

# Midcentury Jacobean: Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh,

## P.D. James and *The Duchess of Malfi*

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During the mid-twentieth century, a dramatic shift was taking place in the conceptualization of Early Modern drama. The internal tensions which had always beset the category of “Elizabethan” drama reached a critical point, and from that crisis the concept of “the Jacobean” emerged in all its horrific glory. Pascale Aebischer’s work on the Jacobean has set the terms of debate in two ways. Firstly, her metacritical history in the volume *Jacobean Drama* has traced the appearance of the term in scholarship and its shifting reputation amongst academics. Secondly, her development of the concept of the “contemporary Jacobean” (notably in *Screening Early Modern Drama Today*) has drawn on the work of Susan Bennett to demonstrate the ways in which Jacobean drama has provided a source for critical, dissident and resistant theatre and film in the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> She has identified works such as Mike Figgis’ *Hotel*, Derek Jarman’s *Edward II* and Alex Cox’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* as exemplars of this “contemporary Jacobean” style, which is consciously deviant, transgressive, irreverent and anachronistic, setting itself up in opposition to the tradition of “heritage” Shakespeare films such as Branagh and Thompson’s *Much Ado About Nothing* and John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love*. Aebischer’s ideas have been extended and debated by a number of other critics, including Courtney Lehmann, Jennifer Clement, and the scholars who contributed to a special issue of the journal *Interdisciplinary*

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<sup>1</sup> See also “Shakespearean Heritage and the Preposterous ‘Contemporary Jacobean’ Film: Mike Figgis’ *Hotel*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 60.3, Fall 2009, pp.279-303.

*Literary Studies* devoted to “The ‘Preposterous Contemporary Jacobean’: Adaptations in Film and Theater, Responses to Pascale Aebischer”.<sup>2</sup> Almost all of these developments have explored the applicability of her notion of the “contemporary Jacobean” to culture in the late twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> In this article I intend to go backwards from this period, examining the appearance of the Jacobean in midcentury detective fiction. Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh and P.D. James all produced novels in this period which allude to one of the defining dramatic texts of the Jacobean tradition, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. The books in question are *Sleeping Murder*, *Singing in the Shrouds* and *Cover Her Face*, respectively. By examining the development of the idea of the Jacobean in the midcentury, and tracing the engagements these novels make with Webster, I will reveal that they fill a lacuna in our narrative of the Jacobean, which Aebischer has herself sketched in her metacritical work. A longer origin for the category of the “contemporary Jacobean” will be provided by these novels, which work through the implications of the Early Modern cultural inheritance in devious and ambiguous ways, displaying critical unease about the value of that inheritance. Recent work on detective fiction’s engagement with Shakespeare – most notably by Lisa Hopkins – has emphasized the playwright’s presence as a near-constant of the genre. As elaborated by Hopkins, Shakespearean quotation was far from being a transgression of the generic expectations in detective fiction, or a straining after a more “high-brow” tone, and was in fact a recognised convention.<sup>4</sup> Jacobean drama, however, was a less naturalised part

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<sup>2</sup> Lehmann, “‘Turn off the dark’: A Tale of Two Shakespeares in Julie Taymor’s *Tempest*”, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 32:1, Spring 2014, pp. 45-64; Clement, “Introduction to ‘Shakespeare and Beyond’”, *Shakespeare*, 11, 2015, pp. 1-9; *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Special Issue, ‘The “Preposterous Contemporary Jacobean”: Adaptations in Film and Theater, Responses to Pascale Aebischer’, 17:2, 2015. The influence of her ideas is also in evidence in the special issue of *Shakespeare Bulletin* dedicated to “Not Shakespeare: Early Modern Drama and Film”, edited by Jenny Sager (32.1, Spring 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The major exception is Benjamin Hilb’s “Contesting JFK: The Opposition to Wartime Propaganda in Orson Welles’s *Chimes at Midnight*”, in *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 17:2, 2015 pp.164-188 – since Welles’s film was released in 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), 1-8. See also Jem Bloomfield, “‘Three Ordinary, Normal Old Women’: Agatha Christie’s Uses of Shakespeare”, *Shakespeare*, December 2018 (online), for a discussion of the various engagements with Shakespeare made by one of the novelists in question.

of the genre's world, offering a (slightly) more recondite form of allusion with a less automatic justification for its presence. The cluster of novels I have focused on here are not the only works in the genre which allude to Jacobean drama. I could have considered James' own *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, Ruth Rendell's *A Sleeping Life* or Caroline Graham's *The Killings at Badger's Drift*, to take a few examples. However, the three novels discussed here mark the turning of a cultural moment, and exemplify the use of Jacobean drama in the detective novel to negotiate unease about the cultural inheritance of English literature.

### **The Prehistory of the Midcentury Jacobean**

By the mid twentieth century, Shakespeare had become so securely established as a literary, cultural and even national icon that his work had come to stand for the entirety of the Early Modern period in the minds of many British people. Though the more consciously erudite middlebrow novelists, such as Dorothy L. Sayers, continued to mention authors such as Edmund Spenser and Thomas Browne on their own terms, the sixteenth and seventeenth century became increasingly regarded as "around the time of Shakespeare". The phrases used to discuss such writers shifted from "silver poets of the sixteenth century", to terms like "contemporaries of Shakespeare".<sup>5</sup> At the same time, there were distinct elements in the work of a number of Tudor and Stuart authors which did not easily cohere with the image which been built up around the figure of Shakespeare. John Ford, John Webster and Thomas Middleton, for example, had produced (respectively) *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*, with its apparent glorification of an incestuous relationship and graphic violence; *The Duchess of Malfi*, which also featured incest, dancing madmen and a sexually adventurous heroine; and *Antonio's Revenge*, involving the ritual murder of a child and the dousing of a tomb in its

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<sup>5</sup> As in the anthology *Silver Poets of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century* edited by Gerald Bullett for Everyman (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1947)

blood, carried out by the hero. It is not only the lurid quality of the events depicted onstage which set these plays apart from the positive image of Shakespearean drama, but also the fact that they are frequently carried out by characters with whom the audience are offered the possibility of sympathising. The notion of Shakespearean drama, meaning both works by Shakespeare and those which possess a “Shakespearean” quality, as the epitome of healthy, English culture sat oddly alongside excursions into lycanthropy, ritual murder and transgressive sex. A survey of the most popular scholarly work on Shakespeare and Early Modern drama in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows a growing awareness of these contradictions. William Hazlitt’s hugely successful *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* published in the 1820s, grouped the whole period together, declaring that by the age of Elizabeth “I would be understood to mean the time from the Reformation to the end of Charles I”, and that his concern was with “the writers of a certain School or style of Poetry or Prose, who flourished together or immediately succeeded one another within this period.”<sup>6</sup> He insisted throughout the lectures on the distinctive and valuable qualities of these authors, and the need to rescue them from the neglect into which they had fallen during the eighteenth century:

