "Isabella's separation from her husband during the crisis was also very curious, bearing in mind that she was pregnant." I'm really not sure what he means here. The queen wasn't separated from her husband for most of the period from mid-February to late June 1312, and was with him at York when he heard of Piers' death on or just before 26 June (Alison Weir in her biography of

Isabella also misses the fact that the king and queen were together when news came of Piers' murder). Edward left York for London on 28 June leaving Isabella behind, which strikes me as an entirely sensible, understandable and thoughtful precaution to keep her out of harm's way in the north if he went to war against Piers' killers, not least because she was pregnant. He summoned her south a few weeks later when the situation had calmed somewhat. Doherty also claims in the author's note that "Isabella was trapped at Tynemouth and had to fight her way out. Some chroniclers place this in 1312, others 1323, and others claim that such an escape happened twice." I don't know of any chroniclers who place this event in 1312 or say that it happened twice; one French chronicle says that she had to escape from Tynemouth in 1322 (not 1323) when Robert Bruce's army was nearby, but the story is not mentioned by any English chronicler that I've seen. Isabella's own household book proves that she didn't have to 'fight her way out' of Tynemouth in May 1312 and was not 'trapped' there: she travelled uneventfully to York by land, possibly with her husband, or was reunited with him there a few days later (Edward had gone by sea via Scarborough with Piers Gaveston; it is not clear if Isabella went with them or travelled separately). Paul Doherty's author's notes and lists of historical characters almost invariably contain errors, such as calling Piers Gaveston the 'duke' of Cornwall, calling Edward II's brother-in-law the earl of Hereford 'Henry Bohun' instead of Humphrey, saying that Eleanor of Castile died in 1296 (recte 1290) and that Edward I and Marguerite of France had four children (recte three), claiming that the 'duke' (recte earl) of Warwick himself stabbed Piers Gaveston to death with his dagger when in reality he wasn't even present, and so on and so on. Most unimpressive.

One of the most problematic aspects of *Darkening Glass* for me is the way Mathilde, a first-person narrator, describes the queen: she constantly - or at least that's how it feels - tells the reader how incredibly beautiful and desirable Isabella is. Mathilde is, throughout the series, in love with a former Knight Templar called Demontaigu, and although there's a hint in the first novel when she looks back at her life that she and Isabella have slept together, there are no other indications that she is sexually attracted to women. Yet she describes Isabella like this:

"Queen Isabella was on the verge of full ripeness. Sixteen summers old, she had matured rich and fertile, a fairy-tale Queen from the romances she so ardently read. A beautiful woman, tall, willowy and slender, her face as perfect as an angel, with lustrous blonde hair, rose-kissed lips and eyes that could dazzle with life."

This passage, especially the 'ripeness' bit, made me squirm, as did Mathilde/Doherty's reference in the prologue (which is set a few decades after the events of the rest of the novel) to Isabella's tomb at Greyfriars which contains "her beautiful body" (Isabella was in her sixties when she died in 1358). We also get "She looked radiant...Never had she looked so glorious," "though beautiful and graceful, [she] was sturdy as an oak. Sixteen she was, of full height...Pregnancy had brought a fresh bloom to those blue eyes and that golden face," "Her face, framed in a white wimple, looked truly beautiful, her skin translucent, those eyes a deeper blue, sensuous red lips slightly parted," and "Isabella was that rare flower, elegantly beautiful and lissom but in fact hard and tough as the finest armour in the land." In the first Mathilde novel, *Cup of Ghosts*, she is said to have "a body even a friar would lust after." OK, OK, Isabella has an incredibly beautiful, desirable body and an incredibly beautiful face. I get it.

By contrast, the only physical description of Edward II I can remember in the entire novel is "Edward's face grew soft, smiling, full of that lazy charm that could so easily disarm you." Shouldn't a woman who is supposed to be attracted to men notice and comment on the fact that Edward is tall, muscular and good-looking a wee bit more often? Shouldn't Mathilde be noticing his 'beautiful body' rather than Isabella's, and why on earth would she be constantly thinking about Isabella's 'ripeness' and sensuous, 'rose-kissed lips' (whatever they are)? I'm afraid the frequent and tedious talk of Isabella's amazing gorgeousness and 'beautiful [dead] body' struck me as the author leering over her. There's a huge disconnect between what Doherty wants to describe and the way his chosen narrator would think and feel and react to those around

her; he seems unable or unwilling to write from the perspective of a person who desires men, not women. This has been a problem throughout the Mathilde of Westminster series, but it's particularly acute in the third one. It seems to me too that no other woman in the novels is allowed to be either physically attractive or a sympathetic well-rounded character, and thus risk overshadowing Isabella.

Piers Gaveston, meanwhile, is "pretty-faced" and "a spoilt pampered fop," and has "woman-like features." Well, of course he does. He's Edward's lover. We've got to get those stereotypes of gay/bi men in there somewhere, and never mind the fact that the real Piers was an excellent soldier and jousting knight and - like Edward II himself - about a million miles away from being a pampered fop. Piers' supporters, the so-called Aquilae Petri or 'Eagles of Piers' (an invention of Doherty's), have "foppish ways, curled coiffed hair, painted eyes...". But of course. They are supporters and allies of a man who is in love with and has sex with another man. Obviously, despite being "deadly" and expert soldiers, they have to wear make-up and be as girly as possible.

