

A Queer Approach to Agatha Christie, 1920-1952

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Abstract

This thesis provides the first extensive queer reading of a 'Golden Age' British detective fiction writer. The aim of this thesis is to assess queer potential in texts published by Agatha Christie between 1920 and 1952. Human identity can be read as self-consciously constructed in Christie's novels, which were written in a context of two world wars, advances in technology and communication, and what Michel Foucault called the 'medicalization' of Western culture. The self-conscious stereotyping in Christie's prose undermines her texts' conservative appeal to the status quo. Chapter One justifies this project's critique of identity essentialism in the texts by considering the manufacturing of 'Agatha Christie' as a widely-read celebrity author. Reading Christie's authorial identity as something established and refined through a market-driven response to readers' expectations and a conscious engagement with earlier forms of detective fiction provides space for reading identity itself as a stylized, performative, and sometimes parodic theme within the texts. In subsequent chapters, employing theoretical insights from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Lee Edelman, I explore Christie's participation in contemporary debates surrounding masculinity, femininity, and the importance of the family in shaping individual identity. Finally, I consider Christie's reputation in the twenty-first century by exploring nostalgic television adaptations of her work. Comparing the presentation of 'queer' characters in the literary texts to the adaptations' use of explicit homosexual themes and characters, I conclude that there is a stronger potential for 'queering' identity in the former. As the first full queer reading of a 'Golden Age' detective novelist, this thesis expands queer notions of archive and canonicity: few scholars to date have considered mainstream literary texts without overt LGBTQ+ themes or characters from a queer perspective. Given Christie's global reach and appeal, locating queerness in her texts means understanding queerness as fundamental to everyday culture. This means engaging with a subversive potential in twentieth century middlebrow conservatism.

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Introduction

And there's queerness, of course. So many people are a little queer, aren't they? – in fact, most people are when you know them well.

Miss Marple in *The Murder at the Vicarage*¹

Preamble

When Agatha Christie died in 1976, she was the best selling novelist in history. Her appeal was much-discussed at the time, and has been subsequently. Early commentators were apt to agree with the crime fiction historian Julian Symons, who put Christie's 'permanence' down to 'the comfort of the familiar.'² According to Symons, the formulaic nature of Christie's puzzle-based detective fiction, combined with her stereotyped characters and picturesque middle-class settings, created a literary world that was unlikely to shock or surprise; a reassuringly conservative worldview. By the same token, Symons acknowledged a limited audience: 'Few feminists or radicals are likely to read her.'³

Nonetheless, familiarity does not breed certainty, and 'feminists and radicals' have long noted something playful or even subversive in Christie's conservatism.⁴ For one thing, any 'fictional world – however [familiar] – where almost all the players are [murder] suspects,' and most characters are hiding

¹ Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (New York, London, Toronto: Harper, 2010), 245. Further references to this source will appear as *Vicarage*.

² Julian Symons, 'Puzzle Maker', Review of *A Talent to Deceive* by Robert Barnard, *Inquiry* (24 Nov. 1980), 29-30 (30).

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991); Marty S. Knepper, 'Agatha Christie - Feminist', *The Armchair Detective*, 16 (1983), 398-406; Johann Hari, 'Agatha Christie: A Radical Conservative Thinker', *Independent on Sunday* (5 Oct 2003). reproduced in "Johann Hari" (4 Oct. 2003) and accessed online (26 Jun 2014): <http://johannhari.com/2003/10/04/agatha-christie-radical-conservative-thinker/>

something, 'hardly suggests a society at peace with itself.'⁵ Christie, touted by her publishers as 'the Queen of Crime,' has become synonymous with her tradition of crime fiction, to the extent that her name appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'whodunit.' In that genre, it is a truism that few characters present themselves as they 'really' are. By the end of the narrative, the detective will have assigned identity labels – guilty/innocent and so on – to a motley collection of individuals. Although these characters and their surroundings are recognizable, as are the plots they inhabit, when such limited 'types' are repeated in different arrangements over sixty-six novels and hundreds of other texts, the effect can be disorienting. The murderer might be an elderly colonel 'type' in one book, but that 'type' may describe the victim in the next; the combination of identities varies. Far from being safe in its familiarity, an Agatha Christie novel notions towards fear of disorder and uncertainty in recognition.

Here, the detective resembles the figure of the doctor as described by the historian and philosopher Michel Foucault: an authority figure who reads the human body, identifies and categorizes 'diseases' (or, in the detective's case, clues), and finally declares what will become accepted as 'natural truth' about the individual.⁶ Several theorists have built on Foucault's insights and set to 'queering' modern culture, pointing out that without the authority of official identity categories, human behaviour would be defined very differently. Towering figures such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have critiqued apparently 'natural' ways of categorizing human beings. For example, Butler has revealed gender and biological sex to be 'performative,' part of a social script that owes more to people enacting it than to any natural authenticity, and Sedgwick has explored ways of registering human sexuality beyond, or more appropriately than, the gay/straight binary.⁷ This thesis builds upon a rarely acknowledged similarity between puzzle-based detective fiction

⁵ Cora Kaplan, 'Queens of Crime: The Golden Age of Crime Fiction', in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920-1960*, ed. by M. Joannou (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 144-60 (146).

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 50.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, London: Routledge, 2008); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2008).

and the writings of queer theorists: both present human identities as constructed within their given contexts.

Queer theorists' insights can afford new readings of Christie's novels and short stories as texts with queer potential. That is, the texts can be read as spaces in which presumptions about human identity are exposed, undermined, and renegotiated. Drawing parallels between queer theory and questions of identity in Christie's detective fiction means rethinking the relevance of a body of work, once dismissed by rote as escapist and 'ephemeral'.⁸

This thesis has a two-fold relevance. On the one hand, it provides a new reading of Christie, acknowledging an historically unique context of change, development, and adaption. Social customs, codes, and orders came under unprecedented scrutiny in the context of two world wars and advances in technology and communication, while the necessity of change was underscored by an increasing awareness that nothing was stable; that little if anything about individuals and their worlds could be 'known.' On the other hand, as the first full queer reading of a 'Golden Age' detective novelist, this thesis expands queer notions of archive and canonicity. Despite the diversification of queer theory in the twenty-first century, engaging perspectives beyond those of white gay western men, and despite the increasing popularity of queer methodologies in literary analysis, very few scholars to date have considered mainstream literary texts without already obvious queer coding from a queer theoretical perspective.⁹ Such exclusionary readings endorse a key presumption against which many theorists rally: that 'queerness' already exists, delineated if not defined as the 'other' of some unproblematized model of straightness or normalcy.

Christie, a staple of British television and tourism, seems to have been completely heterosexual. She claimed to be, foremost, a wife and mother,

⁸ Odette l'Henry Evans, 'Croquet and Serial Killers: Feminism in Agatha Christie', in *It's My Party: Reading Twentieth Century Women's Writing*, ed. by Gina Wisker (London: Pluto Press, 1994), 174-80 (174).

⁹ A notable project that uses queer theory to illuminate an apparently straight body of work, discussed in Chapter Four, is Holly Furneaux's *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

insisting that her passport should list her profession as ‘housewife.’¹⁰ Moreover, as the best selling English-language author in history, and a Dame Commander of the British Empire, she can be identified positively with ‘Establishment’ institutions. A white English Victorian, Christie hardly seems queer. Her main detective, Hercule Poirot, has long been read as a figure whose ‘aim (and purpose) [is] to restore order after it has been disrupted by crime’.¹¹ Nonetheless, as Sally R. Munt observes, ‘[h]e is a parody of the male myth; [...] a shortened Hercules [...] and socially “other”’.¹² Moreover, Christie’s prose, which relies on ready stereotypes but also on presenting them in unexpected ways (if only to fool the reader as to the puzzle’s solution) must have something to say about normality; a construction queer studies seek to destabilize. As Christie’s other popular detective, the spinster Jane Marple, states in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), ‘most people are’ ‘a little queer’, ‘when you know them well’: queerness may be hard to spot and harder to define, but is more pervasive than its opposite. This thesis uncovers an extraordinary amount of playful destabilization in the texts: Christie uses ready stereotypes in sometimes jarring ways. In this sense, her writing is not merely superficial; it draws attention towards the artificial nature of identity itself.

Treatments of Christie to Date

Before going further, we must define the ‘Golden Age’ of British detective fiction. Christie is usually said to typify the Golden Age, partly because of her memorable sales figures, but also because of her strict adherence to the puzzle-format, which has become the trademark of the period.¹³ Commentators do not agree upon a time-frame for the Golden Age; Heather Worthington puts it between 1918 and 1930, John Curran between 1918 and 1945, and Susan

¹⁰ Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Harper, 2011), 420. Further references to this source will appear as *Autobiography*.

¹¹ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London, New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 47.

¹² Sally R. Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

¹³ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 88.

Rowland between 1920 and 1937.¹⁴ More universally accepted is that Golden Age detective fiction is both puzzle-based and highly artificial, usually featuring murder and an amateur, rather than a professional, detective. The detective discovers who committed the crime and how; the solution is often outlandish but the reader should have access to sufficient clues to solve it.¹⁵

In the 1920s, with Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and J.J. Connington dominating the market with their puzzle-based mysteries, the Detection Club – a body of crime writers – was established. There followed, both within and beyond the Club, numerous sets of ‘rules’ for writing detective fiction. The most famous British example is Ronald Knox’s ‘Ten Commandments’ (1928). Knox stipulated that a detective novel

must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end.¹⁶

Rules included ‘fair play’ clauses (‘Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable’) and snobbery concerning populist clichés (‘No Chinaman must figure in the story [...] Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear’).¹⁷

As the tone indicates, these ‘rules’ were chiefly gentle satires between professionals acknowledging the tropes and clichés of each other’s work. Nonetheless, they carry a sense of commitment to careful structure and coding, an impression of sparring between writer and reader, and they point towards the centrality of the ‘whodunit’ question. As such, some commentators have considered this incarnation of the genre as a kind of parlour game.¹⁸ I use

¹⁴ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 13; John Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Murder in the Making: More Stories and Secrets from Her Archive* (London: HarperCollins, 2011), 14; Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 3.

¹⁵ Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800*, 84-85.

¹⁶ Ronald Knox, Introduction to *The Best English Detective Stories of 1926* (New York: Horace Liverlight, 1928), 9-26 (9). Knox’s title reflects a spirit of jocularly; he was a priest as well as a crime writer.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ See John Curran, ‘Happy Innocence: Playing Games in Golden Age Detective Fiction, 1920-45’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 2014).

'Golden Age' to evoke this playful trend in detective fiction. The chief titles that fit this format were published between the First and Second World Wars, so 1918-1939 is my rough timeframe for 'Golden Age.'¹⁹ However, I am considering Christie titles published during and immediately after the Golden Age. While detective fiction fashions evolved, Christie remained the market-leader for decades.²⁰ With the cut-off date of 1952, this thesis can consider how texts respond to the social upheavals brought about by two world wars, but also to the genre's increasingly unfashionable status.

The perceived centrality of the puzzle to Christie's success has led to some distinctly limited critical readings. An oft-repeated phrase, coined by Francis Wyndham, is 'animated algebra.'²¹ It follows that there is little if anything more to the books than a 'basic equation': in the mid-twentieth century *Oxford History of England*, A.J.P. Taylor described detective fiction as a 'curious [...] new development' in 'middle class' taste, 'an intellectual game like crosswords' that was 'without significance'.²² Taylor named Christie as representative of this 'development.' Throughout the 1970s, criticism of genre fiction, including detective fiction, emerged, but Christie remained sidelined: for instance, Symons remarked that a Christie novel was 'original in the sense that it is a puzzle story and only that.'²³ As Alison Light points out, Christie's name has long been 'marked out' in academia to represent the genre at its most simplistic; its most unambitious and uninteresting.²⁴ Academic treatments of other Golden Age writers were justified on the grounds that there is more to their work than to Agatha Christie's.²⁵

In 1991, Light published a radical re-evaluation of several women writers, claiming Christie as a 'conservative modernist' who engaged deeply with

¹⁹ For instance, Freeman Wills Crofts' *The Cask* (1920); Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926); Anthony Berkley's *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (1929); John Dickson Carr's *The Hollow Man* (1935); and Dorothy L. Sayers' *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937).

²⁰ See Chapter One, below.

²¹ Francis Wyndham, 'Agatha Christie Writes Animated Algebra: Dares One to Solve Buried Basic Equation', *Watertown New York Daily Times* (1966).

²² A.J.P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 312.

²³ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 96.

²⁴ Light, *Forever England*, 63-64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

change and uncertainty in interwar Britain and whose reputation for superficiality was more a stereotype than a reality.²⁶ Around the same time, Marty S. Knepper pointed out that Christie scholarship tended to appeal to ‘inaccurate [...] truisms’ and ‘dubious assertions’, and suggested that the texts themselves warrant close-reading and analysis.²⁷ The 1990s and 2000s saw a surge in academic interest.²⁸ Palgrave Macmillan’s *Crime Files* series has led to several monographs which take Christie seriously.²⁹ Merja Makinen, for instance, considers Christie in dialogue with contemporary feminist thought, exposing feminine identity in her prose as a complex and often fraught masquerade. Meanwhile, Linden Peach sees the construction of criminality in her detective fiction in dialogue with socio-legal constructions of criminality and wider politics of modernity. Since Nicola Humble’s 2001 study, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, the rise of ‘middlebrow studies’ has meant that Christie, the best selling popular novelist of the twentieth-century, has been under constant discussion.³⁰ Numerous British universities teach Christie on undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes.³¹ In 2014, I organized a conference at the University of Exeter that considered her life and literature exclusively. In short,

²⁶ Ibid., 61-112.

²⁷ Marty S. Knepper, ‘Reading Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple Series: The Thirteen Problems’, in *In the Beginning: First Novels in Mystery Series*, ed. by Mary Jean DeMarr (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995), 33-58 (34).

²⁸ The following English-language PhD theses deal principally with Christie or devote considerable attention to her literature: Roberta S. Klein, ‘Agatha Christie: A Feminist Re-Assessment’ (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Florida, 1999); Chia-Ying Wu, ‘The Importance of Being Cosy: Agatha Christie and Golden Age British Detective Fiction’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2007); Charles Nicholas Martin Baldock, ‘The Religious Imagination in British Popular Fiction and Society, 1900-1945’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 2009); Malcah Efron, ‘If Only This Were a Detective Novel: Self-Referentiality as Metafictionality in Detective Fiction’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, Newcastle University, 2010); Marjolijn Storm, ‘A Corpus-Driven Analysis of Translations of Agatha Christie’s Detective Novels into Dutch and into German’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2012); Curran, ‘Happy Innocence’. At the time of writing (2015), Brittain Bright at Goldsmiths College, University of London and Christopher Yiannitsaros at Warwick University are completing PhD theses which consider Christie prominently.

²⁹ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*; Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Linden Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); R.A. York, *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Mark Aldridge, *Agatha Christie on Screen* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s-1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford, New York, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³¹ Representative modules: ‘Bodies in the Library’ (MA Creative Writing; Bath Spa University), ‘Detective Fiction’ (BA English Literature, University of Chester), and ‘Crime and Punishment’ (BA English, University of Exeter).

Christie is now understood as a writer of substance, whose work rewards scrutiny.

The mechanics of Christie's prose have been considered from various angles; in terms of reader response manipulation, rhetorical hypnosis, and information value analysis.³² An imaginative approach to words and language in Christie can be found in Pierre Bayard's poststructural 'tribute' to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.³³ In *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* (1998), Bayard posits the impossibility of certain truth in detective fiction by proposing an alternative solution to the most iconic of Christie's mysteries: 'numerous studies in the humanities have used [the narrator-as-murderer solution] to deal with theoretical problems [... but n]o one dreams of doubting [the narrator's] guilt.'³⁴ In Bayard's reading, the orderly, structured nature of the puzzle-based detective story creates, not a world where readers are guided towards absolute truth, but one where multifaceted meanings and experiences are limited, stylized, and obscured as a single 'truth' is foregrounded.

Everything is a potential clue, but, in order for the narrative to progress, the value of clues must be differently weighted. 'Agatha Christie's detective novels', Bayard insists,

display the difficulty of interpretation at work, which is in the first instance *the difficulty of deciding what to interpret*. For *everything* can be interpreted in a text (physical traces, behavior, words), especially if this text has been constructed in such a way as to both disseminate and obscure meaning.³⁵

As Bayard understands it, the detective novel's streamlined, manipulated structure points towards the unreality of its own conclusion: everything has been imbued with potential relevance until a voice of authority has decided what

³² Marc Alexander, 'Rhetorical Structure and Reader Manipulation in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*', *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* (2009); Ben Warwick (dir.), *The Agatha Christie Code* (2005). 27 Dec; Michelle M. Kazmer, 'One Must Actually Take Facts as They Are: Information Value and Information Behaviour in Agatha Christie's Miss Marple Novels', in *Agatha Christie: Crime, Culture, Celebrity* (University of Exeter, 2014).

³³ Pierre Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? The Murderer Who Eluded Hercule Poirot and Deceived Agatha Christie* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), back cover.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 69. Both emphases original.

should be registered, and how. Since a whodunit is structured around identifying a culprit or culprits, and only some information can fit the 'solution,' it is possible to conclude from here that no understandings about essential identity are fully conclusive: there will always be potential 'clues' to a person's identity that tell a different story. The simple and systematic nature of Christie's prose, then, also serves to illustrate the impossibility of certain knowledge.

More generally, however, an equation of superficiality with negligible literary merit remains. Indeed, other writers have announced their own literary relevance by critiquing Christie's approach to character and setting. P.D. James, for instance, denies that Christie has had 'a profound influence on the later development of the detective story.'³⁶ Robert Graves critiqued Christie's 'schoolgirlish' English and 'artificial' settings, while Ruth Rendell has described her characters as flatter than cardboard.³⁷ Still, superficial stereotypes can serve an important dialectical purpose. For one thing, as the epigraphist Sydney Smith wrote to Christie in 1943, 'elimination of all but harmonious detail [allows for] a social study with more truth than the longer efforts by the biographical school of novelists.'³⁸ Smith's observation is perceptive; a strategically superficial text displays its superficiality and allows the reader to consider how the society it depicts works.

For another thing, stereotypes indicate their own unreality by virtue of their impossibly absolute coherence. Dorothy L. Sayers criticized characters 'on the *Punch* level of emotion',³⁹ but *Punch Magazine's* satirical caricatures were recognizable as real figures, stylized into some identifiable extreme. No whole truth about a character can be revealed in any number of lines; instead, a few lines reveal an exaggeration that is familiar and resonant. It is this aspect of Christie's apparently simplistic prose that has received some queer attention.

³⁶ P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2009), 87.

³⁷ Robert Graves quoted in Thomas Lask, 'Hercule Poirot Is Dead: Famed Belgian Detective', *New York Times* (4 Aug. 1975); Ruth Rendell quoted in 'Quote Unquote', *Independent* (3 Apr. 1993). Accessed online (26 Jun 2014): <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/quote-unquote-1453120.html>

³⁸ Letter from Sidney Smith to Agatha Christie, 3 Apr 1943, quoted in Laura Thompson, *Agatha Christie: An English Mystery* (London: Headline, 2007), 401.

³⁹ Quoted in James, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, 87.

The historian and gay rights activist Dennis Altman first suggested that Christie could be 'queered' in a series of talks in the 1990s.⁴⁰ Following an article by journalist Johann Hari, who claimed that Christie appeals to socialists because of her conservatism, so over-keen that it advertises its fictional status, Altman claimed that non-heterosexual people might read Christie for similar reasons.⁴¹ His project involved talking about characters who were 'coded', but not explicitly identified, as 'homosexual,' thus allowing glimpses of 'another, less ordered world' than that which Christie sought to present.

The experiments, Altman claimed,

allowed us to speak of homosexuality in ways that suggested the fragility of conventional sexual and gender norms. Here, the term 'queer' brought together both its contemporary sexual meaning with its older sense of something that disturbs what is taken for granted.⁴²

It is, according to Altman, the 'older sense' of 'queer' that was available to Christie – so he claims that she must be deliberately reimagined for 'contemporary' queers. The thrust of Altman's argument is that Christie uses such basic stereotypes that discerning readers can understand them, and prejudices that create them, as unreal and artificial. Altman concludes that Christie can help readers to 'see the frailty of social structures', but only when read ironically.⁴³

However, Altman's reading is hampered by two things. Firstly, he does not close-read any text, drawing on memory, which inevitably leads to glossing when he concludes that 'all homosexual characters of the period' end up murdered.⁴⁴ Secondly, 'queer' has never had a unilateral meaning; this is, as discussed below, part of its appeal to theorists. It means different things to

⁴⁰ Dennis Altman, 'Reading Agatha Christie', *Inside Story: Current Affairs from Australia and Beyond* (5 Jan 2009). Accessed online (26 Jun 2014): <http://inside.org.au/reading-agatha-christie/>. See also Dennis Altman, *The End of the Homosexual?* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2013), 129-32.

⁴¹ Hari, 'Agatha Christie'.

⁴² Altman, *The End of the Homosexual?*, 130.

⁴³ Altman, 'Reading Agatha Christie'.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* In one instance, Altman conflates two characters with similar names (Shaitana and Satterthwaite) under a new name ('Mr Satterthwaite') to prove his point. In fact, Satterthwaite is not a victim but a recurring detective who is presented sympathetically.

different people – to some, it means many things, or nothing at all. As early as the 1910s ‘queer’ was recognized as slang used among and to connote men who had sex with men.⁴⁵ Indeed, Christie characters use the word to refer to non-heterosexuality in 1933 and in 1964, although in both encounters the implied author is amused at the characters’ dependence on the voguish label.⁴⁶ Altman draws attention towards the fact that reality is never as clear as a stereotype; but a closer look at the texts reveals a degree of self-reflexivity that points towards the unreality of orderly worldviews.

An assumption underscores Altman’s and many other excellent analyses: that Christie’s main objective was ‘to provide relief from the anxieties and traumas of life both in peace and war.’⁴⁷ Even Gill Plain’s ground-breaking reading of dead and living bodies in Christie is framed with the suggestion that Christie wrote to ‘make safe’ ‘unruly bodies of desire.’⁴⁸ Few commentators question that Christie’s literature is fundamentally conservative and fewer still read this apparent conservatism as something with which Christie consciously engages. As Altman fails to note, Christie does not simply draw upon available ‘homosexual’ stereotypes (although I shall problematize even this in Chapter Two and, partially, in Chapter Five); she exploits prejudice surrounding them for narrative purposes. Simply put, the implied reader will not like a discourteous, effeminate male socialist and will therefore feel suitably bamboozled when this character is revealed to be completely innocent of murder, and a more likeable figure emerges as guilty. As Gillian Gill puts it, ‘the stereotype acts to trip the reader up’.⁴⁹

However, I do not go so far as to agree with Gill that the ‘truth’ at the end of a Christie abandons stereotype and hails complexity. Nor do I accept

⁴⁵ See George Chauncey in Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 74.

⁴⁶ In *Three-Act Tragedy* (1934), a modern woman shocks a ‘Victorian’ friend by saying that she ‘like[s] men to have affairs [because i]t shows they’re not queer’, while in *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), Miss Marple’s artsy nephew tries and fails to shock her by talking of his ‘house-proud’ friend who is ‘a queer’. Agatha Christie, *Three-Act Tragedy* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 50; Agatha Christie, *A Caribbean Mystery* (London: Book Club, 1964), 10. Further references to these sources will appear as *Three-Act* and *Caribbean*.

⁴⁷ James, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, 89.

⁴⁸ Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 27.

⁴⁹ Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries* (London: Robson, 1991), 147.

Altman's view that we must see past the stereotypes to a complexity of which Christie was oblivious; rather, the texts' solutions lie in unexpected arrangements of stock figures and tropes, consciously pointing towards their incongruence, their artificiality, and even potential subversion. Altman claims that some Christie characters are so obviously 'homosexual' that they are 'crying out for a queer reading'.⁵⁰ Alternatively, I suggest that a reading of Christie informed by queer theory can move beyond highlighting gay stereotypes (a process that risks confirming their currency). The reading I propose indicates self-conscious frailty in all identity 'types', and the interdependence of 'queer' and 'normal' types, in the prose. It is time, then, to consider which strands of theory can best illuminate these texts' queer potential, and how.

Theory: Evaluation and Overview

In this section, I will consider approaches to queer theory that inform this thesis, illuminating the above themes. Then, I will ask how Christie texts, which have not yet been explored from a queer theorized perspective, will significantly impact upon existing queer approaches to popular culture. I aim to show that queer theory is urgently relevant to this project. However, this is not simply a case of defining 'queer theory' and using it to interpret the texts. 'Queer' has long been a contested term, and queer theory has almost as many branches and valences as it does adherents. The death of queer theory is routinely announced, as are new avenues and bifurcations. Appropriately, one thing for which queer theory has been criticized may be its greatest critical strength: indefinability.

Although 'queer' has traditionally referred to anything unusual, unfitting, or inexplicable, it has long been understood as a derogatory slang term, referring to people who are not 'straight'; particularly, homosexual men.⁵¹ As a

⁵⁰ Altman, *The End of the Homosexual?*, 129.