Their attainments of different kinds bore the same general stamp, and it was sterling; what they did had the mark of their age and country upon it. Perhaps the genius of Great Britain (if I may so speak without offence or flattery) never shone out fuller or brighter, or looked more like itself, than at this point. Our writers and great men had something in them that savoured of the soil from which they grew... There was no tinsel, and but little art; they were not the spoilt children of affectation and refinement, but a bold, vigorous, independent race of thinkers, with prodigious strength and

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<sup>6</sup> William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, chiefly dramatic*. (1820, repr. London: George Bell, 1901) 1-2.

energy, with none but natural grace, and heartfelt, unobtrusive delicacy. The mind of their country was great in them, and it prevailed. With their learning and unexampled acquirement, they did not forget that they were men: with all their endeavours after excellence, they did not lay aside the strong original bent and character of their minds.<sup>7</sup>

Hazlitt's lectures were a major factor in starting the enthusiasm for "the old British dramatists" which grew during the mid and late nineteenth century. Authors including Marlowe, Dekker, Webster and Jonson were printed, edited and discussed, often in terms which recalled Hazlitt. When the French "Theatre Libre" inspired a number of small British theatre companies to form and begin staging unconventional or uncommercial work in the 1890s, some of the plays performed were the supposedly neglected classics of the Early Modern playwrights. This trend continued into the twentieth century, with the groups growing in number and influence. The contemporary theatre writer Norman Marshall called this phenomenon "the Other Theatre", a network of small, independent companies all aiming to affect the mainstream theatre industry.<sup>8</sup> Some wished to show how different, and how much better, theatre could be if it were radical, experimental, politically committed or all three, whilst some intended to showcase new talent in acting or writing which could be transferred more seamlessly to the traditional theatres. At the same time, the combination of scholarly interest in Early Modern theatre and the traditions of student drama led to other small productions in universities. At Cambridge the Phoenix Society, whose name signalled their interest in the potential for "reviving" supposedly dead plays, was led by the don George Rylands. He also advised on some London theatre productions, including one to which Christie alludes, as I will discuss below.

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<sup>7</sup> Hazlitt, *Lectures*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre* (London: John Lehmann, 1947)

Whilst these theatrical experiments were taking shape, the essays of T.S. Eliot focused attention on Elizabethan and Jacobean literature in literary criticism. Eliot's serious consideration of dramatists such as Ford, Massinger, Torneur, Beaumont and Fletcher introduced them to a wider readership and encouraged an appreciation of their distinctive forms of dramaturgy. Eliot's work values Shakespeare above all his contemporaries, but does not collapse the qualities and value of those contemporaries into the question of their similarity to the more famous author. He veers between the terms "Elizabethan" and "Jacobean" in his essays, referring to *King Lear* and *The Duchess of Malfi* as "masterpieces of Elizabethan tragedy" in "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation", but describing Webster, Torneur and Middleton in the same essay as "the later or Jacobean dramatists".<sup>9</sup> Later again in that essay he describes the third period of early modern drama as Jacobean, but regards it as dominated by the tragicomic romances of Beaumont and Fletcher, rather than by tragedy. His "Cyril Torneur" characterizes Ford and Shirley as "the decadence" of the Shakespeare tradition, whilst "Webster [represents] the last ripeness".<sup>10</sup>

There is always a risk in reading teleologically, but Eliot does appear to be developing certain notions which will become significant later in the century. He lavishes sustained attention on the Jacobean writers, begins to use the term "Jacobean", and insists on their significance when considered apart from Shakespeare. He identifies the gory and troubling aspects of their works without necessarily explaining these away as unfortunate excrescences on otherwise noble texts. The significance of his ideas for the present article are evident from a pair of details. The essays dealing with Jacobean drama continued to be collected and reprinted long after the bulk of them had been written in the 1920s and 30s. His preface to

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<sup>9</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Elizabethan Dramatists*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1963, repr. 1968), pp.27, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Eliot, *Elizabethan*, p.109.

the collected *Elizabethan Essays*, for example, was written in 1962, the same year that P.D. James published *Cover Her Face*. In a comment which cemented Webster's status as a representative of the Jacobean poets, Eliot noted there was no separate essay on Webster because "a great deal has been written on this subject...and I have alluded constantly to Webster in discussions of other dramatists".<sup>11</sup> The other detail is the continuing impact of his poem "Whispers of Immortality", which begins with the lines "Webster was much possessed by death/ And saw the skull beneath the skin." P.D. James not only cited Webster in the title of *Cover Her Face*, but also Eliot's phrase about Webster in her later novel *The Skull Beneath the Skin* (1982). Indeed, an echo of the same poem can be found in a crucial moment of her novel *Unnatural Causes* (1967): "Now they were anxious and shaken, possessed by images of blood and death from which they had little hope of shaking free."<sup>12</sup>

The next stage of mid-century Jacobeanism was visible in the 1940s. Whilst this interest in, and enthusiasm for, non-Shakespearean Early Modern drama was burgeoning, the tension I mentioned above was becoming more apparent. The equivalent of Hazlitt's lectures in the mid twentieth century was E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Tillyard's was a more consciously academic work, but still enormously popular and it exerted a huge influence on the public understanding of the period's literature and culture. In it he outlines the cosmology and vision of the world which he believed the Elizabethans held, and which typified the "Elizabethan" spirit. Tillyard uses this idea whilst admitting to the chronological tension involved in deploying the term:

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<sup>11</sup> Eliot, *Elizabethan*, p.7

<sup>12</sup> P.D. James, *Unnatural Causes*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p.219

I sometimes use the word Elizabethan with great laxity, meaning anything within the compass of the English Renaissance, anything between the ages of Henry VIII and Charles I akin to the main trends of Elizabethan thought<sup>13</sup>

Where Hazlitt celebrated this, Tillyard felt the need to defend it, hinting at the growing awareness of the other events and impulses which had to be subsumed in “Elizabethan”, or defined outside it. This ambivalence resurfaces more obviously when he comes to sum up the significance of the work in the last chapter, remarking “If we are sincere with ourselves we must know that we have [the Elizabethan mental] habit in our own bosoms somewhere, queer as it may seem”.<sup>14</sup> The last sentence of the book takes this idea even further:

And, if we reflect on that habit [of mind], we may see (in queerness if not in viciousness) it resembles certain trains of thought in Central Europe the ignoring of which by our scientifically minded intellectuals has helped not a little to bring the world into its present conflicts and distresses.<sup>15</sup>

The earlier author, writing in the at the beginning of the nineteenth century, saw the “Elizabethans” as the source of hearty, authentic British culture, and believed they offered an opportunity for Britons to commune with their national “genius” in its strongest and manliest incarnation. Tillyard, writing after one world war and during another, finds tensions and problems which have led to the present state of Europe. Later in the century, these anxieties and tensions became increasingly attached to the term “Jacobean” rather than “Elizabethan”. They would eventually find expression in the late twentieth-century productions of plays by Webster, Middleton and Rowley, discussed by Aebischer and Bennett, which stressed the

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<sup>13</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, (1943, repr. London: Pimlico, 1998), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Tillyard, *Picture*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> Tillyard, *Picture*, 117.