Turning to characterisation in Darkening Glass, it's rather one-dimensional. Stephen Dunheved, who temporarily rescued Edward from Berkeley in 1327 and joined the earl of Kent's plot in 1330, and is a Dominican friar here (his brother Thomas was, but Stephen was lord of the manor of Dunchurch in Warwickshire), is "a wolf disguised as a lamb," a fanatic, devious and evil; even in his author's note, Doherty calls him a "real and very sinister figure." Err, why was Dunheved 'sinister'? I've studied him as much as anyone has in the last 700 years, and I have no idea. Edward II is a feeble brainless idiot; Piers Gaveston has "a heart full of murderous deceit"; the Beaumont siblings Henry, Louis and Isabella, relatives of both Edward II and his queen, are an "unholy trinity, those imps of Satan, falseness incarnate..."; the earl of Warwick is "violent and malicious...the devil at the feast"; the earl of Hereford is fat and stupid; Isabella's father Philippe IV of France and her three brothers are evil and nasty and sex abusers to boot. Edward III is mentioned briefly in the prologue, and has been depicted in previous Doherty novels as - bizarrely - some kind of raving psychopath. (From Cup of Ghosts: "The king ordered me here screaming, his foam-flecked lips curling like those of a snarling dog.") The Mathilde novels are plot-driven rather than character-driven, but still, I'd hoped for more subtle characterisation than this. Pretty well all the characters in the series except Isabella, Mathilde herself and her lover Demontaigne are horrible and/or evil and/or stupid (with the exception of Margaret de Clare, who's a bland "little mouse"), and Isabella is, completely implausibly, perfect and wonderful with no character flaws whatsoever. (As well as being incredibly amazingly beautiful and having a beautiful gorgeous beautiful desirable beautiful body, in case you hadn't noticed. Yes, even when dead in her sixties.)

In his much earlier novel *Death Of A King*, Doherty changed Edward III's date of birth by eight months in order to make Roger Mortimer his real father. (AGH!!!!) In *Darkening Glass* he graciously allows Edward II to be the father of his own son, but we do get a passage that made me snort with laughter:

"In the February of 1312, the favourite's wife, that little mouse, the sanctimonious and ever pious Margaret de Clare, gave birth to a girl child. Six weeks later, Isabella announced to a delighted court that she too was expecting a child. I had known this since the Feast of the Epiphany [6 January]. I advised the queen that she was to be a mother: her courses had stopped for at least three months..."

Edward III was born on 13 November 1312, yet Mathilde knows at the beginning of January that Isabella is expecting - and it appears that Isabella's menstruation had ceased at least three months prior to that, so in September 1311. Blimey, that's a long pregnancy, isn't it?

Paul Doherty claims in his author's note that "The events of this novel are closely based on fact...". Unfortunately, I'd have to disagree with that. It's a slow-moving and rather implausible murder mystery

based extremely loosely on real historical people and events. I often feel with Doherty that the speed with which he writes his books - several a year - has a negative impact on their quality, and I don't think *The Darkening Glass* is one of his better ones. Probably a good idea to go back to one of his Hugh Corbett novels instead.

Helen says

We recently had a tv program on this period so it was interesting to compare that with Paul Doherty's version. They are certainly in agreement on the general events, but Doherty, because he's writing historical fiction, can run alternate scenarios.

Queen Eleanor - is pregnant at this time so any instability in her actions would be put down to raging hormones but both the book & the program seem to agree that the 16 year old was holding her own in the political stakes and Doherty suggests that she had won Edward away from Gaveston, who seems to have been almost blindly ambitious. She had spent the years from 12 to 16 learning the ins and outs of the English court and with so much to lose she was certainly motivated to get on top of it all.

Edward - we don't really see too much of him in the book but the film portrayed him as waffling and uncertain. Doherty suggests that he was tired of being at odds with those who should be his chief counsellors and even tired of Gaveston. Tired of being tired, perhaps.

It's odd to be reading this fiction as if it were history, but Doherty makes historicity claims in his author's note so we're entitled to address him seriously. He appears to have created Gaveston's Eagles in order to have a mystery and has added the King and Queen's confessor Stephen Dunheved, a Dominican brother, to complicate things. Brother Stephen apparently existed as described and was there at the time, but given what Doherty says of him it would be hard to explain his continued existence as confessor.

The fictional characters - Matthilde and Demontaigu are as portrayed in the previous volumes and are sympathetic and pretty well medieval, even in Matthilde's medical practice.

This is a good series and the questions I have about events - Tynemouth, York, the separation of King & Queen, and the whole matter of Scarborough - will have to wait until I lay my hands of some serious historical material, preferably *The Life of Edward II*. Very enjoyable, if a little confusing as to motivation.

Winnie says

The third series featuring Mathilde of Westminster as she recalls her adventures with Edward II and Isabella - I find these utterly compelling reading - thoroughly enjoyable.

Betty says

I enjoyed the trilogy very much. (*The Cup of Ghosts*, *The Poison Maiden* and *The Darkening Glass*). Contemporary accounts were used to create a factual reading of that day. The incidents which took place in the novels took place in the 14th century. You truly get a glimpse of what Royal life would have been like.

Marion Mansfield says

Int

Intrigue, mystery and all the suspense of a master chess game. I thoroughly enjoyed it and highly recommend that you read it!

Rebecca says

I can deal with historical inaccuracies, but not when they are even wrong in the author's note explaining what 'really happened'. The descriptions in this book made it exhausting to read. The characters were not all that believable. I can't see me reading this author again.

Mary says

I would have loved it more if the story had continued for about 10 more pages.

Robert Olson says

Erased my review twice

I refuse to write a third time. Flaw in kindle ap. Liked the book. They could definitely improve link to goodreads.

Kathy says

My interest in the period kept me reading, but there is a lot not to like in this book I purchased...I usually try to read through this author's books when I am visiting the library but had to buy something to read on the train.

The book has many historical inaccuracies. Oh well. My cell phone woke me at 1:30 am so at least the book got me through the night.

Blame it on algorithms that suggest I read his books since Amazon knows I like medieval books.

Author Kathryn Warner thoroughly reviews this book here on GR if you wish to know its many shortcomings.