⁵¹ Oxford English Dictionary, "Queer, N.2" (Oxford University Press).

theoretical term, 'queer' has served many purposes – indeed, as Annamarie Jagose points out, 'indeterminacy [is] one of its most widely promoted charms'.⁵² Although clearly a reclaimed word, in a theoretical sense it cannot be used to connote male homosexuality exclusively. Rather, it stands for adopting and embracing a position *outside of* and *excluded from* the dominant norm, which therefore holds that norm up for interrogation. Again, Jagose observes, "'Queer" is not simply the latest example in a series of words that describe and constitute same-sex desire transhistorically but rather a consequence of the constructionist problematising of any alleged universal.'⁵³

Queer activism and theory partly arose from the work of Foucault, who summarized his method as 'a systematic scepticism with regard to all anthropological universals.'⁵⁴ Foucault drew attention towards what he called the 'medicalisation' of sexual identity in particular, pointing out that nineteenth-century theories of homosexuality and sexual inversion bestowed more than a 'disease' onto subjects: they created identity categories.⁵⁵ Foucault's call to new and subversive bodily pleasures has provided an intellectual core for much western queer theory. Assuming 'queer' as a theoretical stance can mean challenging presumptions about heterosexuality as 'natural,' but also critiquing a more general reliance on binaries which have been taken for granted, such as gay and straight, man and woman, or male and female. Often, a queer perspective positions itself as *not the norm*, signifying normality as referential and directly engaging with 'the risks and limits of identity' itself.⁵⁶

As an academic discipline, queer studies has roots in a variety of feminist debates and activist projects surrounding gender and sexuality in the 1980s. Although the genesis of queer theory is hard to pinpoint, two texts published in 1990 are often considered foundational: Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*. Butler's contribution to feminist theory follows the work of such linguists and philosophers as Ferdinand

⁵² Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* (London, New York, Victoria: Penguin, 1998), 89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁵⁶ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 83.

de Saussure, J.L. Austin, and Louis Althusser, who maintained that language constructs social reality even as it appears to reflect it; that utterances bring what they signify into being; and that in order for an ideology of being to have any significance it must be already accepted and enacted.⁵⁷ From this premise, Butler theorizes gender as a 'stylized repetition of acts': the subject creates their gender identity by performing it, and therefore gender identity 'is constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.'⁵⁸ A primary aim of Butler's *Gender Trouble* was to urge feminist theorists to reject the apparently essential category of 'woman'; by claiming that gender is performative, and not related to some essential law of biology, Butler considers the female/male sex divide as a gendered construction which serves antifeminist agendas and excludes all but a limited number of available 'identity' options.⁵⁹ This is not to say that Butler claims women do not exist. Her point is that human subjectivity is based upon a politics of the performative, and essential personhood is daily constructed as it is enacted.

Within radical feminism in particular, Butler's views have been criticized as abstractly theoretical and unconnected to the reality of women's victimization on the grounds of biological difference.⁶⁰ However, much of this is due to an equation of 'gender performativity,' describing a deep political inscription that must be challenged, with 'gender performance,' which suggests a conscious or even arbitrary assumption of gendered identity.⁶¹ I will consider Butler's controversial discussion of 'drag' as an example of gender performativity, and readings of this as a call to political drag, in Chapter Three. These criticisms aside, *Gender Trouble* had a strong influence on the emergence and development of queer theory and studies in the 1990s by indicating that everything about identity, and thereafter identity politics, can be subverted.

⁵⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34-58.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vii-xxviii.

⁶⁰ See particularly Sheila Jeffreys, 'The Queer Disappearance of Lesbians: Sexuality in the Academy', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 17 (1994); Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective* (Cambridge, Oxford, Malden: Polity, 2003).

⁶¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), viii-x.

If *Gender Trouble* is a parent-text in queer academia, then Sedgwick's *Epistemology* is at least co-parental. Sedgwick considers varied texts at the heart of 'modern western culture', from an 'antihomophobic' perspective.⁶² That is to say, she 'incorporate[s] a critical analysis of the modern homo/heterosexual definition' into her readings.⁶³ Towards the end of her life, Sedgwick claimed that the queer quality of her work lay in its

resistance to treating homo/heterosexual categorization – still so very volatile an act – as a done deal, a transparently empirical fact about any person. [...]he specificity, materiality, and variety of sexual practices, along with their diverse meanings for individual lives, can be done better justice in a context where the impoverished abstractions that claim to define sexuality can be treated as not authoritative. The dividing up of all sexual acts – indeed all persons – under the 'opposite' categories of 'homo' and 'hetero' is not a natural given but a historical process⁶⁴

which means that the process is not over, and that as contexts change, so too will identities. In turn, this means that existing identity categories, with all their apparent innateness, should be acknowledged as constructions. In a western society where heterosexuality has a 'defining, normalizing function [...] which marginalizes other sexualities at best and invalidates them at worse [*sic*]',⁶⁵ acknowledging heterosexuality's unreality and mutability is important. It means undermining structural oppression; upholding queerness and diversity.

Seemingly endless space has been devoted to exploring or contesting what 'queer' can *do*, as a noun or a verb. As Laura Doan observes, it is both an umbrella term, referring to sexualities and orientations not considered 'straight,' and a 'non-identity' – this, according to Doan, gave the word a unique critical value in the 1990s, because it could be incorporated into a range of projects.⁶⁶ Some theorists reject the idea of having a queer identity, on the grounds that '[q]ueerness can never be an identity, it can only ever disrupt an identity', and

⁶² Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexualities* (London, Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2010), 92.

⁶⁶ Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago, London: Chicago University Press, 2013), 7.

that ‘if it ceases to be a critique of identity it’s lost its critical edge.’⁶⁷ However, others argue that this ‘slipperiness’, or even confusion over meaning, can act to radically destabilise the very structures in which people write about queerness.⁶⁸ Exploring the concept of queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman observes that queer texts are important because they invite readers ‘to look hard and askance at the norm’, thereby offering a way into history that emphasizes history’s own indebtedness to cultural constructions.⁶⁹

This idea of ‘look[ing] hard and askance at the norm’ is one that much queer theory has embraced, especially in the twenty-first century. According to the queer theorist Jack Halberstam, ‘the “How weird is that?” approach to heterosexuality [in the context of gender studies] works much better than the “Try to be tolerant of these weirdos” approach showcasing queerness.’⁷⁰ Halberstam insists that the approach ‘forces [students to] look at their own investments, their own issues, their own struggles with what is supposed to come naturally.’⁷¹ In her more theoretical *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed highlights, from a Butlerian perspective, the unproductive nature of reading desire in terms of deviation from heterosexuality, which acts ‘to bring what is “slantwise” back into line.’⁷² Paraphrasing the feminist Simone de Beauvoir, Ahmed writes that ‘[o]ne is not born, but becomes straight.’⁷³ For Ahmed, as the uncontested and therefore compulsory ‘straight’ norm, heterosexuality ‘reproduces more than “itself”’: it is a mechanism for the reproduction of culture’, and queerness, which she terms ‘a refusal to inherit’, destabilizes not ‘just sex’ but a whole political order.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2004), 17; Judith Butler quoted in Noreen Giffney, ‘Introduction: The Q Word’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. by Noreen Giffney and Michael O’Rourke (Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 1-13 (4).

⁶⁸ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 2, 5-6.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010), xvii.

⁷⁰ J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 11.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2006), 2, 79.

⁷³ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 161, 78, 62.

Justifying his seminal project, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, the historian Jonathan Ned Katz points out that when perversity is created, its opposite usually follows. His rationale extends from the question, '[I]nspired by Foucault's comments on "The Perverse Implantation," may we not now ask about "The Normal Implantation"? In the late nineteenth century was not heterosexuality also implanted as one form of sexuality?'⁷⁵ A major result of Katz's project is the understanding that the word 'heterosexual' has not always meant 'normative' – prior to the 1960s, Katz insists, when 'heterosexuality' signified a kind of perversion, there was an 'implicit norm,' 'unnamed' and therefore 'unquestioned.'⁷⁶ The publication of Katz's work paved the way for a number of explorations of the phenomenon of named and labelled straightness, although there is much that still needs to be explored – specifically, the extent to which the 'implicit' and 'unnamed' was always 'unquestioned.'

This thesis considers texts by the supremely popular Agatha Christie published before the 1960s. As stated above, the publication time-frame I have chosen, 1920 to 1952, covers the periods immediately following the First and Second World Wars, as well as incorporating wartime. This was a period before 'heterosexual' meant 'normative,' one of radical change and renegotiation, as entire national and social orders were shaken up by military, economic, and technological changes. Christie's texts have not significantly impacted upon queer theory, and neither has Golden Age detective fiction more generally. However, the indelible presence of crime and transgression in these texts means that when questions around identity and labels are raised, there must be an ethical question of good and evil. Finding queerness in these mainstream, conservative texts will extend queer theories' range and relevance.

Christie is not the only, nor the most obvious, detective novelist of the Golden Age to draw attention towards the staginess and unreality of daily life. For instance, in Gladys Mitchell's first detective novel, *Speedy Death* (1928), the victim is a transgendered man whose fiancé knows nothing until his naked

⁷⁵ Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago, London: Chicago University Press, 2007), 173.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

corpse is discovered. Mitchell's detective, a female psychoanalyst, defends lesbianism and incest and commits murder, without remorse or punishment, on at least two occasions.⁷⁷ However, Mitchell consciously rejected generic developments of the Golden Age. Christie, a president of the Detection Club, did not. Most of her books conclude with a clear solution, a murderer dead or sentenced to death, a marriage or pregnancy (within marriage), and, seemingly, a sense that the traumatic events of the narrative will no longer impact upon daily life. However, the very use of a formula suggests that everything will be repeated; there will be another 'Christie for Christmas' which means another murder. The repetitive predictability at the heart of the Christie phenomenon – that 'comfort of the familiar' – means that apparently secure solutions are never absolute.

Faye Stewart has considered the 'tension between' detective fiction's generic demand for 'closure' and the fluidity of 'queer narratives.'⁷⁸ She makes the point that, by posing a riddle for resolution, a detective novel can be read as a story about interpreting signs and constructing identity.⁷⁹ Stewart interprets clues queerly: she points out that 'a clue is [...] a queer sort of thing' since it is an aspect of the text that assumes significance only when labelled by a detective with narrative authority.⁸⁰ Clues, that is to say, appear ordinary – they seem to belong in the world of the novel – but they are connected with the crime; the narrative disruption.⁸¹ 'If clues are somewhat queer,' she adds, 'the herring is even queerer.'⁸² Red herrings are things that do belong in the orderly world of the novel, but do not appear to. They are so strange that they need to be finally labelled as ordinary. The red herring, then, occupies a unique role in the narrative: it advertises its strangeness, which in turn means that it cannot

⁷⁷ Gladys Mitchell, *Speedy Death* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1929); Gladys Mitchell, *The Saltmarsh Murders* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1931).

⁷⁸ Faye Stewart, 'Of Herrings Red and Lavender: Reading Crime and Identity in Queer Detective Fiction', *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 27.2 (2009), 33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸¹ In the structuralist Tzvetan Todorov's conception, a detective story is really two stories – that of the crime, and that of the investigation ('The Typology of the Detective Story', in *The Poetics of Prose* [Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977], 42-52). A clue, then, is an element of the first story hiding in the second.

⁸² Stewart, 'Of Herrings Red and Lavender', 35-36.

signify the ‘real’ disorder of the narrative – the crime – because clues must be hidden. ‘[T]he red-herring’, then, ‘is a queer device.’⁸³

Finally, Stewart coins a new term, ‘lavender herring’ to designate ‘the misreading of sexuality, whether intentionally induced or merely coincidental’.⁸⁴ Stewart’s article is ground-breaking in that it indicates the genre’s queer potential in its appeal to the ordinary and draws connections between trying to establish somebody’s sexuality and trying to grasp the solution to a crime. However, her focus on ‘queer detective novels,’ which means mostly narratives set in LGBTQ+ communities, undermines the radical potential in her understanding of detective narratives as ‘hermeneutical code[s]’ which can be used to critique identity norms.⁸⁵ Artificial, stylized, and self-conscious, narrative resolution itself can indicate instability and irresolution.

Despite the likely benefits of a properly theorized queer approach to LGBTQ+-coded Christie characters, this thesis will not focus exclusively upon characters who might be read as ‘homosexual’ (or otherwise non-heterosexual), but also upon mechanics by which social constructs are formulated. In fact, the language of ‘non-heterosexuality’, which positions the heterosexual as a standard against which diversity must be measured, will be discarded. Instead, I will investigate the very construct of ‘straight’ as intangibly defined against queerness while I consider to what extent the texts problematize ‘normality’ itself.

Chapter Overview

According to George Grella, ‘the great concern of the [Golden Age] detective novel is centripetal; it is a formal minuet leading to an inescapable conclusion, as mannered and unreal as the masque, the sonnet, or the drawing room

⁸³ Ibid., 36.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 34.

farce.’⁸⁶ This thesis reads Christie’s prose as ‘mannered and unreal’ – maintaining that in their formal artificiality the texts provide a unique kind of social commentary. The approach is influenced by Humble’s theorization of detective fiction as something to be read, not merely ‘in terms of the history of the genre,’ but also as part of a ‘middlebrow’ twentieth-century movement, ‘established through a complex interplay between texts and self-images of their readers.’⁸⁷ There is queer potential in these texts, as questions are raised about the ways in which normality, deviance, and essential identity are perceived in the time Christie was writing.

Chapter One justifies this project’s critique of identity essentialism in the texts by considering the manufacturing of ‘Agatha Christie’ as a widely-read celebrity author. Reading Christie’s authorial identity as something established and refined through a market-driven response to readers’ expectations and a conscious engagement with earlier forms of detective fiction provides space for reading identity itself as a stylized, performative, and sometimes parodic theme within the texts. The chapter considers Christie’s manipulation, parodic innovation, and ultimate exploitation of male-coded detective fiction conventions.

After considering Christie’s emergence as ‘a new woman writer of detective fiction,’⁸⁸ I explore her use of gendered parody in *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), in which the female protagonist tries to become an action heroine but finds her male-authored role-models implausible. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) delivers a decisive blow to pre-First World War masculine security by identifying the traditionally heroic and impeccable narrator as the culprit. Chapter One finally looks at Christie’s most obvious fictional alter ego. The fiercely lowbrow ‘Mrs Oliver’ begins as a parody of stereotypes surrounding popular women writers and evolves into a strategic self-portrait via which Christie promotes an image of herself as a conventionally

⁸⁶ George Grella, ‘Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 4.1 (1970), 101.

⁸⁷ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 3-5.

⁸⁸ Allen Lane, in ‘Agatha Christie’, *Close-Up* (1966). Broadcast via the BBC Home Service. Lane’s scripted section is archived in the University of Bristol Penguin Archive, file DM1819/10/3. This line occurs on page 2.

feminine professional amateur. If authorial identity is understood as a culturally manufactured construct, then identity more generally can be read in terms of artifice.

As Todd W. Reeser notes, 'masculinity [...] inevitably functions in relation to a series of others. In fact, it is defined by that very dialogue.'⁸⁹ In Chapter Two, I consider Christie's presentation of masculine heroism as a self-consciously vulnerable requirement of the detective fiction genre. My concerted discussion of Christie's work and contemporary sexological theories situates the rise of the detective novel in a period when categories for human sexual identity were beginning to become available. Building on this initial discussion of sexology, I then use Sedgwick's theoretical insights to consider Poirot as a parodic response to Sherlock Holmes. His companion, Arthur Hastings, enacts a kind of maudlin masculine heroism, in contrast to Poirot's dandyism; their disparity draws attention to complexities and insecurities in male homosocial bonding. The next part of the chapter looks at *Cards on the Table* (1936), a novel in which a 'queer' 'oriental' figure about whom little is known is killed at a bridge party by one of four respectable party-goers, all of whom have previously got away with murder.

As well as examining the 'oriental' threat in *Cards*, I consider a colonial hero who is nonetheless a suspect in the murder. Despite being the picture of heroic masculinity, this tanned adventurer is shown to have a limited and conveniently oblivious way of interacting with 'the colonies' and with women: he 'sees only what blends and harmonises with his bent of mind' (*Cards*, 132). Finally, I contrast the presentation of two 'womanish' men, considering how the heroes in their respective texts define themselves against them. In *Murder is Easy* (1938), a 'nasty' 'queer' antiques dealer is presented as a male witch who corrupts young men and women, and the hero bonds with his future wife over setting the police onto him.⁹⁰ However, in a later short story 'Three Blind Mice' (1948), the hero who tries to keep a 'definitely queer' youth 'out of the kitchen'

⁸⁹ Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory* (Malden, Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 41.

⁹⁰ Agatha Christie, *Murder Is Easy* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1971), 50, 189. Further references to this source will appear as *Easy*.

and away from 'pretty furniture' sees himself in the other man, and admits that he has been 'insanely jealous' of the latter's strange confidence.⁹¹ Moreover, the youth turns out to be a war hero (73). Queer masculinity, then, always illustrates the frailty of masculine heroism, and this becomes increasingly self-conscious.

Chapter Three considers feminine power and masquerade. There is a strong sense throughout selected interwar Christie texts of femininity as elaborate artifice. The chapter begins by examining Poirot's love interest – the woman who confirms his heroic sexual virility. Just as Poirot's sidekick is elaborately macho, the woman he loves, a Russian countess of dubious repute, is flamboyantly feminine. Indeed, the Countess is described in language similar to that used of contemporary female impersonators. Close-reading is enriched by Butlerian discussions of gender performativity and drag.

If the detective creates the murderer by naming them as such, then the other character must accept this new identity. In *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), the killer seems always devoid of a real personality. She is a glamorous actress who kills her husband while disguised as herself. Because her image is so recognizable and reproducible, this Jane Wilkinson has been able to disguise herself as a celebrity impersonator while a real impressionist gave her an alibi elsewhere. Here and elsewhere in her interwar fiction, Christie explores the full narrative potential inherent in elaborate constructions of the feminine self. Finally, the chapter considers a hyper-feminine *femme fatale* victim in *Evil Under the Sun* (1941). Christie uses the generically required corpse to reflect on the 'eternal [...] victim' status of women in the contexts of modernity and consumerism, where women are told to be as 'standardized' as their clothes, their bodies, and their love affairs.⁹² The women in these texts appear strong and intimidating to men – as victims or as criminals – but throughout her fiction Christie exposes these identity categories as elaborate constructs.

⁹¹ Agatha Christie, 'Three Blind Mice', in *Three Blind Mice and Other Stories* (New York: St Martin's, 2001), 1-95 (76, 85). Further references to this source will appear as 'Mice.'

⁹² Agatha Christie, *Evil under the Sun* (Glasgow, London: Fontana, 1988), 204. Further references to this source will appear as *Evil*.

Chapter Four looks at families in texts written shortly after the Second World War. The dominant post-war rhetoric of national recovery focussed on the family unit's sanctity. Christie's texts, on the other hand, suggest a need to radically re-conceptualize the family if it is to survive in changing times. Families in the novels I discuss – *Sleeping Murder* (written in the late 1940s), *Crooked House* (1949), and *They Do it with Mirrors* (1952) – are all downsized and shaken up over the course of the narratives. While each of these families tries to proceed along familiar lines, each has to change fundamentally in order to avoid facing extinction. To illuminate this theme, my analysis covers three major tropes: incest, heredity, and adoption.

Like many anti-family queer theorists, Christie confronts the rhetorical image of the innocent child in these texts.⁹³ In *Sleeping*, the child who witnesses a crime has secret knowledge, but she must learn to express it in adult terms. In *Crooked*, a child kills her grandfather because he would not give her ballet lessons. In *Mirrors*, biologically-conceived children born in and out of wedlock are brought into proximity with each other, with adopted children, and with troubled youths in a tangled gothic house that acts as a traditional family home and a modish charity centre at once. The child is often invoked as a symbol of innocence, but childhood is also a time in which knowledge can be absorbed without the codes and biases that adults have internalized. This is a kind of power, as the child has access to a life without the limits that structure the world of adults, or with different parameters.⁹⁴ Christie, I argue, presents the innocent child as a social fabrication, while also exploiting the power of childhood to stand for potential alternative lives and narratives.

In Chapter Five, I consider television adaptations, with which Christie's name has become synonymous in the twenty-first century. ITV's *Agatha Christie's Poirot* (1989-2013) and *Agatha Christie's Marple* (2004-2014) are crucially period dramas. Dialogue, costumes, and scenery evoke historical periods. *Poirot* is a more sombre venture than *Marple*, which presents itself as

⁹³ Edelman, *No Future*.

⁹⁴ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2009), 1-57.

'camp.' Using Jonathan Simon's socio-legal concept of 'wilful nostalgia,' I consider the presentation of the past, and of male sexuality in the past, in later episodes of *Poirot*. The presence of explicitly homosexual characters in *Death on the Nile* (2004) and *Cards on the Table* (2006) has the surprising consequence of making Poirot appear conventionally manly, heroic, and explicitly heterosexual. The nostalgic vision of England in *Poirot* appeals to 'simpler' times – presented as a binarized 'straight' time.

More controversial was the decision to launch *Marple* as an 'updated' series in 2004. The series sets up Christie's literary texts as closed and conservative products of the past, presenting 'updated' plots in line with dominant lesbian and gay liberation projects by self-referentially 'outing' as homosexual a range of characters who are not conventionally masculine or feminine. Accessible literary stereotypes are reduced to a binary – manly men are heterosexual; other men are homosexual – creating a limited worldview. Moreover, the historical element, as the 1950s are portrayed as a time when homosexual people could not 'come out,' enforces the homo/hetero binary and presents the twenty-first century, with these binaries emphasized, as the end consequence of progress and the height of queer visibility.

Despite queer theory's criticized absorption into the academic mainstream, it remains at odds with dominant identity politics in Britain. Notwithstanding the increasing popularity of the word 'queer' in activism, anti-essentialist arguments – which critique the 'born this way' mantra of post-Stonewall LGB liberation movements – are considered extremist.⁹⁵ Doan warns of 'measuring the past against current understandings'; such approaches tend to find what they are looking for.⁹⁶ As I show in my final chapter, there is more queer potential in Christie's conservative prose than in the more consciously democratic television adaptations.

⁹⁵ See Jay Poole, 'Queer Representations of Gay Males and Masculinities in the Media', *Sexuality & Culture*, 18.2 (2014).

⁹⁶ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 3, 4.

This thesis, then, assesses queer potential in detective fiction published by Agatha Christie between and shortly after the two World Wars. It problematizes readings of Christie's conservatism, and broadens the scope of queer engagement with popular culture. If human identity can be read as self-consciously constructed in Christie's novels, which were written in a context of national change and insecurity, then these texts might undermine their own conservative appeal to the status quo.

The Case of the Middle-Class Wife: Exploiting a Genre and Crafting an Identity

I'm pretending to be a writer. It's almost queerer than pretending to be a wife or a mother.

Celia in *Unfinished Portrait*⁹⁷

I suppose I must resign myself to *being* me.

*An Autobiography*⁹⁸

Introduction

Christie hated television sets and rarely allowed her work to be adapted for the small screen.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, a high-profile set of dramatizations for London Weekend Television began in 1979, three years after her death.¹⁰⁰ A mini-series for television, *The Agatha Christie Hour* (1982) included ten episodes, of one hour each, based on Christie's lesser-known short stories. The animated title sequence for each episode, lasting eighteen seconds, shows an upright woman working at her typewriter by a window, through which day turns to night and the seasons change. The typewriter pings and the woman removes her paper.¹⁰¹

She is in silhouette. Her expensive 1930s dress, the wall and window, and the rose on her desk that alternately wilts and flourishes, however, burst with colour. The short sequence does several things at once, as the viewer is prepared for an hour of 'Agatha Christie.' It evokes Virginia Woolf's remark that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.'¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Mary Westmacott, 'Unfinished Portrait', in *The Mary Westmacott Collection: Volume One* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 331-592 (547). Further references to this source will appear as *Unfinished*.

⁹⁸ Christie, *Autobiography*, 410. Emphasis original.

⁹⁹ Janet Morgan, *Agatha Christie: A Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 347.

¹⁰⁰ John Davies (dir.), *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (London Weekend Television, 1979). Broadcast on ITV on 30 Mar. 1980.

¹⁰¹ Michael Simpson (dir.), 'The Case of the Middle-Aged Wife', *the Agatha Christie Hour*, 1.1 (Thames Television, 1982). Broadcast on ITV on 7 Sep. 1982.

¹⁰² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

With the impression of a room devoted to a typewriter and the depiction of a great deal of time passing, the sequence presents just such a literary woman. The woman herself appears absent, a shadow in the colourful world around her; plots and characters seem important, not the woman who puts them there. However, though in shadow, the subject is not characterless. She is defined partly by her surroundings – a conservative domestic setting with a rose, an unspoilt country view, and a fluttering butterfly – and partly by her clothes, hairstyle, and posture. This character seems well-off, from the 1930s, and domestic; a picture of conventional English womanhood.

Such a picture of Christie tallies with that promoted in most scholarship since Robert Barnard's pioneering critical evaluation, published in 1980. In *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, Barnard established Christie as a 'gifted practitioner of this – we won't say art, but – craft' of writing detective fiction.¹⁰³ He marvelled that, despite her social and intellectual limits, being 'an old person interpreting the world for other old people', Christie wrote prose that appealed across communities.¹⁰⁴ Since then, few readings have challenged an understanding of Christie as a 'discreet, private and ladylike person' whose quiet conservatism has nothing and yet everything to do with her escapist prose.¹⁰⁵ While a number of readings to date have downplayed the significance of the author in locating meaning within her texts, they have nevertheless been influenced by this stereotype.¹⁰⁶

The aim of this chapter is not to discern an alternative, more authentic 'Agatha Christie.' Rather, this chapter considers Christie's authorial identity, something constructed within the context of changing perceptions surrounding women writers in the twentieth century. As Wayne Booth has noted, a reader 'will construct a picture' of the author from the text, which 'will help to determine

¹⁰³ Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (London: Collins, 1980), 17.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 14, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Fido, *The World of Agatha Christie* (London: SevenOaks, 2010). Dustjacket.

¹⁰⁶ For example: Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Thompson, *Agatha Christie*; York, *Agatha Christie*. These volumes will be discussed in the next section.

[their] response to the work.¹⁰⁷ This ‘implied author’, an artist’s ‘second self’, created by the reader’s interaction with the text, feeds the reader’s desire for narrative certainty; ‘the need to know where [...] the author wants him [*sic*] to stand.’¹⁰⁸ Presumptions about an author’s ‘tone’ therefore unconsciously limit the range of meanings a text can have: ‘[t]he “implied author” chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read’.¹⁰⁹ Considering Christie as a businessperson whose contribution to the detective genre was as innovative as it was market-driven, we can re-evaluate how Christie herself is presented in the texts. Understanding Christie’s conservative and conventional image as one she deliberately crafted for herself opens up space to think more broadly about the constructedness of identity in her fiction.