corrupt and transgressive side of the Early Modern cultural inheritance. The novels I will be discussing in this chapter fall between Tillyard's *Elizabeth World-Picture* and the self-consciously transgressive productions of Jacobean drama in the 1980s and 1990s

I have made this excursion into the critical and cultural history of Early Modern drama because it is necessary to understand the trajectory of the idea of "Jacobean" drama in order to appreciate the complex games Christie, Marsh and James are playing with *The Duchess of Malfi*. In turn, they provide new evidence for the development and reception of "Jacobean" drama as a felt category, which was not yet securely part of the scholarly conversation but which apparently formed part of the imaginative landscape of popular detective fiction. This category articulated a sense that drama written during the Jacobean period was not simply an immoral or debased version of earlier Elizabethan art, but that its very corruption and transgression provided a critique of the society which gave rise to it. Aebischer's account of the history and historiography of critical writing on Jacobean drama identifies the period when these novels appeared as a lull in the development of the scholarly conversation. According to her narrative, the mainstream discussion of Jacobean drama was largely aesthetic and "literary" in its focus during the mid-twentieth century. Una Ellis-Fermor's *The Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation* appeared in 1937, with a sense that the period's art had concerns in common with the modern period, and L.C. Knight's *Drama and Society in the Age of the Jonson*, published the same year, made some moves in historical and contextual analysis before turning to a formalist approach.<sup>16</sup> However, "Knight's book...reveals the painful wrench the transition from aesthetic and purely 'literary' to historically informed and political criticism represented" and shows "why that transition took such a long time to be effected".<sup>17</sup> Critical works of the 1960s – Robert Ornstein's *The Moral Vision of Jacobean*

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<sup>16</sup> Aebischer, *Jacobean*, 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Aebischer, *Jacobean*, 21.

*Tragedy*, T.B. Tomlinson's *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* and Ralph J. Kaufmann's *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism* – betrayed a sense that Jacobean drama was “of little literary and moral value” and not worth as much as Elizabethan work “in the age of formal analysis, stylistic appraisal and moral criticism”.<sup>18</sup> It was not until the late 1970s and the 1980s, according to Aebischer, that “the historical relevance and political force” of Jacobean drama would become the focus of critical writing.<sup>19</sup> It is my contention in this article that the crime novels I am discussing display a strong sense of this political critique and anticipate the next articulation of Jacobean drama's meaning. I will examine the use they make of their allusions to Webster's play, before setting them in the context of the mid-century and showing how they developed an early form of the “contemporary Jacobean” which clashed with the “New Elizabethanism” of the 1950s.

### ***Sleeping Murder***

Christie wrote the novel *Sleeping Murder* in the 1940s, though she then consigned it to a safe until the 1970s, always intending it to be Miss Marple's last case. The plot begins with a young woman from New Zealand looking for a house in which she and her fiancé can live. She is particularly drawn to a house she sees almost by accident, and begins to plan alterations, such as putting some steps up to the house and wallpapering a particular room to turn it into a nursery. She is worried when the gardener clears some bushes and finds that there used to be steps up to the house in that place, and she opens a cupboard to find exactly the wallpaper she had envisioned. Haunting, psychic powers and the theories of J.W. Dunne all present themselves as possibilities to her, before it becomes clear that she actually used to live at this house when she was a very small child, and has residual memories of it. She goes

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<sup>18</sup> Aebischer, *Jacobean*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Aebischer, *Jacobean*, 22.

to stay with Raymond West (Miss Marple's nephew) and his wife Joan, only for another long-forgotten memory to emerge during a visit to the theatre to see *The Duchess of Malfi*:

The lights went down and the play began.

It was superbly acted and Gwenda enjoyed it very much. She had not seen many first-rate theatrical productions.

The play drew to a close, came to that supreme moment of horror. The actor's voice came over the footlights filled with the tragedy of a warped and perverted mentality.

'Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle, she died young...'

Gwenda screamed.

She sprang up from her seat, pushed blindly past the others out into the aisle, through the exit and up the stairs and so to the street. She did not stop, even then, but half walked, half ran, in a blind panic up the Haymarket.<sup>20</sup>

When they return home Joan suggests that Gwenda's reaction was because "the play was a bit too *macabre* for her", and Raymond agrees that "Webster *is* a bit grisly" but that her reaction was extreme for "[j]ust seeing a Jacobean drama".<sup>21</sup> Miss Marple believes that there is more to the episode than the power of Webster's grisly dramaturgy and she is right:

Gwenda has had a flashback of seeing a strangled woman and a man with monkey's paws looking down at her and reciting Ferdinand's line "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle". As the novel unfolds, we discover that this memory is from her own childhood, and took place in the house which she has just bought. The victim was Gwenda's step-mother-to-be, whom she

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<sup>20</sup> There are two details here worth commenting upon. Firstly, as reader familiar with the play will be aware, Christie's description seems to reshape the play slightly: the death of the Duchess happens at the end of the fourth act, not at the end of the fifth, though it is often discussed as the climax, or at least the crucial moment of the play. Secondly, the mention of a "first-rate" production, and Gwenda's flight out of the door onto the Haymarket suggest that Christie had a specific production in mind: *Malfi* was performed at the Haymarket theatre in 1945, with Peggy Ashcroft in the lead and John Gielgud as Ferdinand. Agatha Christie, *Sleeping Murder*, 23-4.

<sup>21</sup> Christie, *Sleeping*, 25.

barely remembers. At the denouement of the novel it turns out that the killer was the victim's brother, who had a possessive and quasi-incestuous obsession with her, eventually killing her to prevent her moving away with the man she loved. This maps onto what are probably the two most famous aspects of *Malfi* in this period: the facts that the story centres on the killing of the title character by strangling, and that her death was at the instigation of her jealously possessive brother. As noted by Charles Osborne, this is probably the only Christie novel in which a quotation within the fictional world potentially reveals the murderer.<sup>22</sup> At least, it could do so, to a sufficiently alert reader who made the right guess. There are no other notable parallels within the text to Webster's play, but the quotation could cause a reader to scrutinise the brother's actions more closely, and there are other clues which point to him. As well as functioning in the extra-textual relationship between the novel and its audience, the quotation guarantees the authenticity of Gwenda's memories within the narrative. She is tempted to believe that her recollections are unreliable, or that her supposed memory was actually a childhood nightmare, but the precision of the quotation allows her to rely on its accuracy, on the basis that a child would not be able to invent a line from a Jacobean play. The very textuality of the horror renders it reliable, even when the same memory involves a man with monkey's paws.

Before "Jacobean" was used to characterise drama, however, it was applied to furniture, and Christie's novel plays an intriguing game with the connotations of the word in these two spheres.<sup>23</sup> Jacobean furniture was extremely popular in the early twentieth century in both Britain and the United States, noted for its heavy and simple forms, in contrast to the slimmer curves of Chippendale or Hepplewhite. The solid, dark Jacobean oak chests or gate-leg tables were associated with authenticity and history rather than grace and elegance, and

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie: A Biographical Companion to the Works of Agatha Christie* (1982, rev. 1999, repr. London: HarperCollins, 2000), 376.