While this chapter does not focus directly on the queer potential inherent in Christie’s fiction, it informs queer readings in subsequent chapters. By viewing identity in the fiction of Agatha Christie as a performative construct, I aim to expand the possibilities of queer canonicity. Before turning to queer theory and thinking about how it resonates with the texts, therefore, I wish to confront the question of Christie’s authorial identity. If the well-known figure of ‘Agatha Christie’ is viewed as a professionally-developed authorial identity, then we can begin to read identity more broadly in these texts as constructed and performative.

First, this chapter explores Christie’s emergence as a writer in a ‘masculine’ literary market, and her innovative contributions to a supposedly ‘masculine’ genre. As Amy Kaplan notes, women writing fiction in the twentieth century had to consider more than ‘entrap[ment] in male texts and male genres’; they had to confront the class-conscious expectation that they would ‘locate [...] their audience at the hearth rather than in the library.’¹¹⁰ To begin with, Christie exploited formulae established by male writers with male heroes, such as Arthur Conan Doyle and E.C. Bentley. However, when her debut novel, *The*

¹⁰⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Second ed. (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 71.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹¹⁰ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago, London: Chicago University Press, 1992), 79, 70.

Mysterious Affair at Styles was published in 1920, she had begun to establish a unique voice, rewriting certain passages to emphasize the novel's domestic setting, and drawing upon a domestic wartime aura to provide new contexts and backgrounds for the traditional detective novel.

Throughout the first decade of her career, Christie parodied and experimented with generic conventions and with readers' expectations. As Woolf described the writerly sentence as heavy and assured, 'a sentence made by men' which must be 'alter[ed] and adapt[ed]' by the woman writer,¹¹¹ the traditions with which Christie interacts might be read as male. To explore the strong, under-acknowledged element of parody in Christie's writing, this chapter considers two narrators in early texts. Anne Beddingfeld, who narrates *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), is practically the only female narrator of a Golden Age detective novel. Anne craves adventure and seeks to emulate the heroines of romantic films and literature. In so doing, she critiques these characters' dependence on men, also exposing their incoherence as characters, created without an understanding of women. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), a profoundly conventional detective story with distinct allusions to Doyle and E.C. Bentley, is narrated by the murderer. As the sidekick figure in the narrative, Dr Sheppard seems to be utterly trustworthy, but his version of events, like everyone else's, turns out to be subjective. Through Sheppard's misleading narrative and subsequent confession of guilt, Christie critiques the narrator's authority in reconstructing the story. Together, these texts reveal a playful gendered approach to tradition in popular texts, introducing an authorial voice partly defined by novelty.

Finally, this chapter considers Christie's strategic deployment of an authorial persona in *Cards on the Table* (1936) and *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952). Having established herself as a genre innovator, Christie continued to dominate the market even after fashions changed. A crucial element of this was her creation of a fictional alter ego, the eccentric feminist crime-writer, Ariadne

¹¹¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Fiction', *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 132-39 (136).

Oliver. Appearing in nine titles, Oliver develops from a satirical stereotype of popular women writers in general to a conscious, tragicomic self-portrait.¹¹² Writing about Oliver, Christie could reflect upon her experiences as a woman writer of detective fiction, but she also promoted a particular image of herself as an author, to her readers. Discussing the character as a deliberate construction, designed to be read as a self-portrait, rather than simply as shorthand for 'Christie herself,' can inform new readings of the texts as spaces in which identity is a construct. From here we can begin to appreciate that, far from being glibly conservative, Agatha Christie's prose brims with disingenuous artifice. Awareness of the market and of readers' expectations operates across these texts, informing a self-conscious, then parodic, and finally strategic exploitation of class-based, gendered, and other expectations surrounding her profession. This in turn broadens possibilities for a queer reading of her fiction, destabilizing apparently innate gendered constructions.

As Kathy Rudy points out, 'queer theory prods us to question our attachment to the stable categories of men and women.'¹¹³ One point that Butler repeatedly makes is that sex itself is a product of gender, 'the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place' and that, therefore, any 'masculine' or 'feminine' performance is inevitably an effort to make things 'fit the binary' when they 'do not' – by this token, all gender performances, which create their own reference points, hold the key to gender's subversion.¹¹⁴ Christie's immensely popular fiction, which seems to depend on

¹¹² Oliver appears in the following: 'The Case of the Discontented Soldier' (1934), 'The Case of the Rich Woman' (1934), *Cards on the Table* (1936), *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), *The Pale Horse* (1961), *Third Girl* (1967), and *Elephants Can Remember* (1972). Since *Hercule Poirot and the Greenshore Folly*, published in 2014, is an early draft of *Dead Man's Folly*, it is not included here.

[Agatha Christie, 'The Case of the Discontented Soldier', in *Parker Pyne Investigates* (New York: William Morrow, 2012), 17-38. Further references to this source will appear as 'Soldier'; Agatha Christie, 'The Case of the Rich Woman', in *Parker Pyne Investigates* (New York: William Morrow, 2012), 87-104. Further references to this source will appear as 'Rich'; Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1969). Further references to this source will appear as *Cards*; Agatha Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (London, Glasgow: Fontana, 1974). Further references to this source will appear as *McGinty*; Agatha Christie, *Dead Man's Folly* (London: Collins, 1956). Further references to this source will appear as *Folly*; Agatha Christie, *The Pale Horse* (New York, London, Toronto: Harper, 2011). Further references to this source will appear as *Pale*; Agatha Christie, *Third Girl* (New York, London, Toronto: Harper, 2011). Further references to this source will appear as *Girl*; Agatha Christie, *Elephants Can Remember* (London: HarperCollins, 2002). Further references to this source will appear as *Elephants*.]

¹¹³ Kathy Rudy, 'Queer Theory and Feminism', *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*, 29 (2000), 195-96.

¹¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, London: Routledge, 2004), 42.

binary notions of guilt and innocence, good and evil, and so on, can be viewed anew if we reconsider the apparently indelible presence of the author in the text as a contextually-contingent construction, not 'a done deal'. Rethinking Christie's authorial identity as something constructed along the lines of a presumed 'transhistorical, transcultural' gender innateness¹¹⁵ means understanding her novels as texts with queer potential.

Reading and Writing

Unlike such writers as P.D. James, Val McDermid, and even Dorothy L. Sayers, Christie does not discuss being mistaken for a man by readers in any document I have uncovered.¹¹⁶ She had a controlled and consciously feminine public image in her lifetime. Publicly calling herself 'an industrious craftsman' and 'a perfect sausage machine' who churned out identical texts with regularity,¹¹⁷ Christie allowed publishers to make her appear as domestic and comfortingly sisterly, then maternal, as possible. Dodd, Mead, her American publishers, referred on dust-jackets to Christie's American father and her fondness for dogs.¹¹⁸ When *Dumb Witness*, a novel featuring a dog, was published, the Book Club issued it with illustrations of her own pet dog.¹¹⁹ Christie actively flirted with the media, before health problems in 1926 rendered her suspicious of journalists: she gave numerous interviews, wrote for newspapers about current affairs, and always kept the press-clippings. In the 1920s, photographs of 'Mrs Christie at home', playing with her daughter, answering the telephone, and

¹¹⁵ Rudy, 'Queer Theory and Feminism', 196.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in XtraOnline, 'Val McDermid: Women Write Violence Better Than Men', in *Daily Xtra* (YouTube, 2012); Quoted in Nigel Farndale, 'P.D. James: I Have Lived a Very Happy and Fulfilled Life', *Sunday Telegraph* (22 Dec. 2010); Quoted in Fido, *The World of Agatha Christie*, 90.

¹¹⁷ Agatha Christie, 'Mystery Writers in England', in *Ask a Policeman* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), xiii-xx (xix). Further references to this source will appear as 'Writers;' Quoted in Wyndham, 'Agatha Christie Writes Animated Algebra', 9.

¹¹⁸ Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1932). Dustjacket. Further references to *Peril at End House* will cite an alternative edition.

¹¹⁹ Agatha Christie, *Dumb Witness* (London: Book Club, 1937). Further references to this source will appear as *Dumb*.

arranging flowers, became a popular feature of *The Sketch* newspaper.¹²⁰ The cultivated image of a homely woman writer in a domestic sphere was instrumental in selling her books.

Like her main detectives, Christie was marketed as a professional amateur. In his original script for a radio profile, later edited out, Christie's publisher Allen Lane described her as somebody primarily concerned with 'the ordinary day by day job of a housewife – sewing, needlework and cooking' – who happened to write in her free time.¹²¹ He added that Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham, 'our two other best writers of detective fiction' were also, like Christie, 'superb cook[s]'.¹²² Though old-fashioned by 1966, when Lane was writing, the image of the woman crime writer as primarily a middle-class 'housewife' was common in the interwar period. For example, books in the Penguin crime series all featured author photographs, and while Anthony Berkeley, G.V. Galway, and other male writers appeared in traditional portraits, Christie, Allingham, and other female writers were photographed in their homes, Allingham surrounded by cats. For some commentators, such as Joanne Hollows, interwar images of women writers in domestic environments were supposed to present these women as 'modern' because the home and the workplace were not distinct. The image of a 'modern', middle-class woman working from home distinguished her from 'working-class domestic labour' while connecting 'home-making' with 'artistic achievement'.¹²³ Some of the writers had fun trivialising their achievements, publicly connecting their professions with domestic tasks and hobbies: Josephine Tey called crime writing 'my yearly knitting', Ngaio Marsh liked to call her damehood 'my damery', and Christie reportedly told aspiring writers that '[t]he best time for planning a book is while you're doing the dishes.'¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Alfieri, 'The Maker of the Grey Cells of M. Poirot: Creator of the Most Interesting Detective since Sherlock Holmes: Agatha Christie', in *The Sketch* (1923), p. 467.

¹²¹ Lane, 'Agatha Christie – Close Up', 3-4.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²³ Joanne Hollows, *Domestic Cultures* (Maidenhead, New York: Open University Press, 2008), 31.

¹²⁴ Quoted in John Gielgud, *Early Stages* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 1; 'Discover Author: Ngaio Marsh', [accessed 31 July 2013]; Quoted in Tom Waldrep, *Writers on Writing* (New York: Random House, 1985), 311.

Scholarship that looks for subversive or radical spaces in Christie's prose almost always dismisses Christie herself as an un-subversive, anti-radical woman. In so doing, the scholarship perpetuates received stereotypes about Christie-the-author. When Rowland concludes that Christie 'suggests (perhaps without intending to) a feminist ethical attitude,' her parentheses indicate that Christie's conservatism is almost beyond contestation, and posits a tension between text and author.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, as a retiring but defined presence in her 'fragrant world', the Christie of popular imagination has held sway for decades.¹²⁶ An image of Agatha Christie, the irrelevant housewife and grandmother, is a building block of one stereotype that is being re-evaluated here and elsewhere: what Barry Forshaw calls 'the never-never England' of her creation.¹²⁷

Re-evaluating this stereotype encourages responses to questions that have long been unanswered, or answered only perfunctorily, about Christie's broad appeal. According to Barnard, Christie's readership 'bridges national and generational gaps', while her books 'appeal equally to all class and intelligence brackets.'¹²⁸ He is intrigued, because:

every nationality and age-group finds something to respond to in her books [... Christie's] working-class readership was probably more numerous than that of any other popular writer, and she is said [...] to be favoured reading in Buckingham Palace. [...] If she is read by miners, shop assistants and old-age pensioners, equally she is read [...] by academics, politicians, scientists and artists. [...] But stories about English country houses and English villages? What do they have that goes so unerringly to the hearts and minds of everyman and everywoman?¹²⁹

¹²⁵Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 157-58.

¹²⁶ Critiquing Christie and her peers, the American 'hardboiled' writer Raymond Chandler claimed that detective fiction should instead depict that 'not [...] very fragrant world' of reality. See Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 20.

¹²⁷ Barry Forshaw, 'The Curious Case of the Author Who Would Not Die', *Independent* (2009) <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-curious-case-of-the-author-who-would-not-die-1634753.html>> [accessed 27 Aug. 2013].

¹²⁸ Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, 14.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Barnard's response, largely accepted, is that Christie crafted engaging puzzles with enough simplicity in the trappings – plot and character – not to distract the reader. However, she was never the only, nor most original crafter of puzzles, and certainly not the only writer to rely upon stock characters and settings. The unanswered question of Christie's broad appeal will ripple beneath the surface of this thesis. For now, we must confront the pervasive image of 'Agatha Christie' as a woman writer, which so clearly influences discussions of Christie's life and work.

As Gillian Gill notes in her psychoanalytically influenced biography, '[a] woman writer who fails to go mad, have "interesting" lovers, bear illegitimate children, commit suicide, or die in poverty is simply no fun.'¹³⁰ Gill suggests, however, that a quiet, even mundane life can reward scrutiny, and seeks to move beyond 'Christie's hidden-author strategy,' illuminating themes in the texts via 'a new evaluation of Christie the woman.'¹³¹ Writing in 1990, Gill, whose principal sources are novels, broaches new ground. Subsequent treatments of Christie as a female writer have been influenced by Gill.¹³² Ultimately, Gill does not question that the Christie who emerges from her prose is the 'real,' 'hidden author,' suggesting a definitive reading 'of Christie the woman' that is not far from the stereotype: a domestic, motherly figure.¹³³

For a popular female author, to quote Kaplan, 'professional identity evolves [...] from learning to construct a separate "personality" in the public eye and to externalize one's name on a book that can circulate in the marketplace.'¹³⁴ More than Gill's, Thompson's biography approaches this point. Thompson similarly describes the prose as 'impersonal', but she also suggests that Christie developed an authorial 'image [which] became synonymous with what she wrote. "Agatha Christie" became the living definition of classic English

¹³⁰ Gill, *Agatha Christie*, x.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 2, 8.

¹³² See, for instance: Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London: Routledge, 1991); Klein; Makinen, *Agatha Christie*.

¹³³ Gill, *Agatha Christie*, 208.

¹³⁴ Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, 67.

mystery fiction: the respectable veneer that hides the mayhem beneath.¹³⁵ If the world Christie writes about looks idyllic but is really sordid, then, according to Thompson, the same applies to ‘Agatha Christie,’ whose ‘genteel’ and ‘ladylike’ persona masks a darker personality. In Thompson’s estimation, two Agatha Christies exist concurrently; the ‘real,’ biographically knowable ‘Agatha’ and the name on the books, which evokes respectability and neatly contains complexities. ‘This’, Thompson suggests, ‘was the way that she wanted to present herself, because it protected her so completely from view.’¹³⁶ After distinguishing ‘Agatha herself’ from “‘Agatha Christie”, [a persona] fossilised in time’, Thompson looks in the books for clues to this supposed genuine identity.¹³⁷

Both biographers’ approaches assume an essential, real ‘Agatha’, and for the purposes of this investigation, both are problematic. This project is not a biography, but it does consider the author. While I am keen to develop Thompson’s idea of putting ‘Agatha Christie’ into inverted commas, understanding Christie’s public persona as a deliberate mask, I am less interested in what the mask covers than in how the mask works. Not looking for ‘Agatha herself’, or assuming ‘Agatha herself’ to exist, this chapter can focus on how ‘Agatha Christie’ is constructed. Such a focus means understanding the texts as spaces in which identity is not, as I have previously suggested by quoting Sedgwick, ‘a done deal’.¹³⁸ I have already indicated that reading Christie’s authorial persona as performative can illuminate her prose in a new way – the role of identity within these books can be rethought considerably.

Emergence: *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920)

The respectable woman writer – the social commentator, the serious novelist – rose to prominence in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late

¹³⁵ Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, 374, 76, 77.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 377.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

¹³⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, xvi.

nineteenth century. Linda H. Peterson claims that, '[a]s social norms for women changed during the nineteenth century, so too did attitudes toward women's writing.'¹³⁹ Slowly, it became acceptable for middle-class women to write, and to receive payment for their writing.¹⁴⁰ There has been some debate over whether female writers were distinguished in the marketplace along 'economic and aesthetic', or 'socially gendered' lines; the extent to which the distinction between the 'proper lady [of letters]' and the 'woman writer' was class-based.¹⁴¹

Less disputed is what kind of writing was largely perceived as suitable for women by the turn of the century. The novelist George Moore insisted that, despite 'some half-dozen charming novels' of little significance, the canons of English literature could do without contributions from 'women [who] hold that the mission of their sex extends beyond the boudoir and the nursery.'¹⁴² For some commentators of the time, all women who wrote were 'lady novelists,' and well into the twentieth century, as Humble points out, 'virtually all women's writing [...] (with the standard exception of Virginia Woolf) was treated as middlebrow.'¹⁴³ By 1931, Woolf had identified a haunting ideal of decorative, passive femininity; an 'Angel in the House' telling her to 'be pure', and never to reveal 'a mind of [her] own.' Woolf maintained that the woman writer had to kill this Angel in order to pursue a literary career.¹⁴⁴

As the literary marketplace expanded to incorporate 'feminine' elements, 'lowbrow' detective fiction also gained prominence.¹⁴⁵ With his detective Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle popularized both the detective genre and

¹³⁹ Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton, Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2009), 10.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10. See also Hilary Radner, 'Exiled from Within: The Woman's Novel', in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynne Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Bridget Fowler, 'Literature Beyond Modernism: Middlebrow and Popular Romance', in *Romance Revisited*, ed. by Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995).

¹⁴² George Moore, 'Sex in Art', in *Modern Painting* (London: Walter Scott, 1893), 220-31 (220).

¹⁴³ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 15.

¹⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-45 (141). The 'Angel in the House' is named after an iconic figure in a nineteenth-century male-authored poem.

¹⁴⁵ The word 'middlebrow,' which would ultimately be applied to most writing by women and quintessentially to detective fiction, did not gain strong currency until the interwar period. See Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 1-2.

the short story format.¹⁴⁶ He claimed to have invented it for people who lacked the time, concentration span, or revenue to keep up with a full serial and proposed it as a money-spinner to the editor of the *Strand* magazine.¹⁴⁷ While commercially lucrative, detective fiction did not enjoy critical acclaim and, according to Kate Watson, its low literary status made it relatively easy for women to be accepted as detective fiction writers.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the most popular detective stories were full of action, with few female characters, and they were read by working men commuting on trains: lending libraries and book clubs had yet to develop. By 1900, almost half the periodicals published in Britain contained detective stories.¹⁴⁹ Still, the *English Woman's Journal* published fiction but never detective fiction, and the *Strand* rarely featured female-authored crime fiction before Christie.¹⁵⁰

In America, Anna Katherine Greene prolifically wrote sensation stories, which were regarded with condescension in Britain.¹⁵¹ After Catherine L. Pirkis published *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective* in 1894, a number of women writers offered variations on the Sherlock Holmes mould. Parodying masculine forms was standard practice for women writing detective fiction. For instance, the anonymous 'Ka,' at Edinburgh University, published stories about the irrational Mrs Herlock Sholmes and her companion Mrs Wiggins.¹⁵² Women writers' recourse to parody, Sally R. Munt suggests, was 'an inevitable response to their position as literary intruders'.¹⁵³ Being published mostly in university journals and private periodicals, these parodies and satires were constructed by and for educated or socially privileged women, so that even within this subgenre of detective fiction, women had limited literary voices and audiences.

¹⁴⁶ Sherlock Holmes first appeared *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887, and a series of short stories followed in weekly instalments.

¹⁴⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures: An Autobiography* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2007), 80-81.

¹⁴⁸ Kate Watson, *Women Writing Crime Fiction, 1860-1880: Fourteen American, British and Australian Authors* (Jefferson, London: McFarland, 2012), 9.

¹⁴⁹ John Sutherland, *The Stanford Companion to Victorian Crime Fiction* (California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 182.

¹⁵⁰ Watson, *Women Writing Crime Fiction*, 67.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁵² See Peter Ridgway Watt and Joseph Green, *The Alternative Sherlock Holmes: Pastiches, Parodies, and Copies* (London, New York: Ashgate, 2003), 193-94.

¹⁵³ Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, 5.

'The Edwardian period', Makinen points out, 'was a time of intense gendered contention, with the agitation of suffragettes and suffragists, [and] *New Woman* [fiction, which] challenged the representation of feminine roles.'¹⁵⁴ Still, it was not until Baroness Orczy published *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* in 1910, quickly achieving three editions, that female-authored texts entered the British detective fiction canon. Orczy's plots, however, are not innovative, and there is nothing independent about Lady Molly, who helps, rather than trumps, male investigators, ending up married and retired from detection. Moreover, Orczy sticks to the 'low' format of the short story, despite publishing a full volume, and Lady Molly does not, like the creations of Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, or even Doyle, feature in a full-length novel. While doing nothing to challenge patriarchy, *Lady Molly* nonetheless represents increasing possibilities for women writers, and foreshadows innovations in the 'feminized' 'golden age' of British detective fiction.

Orczy aside, women did not typically impact upon the pre-war market for detective fiction. As Heather Worthington points out, crime or detective fiction was, at this stage, 'a masculine and deeply conservative genre.'¹⁵⁵ Although there had been female detectives in English fiction for some time, by the time Christie started writing there were few well-known female authors of the genre and still fewer were respected.¹⁵⁶ The most prominent British and American detectives invented in the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s were, like their creators, male: Sexton Blake (Hal Meredith), Professor Van Dusen (Jacques Futrelle), and Father Brown (G.K. Chesterton). Towards the beginning of Christie's career, a *Herald* interview opened hyperbolically: 'Policewomen are no longer a novelty, the sight of a woman lawyer excites no comment, but a woman writer of detective stories is still somewhat of a pioneer.'¹⁵⁷ Christie's distinction lay less in her commitment of pen to paper than in her successful publication of a mainstream crime novel.

¹⁵⁴ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 42.

¹⁵⁵ Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, 41.

¹⁵⁶ Early examples of female detectives include Andrew Forrester's *The Female Detective*, and William Stephens Hayward's *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, both published in 1864.

¹⁵⁷ 'Stories That Thrill', *The Herald* (2 Jun. 1922).

The motivation was never a secret. In the *Herald* interview, Christie describes ‘trying to decide on a career’ as a girl, and rejecting convent life and poetry-writing because ‘[d]etective stories pay so much better’.¹⁵⁸ This cynical reflection on her role in the market-place suggests professionalism, rather than interest in literary respectability. Money remained the animating drive in Christie’s career long after she stopped discussing it publicly. Archived correspondence with publishers contains multiple discussions of money, tax, and financial loopholes. When a media survey reached her in 1951, Christie sent it back to her agent with a scrawled response. Answering the questions of why she started writing, and what she liked most and least about the profession, she wrote: ‘1. idleness, 2. Money!, 3. Publicity’. Her responses were not published.¹⁵⁹ Evidently, Christie’s commercial instinct was stronger than concerns over being perceived as an intellectual.

Christie’s debut, *Styles*, was supposed to be ‘an orthodox detective story’.¹⁶⁰ Christie did not mean for it to be an innovation; she wanted it to sell. Conscious of her sex, she first wrote under male pseudonyms – Mac Miller, Nathaniel Miller, Mostyn Grey, and Martin West¹⁶¹ – but John Lane, of the Bodley Head, encouraged her to use her own name because ‘Agatha’ sounded gothic and ‘unusual’ (*Autobiography*, 283). The name, from the Greek *agathos*, has rarely been used for boys and had faded from fashion by the 1850s, making it recognizably feminine and old-fashioned.¹⁶² Christie later acknowledged that she had been mistaken in thinking a ‘manly and forthright’ name would attract while a woman’s name would ‘prejudice’ readers (283). Her autobiography hints at the financial underpinnings of her first publication: she introduces Lane as ‘a man who would drive a hard bargain’ (276) and suggests that, although she ‘would have signed anything’, the contract she signed ensured abundant revenue for her publishers and measly royalties for herself (277). According to

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Letter to Edmund Cork, 6 Sep. 1951. Archived at the University of Exeter Special Collections, Agatha Christie Business Archive. File EUL MS 99/1/1951.

¹⁶⁰ Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: Agatha Christie Ltd., 2011), 3. Further references to this source will appear as *Ackroyd*.

¹⁶¹ Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 92.

¹⁶² Patrick Hanks, Kate Hardcastle, and Flavia Hodges, *A Dictionary of First Names* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

her autobiography, Christie argued extensively over a single point, the spelling of 'cocoa,' before allowing the publishers' misspelling to appear in print (283). Despite dubbing herself a 'complete amateur – nothing of the professional about me', in the same paragraph she lays out with precision the financial implications of her contract and her contractual obligation to publish five more novels with the Bodley Head (277). These claims to amateurism must be read sceptically – but on a business and commercial level, at this stage of her career, Christie let her publishers tell her what to do.

Styles was completed and sent to numerous publishers in 1916. The Bodley Head accepted the manuscript in 1918. Allen Lane, John's nephew and colleague, acknowledged that it was an unusual venture for publishers well known for printing 'the "Yellow Book" authors – Dowson, Beerdsley [sic], Max Beerbohm, and so on. [...T]he appearance of a new woman writer of detective fiction was a bit un-expected.'¹⁶³ Associated with the aesthetic and decadent movements of the 1890s, the *Yellow Book* was a literary journal that aimed to shock, provoke, 'seduce and stimulate the young'.¹⁶⁴ It was said to herald the influence of the 'wicked and decadent French novel' upon the English marketplace.¹⁶⁵ As Humble has convincingly argued, the First World War saw a radical shift in the middle-class marketplace, as readers demanded 'intellectual stimulation without effort', perceiving an unattractive irrelevance in 'modernist and associated avant-garde movements'.¹⁶⁶ Christie's publishers were concerned with changing fashions; with mainstream innovation and experimentation.

At this stage, Christie allowed herself to be marketed as 'a new woman writer', and not, less uniquely or lucratively, a male/masculine one. The war context in which she wrote was partly responsible for this. The First World War (1914-1918) meant gender stereotypes were sometimes radically rethought as, with men in combat, women took on traditionally masculine jobs; famously in

¹⁶³ Lane, 'Close-Up', 2.

¹⁶⁴ Willa Cather, *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories: Willa Cather's Uncollected Short Fiction, 1915-1929* (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 45.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 11.

public transport, medical care, and munitions factories. War years also saw more women's teams in competitive sport: a football club advertised in 1915 for female players to 'show that' 'a manly game [...] can be womanly as well':¹⁶⁷ it is not simply that women became more 'manly' but rather that questions surrounding what constituted 'manly' or 'womanly' behaviour were raised. Although the poetry of Jessie Pope was far from isolated in its patriotic assurance that 'sensible, fit' women were only 'out to show their grit' until 'the khaki soldier boys come back',¹⁶⁸ gender politics had changed. Fatality, shell-shock, and the low cost of female labour meant that women continued to 'show their grit' in traditionally masculine roles throughout the 1920s. It was what Alison Oram calls 'a time of transition and crisis' for gender.¹⁶⁹ Although Christie's debut was submitted to publishers under a masculine name, the Bodley Head, not the most conservative or least controversial of mainstream publishing houses, saw a strategic benefit in presenting 'Mrs Agatha Christie' as the author of *Styles*.

Christie evidently had an eye on the market when she started writing *Styles* at twenty-five. She only started writing it, during 'slack periods' at work, after hearing that her efforts at romantic fiction were unsellable (*Autobiography*, 254, 196). 'At that date I was well steeped in the Sherlock Holmes tradition,' Christie claimed, 'so I considered detectives. Not like Sherlock Holmes, of course: I must invent one of my own' (254). Nursing soldiers in Torquay with the Voluntary Aid Detachment, she decided to base her detective on a Belgian refugee patient (256). Unlike Sherlock Holmes, a romantic portrait of his creator's university supervisor, Hercule Poirot is explicitly an outsider.¹⁷⁰ He is unlike other Europeans – Edgar Allen Poe's M. Dupin, for instance, solves mysteries in his native Paris – and unlike such existing 'country house' detectives as the policeman and gentleman amateur in Wilkie Collins' *The*

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Kate Adie, *Fighting on the Home Front: The Legacy of Women in World War One* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2013), 145.

¹⁶⁸ Jessie Pope, 'War Girls', in *The Virago Book of Women's War Poetry and Verse*, ed. by Catherine Reilly (London: Virago, 1997) (90).

¹⁶⁹ Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman!: Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2007), 17.

¹⁷⁰ Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, 21.

Moonstone. Instead, he is an alien whose stripe of masculinity is out of place in the world he inhabits.¹⁷¹ Christie's wish to fulfil the demands of the market, for conventions and renegotiation, led her to confront tradition with a motif of alienation embodied in her detective.

The world of *Styles* reflects contemporary changes in gender dynamics. It is the first of many novels set in a matriarchal country house where women are both conventionally and modernly feminine. The story is narrated by Arthur Hastings, a soldier 'invalided home from the Front',¹⁷² who goes to stay with a friend's family in Essex. The household consists of three men and four women. This seems fairly balanced, but the characters are not equal. The house is owned by Emily Inglethorp, a matriarch 'who liked to make her own plans, and expected others to fall in with them' (6). Emily's Voluntary Aid Dispatch protégée is 'sharp and professional' (7), and her paid companion, with 'manly', 'stentorian tones' and a 'hearty, almost painful' handshake, is a 'Jack of all trades', helpful around the village and comradely with men. One man assesses her in terms of conventional femininity, and then of sportsmanship: 'Not precisely young and beautiful, but as game as they make them' (7).

Generally, the men are less robust and popular than the women: one is 'sickly'; Emily's husband is a brooding 'outsider' (6, 7). 'Women are doing great work nowadays,' Poirot remarks of the V.A.D. nurse (84). He adds that this means women have access to deadly poisons and secrets – that is to say, they have power (84-5). Some campaigners for women's suffrage, such as Millicent Fawcett, believed that gender inequality had been 'revolutionised' by the war effort,¹⁷³ but this was optimistic. Even at the time, suggestions that women could be masculine appeared in propaganda principally to encourage 'cowardly' men to prove their manliness to a higher degree in the military, thus confirming

¹⁷¹ The next chapter considers Poirot's 'otherness' more fully.

¹⁷² Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 5. Further references to this source will appear as *Styles*.

¹⁷³ Millicent Fawcett, *The Women's Victory - and After: Personal Reminiscences, 1911-1918* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 106.

basic gender binaries.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, Poirot's praise of the nurse's 'great work' is eclipsed by his subsequent lengthy ruminations on her 'beauty' and the effect this beauty will have on men (*Styles*, 84-5). The solution to the crime has shock value dependent on the reader not suspecting that anyone would have an affair with Emily's 'manly', 'hearty', 'stentorian' companion. Ultimately, she is revealed to have been driven to violence by her love for Emily's 'brooding' husband. Christie's first text relies on constructions of conventional womanliness and – more so – manliness in order to present 'professional' or 'manly' women along fashionable lines. However, the way that Christie uses fashionable gender constructions is strategic; readers' prejudices around these stereotypes inform the mechanics of the plot.

In gendered terms, *Styles* has little in common with Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, which, as Linden Peach notes, 'present women in conventional and stereotypical ways.'¹⁷⁵ Doyle was inspired by Wilkie Collins' epistolary novel *The Moonstone* (1868) which has various narrators and centres on a young woman's exotic cursed diamond. While the woman, Rachel, is at the heart of the narrative, she does not narrate any section, and is conspicuously silent. The house in *The Moonstone*, unlike the 'war household' in *Styles* (18), is strictly traditional. When Doyle paid homage to *The Moonstone* in his debut, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), he effectively cut out women. While the crimes investigated are animated by a love affair, the woman concerned speaks only within an anecdote, and has little to say. The main themes are the dangers of organized religion and the importance of scientific reasoning, while the truly important character is Sherlock Holmes. While, traditionally, women in long nineteenth-century detective fiction have been considered 'essentially passive',¹⁷⁶ Christie's debut, as Gill notes, is set in 'a world where women have power, where they feel free to work, to earn money, act in their interests, use trickery and violence if necessary, and occupy any of the traditional male roles without fearing for

¹⁷⁴ Pamphlet on women's war work, Sept 1916. Records of the Ministry of Munitions (National Archives, Kew). File no. MUN 5/70/324/22.

¹⁷⁵ Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction*, 82.

¹⁷⁶ Derek Longhurst, 'Sherlock Holmes: Adventures of an English Gentleman, 1887-1894', in *Gender, Genre, and Narrative Pleasure*, ed. by Derek Longhurst (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 51-66 (65).

their femininity.¹⁷⁷ In *Styles*, Christie might understand masculinity and femininity as fundamentally different but, with times changing, it is not always clear what behaviour falls into which category.

After a reader report at the Bodley Head 'detect[ed] the hand of a woman' behind A.M. Christie's initials, Christie was encouraged to further revise her novel, exploiting this unique selling point, rather than merely rehashing convention. Revising the novel's ending in 1918, she made small but defining changes. The denouement, in which Poirot explains the solution to the case and methodically re-presents each clue in light of 'the truth,' was rewritten in 1918, at John Lane's insistence. Lane, who had convinced Christie to publish under her own name rather than a man's, also insisted that her original ending was implausible. At first, Christie had written a sensational courtroom scene in which Poirot, a witness at a murder trial, introduces all the evidence to '*M. le Juge*' and finally identifies the real criminals. The judge permits all of Poirot's evidence, illegal in that it is often on the 'psychological' or folk wisdom level (two people hated each other too elaborately, so they must really be in love) or that it has not been presented before (a love letter Poirot found and kept to himself). As well as this, the judge archaically speaks with the royal 'we,' and nobody challenges Poirot's lengthy, potentially slanderous, accusation of two witnesses.¹⁷⁸ As a denouement, the court scene is distractingly unconvincing, and, as Curran notes, is unoriginally close to a scene in Gaston Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (1907).¹⁷⁹ When Christie revised it she also changed its tone, so that it became less imitative and more distinctive.

This part of the novel, however, in which the puzzle is solved for the reader, is arguably the most important, defining part. Catherine Ross Nickerson observes that '[t]he story that the detective reconstructs and presents has to be wholly convincing and beautifully shaped.'¹⁸⁰ It is not simply a case of

¹⁷⁷Gill, *Agatha Christie*, 63.

¹⁷⁸ See in Curran, *Agatha Christie's Murder in the Making*, 87, 91. Curran reprints the original ending (75-91).

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸⁰ Catherine Ross Nickerson, 'Introduction: The Satisfactions of Murder', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. by Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-4 (4).

answering the questions and tying the loose ends, but of presenting them in a way that is both intellectually and emotionally satisfying. In the published version, Christie keeps most dialogue, relocating it to a drawing-room in Styles Court, where Poirot asks to 'stage a little *réunion*' (Styles, 180), thereby altering the scene's tone. Use of traditionally 'feminine' or 'domestic' language and images when navigating masculine terrains can encourage the text, in Janet Wolff's words, 'to comment on the ways in which women's perspective transforms the spaces of masculinity.'¹⁸¹ A drawing room is an iconic domestic scene of relaxation and social engagement. It is not a place where male barristers argue points of androcentrically coded law before exclusively male jurors,¹⁸² but where the lady of the house traditionally serves tea.

The drawing-room dénouement has become a cliché connected with detective fiction generally and with Christie specifically.¹⁸³ It owes much to her perceived need to write out of the court-room tradition. In addition, the setting strengthens the novel's domestic emphasis, accentuating the difference between Poirot and other detectives emerging from the war. Such a scene would never be chaired by Sapper's Bulldog Drummond, advertised in 1920 as a 'Detective, Patriot, Hero and Gentleman'.¹⁸⁴ For a female-authored crime novel published in 1920, *Styles* is an innovation.

Rowland barely exaggerates when she uses Christie's 1920 debut to mark an overnight shift from a male-dominated to a female-dominated genre.¹⁸⁵ The bestselling crime writers of the interwar period, from Christie to Sayers and Allingham, were all women. However, T.S. Eliot's critical column in *The Times*, devoted to detective fiction, notably prioritized J.J. Connington, Anthony Berkeley, and other male writers. Hugh Greene, a B.B.C. director-general and one of the most prominent authorities on Sherlock Holmes, famously lamented

¹⁸¹ Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 60.

¹⁸² *Styles* was revised before the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act (1919) introduced female jurors, magistrates, and, in theory, solicitors to English courts.

¹⁸³ Grella, 'Murder and Manners', 37.

¹⁸⁴ Sapper, *Bulldog Drummond* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1920). Dustjacket.

¹⁸⁵ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 15.

‘the years between the wars when Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, and Dorothy Sayers exercised their monstrous regiment of women.’¹⁸⁶

By 1931 H. Douglas Thomson had complained that the ‘lowbrow’ likes of Christie were ‘feminising’ Doyle’s ‘highbrow’ (i.e. masculine) school of detective fiction by including domestic details and emotion.¹⁸⁷ Howard Haycraft, in his 1941 study *Murder for Pleasure*, was virtually alone in suggesting that ‘the rise of the feminine crime writer’ was an ‘important’ phenomenon, and that women writers had changed crime fiction for the better.¹⁸⁸ Such authors as Sayers, arriving in print on Christie’s heels, were able to ‘pioneer the field’, taking the detective story in psychological or philosophical directions.¹⁸⁹ Regardless of the limited contemporary critical perspectives, British crime fiction of the 1920s and 1930s was largely innovated and developed by women. It is unlikely that the genre would have developed along ‘feminine’ lines without Christie’s successful contributions.

Parody: *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924)

With the growth of book-clubs and lending libraries in the 1920s, the market for popular fiction became, unprecedentedly, domestic. While entertaining fiction had previously been read by commuters or, sometimes, wealthy individuals in drawing-rooms, it could not be cheaply taken home, enjoyed, and shared or exchanged. A great number of readers in this period, of course, were women; in some circles, ‘library books’ became shorthand for books written and read by women.¹⁹⁰

George Orwell and Q.D. Leavis both critiqued ‘women’s fiction’ on the grounds that women, unlike men, were unlikely to discriminate their reading

¹⁸⁶ Hugh Green, *The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Bodley Head, 1970), 10.

¹⁸⁷H. Douglas Thomson, *Masters of Mystery: A Study of the Detective Story* (London, Glasgow, Sydney: Collins, 1931), 211.

¹⁸⁸ Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1964), 128.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 194-95.

¹⁹⁰ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 39.

matter intellectually. Orwell warned that ‘women of all kinds and ages and not, as one might expect, merely [...] wistful spinsters and the fat wives of tobacconists’ read popular fiction, while Leavis argued that because ‘women rather than men change the books (that is, determine the family reading)’, the rise of public libraries and the spread of the popular, domestic novel promised a bleak future for public intelligence.¹⁹¹ Women writers at the turn of the century were, however, often highly educated. Some thirty-three per-cent of those whose books were read by members of the Boots book club had received a university education but, in Clare Hanson’s words, ‘failing to gain entry to the literary world, transferred their attentions to the marketplace.’¹⁹² With the increased cheapness of popular fiction, a gulf that had been formed in the nineteenth century, between ‘the popular writer [and] the high-art woman of letters’,¹⁹³ deepened.

Woolf claimed that writing, in a patriarchal context, is inherently male; that women must develop new ways of writing.¹⁹⁴ As an example of the masculine voice, she cited

Dr Watson in Sherlock Holmes [who] is real to [men who write or read]: to me Dr Watson is a sack stuffed with straw, a dummy, a figure of fun. And so it is with character after character – in book after book.¹⁹⁵

As a genre novelist, Christie inevitably and explicitly confronted the shadow of Dr Watson. The extent to which she configured the character as ‘a figure of fun’ in order to revise his significance will be considered later in this and the next chapter. For now I note that Christie’s success in a traditionally masculine genre was largely down to reinvention. Early in her career, she introduced

¹⁹¹ Both quoted, *ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹² Clare Hanson, *Writing, a Woman’s Business: Women, Writing and the Marketplace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 68.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹⁴ See also Wolff, *Feminine Sentences*, 52.

¹⁹⁵ Virginia Woolf, ‘Character in Fiction’, in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37-54 (43).

experimental tones. For each Poirot novel published between 1920 and 1925, there were two with other protagonists – normally young adventurers.¹⁹⁶

In this section, I consider Christie's typically gendered use of parody to probe and critique available femininity constructions in popular narratives. *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), Christie's third published novel, satirizes 'heroines' of popular entertainment through its deeply ironic female narrator. The plot calls for the narrator to become several different 'types' of heroine; she ultimately has to carve her own identity rather than trying to live as a 'type' she has encountered in a male-authored text. By 1924, Christie had already created female heroes who stood up to, and apart from, their manly counterparts.¹⁹⁷ The protagonist in 'A Trap for the Unwary' (1923), a story about a woman who outsmarts her blackmailer, decides that she cannot trust any men in her life, nor the police, to deal with her problem. 'Something', she says, 'between gloves and bare fists is needed. Let us say mittens! That means a woman'.¹⁹⁸ Fittingly, *Brown*, the first title Christie published through an agent, and the first title on which she negotiated high serial rights from the *Evening News* (five-hundred pounds, whereas *Styles* had been sold to *The Times* for twenty-five pounds [Autobiography, 317-19, 280]) is a tale narrated by a woman carving her name in a patriarchal world, working her way to financial stability and social success.

The story has been described as Christie's least 'straight'.¹⁹⁹ Anne, a young woman 'with particularly good legs' (*Brown*, 61), who likes going to the cinema and dreaming of 'stern silent Rhodesians' (12), is left with few friends and little money when her father dies. She goes to London, seeking adventure, and runs into a man who dies suddenly on the tube platform. Anne finds a cryptic note belonging to the man and takes it to Scotland Yard, insisting that he

¹⁹⁶ Christie's most famous non-Poirot tales from this period are *The Secret Adversary* (1922), *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), and 'Traitor Hands' (1925), later retitled 'The Witness for the Prosecution.'

¹⁹⁷ The most obvious example is Prudence Cowley, or 'Tuppence,' who splits detective work equally with her friend –cum-lover in *The Secret Adversary*. Makinen (51) considers Tuppence a figure of feminist potential.

¹⁹⁸ Agatha Christie, 'A Trap for the Unwary', in *The Agatha Christie Centenary*, ed. by Lynn Underwood (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1990), 19-23 (21). Further references to this source will appear as 'Unwary.' The story, edited by Tony Medawar and re-titled 'The Actress', appears in the 1997 Christie volume, *While The Light Lasts*.

¹⁹⁹ Janice Curry, 'The Man in the Brown Suit (1924)', in *The New Bedside, Bathrub and Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie*, ed. by Dick Riley and Pam McAllister (New York: Ungar, 1991), 14-15 (14). Meaning, in this sense, her most humorous and least plot-heavy.

was murdered. She does not like the Inspector, so withholds the note and takes it instead to a newspaper magnate. As a freelance journalist after a scoop, Anne sets sail on a ship mentioned in the note and meets a variety of characters. Soon, a man she saw fleeing the scene in the tube stumbles into her cabin, wounded, and she hides him. The man is called Harry Rayburn. Numerous adventures follow in and around South Africa, as Anne tries to identify 'the Colonel', a master criminal, and to hide priceless diamonds the Colonel is seeking. After several escapes from death, Anne identifies the Colonel, lets him flee justice because he amuses her, and accepts a marriage proposal from Harry. They disappear to start a family on a small island away from Harry's inherited wealth ('Lunatics' Island', says one friend [190]).

Anne explains at the beginning of Chapter One that she is only writing because 'everybody has been at [her]', before proceeding with professional briskness: 'So here goes. Anne Beddingfeld starts to narrate her adventures' (10). She is not so apologetic as Christie's other female narrator, Nurse Leatheran in *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), who regularly insists that she is not a writer and requests that her grammar be 'cleaned up'.²⁰⁰ More confident, Anne apparently feels equal to the task of writing; she simply asserts that her account will not be conventional. 'By the way,' she notes half-way through, 'this story will not be a story of South Africa. I guarantee no genuine local colour - you know the sort of thing - half a dozen words in italics on every page' (*Brown*, 92).

Anne goes on to suggest that authors of such tales tend to mention 'the *paw-paw*', which she gets confused with the *hula hula* and the *lava lava* (92), before musing that English breakfast might be more interesting if it consisted of 'bacon-bacon' (93). On one level, the narrative is distanced from the glut of anthropological and faunistic studies of South Africa appearing in the early 1920s and from middle-class England's growing penchant for travel writing. The narrator also insists that her 'story' depends more on content than on exotic

²⁰⁰ Agatha Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia* (London: Harper, 2001), 17, 10. Further references to this source will appear as *Mesopotamia*.

'local colour', unlike, for instance, H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), which was dedicated 'to all the big and little boys who read it.' What 'this story will not be' is dismissed with 'you know the sort of thing', suggesting that what is coming is less familiar and therefore more intriguing. It is a way of presenting the narrative as new.

Like a number of women-authored novels of the period, Anne's narrative symbolically takes off with the death of her father. In that the father's death enables the protagonist to pursue independence unfettered by family strictures, it may be compared to such experimental novels as May Sinclair's *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919). However, since the first paragraph of Anne's narrative asserts that her experience is 'just like the pictures' (*Brown*, 10), the tone is more consciously populist. Anne's father, Professor Beddingfeld, 'one of England's greatest authorities on Primitive Man', is described as 'immersed in the past': 'Papa did not care for modern man [...] and he did not rise to enthusiasm until he reached the Mousterian period' (10). Anne reflects, however, that 'one cannot entirely dispense with modern men' and that 'it fell to me to undertake the practical side of living,' liaising with greengrocers and so on (10).

However, her father's oblivious antiquity does not fulfil Anne:

I hate Neolithic Man, be he Aurignacian, Mousterian, Chellian, or anything else, and though I typed and revised most of Papa's *Neanderthal man and his Ancestors*, Neanderthal men themselves fill me with loathing, and I always reflect what a fortunate circumstance it was that they became extinct in remote ages. (10)

With breezy cynicism, Anne posits her father, and her daily life, as so outmoded they are effectively 'extinct'. The past – her father – needs the present – herself, as typist and revisionist – in order to make any sense. Although Beddingfeld is starting with Neanderthals and looking backwards at their ancestry, Anne is forced to look forwards, to bills and contracts and publication deadlines. The past and the future are here distinguished along gendered lines; Anne, the modern woman, moves her fingers along the typewriter keys while her father is lost in the cerebral world of skulls and fossils, all belonging to 'men.'

At this outset, however, Anne is tied to her father, and therefore to perpetuating his absorption in the past, although she ‘hate[s]’ it. Even deriding ‘Neolithic Man’, she uses technical vocabulary, which she retains: the novel ends with her giving birth to a child with a ‘platycephalic’ head (190). However such vocabulary is presented as a product of her upbringing, and not her own proclivities – although those, too, centre on men. Indeed, Anne laments that the only men she comes into contact with are the tiresome dead ones of antiquity and her father’s ‘dated’ friends (11). The professor, antiquated and irrelevant, nonetheless has power over his daughter’s role in the world.

When her father dies, Anne reflects that she never loved him, nor he her. Instead, she felt sorry for him, as one might feel sorry for an associate in the wrong place at the wrong time (14). Inheriting a small sum of money, Anne spends it all at once, apparently not aware that her future is insecure (‘I couldn’t do it,’ says another character [70. Emphasis added]). Refusing marriage proposals and employment offers from locals, Anne rejects the promise of security, but also the bind to the past that she has escaped (14-16).²⁰¹ She goes to London, and then travels further, pursuing mystery and adventure, like women on the screen. Their adventures are, after all, the only narratives available to her, as a young woman in an old men’s environment.

Certainly, Anne does not set herself up as an intellectual or up-market heroine. Her decision to become a journalist interacts with a widespread prejudice in the middle-classes against women journalists who, as writers, were ‘viewed with condescension’ by their peers.²⁰² When newspaper magnate Viscount Northcliffe addressed the Society of Women Journalists in 1912, despite encouraging women in journalism, he could not resist asides about the time-consuming vanity of women, or their tendencies to meet deadlines with

²⁰¹ The account of Anne’s rejection of a marriage proposal is similar to Cynthia’s rejection of Hastings’ proposal in *Styles* (141-2), and also to Christie’s account of her own response to a premature marriage proposal in *Autobiography* (175).

²⁰² Maroula Joannou, ‘Introduction: Modernism, Modernity, and the Middlebrow in Context’, in *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1920-1945*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-20 (18).

'tears and other signs of feminine perturbation'.²⁰³ Anne herself becomes parodically emotional, 'impulsively' flinging her arms around strangers' necks (*Brown*, 42), getting 'superstitious about' the number thirteen (47), and using phrases like, 'you do make my flesh creep' (91). She also spends stretches of time in front of the mirror, trying on new outfits and perfecting different 'looks' for whatever scene she is about to step into.

Like the stereotypical reader of Christie's adventure fiction, Anne feels a need to escape her 'existence of drab utility'.²⁰⁴ Her need is channelled into a 'yearn[ing] for adventure, for love, for romance', fuelled by her consumption of 'pulp' (12). Anne reads 'tattered works of fiction' from the village library, 'enjoy[ing] perils and love-making second hand', 'dreaming of stern silent Rhodesians', and lamenting the lack of such men in the village (12). That the books are 'tattered' suggests something well-worn, and more than 'second hand', about them. Anne's rather ironic search for 'stern silent Rhodesians' in Little Hampsley indicates quite clearly that popular fiction does not reflect lived experience and that the lessons learned from one cannot be readily applied to the other. Certainly, the economic concerns that will lead women like Anne to lending libraries rather than to bookshops prohibit such a lifestyle. If Anne's expectations of life revolve around 'perils and love-making' in the arms of a man who does not exist in her village, then they are blatantly unrealistic.

Frequently 'struck [...] by [her] likeness to a film heroine' (13), Anne decides to run away in search of exotic men and adventure. Her model is the star of *The Perils of Pamela*. The allusion to *The Perils of Pauline*, a popular (and widely-parodied) film serial about a wealthy 'adventuress,' is evident:

Pamela [i.e. Pauline] was a magnificent young woman. Nothing daunted her. She fell out of aeroplanes, adventured in submarines, climbed skyscrapers and crept about in the Underworld without turning a hair. She was not really clever, the Master Criminal of the Underworld caught her each time, but as he seemed loath to knock

²⁰³ Viscount Northcliffe, 'Women as Journalists', *The Times* (4 Nov. 1912).

²⁰⁴ *The Secret Adversary*, for example, had been dedicated 'to all those who lead monotonous lives in the hope that they may experience at second hand the delights and dangers of adventure'. Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary* (London: Pan, 1963), 4. Further references to this source will appear as *Adversary*.

her on the head in a simple way, and always doomed her to death in a sewer-gas-chamber or by some new and marvellous means, the hero was always able to rescue her. (12)

There is knowing irony in Anne's description of the 'magnificent' Pamela. Of course, by puzzling over 'the Master Criminal's' refusal to simply 'knock her on the head', and by puzzling over the ever-presence of 'the hero', Anne draws attention to the lack of logic in these plot devices, as well as to their reliance on well-worn clichés. When Anne goes on to model herself on Pamela, she enacts parody in its most obvious form: what Linda Hutcheon calls 'imitation characterised by ironic inversion'.²⁰⁵

Renaming herself 'Anna the Adventuress', Anne dresses up and enjoys herself in front of the mirror: 'The whole effect pleased me very much', she notes before adding that '[g]irls are foolish things' (18). The name is significant beyond its alliteration. *Anna the Adventuress* was the title of a 1904 adventure novel by E. Phillips Oppenheim. It concerns the exploits of Annabelle, a vivacious flirt, who pretends to be her demure sister Anna, in order to entice men into marriage. Like *The Perils of Pauline*, it is a male-authored text undermining its heroine's autonomy by presenting her as somebody who needs saving by a man. Anne's decision to name her story 'Anna the Adventuress' is somewhere between playful and bracingly ironic, since her strong narrative voice undermines the narratives (and their heroines) that she evokes. Calling herself 'Anna the Adventuress' is as much a sign of Anne's stifling, limited upbringing as the Victorian compliments on her 'neat little waist', which form her experience of courtship while she lives among her father and his friends (11-12).²⁰⁶

However, Anne is only Anna in the privacy of her own room and, even at this stage, dresses up in different ways – looking deliberately unglamorous, 'as

²⁰⁵Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 6.