<sup>23</sup> see "Jacobean", sense A. adj., b., in *Oxford English Dictionary*, [www.OED.com](http://www.OED.com).

gained attention at the same time as the Early Modern dramatists were becoming popular in literary circles. The style became so popular that it was widely faked and mass-produced reproductions flooded the market, exported from the US. In her 1916 book, *Jacobean Furniture and English Styles in Oak and Walnut*, Helen Churchill Candee noted that the taste for “heavy square construction, not for bandy legs and delicate restraint” had become so widespread that the “commercial eye of the modern manufacturer began to make hideous variations” on it, producing “tasteless things” that “fill our department stores”.<sup>24</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, “A Correspondent” in *The Observer* complained that a “craze” for Jacobean furniture was encouraged by “producers with exceptional facilities for cheap manufacture”, who used “chemical processes” to give an air of age to the pieces.<sup>25</sup> As a result of the furniture flooding the market, according to this writer, “it is becoming common...When you dine with the Joneses you mingle with the modern Jacobean furniture..It stares at you from nearly every furniture store”.<sup>26</sup> This combination of Early Modern associations with an air of fakery and mass production echoes in Christie’s use of the word “Jacobean”. It appears three times in the novel, the first being when Raymond, Joan and Miss Marple discuss Gwenda’s distress at the theatre. The second and third mentions of the word appear as part of the thought processes of Lily Kimble, a woman who was in service at the house when the murder occurred, and during the novel is persuaded by a newspaper advert to get in touch with Gwenda and her fiancé. Unbeknownst to them, the murderer has also made arrangements to meet her slightly earlier, and Lily is murdered to prevent her giving any details of her memories which might identify the killer. Lily is initially uncertain whether to answer the advertisement, worrying it might involve her with the police, but hoping that it might result in the proverbial “something to her advantage” in the form of a

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<sup>24</sup> Helen Churchill Candee, *Jacobean Furniture and English Styles in Oak and Walnut* (New York: Frederick Stoakes, 1916) p.4, 5.

<sup>25</sup> “A Correspondent”, *The Observer*, (London: 25<sup>th</sup> Sept 1920), p.19.

<sup>26</sup> “A Correspondent”, *Observer*, p.19

bequest or a reward. This benefit crystallises in her thought processes around what she would spend the money on:

Jim was so hidebound, so stick-in-the-mud. She wished there was somebody else she could ask. Someone who would know all about rewards and the police and what it all meant. Pity to turn up a chance of good money.

That wireless set...the home perm...that cherry-coloured coat in Russell's (ever so smart)...even, maybe, a whole Jacobean suite for the sitting-room...

Eager, greedy, short-sighted, she went on dreaming...<sup>27</sup>

As she later travels by train, towards the appointment which she hopes will make her better off but which will in fact result in her death, the same word appears: "Lily Kimble looked out of the window with eye that did not see the lush countryside, but saw instead a Jacobean suite upholstered in jade green..." In *Sleeping Murder* the word "Jacobean" means both the authentic words of a play from the age of Shakespeare and the cheap reproduction furniture which lures a woman to her death. It is particularly telling that the countryside which has been used as a metonym for England, rather as Shakespeare has, changes in front of Lily's eyes to the Jacobean chairs.

At first reading, it might appear that Christie is simply imposing a class division on the meanings of the word: the upper middle-class young woman thinks of seventeenth-century drama whilst the working-class older woman thinks of consumer goods. In the intertextual world of the detective novel, Gwenda would have correctly understood the textual matrix she inhabits, whilst Lily's misreading led to her losing the game by being murdered. However,

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<sup>27</sup> Christie, *Sleeping*, 133.

*Sleeping Murder*'s attitude to the Jacobean is much more ambivalent than this binary reading would allow. *The Duchess of Malfi* provides a prompt for Gwenda's memories, guarantees their authenticity and gives her an opportunity to discover her step-mother's murderer. It also reveals horrors in her family past about which she was totally unaware. The play participates in the cluster of symbols which represent the spaces, history and culture which Gwenda, as a New Zealander, expects to enjoy in her married life: "she would see something of England – of that England that Giles had told her about and which she had never seen; although, like most New Zealanders, she called it Home".<sup>28</sup> The same can be said of the house which she buys, not knowing she briefly lived there as a child: "This is *my* house, thought Gwenda. It's *home*. I feel already as though I know every bit of it".<sup>29</sup> Though the plot rules out the idea that the house is literally haunted, the murder takes the place of supernatural activity in constructing a Gothic world for Gwenda to explore. The house, England, Jacobean drama and her own family constitute a set of overlapping spheres of the uncanny, in which Gwenda expects to find comfort and identity, but in which she is forced to face horror and ancestral guilt. Lily's understanding of the word "Jacobean" is not part of the same symbol cluster, but it also takes part in the tarnishing of the image of England and its meanings with which Gwenda starts the novel. A term which denotes high culture, historical authenticity and cultural inheritance is undermined both by its association with commercial reproduction and by the demonstration that it hides perversions and violence on which later life has been built. *Sleeping Murder* plays with the word "Jacobean" just as it is becoming a more generally used term, and shows a similar interest in the transgressive and threatening side of that cultural inheritance which was previously covered uneasily by "Elizabethan". This ambivalence about the value and safety of the cultural inheritance represented by Early Modern drama will come into even sharper focus in the next novel to be discussed.

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<sup>28</sup> Christie, *Sleeping*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Christie, *Sleeping*, 9.

### *The Singing in the Shrouds*

In the late 1950s, Ngaio Marsh introduced *The Duchess of Malfi* into *The Singing in the Shrouds*, another detective novel which used it to reflect on high and low culture. This novel concerns a group of people on an ocean liner sailing from London to South Africa, one of whom is a serial killer who strangles his victims and leaves flowers by their bodies.

Webster's play is mentioned when the detective, Roderick Alleyn, discovers his fellow passengers discussing Early Modern drama, with one person defending an unexpected opinion:

"I honestly don't understand", Father Jourdain was saying, "how you can put *The Duchess of Malfi* before *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*."

"Or why," Miss Abbott barked, "you should think *Othello* so much better than any of them.

Mr. Merryman groped in his waistcoat pocket for a sodamint and remarked insufferably that really it was impossible to discuss criteria of taste where the rudiments of taste were demonstrably absent. He treated his restive audience to a comprehensive de-gumming of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. *Hamlet*, he said, was an inconsistent, deficient and redundant rechauffé of some absurd German melodrama: it was not surprising, Mr. Merryman said, that Hamlet was unable to make up his mind since his creator had himself been the victim of a still greater blight of indecision.<sup>30</sup> *Macbeth* was merely a muddle-headed blunderer. Strip

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<sup>30</sup> Marsh has inserted Merryman into an erudite critical lineage here: Eliot's essay on "Hamlet and His Problems" contains strikingly similar comments. Eliot frames the play as a critical problem to be explained when "we perceive his *Hamlet* to be superposed upon much cruder material which persists in the final form" and argues that "Hamlet's bafflement... is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem". T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London: Methuen, 1920, repr. 1960), 97, 101,



away the language and what remained? A tediously ignorant expression of defeatism

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He went on to praise the classic structure of *Othello*, the inevitability of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and, astoundingly, the admirable directness of *Titus Andronicus*. As an afterthought he conceded that the final scene of *Lear* was 'respectable.'<sup>31</sup>

The conversation then turns to a discussion between the doctor on board and the others on whether it is totally unrealistic for Desdemona to revive, having been already smothered. This merely highlights what many readers will already have noticed in the passage above (though it is somewhat easier to notice when the passage is underlined as crucial to the novel): the murderer has given himself away in this discussion of Early Modern drama. Mr. Merryman's taste, which elevates *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi* over *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, is surprising enough, but it becomes clearer when *Titus Andronicus* and the last sequence of *Lear* are added. He is arranging the Early Modern dramatic canon by a crude (in both senses) criterion: plays are good if they involve a woman being strangled, smothered or having her neck broken. *Malfi* and *Othello* both depict this onstage, whilst *Titus*' "admirable directness" presumably consists in the snapping of Lavinia's neck, and *Lear* becomes "respectable" (though not as great as the others when Cordelia's dead body is brought on stage) with the ambiguous implication in *Lear*'s "my poor fool is hanged" that she was killed in this way. The reader is alerted to the possible significance of his preference by a comment by Mr Cuddy (whom all the other characters regard as rather vulgar and socially beneath

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<sup>31</sup> Ngaio Marsh, *Singing in the Shrouds* (1958, repr. London: Fontana, 1980), 148-9.

them) to the effect that the Desdemona discussion make him think “Isn’t it funny...how the conversation seems to get round to the subject of ladies being throttled?”<sup>32</sup>

This interjection clarifies the meaning of the conversation, and makes it more likely that a reader who had not picked up the significance of the list of plays would do so. This reduces the value (in plot terms) of the clue to anyone who had worked it out before reaching Mr Cuddy’s comment, but it heightens the scene’s engagement with the cultural politics of *Malfi* and Jacobean drama. In one sense Mr. Cuddy’s remark about conversations coming round to “throttling ladies” shows his lack of appreciation of either the medical or the artistic issues being discussed: it shows he is unsuited to take part in either the intellectual life shared by the other passengers, or to appreciate the sort of knowing middlebrow literature enjoyed by readers of *The Singing in the Shrouds*. In another sense, it can be read as a critique of that kind of literary game, since Mr. Cuddy has in fact recognised the key element which would be recognised by those with a working knowledge of Early Modern drama. It seems one does not need to know about the famous ambiguity of which “poor fool” has been hanged, and the stage traditions which negotiate this complexity, or the disagreements over whether Lear is sure Cordelia is dead by the time he dies himself, in order to get the point of this set of references. Merryman’s impromptu lecture on the relative value of Early Modern plays also potentially operates in these two senses. It continues the game of literary recognition, providing an opportunity for reader and detective alike to exercise their knowledge of a genre of writing regarded as more valuable and more canonical than crime fiction. It also shows a pompous and pedantic man making elaborate judgements about literary value when his taste is in fact based on his enjoyment of seeing women tortured and killed in a particular way. The literary game can be played with equal effect and panache, it seems, by people whose

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<sup>32</sup> Marsh, *Singing*, 150.

apparent aesthetic and philosophical principles are merely the cover for unpleasant and sordid personal gratifications. Even more subversively, it encourages the reader to interpret these plays exactly in the same way Merryman does, collating the various forms of violence done to women and seeing the drama as a series of isolated and sadistic moments rather than as a set of artistic achievements. Other readings of Early Modern drama are presented by the other characters to counteract Merryman's (which is not, of course, made explicit during the conversations in question), but in order to appreciate the value of this clue, the reader needs to shrink the meaning of these plays to an unpleasant and reductive common denominator. *Singing in the Shrouds* does not mention the term "Jacobean", but it does display the same anxieties around the cultural inheritance of English drama which were visible in *Sleeping Murder*. The classics of the Early Modern stage, with *Malfi* as the epitome, are revealed as potential sources of violent and sadistic pleasure, rather than civilizing and edifying influences. Marsh's novel goes even further than Christie's in its intertextual strategy, since the reader who recognises the list of plays as a clue is themselves implicated in the debased interpretative strategy practised by Merryman. The function of these plays as symbols of British national culture is underlined by a detail I mentioned above: the conversation about Early Modern drama is taking place on an ocean liner travelling away from London towards South Africa. The vessel is carrying an English serial killer, as well as a discussion of English drama, into the colonies.

### ***Cover Her Face***

Whilst the two novels discussed so far allude relatively directly to Webster's play, by mentioning it in ways which offer clues to the murderer, P.D. James' *Cover Her Face* (1962) presents a more diffuse set of engagements. The narrative centres on the murder of Sally Jupp, a young woman employed as a maid at the Maxies' old-fashioned house in a country

village. Despite the fact that Sally had been engaged to work at the house whilst living in a home for unmarried mothers, and much to the unease of the family, Stephen Maxie had asked her to marry him the afternoon before she was found murdered. The novel's title is the first signal of James' engagement with *The Duchess of Malfi*, and it is repeated within the world of the novel when Stephen reportedly speaks the phrase tenderly over Sally's dead body.<sup>33</sup> Unlike Christie, James does not explicitly signal this as a quotation at the time. Nonetheless, the fact that it repeats the title marks it out for a number of readers as a phrase which crosses the boundaries between the characters' world and that of the reader, via Stephen's metaleptic use. The phrase exists in both the internal and external textual worlds, calling attention to it. This is the most obvious allusion to *Malfi*, but there are other scattered throughout the novel. For example, an early scene contains this passage:

Catherine sat holding her hands to the thin flames of the wood fire and tried to look at ease while the others talked about a composer called, unaccountably, Peter Warlock, and of whom she had never heard except in some vague and forgotten historical sense. Certainly Deborah claimed not to understand him but she managed, as usual, to make her ignorance amusing.<sup>34</sup>

Philip Arnold Heseltine, the critic and composer who used the *nom de plume* Peter Warlock for his musical works, had died in 1930. His most famous compositions include, alongside the Christmas carol "Bethlehem Down" and the instrumental suite "Capriol", a dirge entitled "The Shrouding of the Duchess of Malfi". The piece sets the verses from *Malfi* beginning "Hark! Now everything is still", and appears in a trio of dirges which set texts from Webster, with "All the flowers of the spring" from *The Devil's Law-Case* and "Call for the robin-

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<sup>33</sup> P.D. James, *Cover Her Face*, (1962, repr. London: Sphere, 1977), 69.