²⁰⁶ Christie was angry when the *Evening News* chose to serialize the novel, not under its working title of *The Mill House Mystery*, but as *Anne the Adventurous*. Remembering this as 'Anna the Adventuress', Christie complained that the title was 'silly' but added: 'I kept my mouth shut because, after all, they were willing to pay me £500' (*Autobiography*, 319). As Anne says when forging a reference, 'adventuresses must not be too scrupulous in their methods' (*Brown*, 27).

much like the popular conception of an orphan as possible', in order to please the wife of the man she is staying with (17). Anne must work to appear feminine on 'popular' terms, and the vulnerable innocence she has cultivated on this occasion must be manipulated for different audiences. Changing her appearance strategically, she is already questioning the apparent innate passivity of Pamela/Pauline/Anna the Adventuress.

Theorizing in *The Culture of the Copy*, Hillel Schwartz claims that '[silent f]ilms made a point of being synthetic', 'revell[ing] in artifice [by displaying] escapes, leaps of the calendar, outbreaks of singing and dancing [that] transformed men into monsters [and] women into interchangeable chorus girls.'²⁰⁷ Having to carefully make-up for each scene, for individual conversations and audiences, and being thwarted in her expectations that glamour will just happen, Anne enacts a parodic exposé of popular screen texts and their unreality. The narrator of *Brown* has fun with her silver screen role models, but also looks for other ways to dress up.

That Anne may not be a natural 'adventuress,' the only kind of heroine she understands – is stated explicitly. 'It is most undignified for a heroine to be sea-sick', she recalls of her first night on the ship:

In books the more it rolls and tosses the better she likes it. When everybody else is ill, she alone staggers along the deck, braving the elements [...] I regret to say that at the first roll the Kilmorden gave, I turned pale and hastened below. (41-2)

At the outset of her journey, Anne does not question her 'heroine' status, merely her heroic dignity. Despite considering herself a 'heroine', she experiences seasickness like 'everybody else'. Anne has become a 'heroine' by calling herself one, and here differentiates herself from those 'in books'. As Hutcheon emphasizes, in a parody, an older text is presented in a new way, often drawing attention towards the different circumstances surrounding each version of the

²⁰⁷ Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* (Cambridge, London: Zone, 1998), 196.

text.²⁰⁸ This textual play need not involve ridicule, but it must involve an awareness of context, encouraging readers to rethink the parodied text. Literary parody can raise questions about things that have previously been taken for granted: in this case, there is hypocrisy in expectations that women should be strong enough to 'brav[e] the elements' but that they should also be 'pathetic' in the arms of men (30). When Anne falls sick on her first night at sea, she fulfils clichés about feminine frailty – after all, she wants to become the kind of 'girl' who faints at danger and needs to be rescued. However, she also draws attention to this stereotype's incongruity in narratives that require sturdy adventurousness.

Moreover, despite dreams of being whisked to marriage, Anne discusses 'matrimony' among her friends as 'disastrous': 'How often have I not heard a perfectly intelligent female say, in the tone of one clinching an argument, "*Edgar* says – "and all the time you [know] that *Edgar* is a perfect fool' (105. Emphasis original). Here, the anthropologist's daughter reflects that a married 'female' loses her individuality. The readiness with which she configures husbands as potentially 'perfect fool[s]' with unwarranted power belies her wish to be a conventionally feminine and dependent heroine. In fact, Anne relies on men – not to rescue her as Pauline/Pamela does, but to get her into and out of places. For example, when she wishes to miss a train without being seen to do so, she sends her guardian to the chemist for eau-de-Cologne as it is departing, and runs away, unheeded (107-8). When she is kidnapped, and 'reminded forcibly of Episode III of the *Perils of Pamela*', Anne realizes that before anyone can rescue her she needs to know what is going on, and proceeds to interrogate her captor (95). In this parody of popular 'adventuress' fiction, Anne needs to manipulate men in order to appear passively dependent.

At the end of the novel, Anne marries Harry, a secret millionaire. She has become a storybook heroine, settling down with a 'stern, silent' man who has, in a light-hearted way, made it clear that he will beat her if she steps out of line (*Brown*, 130-137). Harry warns Anne that he is giving up his fortune. She teases

²⁰⁸ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 85.

him with the question, 'what about my French frocks?', which he takes seriously, 'never know[ing] when I'm in earnest' (187). Occurring in the epilogue, this line signifies the inability of masculine tradition (exemplified by the wealthy, brutishly autocratic Harry) to accommodate feminine irony (Anne's misunderstood joke, which is based on stereotypes about women liking costly clothes). Similarly, Anne 'can forgive [the murderer]' but 'Harry says "[...] he's a damned scoundrel," and seems to think that settles the matter' (189). As Makinen notes, in this conclusion Anne prefers shades of grey to a 'simplistic' bifurcation, voiced by Harry so configured as masculine, of the condemned guilty and the vindicated innocent.²⁰⁹

Throughout *Brown*, Christie 'parodies and rewrites a particular genre in relation to gendered delineations.'²¹⁰ She uses a fairly conventional format to gesture towards something long noted in feminist discourse: a 'tension between women's [...] experiences and their exclusion from interpreting that experience.'²¹¹ Since Anne develops her identity as a woman through engagement with popular culture alone, she runs into contradictions and has to confront inadequate binaries. *Brown* is not a radical piece of feminine writing, but it draws attention towards popular texts' limited gendered paradigms, decoding a popular form and indicating a need for innovation through parody and some commentary. I suggest above that Christie relied upon, but also explored, exploited, and undermined, detective fiction conventions. In this sense, the title most associated with her name is *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), with its conventional-but-subversive narrator.

Innovation: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926)

While there are strands of innovation as early as Christie's debut, Alan Lutkus speaks for the majority, describing her as a '[g]enre innovator from *The Murder*

²⁰⁹ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 71.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.

of *Roger Ackroyd* (1926) on.²¹² It is worth returning to Woolf's remarks about Dr Watson as a pathetic straw man: Christie insisted that, as soon as *Styles* had been published, she was 'tied to two people: Hercule Poirot and his Watson, Captain Hastings' (*Autobiography*, 282). According to Christie, 'the Sherlock Holmes tradition' – and, by inference, detective fiction as it then existed – was frustratingly limited; the 'eccentric detective, stooge assistant, [and] Lestrade-type Scotland Yard detective' could only take her so far (282).

In the relatively straightforward early Poirot mysteries, she increasingly presents Hastings, to quote Woolf once more, as 'a figure of fun.' Unlike Doyle's Watson, who 'see[s] but do[es] not observe',²¹³ Hastings sees nothing at all. Known as 'the stupidest of all the modern Watsons',²¹⁴ Hastings has a kind of maudlin patriotic conservatism, hinted at in *Styles* and developed subsequently. In *Styles*, Hastings is intimidated by the idea of a woman inheriting her husband's property, considering the arrangement 'unfair to her two sons' (*Styles*, 13), he is amused by another woman's professionalism (21), and he is puzzled by Poirot's natty dandyism (11-12).

In *The Murder on the Links* (1923), a novel rife with parody, Christie affronts Hastings' conservatism by having him marry a flapper who swears and looks like a boy.²¹⁵ By the time of *The Big Four*, a 1925 serial, Hastings has become positively slapstick, finding complicated ways to avoid Poirot's embraces, falling into transparent traps laid by the criminal, mistaking an Italian province for the name of a woman, and believing in Poirot's obviously made-up twin brother, Achille.²¹⁶ By the end of the 1920s, the market had more or less abandoned the Holmes/Watson formula, and successful detective fiction was, as a rule, omnisciently narrated. By 1928, Sayers had remarked that Christie

²¹² Alan Lutkus, 'Agatha Christie', in *Modern British Women Writers: An a-to-Z Guide*, ed. by Vivki K. Janik and Del Ivan Janik (Westwood: Greenport, 2002), 73-80 (74).

²¹³ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'A Scandal in Bohemia', in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London, New York, Toronto: Penguin, 2009), 161-76 (162).

²¹⁴ Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, 132.

²¹⁵ Agatha Christie, *The Murder on the Links* (London, New York: Harper, 2011), 2-6, 251-52. Further references to this source will appear as *Links*.

²¹⁶ Agatha Christie, *The Big Four* (London: Collins, 1927), 253, 56, 18, 71, 78. Further references to this source will appear as *Four*. Hastings is considered more fully as a satirical figure in the next chapter.

was almost unique in 'cling[ing] to the Watson formula'.²¹⁷ However, Christie herself dealt the death-blow to that convention, by identifying the narrator as the murderer in her third Poirot novel.

'*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*', Thompson suggests, 'is all genre: not an atom of authorial personality comes between the writing and the reader.'²¹⁸ The novel is certainly important because of its plot and the surprise ending – Thompson calls this a '*bouleversement*' – which opens up a range of possibilities for the genre.²¹⁹ Part of the final chapter's significance lies in the novel's otherwise profound conventionality. Christie employs every cliché of the relatively new 'orthodox detective story' with an apparent straight face: the setting, stock characters, and narrative structure are more generic than in any other Christie title. However, there are moments of high parody, perhaps typified by the image of Poirot retiring to the countryside to grow vegetable marrows, as Sherlock Holmes retired to keep bees, and throwing imperfect marrows over a garden fence.

The comic touch does not undermine *Ackroyd's* appeal to convention. A country house setting, complete with diagrams, had formed a generic staple since E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* (1913), through Christie's own *Styles* and A.A. Milne's *The Red House Mystery* (1922); *Ackroyd's* Fernley Park, and the detailed illustration of the crime scene, do not shock. The *nouveau riche* Roger Ackroyd is an extremely generic victim, the kind who appears in A.E.W. Mason's *At the Villa Rose* (1910), in Sayers' *Whose Body?* (1923), and in the playful joint-authored Detection Club novels *Scoop* (1928) and *Ask a Policeman* (1931). His niece, Flora, is a clichéd picture of loveliness, who 'pirouette[s] on her toes' around the garden (*Ackroyd*, 87), and so on. The whole thing is capped with a narrator as Watsonian as Hastings, and apparently more earnest.

James Sheppard, who narrates, is a country doctor, so he appears as a more domestic version of the military doctor, John (sometimes James) Watson.

²¹⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'An Omnibus of Crime', in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robin W. Winks (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 53-83 (74).

²¹⁸ Laura Thompson, introducing Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: Harper, 2013), ix-xv (xiv).

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

As Poirot's neighbour, he grows close to the detective and accompanies him on investigations when a mutual friend, Roger Ackroyd, has been murdered. Poirot compares Sheppard briefly to the 'very dear' and 'stupid' Hastings (*Ackroyd*, 22), establishing in the reader's mind that Sheppard is that kind of narrator. Much later, Sheppard claims to have 'played Watson to [Poirot's] Sherlock' (131), so when he is named as the murderer, the gesture marks an abrupt departure from narrative tradition. The entire text needs to be reread as an exercise in concealment rather than a straightforward narration of events. Even the title takes on a new significance in light of the novel's solution: Sheppard has been chronicling his crime, the murder of Roger Ackroyd, and not merely its investigation.

In the final chapter, Christie has Sheppard analyse his own text:

I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following:

'The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.'

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes? (236)

This passage is not merely an authorial gloat; it signifies *Ackroyd's* status as a timely innovation in the face of convention. Here, Sheppard denies that he is an unreliable narrator, appealing to the 'true' nature of what he has written. It is a case of how he has presented the truth that is compromising his reliability. The 'blank ten minutes' represent, not an intermission, but an omission – a missing piece of the narrative that must be restored for the story to end. Since *Ackroyd* would not be a successful mystery novel if Sheppard's omission stayed uncorrected, the narrator-as-murderer presents only a limited challenge to generic convention. It is the reliability of narrators, rather than the whodunit structure, that is under fire. Christie undermines certainty in the figure of the

respectable male narrator, drawing attention towards potential gaps and omissions in traditional male narratives.

Ackroyd is frequently invoked in discussions of language, semiotics, and narrative. By using a homodiegetic narrator, Christie creates a character who seems to stand above suspicion – more so, for instance, than the civil servant whose diary extracts narrate a third of *Brown*, and who also turns out to be the murderer. As Pierre Bayard points out in his psychoanalytic discussion of *Ackroyd*, and narrative devices more generally, the reader ‘forgets that the narrator is also a character, therefore a possible liar, and therefore a possible murderer.’²²⁰ For this reason the novel’s solution has been considered by Roland Barthes as a deconstruction of the very stability of narrative identity – the narrator hides thoughts so that his perspective is not the narrative’s.²²¹ For Bayard, it all means that detective fiction cannot claim to dialogue with absolute truth; if a solution to a detective story can only be constructed with reference to textual clues, and these are related by a narrator who is only partially reliable, the narrative can never really be closed.²²² *Ackroyd*, then, represents a challenge to certainty. In this manner, it innovates a supposedly masculine genre that is built on narrative certitude.

George Grella describes the novel as ‘a departure from conventions that aroused considerable controversy’,²²³ although the controversy has always been chiefly academic. In terms of sales, *Ackroyd* was ‘an immediate and unqualified success’, selling out upon publication.²²⁴ The market was ready for Watson-as-murderer: at least two people had proposed the idea to Christie beforehand (*Autobiography*, 342). Reviews were generally favourable. A *New York Times* critic asserted that *Ackroyd* belonged ‘in the tradition of Poe [and] Sherlock Holmes’, although he considered it ‘inferior to them at their best’, and

²²⁰ Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*, 53.

²²¹ Roland Barthes, ‘An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative’, *New Literary History*, 6.2 (1975), 263. Gérard Genette develops this discussion in terms of narrative focalization – see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 196-97, 245.

²²² Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*, 68-69, 108-10.

²²³ George Grella, ‘The Formal Detective Novel’, in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robin W. Winks (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 84-102 (100).

²²⁴ Michael Gilbert, ‘A Very English Lady’, in *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, ed. by H.R.F. Keating (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 49-78 (54).

made no reference to any cheat. Rather, he praised Christie's solution as technically simple:

The author does not devote her talents to the creation of thrills and shocks, but to the orderly solution of a single murder, conventional at that [...] In the present case [the killer's] identity is made all the more baffling through the author's technical cleverness in selecting the part he is to play in the story; and yet her non-committal characterization of him makes it a perfectly fair procedure.²²⁵

In this description, Watson-as-murderer is not considered outrageous or flabbergasting, but merely 'clever', and appropriate to formula. Christie achieved success as an extremely conventional, traditional writer, capable of mastering the form and probing its limitations.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, however, Christie critiques the masculine tradition to which she belongs. In so doing, she prepares readers for further innovations, such as the rise of the female detective. Even before Sheppard turns out to be the murderer, it is clear that his gossipy sister is a better ally for Poirot. With her network of wives, milkmen, and mah jong players, she has access to more knowledge than anyone else. Poirot regularly calls on Caroline Sheppard, while he never confides anything in her brother until the end. Christie openly acknowledged Caroline as the basis for the later detective Jane Marple, who first appeared in 1928 (*Autobiography*, 434). Other female detectives, such as Sayers' Miss Climpson (first appearance: *Unnatural Death*, 1927) and Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver (first appearance: *Grey Mask*, 1928) also share characteristics, and their social standing, with Caroline.

Caroline was, for Christie, the star of *Ackroyd*.²²⁶ When Michael Morton adapted the novel for the stage in 1928, she fought to stop Caroline becoming Caryl, a demure girl with whom Poirot falls in love (*Autobiography*, 434, 472). When this was not respected she took to adapting her own plays instead, a gesture traditionally read as a sentimental indicator of attachment to Caroline. It

²²⁵ 'Mrs Christie's Murder of Roger Ackroyd', *The New York Times* (18 July 1926).

²²⁶ So much so that Bayard (128-145) compellingly reads Caroline as 'the murderer who eluded Hercule Poirot and deceived Agatha Christie', someone whose guilt even Christie found it impossible to tabulate.

is a view Christie encouraged, although her words do not necessarily imply mere sentiment. They may also hint at an underlying sense of strategy: 'I resented the removal of Caroline a good deal: I liked the part she played' (*Autobiography*, 434). Christie's decision also indicates a canny commercial awareness, given her lucrative status as the best-known member of 'feminised' detective fiction.²²⁷ She knew that readers would respond well to a spinster detective, with feminine investigative tools and no attachment to men or masculinity.

After splitting from the Bodley Head and negotiating elaborate royalties with William Collins for *Ackroyd*, Christie took an active role in marketing her work. She had already gained a reputation with the Bodley Head for telling publicists, cover artists, and font-setters what to do.²²⁸ Collins' employees considered her a meddler: for example, she insisted on a last-minute new cover for *Sad Cypress* because it looked 'tacky', and succeeded despite shortages of paper in wartime; she also rewrote the blurb of *The Body in the Library* as a series of questions, stressing its 'fun' puzzle element.²²⁹ In short, however inconsequential she may have claimed her writing to be, Christie put a lot of work into every stage of its production. 'The main characteristic of Agatha Christie's writing', Barnard claims, 'is that one does not notice it.' This, he considers, is what every 'writer of popular fiction' aspires to.²³⁰ Nor does one notice the author, according to Christie scholarship cited above. Certainly, Christie did not like being a public personality – but this impression of an author who 'never overstepped [her] limits'²³¹ appears to be the result of personal and professional strategy.

'I was a married woman,' she claimed, somewhat disingenuously, in her autobiography. '[T]hat was my status, and that was my occupation. As a sideline, I wrote books' (*Autobiography*, 420). Being 'a married woman' who writes on the side, of course, is not the same as being unnoticeable: an image

²²⁷ Thomson, *Masters of Mystery*, 211.

²²⁸ Gwen Robyns, *The Mystery of Agatha Christie* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 46-48.

²²⁹ See J.C. Bernthal, 'The Body in the Library at Seventy', *CADS: Crime and Detective Stories*, 62 (2012). 19-24.

²³⁰ Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, 129.

²³¹ James, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, 85.

is suggested. Christie distinguished herself from what she called the ‘*bona fide* author[s],’ who might legitimately claim writing as a career (420). Her novels are full of populist quips at the expense of ‘highbrow’ male modernists. For instance, Marple’s pretentious nephew writes poetry, with ‘no capital letters’, which the narrator of *Vicarage* understands ‘is [...] the essence of modernity’, and publishes ‘books [...] about unpleasant people leading lives of surpassing dullness.’ Marple, meanwhile, tolerates his modishness with ‘an amused twinkle’ which the earnest highbrow ‘never notices’ (186). Christie established herself as the opposite of a publicly highbrow male writer.

The air of spirited but unambitious and conventional housewifery so crucial to Christie’s self-promotion was first achieved in interviews, but after a while, she stopped granting them. Those interviews she did grant, mostly to friends, took place in her sitting-room, with tea and cake, and contained such observations as ‘Men have much better brains than women’ and ‘I should like to be remembered as a rather good writer’.²³² Not for nothing did Raymond Chandler, an author of hyper-masculine detective fiction, claim that Christie’s fiction was for ‘flustered old ladies – of both sexes (or no sex)’.²³³ In short, she presented a kind of femininity, as part of her commercially marketed conservative persona, which did not shock because it was reassuring.²³⁴

Ariadne Oliver in *Cards on the Table* (1936) and *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* (1952)

What Gill calls Christie’s ‘hidden author strategy’, then, did not involve vanishing from view, but rather promoting herself as an unintimidatingly middle-class housewife. Christie’s friend and theatrical colleague Hubert Gregg remembered her as nothing of the sort: he described her as unafraid of interrupting and shouting over rehearsals, of dominating a meal or conversation, and of

²³² See Wyndham, ‘Agatha Christie Writes Animated Algebra’, 9; 1974 Interview with Louis Mountbatten, quoted in John Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks: Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making* (London: HarperCollins, 2009), 68.

²³³ Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*, 18.

²³⁴ The extent to which femininity is a masquerade, or the ‘other’ of masculinity, in these texts, and its consequent dynamism or fluidity, are discussed in Chapter Three.

intimidating colleagues.²³⁵ Considering Christie as ‘shrewd’, ‘ruthless’, and ‘a touch vain’, he adds that ‘these are professional pulses.’²³⁶ With the general public, however, Christie rarely made contact, maintaining a different kind of authorial personality. As Thompson and Christie’s grandson, Mathew Prichard, recognize, her confidence regarding her role in the public eye in the early 1920s did not last beyond her marital and mental breakdown in 1926.²³⁷

When her husband asked for a divorce, Christie briefly disappeared, checking into a hotel under a name similar to that of Col. Christie’s mistress, and sparking an international search. Newspapers were full of the story, several accusing Col. Christie of murder.²³⁸ Some suggested that it was a publicity stunt to sell more books.²³⁹ In 1928, having agreed to a divorce, Agatha Christie sought to end media speculation about her disappearance by publishing an account in the *Daily Mail*. The account purports to relate ‘[w]hat actually happened.’ Christie claimed to have suffered from amnesia for the duration of her disappearance. ‘I was certainly in an abnormal state of mind’, she wrote, and ‘had become a new woman’ at the time. ‘I read every day about Mrs Christie’s disappearance, and came to the conclusion that she must be dead.’²⁴⁰

While Agatha Christie returned, remarried, and continued publishing at least one title a year until her death, her ebullient self had not survived. The character Christie assumed at a Harrogate hotel may have been a temporary mask, but her anonymity, with a merely superficial resemblance to the woman in the newspapers, persisted. Christie insisted that she had become her ‘morbid self’ again, lacking ‘that utter happiness of Mrs Neele’ (‘Disappearance’, 11), but there can be little doubt that the events of 1926 were transformative. In books

²³⁵ Hubert Gregg, *Agatha Christie and All That Mousetrap* (London: William Kimber, 1980), 74.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

²³⁷ Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, 138; Mathew Prichard, ‘Introduction’, in *Agatha Christie: The Grand Tour* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 1-9 (8-9).

²³⁸ See Jared Cade, ‘Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days’ (London: Scarab, 2011); Mathew Prichard, introducing Agatha Christie, *The Grand Tour* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 1-9 (8-9).

²³⁹ Edgar Wallace, ‘My Theory of Mrs Christie: Either in London or Dead’, *Daily Mail* (11 Dec. 1926).

²⁴⁰ Agatha Christie, ‘Mrs Agatha Christie: Her Own Story of Her Disappearance’, *Daily Mail* (16 Feb. 1928). Further references to this source appear as ‘Disappearance’. The account did not convince journalists and to this day speculation surrounds the disappearance. It has been the subject of numerous books, films, novels, documentaries, and even an episode of *Doctor Who* (2008).

published after 1926, Christie-the-author appears to distance herself from the 'Agatha Christie' phenomenon, as will be discussed.

Under a pseudonym, Christie published her first non-crime novel in 1928. *Giant's Bread*, concerning obsession and artistry, was published under the name Mary Westmacott. There is evidence that Christie intended her name never to connect with these titles: Heinemann's publishing contract was drawn with a fictional 'Daniel Miller'.²⁴¹ In her second Westmacott novel, *Unfinished Portrait* (1934), Christie discusses the breakdown of her marriage and fears that she might 'go queer again' (*Unfinished*, 574). An autobiographical title detailing a suicide attempt and the strain the divorce put on her relationship with her daughter, *Unfinished Portrait* is Christie's last public discussion of the incidents of 1926. It was supposed to be known as an anonymous work: 'Mary Westmacott' was, even on dust-jackets, stated to be a pseudonym.²⁴² In crime stories Christie focussed on crafting absorbing, escapist plots. In the Westmacott books, she explored her own identity and emotions, but without the constraints of plotting or fearing potential implications for 'Agatha Christie,' the author.

Despite Sayers' belief, expressed in 1931, 'that the market is opening up again to the long novel',²⁴³ Christie continued to write short and very tightly-plotted crime novels throughout her career. However, the books she wrote as Mary Westmacott are of varying lengths, with loose, sometimes tapering, plots. Christie's crime novels are nearly all around 60,000 words in length, while the Westmacott title *The Burden* has a word count comfortably exceeding 250,000. Channelling complicated thoughts about her own identity into the freer Westmacott texts, Christie was able to keep her crime plots precise. Moreover, she was able, as Gill puts it, 'to play with her fame,' inserting self-aware humour into her more conventional mysteries without overstepping the demands of

²⁴¹ Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 207.

²⁴² Mary Westmacott, *Giant's Bread* (London: Heinemann, 1928). Dustjacket. Further references to this source will appear as *Bread*.

²⁴³ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Modern Detective', in *Radio Times* (1931), p. 9.

formulae.²⁴⁴ For example, *Library* sends up various of the genre's 'irresistible cliché[s]', by presenting them in the most 'incongruous' ways possible.²⁴⁵ It even features an annoying character who has collected autographs from detective novelists including 'Dickson Carr and Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie' (100). This self-referential playfulness, which re-affirms the dominant image of 'Agatha Christie,' remains understated. Christie was able to avoid getting caught up in further commentary because she channelled complicated thoughts and questions into less-structured prose, unconnected to her name.

As Humble observes, 'the biggest sin, in the middlebrow imagination, is that of taking oneself too seriously.'²⁴⁶ In a literary marketplace with 'women novelists [...] beginning to outstrip [the number] of men,' many books therefore contained satirical representations of 'male novelists as critically successful but callow and uncommercial'.²⁴⁷ Christie took part, as evidenced by Miss Marple's pretentious nephew, discussed above. However, the obverse is also relevant: women novelists appear in a number of detective novels of the interwar period. Christie's eccentric crime writer character, Ariadne Oliver, is the most well-known example. Although many commentators agree with Curran that 'when Mrs Oliver speaks we are listening to Agatha Christie',²⁴⁸ we may consider Oliver as a more nuanced extension of the commercial benefits of appearing not to 'tak[e] oneself too seriously' during the interwar period.

The interwar crime writer Margery Allingham remarked that a 'story-teller' inevitably 'betray[s] himself' in writing, and that 'his readers know him better than he does'.²⁴⁹ It seems that Christie first mocked and then exploited this maxim via the Oliver character. Oliver comes to represent, in embodied form, not a literal mouthpiece but the implied author; what Booth calls a 'combination of norms' that creates 'a single, unifying' 'image of the artist' which influences

²⁴⁴ Gill, Agatha Christie, 193.

²⁴⁵ Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library* (New York, London, Toronto: Harper, 2011), 5, 8. Further references to this source will appear as *Library*.

²⁴⁶ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 48.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

²⁴⁸ Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, 73.

²⁴⁹ Margery Allingham, 'London My Market Town', in *Margery Allingham: 100 Years of a Great Writer*, ed. by Marianne Van Hoeven ([n.d]: Lucas, 2004), 258-60 (258).

perceptions of the text's 'tone' and 'meaning.'²⁵⁰ Oliver first appears in the 1932 short story 'The Case of the Discontented Soldier.' She has long been interpreted as an 'undisguised self-caricature': Fido suggests that 'the true fascination of Ariadne Oliver' was her revelation of Agatha's feelings.²⁵¹ Arguably, however, the character's 'true fascination' lies in the impression of 'Agatha' that emerges. Like Christie, Oliver is a large woman with an oft-discussed fondness for apples, who writes haphazardly in notebooks ('Soldier', 36). Also like Christie (and Poirot), she has a classical given name and a less classical surname. However, there the similarities end, at this early stage. Like Susan Ertz in *Julian Probert* (1931) and Georgette Heyer in *A Blunt Instrument* (1938), Christie created a fictional counterpart, not as an alter ego but as a send-up of clichés surrounding her, in gendered terms and professionally.²⁵²

Perhaps as an extension of prejudice surrounding 'lady journalists,' the 'lady novelist' had been dismissed by numerous commentators as 'frothy', 'pious', and 'pedantic' producer 'of feminine fatuity' to satisfy an undiscerning public: these words, written by George Eliot under her birth-name, Mary-Anne Evans, in 1858 were widely quoted or paraphrased in the early twentieth-century.²⁵³ To judge from asides in the press of the 1910s and 1920s, the 'popular lady novelist' was 'deficient in a sense of humour', who 'split [...] her infinitives' and had 'deliberately degraded [popular culture by writing about] certain types of cheap "sex"'.²⁵⁴ Initially a 'sensational novelist' who pedals clichés in her prose to keep 'the public' happy ('Soldier', 35, 36), Oliver is considered 'the most conventional' of lady novelists: the thrills and adventures she creates are not said to interest intelligent minds ('Rich', 91). 'The public is conservative', she pontificates towards the end of the story; 'it likes the old well-

²⁵⁰ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 71, 73.

²⁵¹ Fido, *The World of Agatha Christie*, 88.

²⁵² Oliver may also be considered the anti-Harriet Vane. Vane first appears in Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1929), as a fantasy self-portrait. A sensible intellectual crime writer and feminist, it takes several novels for her to agree to marry the hero, Peter Wimsey. Christie found Vane 'tiresome' and said that she 'spoil' the books ('Writers', xv).

²⁵³ See, for example, Helen K. Carpenter and Edward Childs Carpenter, *The Cinderella Man: A Romance of Youth* (New York: H.K. Fly Company, 1916), 227; Alfred Tresidder Sheppard, *The Art and Practice of Historical Fiction* (London: Humphrey Toulmin, 1930), 274.

²⁵⁴ 'Garrick Theatre: The Chevallier', *The Times* (29 Aug. 1904); 'Miss Mulock: Author of *John Halifax*', *The Times* (20 Apr. 1926); 'The Future of the Cinema', *The Times* (4 Sep. 1925).

worn gadgets.’ The remark is followed by a loose gesture towards her ‘forty-six successful works of fiction, all bestsellers in England and America, and freely translated’ (‘Soldier’, 36). Despite her bestseller status, Christie had only published around a dozen novels at this point, and the reference to so many volumes suggests a general concept of the prolific woman writer of sensation fiction. A minor character in this early story, Oliver is clearly satirically sketched, providing an opportunity for male characters to decry the cheap thrills of ‘women’s’ ‘sensational novels’, as the reader enjoys them with the waiver of self-referentiality.

Oliver returns in *Cards on the Table* (1936), having evolved from a ‘sensational novelist’ into ‘one of the foremost writers of detective and other sensational stories.’ She is said to write ‘chatty, if not particularly grammatical, articles’ for newspapers, and to be ‘a hot-headed feminist’ who is apt to exclaim, ‘Now if a woman were the head of Scotland Yard!’ and is ‘an earnest believer in woman’s intuition’ (*Cards*, 14). Oliver’s ‘chatty’ and ungrammatical newspaper articles mark her out as less formal, and less familiar with literary conventions, than more ‘serious’ writers. She resembles ‘[t]he popular novelist’ bemoaned by Q.D. Leavis as:

dependent on a public for his living, frequently making it by regular contributions to the magazines (whose editors nowadays have been shown to keep a scientific finger on the public pulse), [and] identical with his public in background of taste and intellectual environment.²⁵⁵

The emphasis on Oliver’s feminism and ‘women’s intuition’ genders the reproduced concerns over intellectual capacity and artistic integrity. Moreover, Oliver has a fondness for money and clearly writes for the pay cheque alone: ‘some days, I can only keep going by repeating over and over to myself the amount of money I am going to get for serial rights’ (*Cards*, 114).

While this may or may not be true of Christie, it indicates vulgar commercialism: writers positioning themselves as highbrow seldom included

²⁵⁵ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 42.

discussions of money in their writing. As Quentin Bell has noted, Virginia Woolf fretted over ‘the price of eggs’ but her characters ‘scarcely seem to have such thing as an income.’²⁵⁶ ‘[A]n agreeable woman of middle age,’ Oliver is ‘rather untidy’ and apt to vary her hairstyle (14). As Makinen points out, hair is a fluid body part manipulated ‘to signify contemporary modishness’.²⁵⁷ While Makinen connects this aspect of the character with ‘the constructedness of feminine appearance’,²⁵⁸ this ever-changing element of Oliver’s appearance may also represent dynamic fashions in literature; she has to change how she presents herself in order to stay current – as a woman and as a writer – with an ‘untidy’ result.

Oliver is coded as scatty, emotional, and irritating. She gets in the way of the professional men trying to solve the case. The crime, she complains, is ‘badly constructed’ (*Cards*, 30), before telling everyone to look out for the ‘[l]east likely person[, ...] the same as in books.’ (184). ‘People are so unintelligent’, she says when a policeman suggests that she does not understand the complexity of real crime. ‘I could invent a better murder *any* day than anything *real*. I’m *never* at a loss for a plot’ (35. Emphasis original). However, Oliver is so absorbed in the world of fiction that she is out of place in reality. Even typing up her ideas frustrates her:

I always think I’ve finished and then when I count up I find I’ve only written thirty thousand words instead of sixty thousand and so then I have to throw in another murder and get the heroine kidnapped again. It’s all very boring. (113)

Authorship of popular fiction appears as no more nor less than a routine performance subjected to the laws of supply and demand. Oliver’s adventures, glamorous and thrilling, are the stuff of ‘boring’ mechanics which Oliver herself considers ‘hard work’ (112). The subsequent suggestion that ‘more blood cheers [...] up’ a bit of dry writing because, after all, ‘people *like* [the clichés]’

²⁵⁶ Quentin Bell, ‘Introduction’, in *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Quentin Bell (London: Vintage, 2008), vii-x (viii).

²⁵⁷ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 48.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

(113. Emphasis original), emphasizes a supposed lack of individuality and intellectual depth in her writing.

Coming shortly before the discovery of the second body in *Cards* itself, the remark also highlights the disparity between Oliver-the-stereotype and Christie-the-author. Both murders in *Cards* are integral to a worked-out structure, and it is clear that neither has been hastily added to meet a word-count. It is tempting to agree with Cara Kungl for whom Oliver's portrayal in *Cards*, as 'a mere writer who clearly has no idea what the job of Head of Scotland Yard actually entails or how to go about solving a crime, highlights the apparent absurdity of women wanting men's jobs', but also enables Christie to 'examine [...] the relationship between women writers and popular fiction' in the public consciousness.²⁵⁹

At this stage, then, Oliver is still not a self-portrait or self-caricature but is a reflection upon female crime-writers as they are generally perceived. When Poirot points out Mrs Oliver to another guest at a party, he is asked, 'The one who wrote *The Body in the Library?*', and responds, 'The identical one' (17). *The Body in the Library* was not a Christie novel until 1942 so critics who link the character to her creator on account of this title are ill-advised. It was, rather, as Christie emphasized in her prologue to *The Body in the Library*, one of many 'clichés belonging to certain types of fiction' (*Library*, vii). The cliché is widely referenced in detective fiction of the period; for instance, in Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1929), one character, describing himself as a natural 'victim', says, 'Me for the corpse in the library.'²⁶⁰

Oliver herself, though, is not as neat and mass-produced as the clichés that surround her. She is too messy to fit into the neat narratives she writes, and, like Poirot, she appears incongruous in the well-structured crime novel she

²⁵⁹ Carla Therese Kungl, 'Women Writers and Detectives: Creating Authority in British Women's Detective Fiction, 1890-1940' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Case Western University, 2000), 224, 25.

²⁶⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: New English Library, 1987), 9.

occupies, as a character.²⁶¹ Like Poirot, Oliver is a somewhat ‘overdone’ character: when playing Oliver on-screen, the actor Zoe Wanamaker discussed the need to become exaggeratedly feminine. She even wore oversized breasts, which ‘came from a tranny shop’, to play the character, and described as her inspiration the elaborate comedy actor Margret Dumont.²⁶² The arrogance with which Oliver intrudes onto masculine turf, trying to solve the crime by identifying the least pleasant suspect and boasting that she could have thought up a better murder (29), is supposed to be more funny than convincing.

The scattiness with which she wears high heels in marshland (*Cards*, 79-80), the preference she gives to emotion over logic (‘One actually has to *think*, you know. And thinking is always a bore’ [113. Emphasis original]), and her reliance on women’s intuition posit Oliver as a stereotypically popular woman writer, who does not renounce her femininity, even when, as in the investigation of a murder, it is impractical. The gender-essentialist lines along which she is drawn stand in opposition to the masculine logic that prevails in her own books and the fictional world she inhabits. At this stage, then, with Christie being Westmacott elsewhere, Ariadne Oliver is less a self-portrait than a send-up of clichés surrounding women writing detective fiction.

In the years following *Cards*, and the war years, Christie appears to have abandoned the character. She also shunned interviewers and argued fiercely over the use of her photograph in publicity.²⁶³ Meanwhile, she insisted, to quote a letter to a friend, that ‘people should be interested in *books* and not their authors’.²⁶⁴ Ariadne Oliver had been merely an element of interwar crime fiction’s motion towards parody. In this more sombre period, Christie explored the most personal areas of her life in the Westmacott books, as discussed. In *Absent in the Spring* (1944), ‘the one book that has satisfied me completely’

²⁶¹ Gilbert Adair has explored this idea in detail in his postmodern trilogy of novels featuring a parody of Ariadne Oliver called Evadne Mount. See particularly the final title, *And Then There Was No One* (London: Faber, 2009), which ends with Mount pushing Adair himself over the Reichenbach Falls.

²⁶² Quoted in Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table: Poirot Tie-In* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 340. This edition of the text will not be treated as a primary source.

²⁶³ Letter to Edmund Cork, 26 May 1948. Archived at the University of Exeter Special Collections, Agatha Christie Business Archive. File EUL MS 99/1/1948.

²⁶⁴ Letter to Patricia Cork, quoted in Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, 367. Emphasis original.

(*Autobiography*, 498), she explored the idea that nobody loved her; that she was 'alone and always w[ould] be.'²⁶⁵

When *Absent* found commercial and critical success, the *Sunday Times* investigated Westmacott's identity, naming Christie in 1949. What frustrated the author was her family finding out (*Autobiography*, 498-500). Thompson notes the 'absolute freedom' Christie had felt as a novelist not bound to formulae; as Westmacott she could explore every 'recess [...] of her own past'.²⁶⁶ This freedom extended to the matter of identity; Christie could sustain her coherent, socially-conditioned authorial identity as a detective writer, while she had another outlet for the questions and confusions surrounding her sense of self. Her 'best work', Thompson opines, speaking of detective fiction, was composed during 'the years when she sheltered behind that mysterious other self.'²⁶⁷ The two decades in which she could be Mary Westmacott also cover her recovery from the incidents of 1926 and her remarriage; channelling her complex emotions into Westmacott books, she felt able to tightly plot, and still have fun with, Christie stories. However, with her professional identity linked to these works, Christie found herself having to renegotiate her authorial personality.

Having been named as Westmacott, Christie began making earnest use of Oliver, who became a fictional alter ego as unlike the conflicted heroines of *Unfinished Portrait* and *Absent in the Spring* as possible. As soon as *The Sunday Times* published its scoop, Christie 'began to work enthusiastically, drafting nearly all the book that became *Mrs McGinty's Dead*'.²⁶⁸ In *McGinty*, Christie launched Oliver as Poirot's main companion. The character also became, more obviously than before, an apparent, deliberate self-portrait. 'I never take my stories from real life,' she claimed in a *John Bull* editorial, 'but [...] Ariadne Oliver does have a strong dash of myself.'²⁶⁹ Linkage between

²⁶⁵ Mary Westmacott, 'Absent in the Spring', in *The Mary Westmacott Collection: Volume One* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 593-755 (745, 55). Further references to this source will appear as *Absent*.

²⁶⁶ Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, 366.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 367.

²⁶⁸ Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 284.

²⁶⁹ 'Report from the Editor', *John Bull* (11 Aug. 1956).

Agatha Christie and Ariadne Oliver became steadily more pronounced in five further titles, with Oliver's role steadily growing.²⁷⁰

In *McGinty*, Oliver is recognizable as the character from *Cards*. A clumsy figure of fun, often 'completely bewildered' by events (127), she is introduced arriving in her car 'rather in the manner of a volcanic eruption' (72). She still believes in women's intuition:

'Men are so slow,' said Mrs Oliver disparagingly. 'I'll soon tell you who did it. [...] A woman's intuition – that's what you need. [...] Now if a woman were at the head of Scotland Yard—' (73-4)

She would forget her troubles, she decided, by turning her mind to the elucidation of real crime. Hercule Poirot needed help. She would [...] exercise her woman's intuition which had never failed, and tell Poirot who the murderer was. (95)

That Oliver chooses to escape 'troubles' by considering 'real crime' indicates that she treats the murders like a detective story and suggests a lack of awareness of the line between fiction and reality. Poirot manifestly does not need her help – in fact, Oliver inadvertently gives the murderer an alibi, thereby obstructing Poirot's investigation. Of this incident, Poirot remarks, having explained the solution, that 'your woman's intuition was taking a day off' (182). In fact, the almost superstitious justification of Oliver's intuition in *Cards* does not reappear. She identifies the most suspicious-looking local, almost at random, and tells Poirot: 'I can't think why you don't arrest [him.] I would, if I were the Head of Scotland Yard' (170). In this way, Christie draws upon the available stereotypes she has already echoed, suggesting middle-class, creative, feminine incompetence.

Worth remembering here is that Poirot is started on the case by a policeman whose 'instinct' tells him that a man accused of murder is innocent (11): Poirot never questions this 'instinct', and even at the end there is no real evidence, as he acknowledges (184). Oliver's 'woman's intuition' becomes more

²⁷⁰ *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), *The Pale Horse* (1961), *Third Girl* (1966), *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), *Elephants Can Remember* (1972).

implausible than before in *McGinty* so as to distinguish it from legitimate, masculine and professional ‘instinct’. Makinen points out that Oliver’s women’s intuition is slowly accommodated by the narratives, so that by *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), she is able to tell Poirot about her ‘funny feeling’ and have him rush to her aid.²⁷¹ However, it is worth distinguishing ‘intuition’ and ‘instinct’ as the text attempts to – and *McGinty* is certainly more critical of the feminist aspect of Oliver’s character than is *Cards*.

The above is relevant to Christie’s presentation of herself as a woman writer of detective fiction when we consider that *McGinty* deliberately invites the Christie-Oliver comparison. *McGinty*’s Oliver, like Christie, is called the Queen of Crime and is published cheaply by Penguin (*McGinty*, 95). Moreover, Christie uses the Oliver character to voice frustrations that were well-known (or well-believed) to be her own opinions. Oliver is grieved at her choice of detective, a Finnish vegetarian with ‘idiotic mannerisms’: ‘If I met that bony, gangling, vegetable-eating Finn in real life, I’d do a better murder than any I’ve ever invented’ (115-116). Ironically, Oliver addresses Poirot; Christie’s frustrations with Poirot’s mannerisms and the decision to make him a Belgian were, at the time, well-documented. ‘[W]hy did I ever invent this detestable, bombastic, tiresome little creature?’ she wrote in a newspaper in 1938.²⁷²

Oliver also expresses anger at a stage dramatist, adapting her novels, who wishes to halve the detective’s age and make him a womanizer (‘you *can’t* have him a *pansy*, darling’ [*McGinty*, 93. Emphasis original]). She tells Poirot of ‘the agony of having your characters taken and made to say things that they never would have said’ (73), reflecting Christie’s documented responses to Michael Morton’s play *Alibi* (1928), in which Poirot almost became a young French womanizer called Beau Poirot. Finally, she discusses a reader who wrote in to correct a plot point – the length of a blowpipe: ‘Sometimes I think

²⁷¹ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 50.

²⁷² Christie, ‘Hercule Poirot: Fiction’s Greatest Detective’, 32. Further references to this source appear as ‘Poirot’.

As Thompson points out, however, Christie was ‘intense[ly]’ protective of the character [Laura Thompson, ‘What Made Hercule Poirot Perfect’, *Daily Telegraph* (12 Nov. 2013). Accessed online (1 Aug. 2014): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10443824/What-made-Hercule-Poirot-perfect.html>].

Tiring of one’s creation, in the manner of Doyle tiring of Holmes, may have been a generic expectation.

there are people who only read books in the hope of finding mistakes in them' (*McGinty*, 95). The famous real letter, published in a newspaper, concerned a technical error in Christie's *Death in the Clouds* (1935).²⁷³ These elements, the most prominent part of Oliver's character in *McGinty* and more pronounced in later novels, allow Christie to reflect upon her role as a celebrity writer – apparently eliding the need for interviews and deflecting attention from Christie off-the-page. The attempt on Christie's part to suggest an explicit self-portrait seems to take off only in *McGinty*, written in the aftermath of the secret Westmacottian identity emerging.

Exploiting the adage that truth about an author is best evidenced in fiction, Christie presents a self-conscious self-portrait in Ariadne Oliver, weighted by the character's unthreateningly meddlesome femininity. Increasingly, Oliver is defined as a writer only: for instance, in *Dead Man's Folly* (1956) she insists that 'it is an author's business to *write*, not to *talk*' (*Folly*, 172. Emphases original). By the final Oliver novel, she is no longer intrusive; she refuses to get involved in a murder case, declaring 'no interest in criminology' that is not 'entirely fictional' (*Elephants*, 28, 27). Most of the text is given over to Oliver's thoughts, where Christie describes her projected professional self, through the merest of literary veils, as a 'lucky woman who had established a happy knack of writing what quite a lot of people wanted to read' (16). There is disingenuousness in the absence of that commercial canniness Christie openly discussed in her early career. Reducing literary shrewdness to 'a happy knack', Christie deliberately presents herself as an un-ambitious writer, with little claim to literary merit, and in the world of hobby-writing rather than career-authorship. The stereotypes behind Oliver's character construction remain as gender-essentialist, even sexist, as when she was first created in 1932.

However, understanding Oliver as a character whose narrative function changes, and who becomes an increasingly stylized self-portrait of 'Agatha Christie' the author, means reading the texts themselves as open spaces, where questions of identity are raised, explored, and contested. The popular

²⁷³ Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 208.

view that Mrs Oliver is, in Earl Bargainnier's words, 'her creator exaggerated and parodied' is one I partially accept.²⁷⁴ However, I am not satisfied by his suggestion that Oliver is simply a new Hastings.²⁷⁵ A satirical figure of fun, she is also a serious invention. Oliver provides an image of Christie as feminine and unambitious; somebody who has stumbled into success despite a lack of calculation or competence. However, if we read Oliver too literally as a version of Agatha Christie, we indirectly fix identity and limit the ways in which subjectivity is constructed in her texts. The queer potential is lost.

Conclusion

According to Oliver, proving her incompetence at a 'real' crime scene in *Folly*, when 'men get killed', 'nobody minds – I mean, nobody except their wives and sweethearts and children and things like that' (81). Throughout this chapter, it has become clear that Christie complicates her use of literary clichés by critiquing them as they are introduced. This tactic extends to ideas about authorship and her own position as a professional woman in the public eye.

Towards the end of her life, in 1971, a magazine referred to Christie as 'the world's most mysterious woman.' Christie was furious. 'What do they suggest I am?' she wrote to her agent. 'A Bank Robber?' Insisting that 'I am in *Who's Who* and am easily reached by post through my publishers', Christie claimed to be 'an ordinary successful hard-working author – like any other.'²⁷⁶ Her anger, manifesting in the suggestion that a writer who does not crave celebrity is like an incognito criminal in the eyes of the press, glosses an earnest point. Christie did not wish to be understood as any more complex than 'any other author' (albeit a paradoxically 'ordinary successful' one). In fact, she insisted publicly on her right to 'two personalities': in an interview to mark her

²⁷⁴ Earl F. Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder: The Detective Fiction of Agatha Christie* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1980), 57.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.* For one thing, there is a sixteen-year gap between *Cards* and *McGinty*; for another, Oliver is not a foil for Poirot's brilliance.

²⁷⁶ Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 358.

reception of a damehood, Christie claimed to be 'Dame Agatha at work and Lady Mallowan at play.'²⁷⁷ The authorial personality, elegantly pared down, like her plots, is accessible only through publishers and *Who's Who*. The nonprofessional personality is merely that of Sir Max Mallowan's wife and helpmeet.²⁷⁸ When Christie somewhat guilefully ranks her personal achievements as 'work' and claims to prefer being defined by her marriage, she insists on being, separately, an 'ordinary [...] author' and a conventional woman, without elaborating either concept.

In this chapter, I have considered Christie's construction and negotiation of an authorial identity. Entering a male-dominated market, writing within a traditionally masculine genre, Christie satirically deployed parody, a traditionally feminine tool,²⁷⁹ to rewrite generic conventions at a commercial mainstream level. As one of the most prominent authors of, and eventually as the market-leading face of a type of crime fiction, Christie used gendered parody to bring a traditionally elite, irreverent outsiders' tool to the genre's core. In *Styles*, Christie brings self-consciousness and a domestic setting to an otherwise conventional romantic detective story. In *Brown*, she questions and begins to rewrite the limited range of female role-models in popular culture. Anna the Adventuress is a self-consciously 'foolish' invention (*Brown*, 23), just as Sheppard in *Ackroyd* embodies the interwar fear of the 'enemy within' while also un-writing generic certainty coded as masculine.

If Christie rewrites an existing genre of detective fiction, exposing through parody its masculine bias, she also deploys a 'hidden author strategy' that consciously develops a feminine authorial persona. The character of Ariadne Oliver allows Christie to appear as a woman on patriarchy's terms: as harmless, married, and middle-aged, whose exceptional success is down to luck. Over the years, this eccentric character is presented, increasingly, as intellectually stretched rather than limited by her craft. Writing herself, and her professional

²⁷⁷ Quoted in 'Dame Agatha Puzzled by Her D.B.E.', *Sunday Telegraph* (10 Jan. 1971).

²⁷⁸ Mallowan was an archaeologist, and Christie accompanied him on various excavations, claiming to prefer her time in Iraq to her time writing (ibid).

²⁷⁹ Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, 5.

femininity, in such a way, Christie seems to undermine her earlier robust challenge to the limits of role models available to women. It is well to find subversive space or potential in Christie's texts, but the inevitable caveat that Christie herself had little patience with such readings has informed most discussions to date. Regardless of the statement's veracity, it is important to understand that this impression is another of those clichés surrounding Christie's prose that scholarship has sought in recent years to eradicate.

Reducing 'masculinity,' 'femininity,' and 'Agatha Christie' to the status of textual constructs opens up these texts to new readings. With the masculine/feminine binary under discussion, it is worth considering how masculinity and femininity are self-consciously constructed within the Christie canon. Particularly rewarding in subsequent readings will be the roles of masculinity in characterizing detectives, and of femininity in characterizing criminals – irony and self-awareness go a way towards discrediting masculine security and the dangerousness of femininity.

'Too Much of a Miss Nancy': English Masculinity and its Others²⁸⁰

'I like men to have affairs,' said Egg. 'It shows they're not queer or anything.'

*Three-Act Tragedy*²⁸¹

The Major snorted. 'He doesn't play golf. Too much of a Miss Nancy.'

*Murder is Easy*²⁸²

Introduction

As a child, Christie was plagued by nightmares concerning what she called 'the Gunman' (*Autobiography*, 37-8). A tall stranger, 'a Frenchman in grey-blue uniform, powdered hair in a queue, and a three-cornered hat,' he carried 'an old-fashioned musket' but never used it. Instead, he would involve himself in normal proceedings – 'sitting at the tea-table, walking along the beach, joining in the game' – instilling overwhelming fear and panic (37). Even as an adult, Christie could not understand why he scared her, except because '*he ought not to be there*' (38, 37. Emphasis original).