<sup>34</sup> James, *Cover*, 11.

redbreast and the wren” from *The White Devil*. The reference is highlighted paradoxically by James recording it via the perceptions of a character who is unfamiliar with Warlock and his work. This calls it particularly to the attention of the reader, and focuses attention on the potential use of knowing the composer’s work. Later in the novel a character hiding in a hayloft sees only the hand of a person who may have been the murderer, and reports that they were wearing gloves. This detail appears at first to cast suspicion on them, since wearing gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints is a long-established trope of guilty characters in detective fiction. However, it turns out to exonerate that character instead: they always wear a glove because they have a prosthetic hand after an injury sustained during the Second World War. This means they would have been incapable of strangling Sally, as they could not have applied sufficient pressure to her neck. This works as an internal plot point in the novel, but also as a loose allusion to the prison scene in *Malfi*, during which Ferdinand deceives the Duchess with a severed hand.

At the end of the book, the connections to Webster’s work are much clearer. It transpires that Sally was murdered by Stephen’s mother, who was anxious about this supposedly unsuitable young woman marrying Stephen and becoming mistress of Martindale, the ancestral house which the Maxie women had scrimped and saved to preserve as Stephen’s inheritance. Her action is ironised by the discovery that such anxieties were doubly unnecessary: Sally never intended to marry Stephen, since her child was not illegitimate. She was married to a young Canadian airman, who arrived at the house to hear of her death during the later chapters. In retrospect, lineaments of the plot of *Malfi* have been present throughout *Cover Her Face*. A young woman is stigmatised for engaging in sex and bearing children outside marriage, when in fact she is secretly married, and is murdered by someone concerned that she would bring down the honour of the house. Stephen’s quotation of Webster’s line does not point to him as

the murderer, but rather to Sally as the centre of the novel's engagement with Jacobean drama.

The intertextual engagement with the British cultural past is foregrounded when James' detective arrives at the house for the first time:

Detective Chief-Inspector Adam Dalgleish did not reply but swung himself out of the car and stood back for a moment to look at the house. It was a typical Elizabethan manor house, simple but strongly formalized in design. The large two-storeyed bays with their mullioned and transomed windows stood symmetrically on either side of the square central porch. Above the dripstone was a heavy carved coat of arms. The roof sloped to a small open stone balustrade also carved with symbols in relief and the six great Tudor chimneys stood up boldly against the sky. To the west curved the wall of a room which Dalgleish guessed had been added at a later date – probably during the last century. The French windows were of plate glass and led into the garden.<sup>35</sup>

Dalgleish's first appearance in the novel provides a moment of textual chiasmus: he arrives in the reader's perception of the fictional world at the very moment when they enter his perceptions of that world. This is also the first physical description of Martindale, and the chiasmus allows it to offer both information about the location and characterisation of Dalgleish. The scenes reveal it as a survival from the Early Modern period, and him as a culture observer who can analyse its elements and its trajectory through subsequent history. In this moment Martindale is both literally and figuratively "the house of the Maxies", the

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<sup>35</sup> James, *Cover*, 48.

site of Sally's murder and the system which she was believed to threaten. *Cover Her Face* shares the Gothic overtones of *Sleeping Murder*, with an ancestral house providing a symbol for the attractions, inheritances, and crimes of the past. Those crimes are specifically those of the British past and cultural inheritance, signalled by the fact that Sally's actual husband is a young Canadian serviceman who expected to take her away from Martindale and begin their family life elsewhere.

### **Textual traces and Midcentury Jacobean**

Having explored the individual texts' engagements with *Malfi*, I would like to turn to the critical edge of that engagement, and the English literary inheritance which the play represents within them. The term "Jacobean" is necessary to account for the unusual attitude they display towards the *Malfi*, and the broader ambivalence it stands for. As it appears in these novels, the play is at once genuine and suspect. It is a high-status work of British culture from the same period as Shakespeare, but it is also potentially tawdry, debased and nasty. The plots and palimpsests within which it appears reveal a profound ambivalence about the cultural inheritance represented metonymically by Jacobean drama. An ocean liner exports a sadistic murderer fond of quoting Early Modern drama to the colonies. An elderly woman kills her maid for sexual and social transgressions which she fears will bring down her family's reputation. A search for the truth by a young colonial subject reveals incest and murder at the root of her family history in Britain. The intertextual and metatextual aspects of detective fiction focus attention on the process of decoding involved in these narratives, and of the contested meanings produced by that decoding. They interpolate the reader's own knowledge of Jacobean drama, by making it a part of the mechanism of the genre, whilst simultaneously calling into question the assumed values which that knowledge represents. .

That subversion of assumed values, articulated by the uneasy engagement with Webster's play, represents a crucial shift in the development of the idea of the "Jacobean". As I outlined near the beginning of this article, the emergence of the term "Jacobean" was the result of conflicts and problems contained within the idea of the "Elizabethan". The texts, historical events and cultural phenomena which "Elizabethan" was invoked to cover were sufficiently various – and at times actually at direct odds with one another – that it could not sustain the range of uses to which it was put. E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*, which might seem the most confident and totalising statement of the Elizabethan image, contains ambivalent notes in the final pages as it contemplates the "queer" Elizabethan "habit of mind" and the developing chaos in Europe. The immediate catalyst for the appearance of "Jacobean" in these novels was not the Second World War, however, despite the huge explanatory power of that conflict. I would argue that the repeated invocation of the Elizabethan era during the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and the early 1950s is a more likely spur. This took place immediately upon the death of George VI, with the Prime Minister Clement Attlee declaring to the House of Commons that "It is our hope that her Majesty may live long and happily and that her reign may be as glorious as that of her great predecessor, Queen Elizabeth I. Let us hope that we are witnessing the beginning of a new Elizabethan era".<sup>36</sup> Irene Morra describes the rapid adoption of the term by political cartoonists and popular academics, so that it soon became the common currency of the newspapers. More expansive versions of the trope appeared in books such as Philip Gibbs' *The New Elizabethans* and A.L. Rowse's *An Elizabethan Garland*, which both appeared in 1953. In Morra's account of the phenomenon:

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<sup>36</sup> qtd in Irene Morra and Rob Gossedge, eds. *The New Elizabethan Age: Culture, Society and National Identity After World War II* (London and NY: I.B. Taurus, 2016), n.pag.



Invoking a cohesion, creativity and expansive energy informed by a defining Elizabethan heritage, that discourse defied its own postwar, imminently post-imperial reality through the construction and reinforcement of an ideal of national identity as Elizabethan *performance*. In doing so, it ensured the reading of the history and identity of the nation itself through a fundamentally aesthetic template.<sup>37</sup>

These novels demonstrate the reaction to New Elizabethanism via the arrival of an even newer Jacobeanism. Morra's aesthetic construction of a national image via the Elizabethan heritage is subverted and questioned by the construction of much more troubling image via citation of supposedly "Elizabethan" works. Recognizing the importance of the New Elizabethanism as a catalyst for the development of this form of Jacobeanism requires some attention to the joint weight which theatre and early modern drama carried in the midcentury. Their gravitas is a crucial element of my argument that citing Jacobean drama in a crime novel activates concerns about cultural and national inheritance.