In the autobiographical *Unfinished Portrait*, Christie gives her alter ego a happy ending: Celia, having divorced the husband who reminded her of the Gunman, falls in love with a stranger, whom she suddenly recognizes: 'It was the Gun Man again you see – her symbol for fear. [... A]t last she had met him [... a]nd he was just an ordinary human being.' (*Unfinished*, 591).²⁸³ More than being a 'symbol for fear', the Gunman dream illustrates Christie's juvenile terror of the integrated other; the man who 'ought not to be there', bringing alien qualities, the mechanics of which cannot be known, to established, intimate

²⁸⁰ Elements of this chapter have been published in article form. See J.C. Bernthal, 'Every Healthy Englishman Longed to Kick Him: Masculinity and Nationalism in Agatha Christie's *Cards on the Table*', *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, 32.2 (2014), 103-14.

²⁸¹ *Three-Act*, 50.

²⁸² *Easy*, 91.

²⁸³ The 'Gunman'/'Gun Man' inconsistency is Christie's.

scenarios. In her fictional handling of the dream, Christie indicates a desire to know the Other, and to make him 'ordinary'.

Like the Gunman, Christie's primary detective, Poirot, is a European man, whose military bearing and ceremonious mannerisms gesture towards an 'old-fashioned', even anachronistic, model of male authority. In this chapter, I argue that Christie presents masculinity as a social construction that only exists insofar as it is threatened. This chapter, then, explores ways in which her texts undermine traditional masculinity in detective fiction; how English normativity is illustrated in relation to masculinity – defining itself against a necessarily nebulous 'other;' and, finally, how the texts highlight and subvert a generic tradition of scapegoating. Insights from the previous chapter, about the generic masculinity Christie had to negotiate, are developed. After delineating pertinent points of Butler's theory of performativity in gender and Sedgwick's conception of homosexual panic and ignorance in negotiating masculine/non-masculine identities, I briefly consider Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in the context of sexology and homosexual panic. As indicated in the previous chapter, Poirot's investigative technique and relationship with his sidekick, Hastings, are considered as parodies of the Holmesian model, undermining that model's security.

Claiming membership of 'the Sherlock Holmes tradition' of literature (*Autobiography*, 282), Christie mocks her genre's conventional need for a manly hero who, punishing social and sexual deviants, ensures the survival of a mythical standard of masculinity. In so doing, she responds selectively to Holmesian tropes, emphasizing the stories' nationalistic and pro-masculine concerns in contrast to the collapsing authority of the interwar British Empire. Christie created a 'quaint dandified little man', enacting stereotypes of foreignness, effeminacy, and eccentricity as her detective (*Styles*, 23), in a period when 'painted and perfumed travesties of men' were condemned by the

press as dangerous to national morality.²⁸⁴ Enacting these stereotypes has less to do with Poirot's character than with his method: to discover 'the truth,' he depends upon other characters not taking him seriously, on the grounds that he is not a 'manly man' in the 'insular Briton['s]' sense (*Three-Act*, 23; *Cards*, 10). How this 'insular' group understands itself is well illustrated in *Cards* (1936), with its non-specifically oriental victim, Mr Shaitana, whose artistic effeminacy and macabre sense of humour both horrify and captivate polite society. When Shaitana is killed at a bridge-party, Christie's detectives interrogate social codes, customs, and dynamics of knowledge and ignorance in order to find out which of four respectable English bridge-players is guilty.

Finally, I compare two typically 'inverted' men who appear in *Murder is Easy* (1939) and 'Three Blind Mice' (1948), respectively. The former was written just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and the latter shortly after the war's conclusion. Predictably, given the tripling of arrests for 'unnatural offences [involving] indecency between males' in this period,²⁸⁵ Christie portrays such men as 'abnormal', 'perverted', and 'the likeliest [suspects]' (*Easy*, 119). However, far from scapegoating them as criminals and social threats, she presents them as scapegoats – since neither man is guilty of murder – and in the latter case as a victim of prejudice.

Reading Christie through the likes of the natty Poirot and the 'nasty', 'definitely queer' Mr Ellsworthy in *Easy* (50, 61, 82, 83, 127) draws attention to the ways in which she highlights the relevance of the 'other', the 'queer', the not quite British or straight or manly in cultural constructions of masculinity. Christie was by no means a gender activist or civil rights reformer, and her primary concern was to write sellable puzzles.²⁸⁶ However, for her plots to hinge on surprises, she routinely exploits common judgements about good and bad 'types,' which have to be rethought by the time an unexpected party has been assigned guilt and named as the culprit. For this reason, her engagement with

²⁸⁴ *The World*, quoted in Matt Cook, 'Queer Conflicts: Love, Sex and War, 1914-1967', in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex between Men since the Middle Ages*, ed. by Matt Cook, Randolph Trumbach, and H.G. Cocks (Oxford, Westport: Greenwood, 2007), 145-78 (145).

²⁸⁵ Harold Scott, *Scotland Yard* (Harmondsworth, Mitcham: Penguin, 1957), 66.

²⁸⁶ See Christie's remarks in Wyndham, 'Agatha Christie Writes Animated Algebra'.

constructions of masculinity, removed from established heteronormative conceptions, deserves scrutiny.

Reading Christie, Reading Masculinity

In the tradition of detective fiction resolving with neat explanations the sins of the world, the detective might be understood as a divine or angelic visitant, branding the guilty and delivering them to higher authorities for punishment. Discussing Christie among others, Slavoj Žižek writes:

The detective 'proves by facts' what would otherwise remain a hallucinatory projection of guilt onto a scapegoat, i.e. he proves that the scapegoat is effectively guilty. [... A detective] guarantees precisely that we will be discharged of any guilt, that the guilt for the realization of our desire will be 'externalized' in the scapegoat.²⁸⁷

This reading of the genre as reassuring helps us understand 'a culture of scapegoating' in interwar detective fiction. According to Kristine Miller, sexual deviants are blamed and punished as murderers, assuring the 'externalized' nature of guilt, and the stable moral high ground of conventional masculinity (a concept that needs further consideration).²⁸⁸ While this is a neat and attractive way to read detective fiction, it is, as Miller herself notes when discussing Christie and Allingham, limited.²⁸⁹ Christie does not create a culprit who is 'the pansy type' until the 1962 play *The Rats*, which is less a mystery than a reflection on its author's personal fears about youth and unbridled passion.²⁹⁰ It is not, as Miller suggests, that Christie subverts her own tendency to 'scapegoat' threatening figures at the outset of the war when she makes a

²⁸⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2000), 59.

²⁸⁸ Kristine A. Miller, 'Case Closed: Scapegoating in British Women's Wartime Detective Fiction', in *The Devil Himself: Villainy in Detective Fiction and Film*, ed. by Stacey Gillis and Philippa Goode (Newport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 91-106.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁹⁰ Given the date and format of *The Rats*, it falls beyond this project's remit. While this chapter partially explores Christie's engagement with homophobic stereotypes before 1952, specifically with relation to masculinity, I am not concerned with her own homophobia or lack thereof.

British politician the murderer in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*.²⁹¹ Rather, such figures as doctors, solicitors, and politicians are statistically more prone to homicide in her work than are cross-dressers, homosexuals, adulterers, and people from foreign countries or religious backgrounds that are not protestant.²⁹²

Christie's detectives, beginning with Poirot, are at least mock-heroic. Traditional scholarship reads Christie as an author entirely faithful to Doyle's Holmes/Watson formula, distinguished by a pronounced 'talent to deceive'.²⁹³ However, building on Light's suggestion that Christie exhibits 'anti-Victorian and anti-nostalgic elements', Rowland considers her prose 'self-consciously ironic',²⁹⁴ and discusses Poirot as an 'antiheroic feminised' critique of 'male heroism'.²⁹⁵ Rowland conceives of detective fiction as the 'other of [masculine] legal systems,' something that can be explored further; specifically, the nature of 'othering' in Christie's framework, as it engages with masculinity.²⁹⁶

The construction of acceptable maleness is a process clearly reflected in characters' interactions with Poirot, who is able to solve crimes because nobody takes him seriously, as they would a fit young Englishman. Furthermore, Poirot's relationship to English masculinity is dependent on his relationship to Captain Hastings, a 'stooge' with a patriotic military background (*Autobiography*, 282). As the 'extraordinary-looking' but 'brilliant' Poirot (*Styles*, 23) explains in *Lord Edgware Dies*, Hastings is 'amazingly normal'.²⁹⁷ Fido claims that 'Hastings provides a gentle running satire on the masculinity of [the young Christie's lovers]'.²⁹⁸ However, rather than reading the character biographically, I will interpret him in terms of Rowland's reading of Poirot; the outsider who engages with Englishness and manliness as masculine qualities.

²⁹¹ Miller, 'Case Closed', 96.

²⁹² These categories, of course, are less mutually excluding in life than in Christie texts.

²⁹³ James, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, 85. See also, Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*; Charles Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie* (London: HarperCollins, 1999); Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*; Curran, *Agatha Christie's Murder in the Making*.

²⁹⁴ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 41, 51.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21, 38.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21. For a constructive critique of Rowland, see Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 22.

²⁹⁷ Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1983), 99. Further references to this source will appear as *Edgware*.

²⁹⁸ Fido, *The World of Agatha Christie*, 68.

This chapter, then, takes seriously the role of masculinity in Christie. If masculinity is constructed 'in implicit or explicit relation to a series of others', then it is 'defined by that very dialogue.'²⁹⁹ As critics of the genre have noted, at least since John G. Cawelti, formulaic detective fiction can probe the limits of the values of its time by exploring taboos and wrongdoing, because the reader can be assured that the hero will put things right at the end.³⁰⁰ Scaggs points out that this kind of textual 'order, is by implication, bound up with the notion of social order.'³⁰¹ However, Christie's main hero is at odds with the very social order he restores. Her placement of a 'quaint dandified little man', resembling 'a hairdresser in a comic play' (*Styles*, 23; *Mesopotamia*, 125), in the centre of an expanding middle-class – and an increasingly middle-class genre – that privileges conventional masculine national constructions, is striking. It is worth exploring to what extent Poirot is at odds with the social order he serves, and how this might encourage readers to rethink presumptions about heroism.

On one level, detective fiction is all about the construction of identity. By the end of an Agatha Christie novel, the detective has iterated an alternative version of the preceding narrative, in the process conferring such identities as 'murderer,' 'innocent,' and, for their self, 'detective.' Butler has theorized the formation of individual identity as a social process, working in two ways:

In the first instance, a subject only becomes discrete through excluding other possible subject formations, a host of 'not-me's.' In the second instance, a subject emerges through a process of abjection, jettisoning those dimensions of oneself that fail to conform to the discrete figures yielded by the norm of the human subject.³⁰²

In this chapter, I will look at how the texts reflect broader constructions of masculinity through intersections of gender, class, sexuality, and race. Christie, I suggest, draws attention towards the utterances of 'not-me's' that Butler mentions, rather than to the 'others' who have 'emerge[d] through a process of

²⁹⁹ Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory*, 41.

³⁰⁰ John G. Cawelti, 'The Study of Literary Formulae', in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robin W. Winks (Inglewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 121-43.

³⁰¹ Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 47.

³⁰² Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London, New York: Verso, 2009), 144.

abjection,' because her focus is on the struggle to be 'the norm'/the innocent/the survivor. In other words, as Colin Watson has noted, Poirot is 'not really a Belgian'; as a character, he 'encapsulates English ideas about foreignness' and is therefore foreign explicitly on English terms.³⁰³ When Christie presents outsiders, she is making a point about Englishness, and in this sense the 'process of abjection' is highlighted. This means that the negative stereotypes Christie draws on can be seen as more than cheap prejudice: they inform a subtle critique of the desperate narcissism of being normal.

As Butler insists, heterosexual identities are constructed and haunted by the homosexual's otherness.³⁰⁴ If a body only 'exists in its exposure and proximity to others', it is always 'vulnerable' in relation to those others.³⁰⁵ This is because, for Butler, 'the gendered body is performative', creating and enacting gender at once: 'an illusion discursively maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory framework of reproductive heterosexuality.'³⁰⁶ While Christie does not directly challenge compulsory heterosexuality, and even appears to celebrate masculinity, she is at least ironic. A dashing adventurer may be considered 'a pukka sahib', but this is only the 'opinion of the white races', not the colonial subjects with whom he interacts (*Cards*, 123). Following Theodor Adorno, Butler writes that in order to establish 'the human' as a concept or an experience, 'what is needed' is 'the inhuman.'³⁰⁷ In Christie, the exaggerated marginality of such figures as Poirot, and of artistic, effeminate stereotypes, means that 'the inhuman' haunts the text as a self-consciously necessary construction that, read in this way, says more about the frailty of 'the human' than anything else.

For Sedgwick, on whose insights this chapter depends, a culture where 'meaning is constructed along the warp and woof of homophobia, sexism and racism' can only breed subjects who are 'homophobic, racist or sexist.'³⁰⁸

³⁰³ Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audiences* (London: Methuen, 1987), 167.

³⁰⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2, 152.

³⁰⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 61.

³⁰⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185-86.

³⁰⁷ Butler, *Frames of War*, 61.

³⁰⁸ Quoted in Jason Edwards, *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (New York, London: Routledge, 2008), 94.

Certainly, Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker have argued that Christie and her contemporaries were incapable of producing texts that were ‘anti-racist, anti-sexist, [or] anti-homophobic’, given their historical, ethnic, and class contexts and the genre’s conservative nature.³⁰⁹ Of interest in this chapter is Sedgwick’s concept of ‘homosociality’ which I apply, through Holmes and Watson, to Poirot and Hastings. Building on Jean Lipman-Blumen’s model of homosociality ‘as the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference of the company of the same sex’, independent of eroticism,³¹⁰ Sedgwick hypothesizes ‘a continuum between homosocial and homosexual’,³¹¹ demonstrating that nineteenth- and twentieth-century homosociality was built on hostility to the emerging ‘homosexual’ other. Considering fiction by Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, Henry James, and others, Sedgwick rethinks the mutually-dependent, mutually defining binaries of ‘queer’ and ‘non-queer’ in organizing the spectrum of sexualities.

Sedgwick’s model of homosociality is based on triangular human relationships. Male bonding, she reveals, can find its expression in the focus of the male gaze. Glossing René Girard’s *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Sedgwick considers ‘erotic triangles’ in literature:

in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: [...] the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love,’ differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent.³¹²

It is not just in sexual triangles that the male gaze is deployed and focused, foisted onto a woman outside of the male-male relationship. Sedgwick notes literary examples in which a man’s choice of (female) love object is dictated by the fact that she is already his rival’s beloved, hence heterosexual love is an implication of the powerful homosocial bonds between men.

³⁰⁹ Shaw and Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, 105.

³¹⁰ Jean Lipman-Blumen, ‘Toward a Homosocial Theory of Sex Roles: An Explanation of the Sex Segregation of Social Institutions’, *Signs*, 1 (1976), 16.

³¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 4.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

Sedgwick also theorizes the importance of ignorance in deploying and focussing the male gaze. Ignorance is not merely the absence of knowing, but is 'as potent and multiple a thing [as] knowledge'.³¹³ The ignorant party is able to 'define the terms of exchange', which can legitimize oppression.³¹⁴ Men, Sedgwick claims, are 'educated' to be ignorant of women in rape cases (11), with ignorant frameworks 'defining the terms of exchange' (12) and forbidding rights to those who are othered.³¹⁵ Ignorance can be and is assumed – to the casual homophobe who claims their insults were based on not knowing better, she responds: 'Yeah, sure'.³¹⁶ Moreover, ignorance creates a power of eradication: not recording or naming all sexual desire and nonconformity means that others are restricted from 'hearing about different sexual pleasures and possibilities which may generate new and different forms of desire'.³¹⁷

As much as medical and psychological identity categories, slang such as 'queer' or 'Nancy boy' can contribute towards branding individuals according to an identified and labelled deviation. As Butler points out, the use of a derogatory name puts individual experiences into line with the name's historicity and its own evocations.³¹⁸ With usage, a homophobic slur gathers force and normality – the ignorance it cultivates and exploits, which Sedgwick discusses, can be understood in Butlerian terms as a restrictive and hierarchizing power. As seen above, the one who names establishes themselves as not-the-named. The force which the name gathers also depends upon its euphemistic nature: it designates the specific perversion or personality trait unspeakable and therefore 'instates the current boundaries of the social'.³¹⁹

In the early twentieth century, as Laura Doan writes, 'some things [...] assigned guilt through knowing'.³²⁰ Humble has suggested that between the

³¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Privilege of Unknowing: Deiderot's the Nun', in *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 2005), 25-30 (25). The same words appear in Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, 4.

³¹⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 4.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 12.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

³¹⁷ Donald E. Hall, 'A Brief, Slanted History of "Homosexual" Activity', in *Queer Theory*, ed. by Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 96-114 (97).

³¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

³²⁰ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 188.

First and Second World Wars, popular writers, including Christie, refused to name 'homosexuality' while presenting recognizable 'homosexual' stereotypes in order to give readers 'a choice' between 'know[ing] the codes' and 'innocence'.³²¹ It is possible, however, to argue that Christie emphasizes precisely the lack of choice in understanding men whom others deem un-masculine or unconventional in a claustrophobic, war-conscious British milieu.

Poirot in Context

Christie acknowledged that she wrote 'in the Sherlock Holmes tradition' (*Autobiography*, 282), which is to say that in her fiction a detective punishes transgression, restoring order. In early twentieth-century Britain, order meant married white masculine power. When Christie's first novel was published, in 1920, Britain was recovering from the First World War. An enormous loss of life and the need for women to assume traditionally manly tasks with men displaced to the battlefield meant that, while war had formerly been idealized as something that 'made men', spurring the perceived weak working-class and decadent middle-classes into physical, active manhood, it was now seen as something that 'could destroy as well as make men'.³²² Moreover, while 'broken' men found themselves 'practically penniless, and in a condition that I am worth nothing to anyone and still less to myself',³²³ women continued to help bring the differentiation between genders into crisis, being more fit for manual work than 'disabled masculinity'.³²⁴ A soldier wrote to his mother in 1915 that the 'best and fittest men are daily being killed & wounded: all our best blood is going to waste, & our race is bound to suffer in consequence', linking the domestic, the military

³²¹ Nicola Humble, 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow', in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 218-30 (224).

³²² Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5.

³²³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 125.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

and the national in the crucial question of 'best [...] men.'³²⁵ Shell-shocked masculinity had to be renegotiated, rethought, and reasserted.

The idea of 'fittest men' and 'best blood' reflects the fashionable question of eugenics. Emerging from the thoughts of Francis Galton, the eugenic movement gathered momentum in Britain in the Edwardian period and remained popular until the late 1930s. Simply put, eugenicists believed that inferior persons should not be permitted to reproduce: as Ayça Alemdaroğlu points out, the movement took many forms, but always centred on a perceived need 'to protect a nation's population from degeneration'.³²⁶ After the First World War, when a large number of men returned from the battlefield mentally and/or physically maimed, distinctions were drawn between violations wrought upon 'healthy bodies,' and congenital 'defects' which were said to produce bodies as damaged and undermined as victims of war.³²⁷ Much rhetoric focussed upon other issues, such as race, skin pigmentation, and sexuality.³²⁸ These issues, after all, connecting with reproduction and the State, would always relate to concerns over national fitness and futurity.

Of especial importance in the interwar construction of masculinity was 'the defining of Englishness.'³²⁹ Before the war, school-children had routinely been told to 'feel proud' because of the extent of the Empire, the colonial spirit which [other Europeans] do not possess: the daring that takes men into distant lands,' and the unquestioned authority of England over all other races.³³⁰ 'Englishness', as John M. MacKenzie observes, came to be 'presented [to children] as a complex of historical, moral and heroic values which justified the

³²⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 44-45.

³²⁶ Ayça Alemdaroğlu, 'Eugenics, Modernity and Nationalism', in *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity: Bodies, Images and Experiences*, ed. by David M. Turner and Kevin Stagg (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 126-41 (128).

³²⁷ Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchel, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (London, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 119-21.

³²⁸ Lucy Bland, 'White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War', *Gender and History*, 17 (2005).

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³³⁰ George T. Warner, *A Brief Survey of British History* (1899 schoolbook), 248-9, quoted in Denis Judd, *Empire* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 120.

possession of Empire'.³³¹ In light of questions raised by war, these values required definition, which inevitably led to value judgments on people not regarded as English enough. Historians have increasingly come to note the significance of sexuality in establishing the superiority of the Englishman: people who were not white, fit, and male were 'demonised and pathologised in terms of their deviant sexuality.'³³² That is, in a nationalist context, their perceived shortcomings in terms of ethnicity, fitness, and gender were connected with sexual non-normativity.

Indeed, reading the early twentieth century through Foucault, we understand it as fundamentally influenced by the late nineteenth-century emergence of sexology, a discipline that studies and labels human sexuality. In this period, the authority of the priest gave way to the equally truth-ministering authority of the doctor. Foucault observes that '[t]he nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood [...] Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality.'³³³ According to Foucault, sexology led to 'an ever-greater quantity of discourse about sex'; sex was loudly not talked about, 'exploit[ed] as *the* secret', and used to define – and powerfully limit – human identities.³³⁴ It was, then, the 'specification of individuals' and not the repression of various 'aberrant sexualities' that created dynamics of power by limiting acts in a way that let normativity be defined accordingly.³³⁵

The term 'homosexual', indicating a 'contrary sexual instinct', was coined in German in 1869 and taken up by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). Krafft-Ebing classified non-reproductive sexual acts as defining symptoms of various kinds of 'perversion', named in Latin 'in

³³¹ John M. MacKenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1986), 10.

³³² Bland, 'White Women and Men of Colour', 51. See also George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Fertig, 1985).

³³³ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* 43.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23, 34.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43, 44. Emphasis original

order that unqualified persons should not become readers'.³³⁶ Krafft-Ebing limited who could read about these 'pathological' 'perversions', linked with various criminal activities, to the classically educated.³³⁷ The creation of special knowledge conferred on these new identities a danger-status and created power dynamics between the name-giver, the named, and the ignorant public.

Lucy Bland has argued that, in early twentieth-century Britain, sexology was regarded with scepticism by the general public; it was understood as suspiciously European, and thought to encourage sexual impropriety by elevating perversions with scientific jargon.³³⁸ Nonetheless, by now the basic gender and sexual stereotypes that informed sexology had serious currency. Words like 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' may not have entered common parlance, and even words like 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' will have signified different things to different people, but these were categories that were talked about. Angus McLaren claims that men were divided into 'the married and the unmarried', and that bachelors were demonised, considered 'both cause and effect of the growing fear of the male "other"'.³³⁹ In the early nineteenth-century, 'Miss Nancy' was an insult levied at powerful men who were not regarded as sufficiently manly to fulfil their political or military roles,³⁴⁰ but by 1919 the popular press was describing 'Nancy males' as frivolously decadent and violent – also, increasingly, in sexual terms.³⁴¹ In these late nineteenth and early twentieth century decades, sexuality became a matter of general interest, and sexological identity categories became influential, although knowledge of them was far from universal. This tension between encoding identities and suppressing the codes makes the historical period unique.

³³⁶ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathetic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study* (London: Heinemann, 1928), 5.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154-55.

³³⁸ Lucy Bland, 'Trial by Sexology? Maud Allen, *Salome*, and the "Cult of the Clitoris" Case,' in Laura Doan and Lucy Bland (ed.s), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 183-98 (192-3).

³³⁹ Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 55, 30.

³⁴⁰ Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 25.

³⁴¹ 'Nancy Males Ape Females', *Empire News* (18 May 1919).

The playwright Oscar Wilde stood trial for gross indecency in 1895, and his image in the media, derived partly from Krafft-Ebing's inversion theories, combined decadence with wit and effeminacy.³⁴² The 'Wildean archetype', H.G. Cocks claims, was enough to imply male sexual inversion. Cocks notes 'knowing' references in the *Daily Express* to 'Dorian Gray', and homosexual men were described euphemistically by the press as 'artistic and musical', apparently enough to justify the *News of the World's* claim that such men were 'breeding a social pestilence' akin to white slavery.³⁴³ The word 'knowingly' is important: homosexuality may not have been discussed but its threat to white manhood was emphasized in terms that implied secret knowledge it was best not to have. In the early twentieth century, Edmund Backhouse was able to defend his relationship with Oscar Wilde, which he later claimed was sexual, on the grounds that he had 'admired [Wilde's] wit, knowing nothing of his perverted tastes'.³⁴⁴ As Sedgwick has demonstrated, there is no more watertight defence or resistance than a 'knowing' adoption of ignorance.

In this society of rapidly changing codes, systems, and knowledge dynamics, it is unsurprising that detective fiction enjoyed success. The detective hero traditionally embodies their society's core values; being, in Chandler's words, 'the best man in his world'.³⁴⁵ This hero sets order right by capturing villains within a controlled, rigid framework: good and evil are clearly delineated. Christie herself claimed to have enjoyed the genre because it contained a 'crude and [...] simple' morality: 'The *enemy* was wicked, the *hero* was good' (*Autobiography*, 437. Emphasis original). Of course, however stable such constructions may appear, they cannot be clear-cut, since both heroism and enmity are wholly context-dependent. In the early twentieth century, stories of adventure in the London underworld or the far reaches of the Empire depicted

³⁴² Linda Dowling has argued in detail that the extent of Krafft-Ebing's influence on Wilde is less than traditionally assumed [Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994)]. However, how Wilde was presented in the press evidently depended on his association with 'aestheticism that worships a green carnation' ['Oscar Wilde Trial', *The Star* (1 May 1895)] and an implied rejection of what was thought 'manly' and 'natural.' See Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society* (Wiltshire: Redwood Press, 1997), 63.

³⁴³ H. G. Cocks, "'Sporty' Girls and 'Artistic' Boys: Friendship, Illicit Sex, and the British 'Companionship' Advertisement, 1913-1928", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11 (2002), 460-61.