Like Jacobeanism itself, this cultural charge has its origins in earlier centuries of British history. British theatre was still overshadowed by the category of "legitimate drama", which encompassed Shakespearean and other "classic" theatre and marked them off from less respected forms such as burletta, pantomime and music-hall. The term originated in the regulations which governed British theatre from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, but it still possessed force in the twentieth. The social and cultural distinction implied by "legitimate" theatre is caught in a passage from a story by Margery Allingham, in which we hear the thoughts of a provincial actress:

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<sup>37</sup> Morra, in Morra and Gossedge, *New Elizabethan*, n.pag.

The public was besotted with love. Beth La Verne took a professional interest in the thought. It really was extraordinary how interesting they — those strange, moon-faced creatures who peopled the rest of the world and lifted their white countenances to the stage — how incredibly interesting they found love. Beth La Verne did not call it sex. Sex was fun. To a leading lady of “legit” it was love, Love with a capital “L,” and was very deep and emotional and for some reason or other inexplicably sad.<sup>38</sup>

In 1959, the year that *Singing in the Shrouds* was published, the enormously popular radio show *Hancock's Half Hour* included an episode entitled “The Impersonator”. The entire premise of the episode is that Tony Hancock is attempting to become a “legitimate” actor and shed his music-hall comic roots. The jokes about him wishing to mix with titled actors, and receive respectful tugs of the forelock from fans, underline the powerful association in this period between “legitimate” theatre and the social and cultural establishment of Britain. It is worth pointing out that the humour of the episode does not consist in explaining these social and cultural distinctions; on the contrary, it depends upon the audience instinctively grasping them so that they can be used as the basis for jokes. The passage I quoted above from Morra emphasized the New Elizabethanism as a performance of national identity, and Shakespeare was a central part of that nexus: as Morra and Gossedge explain, if “mountaineers and test pilots acted as latter-day Drakes and Raleighs” and if “the Battle of Britain constituted the nation’s modern Armada moment”, then “the contemporary equivalent to Shakespeare was Shakespeare” From 1957 to 1965, the BBC staged an unprecedented TV series of Shakespeare’s history plays; in 1960 the Royal Shakespeare Memorial Theatre transformed itself into the forward-looking Royal Shakespeare Company, opening its first season with *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi*; and in 1963 the new National Theatre opened its doors

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<sup>38</sup> Margery Allingham, “Once in a Lifetime”, repr in *The Return of Mr Campion* (London: Agora, 2019), p.125

with a production of *Hamlet*. The association of “legitimate” theatre with the national past, the national future, and the national establishment, was asserted again and again during the period when Marsh, Christie and James were writing the novels under discussion.

Thus the engagement with the “Jacobean” which I have been tracing makes an appearance in the mid-century detective novel, but its roots lie far back in the preceding centuries. The plays themselves originate in the early seventeenth century, whilst the concept of “the Jacobean” emerged as a result of the way Shakespeare’s reputation had developed in the Victorian period and into the twentieth century. I have argued above, following on from Bennett and Aebischer’s work, that the concept was in some sense an outcome of the tensions which built up within the idealised image of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan period.

Notwithstanding that long historical development, and the cultural anxieties which the “Jacobean” was channelling, it is worth asking why these concerns became visible in the novels of Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh and P.D. James. Detective fiction is no longer regarded as inherently conservative by scholars, with critics such as Susan Rowlands emphasizing the genre’s interest in subversion and process, over closure and order. These three writers arrived at their engagement with Jacobean drama in somewhat different ways, but for each of them it involves questioning the inherited images of British culture.

For Ngaio Marsh, as a New Zealander, the relationship of Shakespeare to national culture was perhaps more evident, because more troubled.<sup>39</sup> Mark Houlahan has described the presence of “Shakespeare in the Settlers’ House” both in terms of its mythologization as a “luridly resonant material signifier of European presence and textual power”, and its history

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<sup>39</sup> I am extremely grateful to Elizabeth Jeffreys of the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon, for calling attention to, and explaining, this aspect of Marsh’s connection to Shakespeare, as well as for sharing her ongoing research into New Zealand Shakespeares and their cultural politics.

as a complex and contested set of negotiations.<sup>40</sup> Houlahan couples Shakespeare with the “double-columned Bibles” which arrived with nineteenth-century settlers, as “twin talismans of sacred and secular English authority”, and describes the ambitions of 1910s Elizabethan festivals to recreate Tudor England under a different climate, as well as the difficulties across the twentieth century of producing an authentic form of New Zealand Shakespeare.<sup>41</sup> Marsh herself received her Damehood not for her detective fiction, but for her work in establishing and encouraging theatre, and specifically Shakespearean theatre, in the country of her birth. The New Zealand literary journal *Landfall* testifies to her role as national cultural commentator: the first issue (in 1947) carries an article by her on the situation of the theatre, the special issue on a proposed New Zealand National Theatre (1949) includes her views on the practicalities of the funding, touring and training system needed, and the special issue on Shakespeare (1964) has a lengthy piece by her on the playwright’s staging over the last decades and relevance for the contemporary theatre artist. Thus she was intensely engaged with the cultural inheritance of British theatre, but at the same time she was very conscious that its possession was not simple or untroubled for her or her compatriots. Rowlands mentions her deliberations over the “complex issues involved in producing a novel adequate to the New Zealand landscape’s non-European intensities with only Western literature as a model”, and classes Marsh as a post-colonial writer as a result. She describes the novelist’s “double-edged colonial identification with England which simultaneously mocks by mimicking its stereotypical forms”, and identifies “an explicitly theatrical or masquerading Englishness” in her work. Rowlands coins the term “country house camp” for the way in which Marsh, the colonial “outsider” presents Englishness as inherently theatrical, a set of roles and scripts which can be parodied and examined, and which depend for their apparent stability on successful theatrical performance. The repeated use of actual theatres and plays

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Houlahan, “Shakespeare in the Settler’s House”, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, No.20, “Settlement Studies: Special Issue”, (2002), pp. 112-124, p.113.

<sup>41</sup> Houlahan, “Settlers”, p.113.

in her novels points up the origin of this language of performance, and also highlights the theatrically-based frames and metaphors within Marsh's fiction. Given this context, it makes sense that she should use Shakespearean and Jacobean drama in *Singing in the Shrouds* as a means to examine the troublesome roots of the apparently secure British cultural inheritance. The material connected her pervasive theatrical metaphors with the symbolism of British culture which she parodied and subverted, even whilst partially reproducing it.

In the case of Christie and James, there is less explicit contextual evidence that they felt uncomfortable with, or sceptical of, the inheritance of British culture. Nonetheless, within their novels can be found a questioning, critical attitude which aligns with their engagement with "Jacobean" ideas in the middle of the twentieth century. Christie's fiction took a distinctly bleaker and more sceptical turn during the Second World War and afterwards. (*Sleeping Murder* was started during the early 1940s, but must have edited or redrafted at some point afterwards, since the performance of *Malfi* in the early chapters is clearly the Gielgud production at the Haymarket, which did not open until 1945.) *Death Comes as the End*, published in 1944, has an ancient Egyptian protagonist who doubts the national religion of her country and its ability to make sense of life and loss, whilst the charismatic scribe she falls in love with criticises the way Egypt's culture and wealth is built on death. A similar theme appears in *Taken at the Flood* (1948), which features a demobbed servicewoman who finds herself restless and unsatisfied by the Britain to which she returns at the end of the war. In 1956, *Dead Man's Folly* goes even further in its symbolism, with a plot which reveals the financial exploitation and murder of a Creole woman by ruthless British aristocrats. The book's most powerful image is the discovery that an architectural folly in the grounds of a country house has been built upon the body of the dead woman, in a symbol which parallels the foundation of British fortunes upon the slave trade and the exploitation of the colonies.

Biographical and autobiographical writings testify to Christie's unease in this period. She herself writes that "life began again" after the war, "though not as it was before...no certainty in the future of peace, or indeed of anything", whilst Laura Thompson describes the sense of "restlessness" and "dissatisfaction" in her post-war work. (527, 351). In the novels I have mentioned this tone finds expression through anxiety about the continuity and value of inherited traditions, whether of religion, family or culture. Though she was not a colonial "outsider" like Marsh, Christie's work in this period demonstrates a scepticism in this period about the British cultural and social inheritance.

James is in a slightly different category again, since she was a contemporary of Christie and Marsh in career terms, but a generation younger than them. As discussed by Rowland, her writing shows a tragic and fragmented vision of Englishness, mediated through her reworking of Golden Age tropes. The novels, and some of the characters, are possessed by a longing for a coherent and transcendent England, but are aware at the same time that this is nostalgia not memory. Rowlands mentions Dalglish's "sense that the desire for a sacred past Englishness is a fantasy not borne out by history" and that "England never was the ideologically whole, undivided nation" to which he harks back (70). This strand of James' vision of social and cultural identity becomes articulated in her later novels through the relationship between Dalglish and one of his subordinate officers: "Kate Miskin, a young police officer who grew up on an inner-city council estate, seems partially designed to emphasise the difficulty of connecting to Dalglish's masculine solitariness", which is "far more predicated upon English heritage traditions of architecture, art and religion" (62). The novel I am discussing in this article predates the appearance of Miskin in the Dalglish novels, but it reveals a similar sense that the Englishness represented by the "English heritage traditions", and depicted in at least some Golden Age fiction, is riven with problems, incoherencies, and

fissures. James' approach and attitudes differ from those of Marsh, with her colonial irony, and Christie, with her post-war scepticism. The three writers arrived at the "Jacobean" element in the detective novel via different personal and literary routes. Nonetheless, their engagements with Webster's play articulate a powerful sense of unease with the cultural inheritance which was being so loudly praised elsewhere.

Whatever the impetus behind the individual authors' citation of Webster, they jointly make it clear that "Elizabethan" texts did not necessarily point to a harmonious and unified national spirit. In *Sleeping Murder* the cultural inheritance characterised as "Jacobean" can equally well include a play in the West End, an incestuous murder and a sofa on hire-purchase.

Christie's novel thus points up possibly the most serious subversion of the New Elizabethanism: it not only calls attention to the horrors contained in the British cultural inheritance, but it questions the very authenticity of that inheritance. After all, "Jacobean" was a term in widespread use for furniture before it became a commonplace of literary and cultural discussions, disrupting the assumption that ideas and terms descend from "higher" cultural spheres to "lower ones". The hierarchy which places great drama above home décor is part of the same hierarchical structure which places the past above the present, the Shakespeare play above the modern film, and the "original" above the "derivative". Lily Kimble's reverie, in which the green fields of England (about which Falstaff babbled as he neared his own death) become a Jacobean three-piece suite, is as authentic a use of the term "Jacobean" as the discussion about Webster's grotesque dramaturgy between young high-brows in the West End. In this we can discern a suggestion of what Aebischer calls the "preposterous" quality of the contemporary Jacobean later in the century. By this she means it is literally "praeposterus" in the Latin sense of putting things backwards, disrupting the

expected flow of time by dislocation, anachronism and refusing to accord deference to canonical priority or originality.<sup>42</sup> *Sleeping Murder* does not expand this suggestion explicitly, but it is a striking part of the book's handling of the term "Jacobean", upon which the plot centres. In the world revealed by this novel, a Jacobean play is no more authentic than a Jacobean tea-room or a Jacobean armchair. The critical and sceptical edge of the contemporary Jacobean, which would only flower in criticism and film during the 1980s, is adumbrated by these three novels' engagement with Webster's play. In tracing the way they weave *Malfi* into their plots, we can recognise a strand of subversion which indicates we should extend our understanding of the "Jacobean" into an earlier period.

### **Conclusions: Jacobean(ism) Rising**

These novels by Christie, Marsh and James do not display the kind of aesthetic or moral transgressions which Bennett and Aebischer associate with the "Jacobean" and anti-Shakespearean film and theatre productions of the 1980s onwards. They are relatively conservative in their formal qualities, maintaining the structures and conventions of the classical interwar detective novel. The Gothic elements are of a piece with that genre too: Susan Rowland has pointed out the echoes and reworkings of Gothic motifs in the work of the female Golden Age detective writers in *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*.<sup>43</sup> Neither can it be claimed that referencing Early Modern drama qualifies as an aesthetic or formal transgression, since Lisa Hopkins' *DCI Shakespeare* has demonstrated that Shakespearean quotation came close to being a defining feature of detective fiction. It certainly would not have been regarded as crossing a boundary between high and low culture, or elite and popular art. To this extent, these three mid-century novels are distinct from the consciously and aggressively deviant forms of adaptation or appropriation which Aebischer has described as

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<sup>42</sup> see Aebischer, "Shakespearean Heritage".

<sup>43</sup> Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (London: Palgrave, 2001).



the “contemporary Jacobean”. However, they do demonstrate a profound unease about the cultural inheritance which they reproduce. James’ novel offers a classic nostalgic village murder mystery to readers, who will discover not only that English villages contain murder and mayhem (a familiar idea), but that the nostalgia for English villages which drives the genre’s production and reception can be a murderous and insane quality. Marsh offers them an opportunity to capitalise upon knowledge of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, in a game which reveals that knowledge to be sleazy and corrupt. Christie structures a clue-puzzle around a historical work of literature, which then seems to have the same cultural value as a cheap three-piece suite. The internal relationships of characters within these novels suggest that the literary inheritance of English culture is one of madness, crime and incest, whilst the external relationships between novel and reader suggest that participation in that inheritance brings complicity and callousness. In this aspect they are socially and culturally sceptical, especially when we follow Rowland in seeking the meaning of women’s detective fiction not in the closure of the novels but in the process of reading them.<sup>44</sup> These texts may end in the punishment of the criminals and the restoration of order in society, but the process seriously calls into question the cultural and moral basis upon which that society prides itself. These novels mark a shift towards the “contemporary Jacobean” by their opposition to the “New Elizabethanism”, and their sense that the chaos and horror of the Jacobean drama is not evidence of an isolated set of aesthetic failures in the past, but a disturbing insight into the cultural ground upon which the present is built.

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