³⁴⁴ Quoted in Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003).

³⁴⁵ Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*, 21.

manly men controlling, educating, or destroying men who failed to live up to a virile standard. In 1890, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote that 'the modern masculine novel' could do without women altogether.³⁴⁶ The fiction of John Buchan tends to convey a homosocial paradise devoid of women, but not of femininity: one of his heroes, for instance, admires the 'slim and fine [hand of a colonial native], more like a high-bred woman's than a man's [which] filled me with a certain confidence.'³⁴⁷ It is a period in which desire can be intensely, erotically, homosocial, as long as the threat of sexual deviancy is kept outside and 'other.'

Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (first appearance, 1887) remains the quintessential hero of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. A detective who outwits and captures criminals from London's underworlds, Holmes seems detached from everything but his investigations. When his sidekick, Dr Watson, admires a woman's beauty, Holmes says, 'I did not observe'.³⁴⁸ Holmes often dresses up to avoid being recognized – 'You've seen me as an old lady, Watson. I was never more convincing'³⁴⁹ – and is able to cross classes in his disguises. Acting as a 'licenced masculine other', Holmes is able to affirm unmarried masculinity in an intensely homosocial relationship with Watson.³⁵⁰ The esoteric Holmes is 'not a whole-soul admirer of womankind', and only admires one woman, the androgynous Irene Adler, on purely intellectual grounds.³⁵¹ Still, in both *The Valley of Fear* and 'The Devil's Foot,' he imagines himself as a married man – in order to explain that a suspect's behaviour has been unusual because Holmes himself 'would not' treat his 'wife' or 'the woman [he] loved' in the same way.³⁵² While confirming other characters' deviance, Holmes also confirms his own embodiment of standard values.

As Sean Brady has indicated, masculinity was 'a social status' that, for late Victorian and Edwardian men, 'meant being married', and being able to

³⁴⁶ Quoted in Joseph A. Kestner, *Masculinities in British Adventure Fiction, 1880-1915* (London: Ashgate, 2010), 6, 131.

³⁴⁷ John Buchan, *Prester John* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 111.

³⁴⁸ Doyle, 'The Sign of Four', 96.

³⁴⁹ Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone', 1014.

³⁵⁰ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 21.

³⁵¹ Doyle, 'The Valley of Fear', 801; Doyle, 'A Scandal in Bohemia', 681.

³⁵² Doyle, 'The Valley of Fear', 801; Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Devil's Foot', 970.

support their wives.³⁵³ Therefore, Holmes's passing references to how he would treat wives forms an essential component of his masculinity, permitting readers to accept his relationship with Watson, despite their almost erotic closeness. Watson is explicitly a ladies' man, boasting of 'an experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents', frequently pointing out 'attractive' and 'beautiful' women.³⁵⁴ Such a vehement gaze at women insists upon straight, or more precisely non-homosexual, desire. Taken alongside the occasionally extravagant affection that Holmes and Watson demonstrate for one another,³⁵⁵ it enacts the 'intimate prohibition' that, for Sedgwick, characterises 'homosexual panic'.³⁵⁶

Poirot is a direct response to Holmes. In some respects, he is an anti-Holmes. In every novel and most of the short stories there are references along the lines of, '[Poirot] doesn't look like a Sherlock' (*Cards*, 148). In the first novel, *Styles*, Poirot is introduced a few paragraphs after Captain Hastings has confessed to 'a secret hankering to be a detective' like 'Sherlock Holmes' (11). Hastings is puzzled by Poirot's 'extraordinary' appearance, his height, his effeminacy, and the fact that 'this quaint, dandified little man [...] had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police' (23). 'His *flair* as a detective had been extraordinary,' Hastings continues, implying a contrast between the detached, acerbic Holmes and the effeminate foreigner with '*flair*', who is at that moment 'rais[ing] his hat with a flourish' to a passing woman (23).

The first book was sold on the strength of Poirot: reader reports praised the detective's 'freshness'.³⁵⁷ The 'exuberant personality of M. Poirot, who is a welcome variation on the "detective" of romance' was singled out,³⁵⁸ the reader's inverted commas indicating that Poirot represents a new idea, not of

³⁵³ Sean Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861-1913* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1, 21.

³⁵⁴ Doyle, 'The Sign of Four', 95-96.

³⁵⁵ When Holmes fears that a gunshot has injured Watson: 'Then my friend's wiry arms were round me [...] It was worth a wound – it was worth many wounds – to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask.' Holmes goes on to 'rip [Watson's] trousers up with a pocket knife' to investigate, and swears that if Watson had been damaged he would have killed the attackers [Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Three Garridebs', 1053].

³⁵⁶ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 162.

³⁵⁷ Quoted in Curran, *Agatha Christie's Murder in the Making*, 72.

³⁵⁸ Quoted, *ibid.*, 73.

masculinity which is in the remit 'of romance', but of what a 'detective' should be. Poirot provides, not a feminized model of masculinity as Light, Makinen, and others have suggested, but rather a critical reflection on the idea of masculinity itself, and an indication that 'the detective' does not mean 'knight-errant.' Whereas Arthur Morrison and Gaston Leroux had previously presented manly detectives in the Holmesian mould, Poirot was never supposed to be, like Holmes, 'idolised and imitated.'³⁵⁹ Rather, he is deliberately 'old-fashioned' and 'bourgeois' (*Cards*, 7). As such, I will now look at how Christie reacts to the Holmesian model she both advances and lampoons with Poirot. A comparison with Dorothy L. Sayers' contemporary detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, who fulfils a more traditional and romantic function, is pertinent.

Unlike Holmes, Poirot, also unmarried, skips and minces, and is described several times as a dandy in the course of the first novel (*Styles*, 10, 12, 23, 127, 180, 181). Halberstam has noted that the dandy was 'a Gothic monster', embodying the 'threat' of 'femininity in a male form that is marked by a desire to be noticed'.³⁶⁰ A character like Poirot cannot pass unnoticed – so much so that Christie cut him out of stage dramatizations, fearing that he would dominate and detract from the mystery³⁶¹ – and can only draw attention to social prejudice as he embraces negative stereotypes and flamboyantly sets order right. As Halberstam notes, the dandy 'represents too much and too little, excess and paucity; [...] the parasitical aristocrat and the upwardly mobile bourgeois. He obviously also represents the homosexual male'.³⁶²

However 'obvious' the 'homosexual' connection may be among those familiar with sexual inversion, the word 'dandy' was not interchangeable with 'homosexual.' Rather, it evoked a cultural 'type' open to varied readings including some or all of the qualities Halberstam mentions. As a 'dandified' European man, at a time when perversion is being widely talked about in the context of national identity without being widely defined, Poirot mingles threats

³⁵⁹ See Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Picador, 2004), 268.

³⁶⁰ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2000), 62.

³⁶¹ Peter Haining, *Agatha Christie: Murder in Four Acts* (London: Virgin, 1990), 30.

³⁶² Halberstam, *Skin Shows*, 62-63.

to English manhood. In *The Big Four* he tries at the end of most chapters to embrace his scandalised companion, Captain Hastings, sometimes claiming that he 'will be very British' and 'not [...] display the emotion' before doing so anyway (*Four*, 149). He does not show the English language respect, constantly interjecting French and mixing up idioms ('The boot is not upon the right leg – is that how you say it?' [76]), is fabulously rich, and claims to be a detective because 'I have a *bourgeois* attitude to murder. I disapprove of it' (*Cards*, 58). Poirot does not simply bring Belgian flamboyance to a traditional English narrative; he persistently acts like an outsider while occupying a central, dependable narrative and social position. The threat is to masculine certainty, and not, explicitly, to heterosexuality.

Poirot is, notably, Belgian, rather than French: indeed, he takes pride in correcting people on this count. In an early story, 'The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan', Poirot even interrupts a chambermaid's hysterics to correct her.³⁶³ Charles Brownson notes that Poirot's Belgian-not-French status makes him, racially, 'twice an outsider.'³⁶⁴ We may take this further, and suggest that it more deeply 'others' Poirot as an heroic male. After all, French men were famously thought to be highly masculine and sexually assertive, with Robert Graves and others telling of French brothels on the front line during the war.³⁶⁵ It was French men's excessive virility, and nothing to do with the neutral Belgians, that featured in British medical reports and American magazine editorials expressing concerns over the state of European masculinity.³⁶⁶ Making Poirot Belgian, rather than French, Christie presents a less-than-threatening kind of foreign heroism, while also exploiting racial stereotypes. As a foreign but questionably manly hero, Poirot stands outside of, but also confirms, British masculine security. On a generic level, as the stock-detective

³⁶³ Agatha Christie, 'The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan', in *Hercule Poirot: The Complete Short Stories* (London: Harper, 2011), 14-27 (18). Further references to this source will appear as 'Metropolitan.'

³⁶⁴ Charles Brownson, *The Figure of the Detective: A Literary History and Analysis* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 60.

³⁶⁵ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Penguin, 2000), 194.

³⁶⁶ Michelle K. Rhoades, 'Renegotiating French Masculinity: Medicine and Venereal Disease During the Great War', *French Historical Studies*, 29.2 (2006); 'What French Women Think of Americans', *The Spiker* (April 1919). Retrieved online via Old Magazine Articles (26 May 2014): http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/what_do_french-women_think_of_American-men_during_world_war-one_pdf

with an unfamiliar but competent methodology, he similarly proves an inauthentic figurehead for the status quo he upholds.

The 'quaint dandified little' Poirot is first described as having 'an almost incredible' neatness: 'a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound' (*Styles*, 23). Like the dandy who 'claimed he had "died" when he could no longer afford to have his Cambric neckcloths laundered', Poirot daintily privileges the aesthetic, exhibitionistically inverting normal values.³⁶⁷ Dust is a domestic inconvenience; a bullet started the Great War, and it was bullets that penetrated masculine bodies on the battlefield. Poirot's difference from the romantic Wimsey is apparent: both are sensitive and lack the virility said to belong to ideal manhood before the war, but Wimsey's sensitivity, first manifest in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1923), is down to shell-shock. Sayers describes at length 'the strain' put by war on his 'nerves' and the 'old wounds [lodged in his] brain', stressing that Wimsey's 'sensitive nervous temperament' relates to his 'mental nimbleness'.³⁶⁸ Poirot, however, is described in terms that engage, to an extent irreverently, with apparent threats to English masculinity – an increasingly sensitive construct.

Poirot solves his first case by noticing that 'the objects on the mantelpiece' are out of order (*Styles*, 217). In later cases, he notices the impractical position of a chair – 'Inspector Raglan dismissed that as of no importance. I, on the contrary, have always regarded it as of supreme importance' (*Ackroyd*, 227) – and the thornless nature of a rose on which someone claims to have pricked themselves.³⁶⁹ Knowledge of the degree of effort required to wipe lipstick from a teacup helps Poirot read a crime-scene (*McGinty*, 174). As he says of his method in *Styles*:

Peril to the detective who says: 'It is so small – it does not matter. It will not agree. I will forget it.' That way lies confusion! Everything matters. [...] Everything must be

³⁶⁷ Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 277.

³⁶⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 219.

³⁶⁹ Agatha Christie, *Sad Cypress* (London: Collins, 1940). Further references to this source will appear as *Cypress*.

taken into account. If the fact will not fit the theory – let the theory go. (38, 82)

The details which Poirot appreciates are, as Knight notes, ‘classically, and stereotypically female.’³⁷⁰ They are also, in Christie’s formulation, widely overlooked but necessary: nothing is unimportant and ‘a system of knowledge that precludes, denies, or suppresses creates ‘confusion’, not order.

Holmes’s ‘ignorance [is] as remarkable as his knowledge’: he does not know, for instance, that the earth orbits the sun, an ignorance he defends because it means there is more room in his brain for important information.³⁷¹ Indeed, having learnt about the earth’s rotation, Holmes endeavours ‘to forget it’, discriminating knowledge before he can process it.³⁷² On the contrary, Poirot weaves a tapestry out of overlooked and marginalized clues. The ability to notice people’s eating habits or conversational quirks is something he has picked up from women, because ‘[w]omen [...] see everything, they notice the little detail that escapes the mere man’ (*Four*, 207, 161). If Poirot is a mockery of generic masculinity, his approach to clues points towards a perceived lack of and need for ‘female’ knowledge in detective fiction itself. The kind of generic masculinity to which Christie responds, then, labels things ‘so small’ as to ‘not matter’ in order to avoid what fails to ‘fit the theory’. With Poirot’s openness to feminine codes of knowledge, detective fiction’s veracity is both undermined and opened up.

Wimsey traces his ancestry back to the Siege of Acre.³⁷³ His brother, the Duke of Denver, is on trial for murder in *Clouds of Witness* – by proving the duke’s innocence, Lord Peter defends the virtues of the aristocracy. As a literary character, his function is conservative, protecting those who have benefited from an increasingly criticised class-system, in the face of accusations and hostility. Though delicate, he is a red-blooded male (‘I’m told I make love rather

³⁷⁰ Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800*, 90.

³⁷¹ Doyle, ‘A Study in Scarlet’, 21.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 245.

nically')³⁷⁴ who quips with, saves from death, and marries an attractive woman: unlike Poirot, he asserts his masculine heroism sexually.³⁷⁵ For Humble, Wimsey is 'the epitome of post-war masculinity as enjoyed by the feminine middlebrow: a jokingly evasive aristocrat [whose] mildness of manner and foppish appearance disguise his courage and startling intelligence.'³⁷⁶ Poirot is nothing like this: he is brave and intelligent, but this is not a secret, and there is no subtlety about the man whose moustaches are not just 'military', but 'flamboyantly' so (Styles, 23, 161).

'Above all', Light notes, 'Poirot is theatrical'.³⁷⁷ Being small and prim and not very credible, he encourages people not to take him seriously. As he explains in *Three-Act*, to an onlooker who suspects him of 'deliberately exaggerating his foreign mannerisms' (31):

I can speak the exact, the idiomatic English. But, my friend, to speak the broken English is an enormous asset. It leads people to despise you. They say – a foreigner – he can't even speak English properly. It is not my policy to terrify people – instead I invite their gentle ridicule. [...] And so, you see I put people off their guard. (318)

At this point, the novel's conclusion, Poirot has just used English prejudice against 'foreigners' to his advantage by encouraging confidences from people who see him as 'someone to talk to' and 'a harmless stranger' (303). His method of detection, 'invit[ing] gentle ridicule', has been sufficient to help him solve the mystery.

By turning 'broken English' into an 'asset' that is not just 'big' but 'enormous', Poirot subverts cultural norms. The idea that he can 'put people off their guard' relates to the stereotypes he espouses, such as foreignness and feminized masculinity, being considered nationally threatening: Poirot poses a subtle threat, since the English are no longer on 'their guard.' Indeed, as well as being strategically un-English, he also 'invite[s ...] ridicule' by appearing to be

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 46.

³⁷⁵ See also *Gaudy Night* (1935) and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937).

³⁷⁶ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 209.

³⁷⁷ Light, *Forever England*, 73.

like a woman – sentimental, prim, and with a domestic mind. His femininity is part of the outsiderism that strengthens him as a detective. When Poirot attacks those to whom he is a threat, he restores order, punishing the transgressor who in this novel is ‘aristocratic’ and titled, and has killed for the sake of a woman (311). Wimsey’s vindication of the status quo in *Clouds of Witness* here finds its mirror image.

In *Peril at End House* (1932), Poirot explains the advantages of his alternative knowledge by comparing himself to his friend Hastings. Hastings has called a naval commander who, it will transpire, is a cocaine-dealer, a ‘pukka sahib.’ Poirot responds: ‘Doubtless he has been to what you consider the right school. Happily, being a foreigner, I am free from these prejudices and can make investigations unhampered by them.’³⁷⁸ Despite his refusal to overlook anything, Poirot consciously chooses ignorance of British codes, but he also reveals these codes to be ‘prejudices’ which ‘hamper’ ‘investigations’ into the truth, and links such prejudice with a particular type of education. Hastings, named after a battle in which the English were defeated, is a comic figure. Described by Christie as Poirot’s ‘stooge assistant’ (*Autobiography*, 282), he is tied up with British, masculine institutions (as an Officer of the British Empire), and remarkably lacking in sense. His education (Eton) is even mocked by spinsters, a demographic category traditionally comforted and impressed by the mention of ‘an old and venerable centre of education’, and themselves regarded with suspicion (*Dumb*, 83). While Poirot’s ridiculous foreignness reflects on the insularity that creates those stereotypes, Hastings’ stupidity is a direct mockery of the same imperial Britishness.

As Christie’s version of Watson, Hastings responds to his prototype’s masculinity. I have motioned towards the character’s ‘increasing stupidity’ in the previous chapter. The almost arbitrary silliness of Hastings’ gaze towards women is emphasized from the outset: in *Styles*, he falls madly in love with two unsuitable women. He spies the first at the beginning, just after noticing several

³⁷⁸ Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House* (London, Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1993), 47. Further references to this source will appear as *Peril*.

unpleasant people sitting in the sunshine: he notes a 'tall, slender' woman who sits, not in sunlight, but in an angelic 'bright light' and has 'wonderful,' 'remarkable' eyes, 'different from any other woman's that I have ever known' (*Styles*, 9). Hastings continues for some time, disingenuously praising her 'different' beauty in language that parodies Watson, who, upon seeing a woman, claimed that in all his experience of women, 'I have never looked upon' such 'singularly spiritual and sympathetic' eyes.³⁷⁹

Virtually the same words are used in the second novel, when Hastings sees a 'goddess' with an 'uncovered golden head[,] gleaming in the sunlight', also at the start of the second chapter (*Links*, 16), prompting Poirot to utter: 'Already you have seen a goddess!' and – asserting himself as other to the compulsorily heterosexual Hastings – 'I saw only a girl with anxious eyes' (16). Poirot often complains that Hastings 'prostate[s him]self before all [women] who are good-looking' while 'psychologically [...] know[ing] nothing whatever about them.'³⁸⁰ As in *Death on the Nile*, when Poirot sees a socialite's tense knuckles while others are dazzled by her wealth and beauty,³⁸¹ his anti-sexualized insight into women and detail is an asset, and here is defined against the obligatory emotions that make Hastings a man.

Like a number of heterosexual men, Hastings is strangely attracted to the male friend who so confidently eschews rituals which absorb Hastings himself. In the Sedgwickian sense, homosexual panic has been inevitable in patriarchal societies, which have encouraged 'certain intense male bonds [...] not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds'.³⁸² The urge to find a female body to fall in love with qualifies and validates as un-perverted the intensity of affection between Hastings and his friend (or teacher, to whom he is a disciple). By *The Big Four*, Hastings has married but left his wife in Argentina, with no communication, because he felt like living with Poirot. While over the course of

³⁷⁹ Doyle, 'The Sign of Four', 94.

³⁸⁰ Agatha Christie, 'The Cornish Mystery', in *Poirot's Early Cases* (London: Harper, 2002), 57-80 (73). Further references to this source will appear as 'Cornish.'

³⁸¹ Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile* (New York, London, Toronto: Harper, 2011), 42-43, 55. Further references to this source will appear as *Nile*.

³⁸² Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 185.

the book, he grows to let Poirot touch him – ‘I [...] did not attempt to evade the embrace with which he overwhelmed me’ (*Four*, 252) – he qualifies this closeness by falling in love with every auburn-haired woman he meets.

Hastings’ wife, known as ‘Cinderella’ because he sometimes forgets her name,³⁸³ is at one point believed to have been kidnapped, which upsets her husband – but he never goes to see how she is. By *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case*, Hastings’ wife has died and Hastings has joined Poirot, who feeds him cocoa, tucks him into bed, and is known to Hastings’ daughter as ‘Uncle Hercule.’³⁸⁴ The close friendship between Poirot and Hastings rests on a parodic version of Holmes and Watson’s sexual coding. However, reading Hastings as an insecurely heterosexual figure relates the character’s parodic generic function to wider considerations of masculinity and the frustrations and limitations of human desire.

The emergence of sexological identity categories may not have brought about a ‘radical condescension’ of human beings into homosexual and heterosexual categories, as Sedgwick claims, because not everybody had access to the knowledge and taxonomies that sexology introduced. However, these categories had influence and reflect a broader medicalization of human desire; moreover, masculinity in the first half of the twentieth century was a concept that understood itself as threatened. Men were scapegoated and othered, enabling normativity to define itself. Into an inherently reassuring and homosocial literary tradition, Christie places an uncomfortable and anti-masculine figure who, with his ‘stooge’, undermines traditional English masculine certainty. This potentially subversive technique is evident in a number of Christie’s novels, including *Cards on the Table*, a neat example of the formal detective story, published at the peak of its author’s career.

³⁸³ While the key example of this is the novel *Links*, in which Hastings falls in love with twins thinking that they are the same person, Anne Hart has catalogued instances throughout the canon in which Hastings refers to ‘Bella,’ the name of his wife’s sister, concluding that he either had an affair or was never sure which woman he married [Anne Hart, *Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot: The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 165].

³⁸⁴ Agatha Christie, *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* (London: Harper, 2002), 38, 193. Further references to this source will appear as *Curtain*.

Men Detecting Men in *Cards on the Table* (1936)

Fredric Jameson has suggested that,

in the period from World War I to World War II the axis of otherness has as it were been displaced: it first governed the relationship of the various imperial subjects with each other; it now designates the relationship between a generalized imperial subject [...] and its various others or objects.³⁸⁵

In *Cards*, Christie taps into fears about the 'oriental other,' and evaluates models of English and 'foreign' masculinities. One of her most precisely-constructed and self-referential detective stories, *Cards* is more obviously concerned with its own fictional status than with the socially constructed nature of masculinity. Ariadne Oliver, discussed in the previous chapter, is constantly being patronized: 'This isn't a detective story, Mrs Oliver', a policeman reminds her (52). 'Real life's a bit different' (30). Nonetheless, within a formulaic narrative and an unusually streamlined plot that brims with references to the inauthenticity of streamlined plots, Christie finds ways to critique the abjection and scapegoating on which English masculine selfhood depends. She also draws attention towards dialogues between knowledge and ignorance by which the Other is incorporated into society.

The story is simple enough: Mr Shaitana, an artistic man of dubious nationality who hosts 'definitely "queer" parties' (10), is six times described as 'Mephistophelian' (10, 13, 14, 22, 28), and enjoys perfume, gossip, and the macabre, invites to dinner four detectives and four people who have got away with murder. After dinner, the murderers play bridge in one room and the detectives play bridge in another; by the end of the evening, Shaitana has been killed. With detectives and criminals paralleled in efforts to reconstruct the crime, Christie presents fear of the unknown – embodied in the victim – as a

³⁸⁵ Fredric Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*, ed. by Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 43-68 (47).

defining ingredient of nationalistic self-construction. With a motif of games and playing running through the text, she presents self-construction as ritual.

In the preface, Christie emphasizes her direction for the genre: ‘a detective story’, she notes, is like a fixed race. The ‘favourite’, or criminal, ‘is likely to be a complete outsider’:

Spot the least likely person to have committed the crime and nine times out of ten our task is finished. [However], *this is not that kind of book*. There are only *four* starters, and any one of them, *given the right circumstances*, might have committed the crime. [... Each] has committed murder and is capable of committing further murder. [...This] was one of Hercule Poirot’s favourite cases. His friend, Captain Hastings, however, [...] considered it very dull! I wonder with which of them my readers will agree. (5. Both emphases original)

Here, Christie sets *Cards on the Table*, and therefore her own fiction, outside the genre at its most quintessential. A stereotype frequently applied to Christie’s prose – the idea that the least likely person did it³⁸⁶ – is discussed here in terms of insiders and outsiders. Although, in this context, Christie does not employ ‘outsider’ in terms of detective fiction’s scapegoating function, it is worth mentioning that each murder suspects occupies an unimpeachable social position.³⁸⁷

By mentioning that they have all committed murder before, and are likely repeat offenders, ‘given the right circumstances’, Christie negates the idea that identifying one culprit absolves everyone else. Finally, she issues the reader a challenge: not just to solve the crime, but to side with Poirot, who voices approval for the story, or the satirical figure of Hastings who dismisses this non-traditional premise as ‘dull’. It is not really a choice, as readers would be unlikely to have bought such a book were they not expecting to enjoy it. From the outset, then, *Cards on the Table* is a self-conscious text, responding to its own

³⁸⁶ Knepper, ‘Reading Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple Series’, 34, 42.

³⁸⁷ A ‘well-dressed’ widow (16), an ‘agreeable and practical’ country doctor (15), a ‘tall, lean, handsome’ adventurer – indeed, the picture of colonial masculinity (16), and a pretty young paid companion. Though the latter is not a lofty social position, as Oliver remarks, people ‘don’t really like the young and beautiful girl to have done it’ in fiction (45).

mainstream status, and it is from this platform that Christie moves beyond satirizing masculinity, indicating the dynamics of fear and ignorance by which normative white masculinity is maintained.

Shaitana cultivates his own image. His persona enables him to “play” English society like an instrument or a game. *Cards*’ opening sentence describes Shaitana’s ‘soft purring voice – a voice used deliberately as an instrument – nothing impulsive or premeditated about it’ (9). In these carefully suspect tones he calls Poirot ‘my dear’, praises the ‘delicious’ art of murder (9), and arranges the dinner party, an exhibition of his collection of murderers that, he is pleased to note, ‘shocks [Poirot’s] *bourgeois* sensibilities’ (12). Moving on to physical description, Christie notes that Shaitana’s ‘whole’ appearance is ‘designed’ to catch the eye. ‘He deliberately attempted a Mephistophelian effect’, she adds, describing his eye make-up and oriental waxed moustache (10): inviting respectable murderers to what is essentially a bridge-party, Shaitana plays his own game, and as he sits in his chair watching the game he forces the players’ hands in casting him as an outsider.

Shaitana’s ‘Mephistophelian effect’ not only aligns him with a devil or demon, but with one from Eastern religious traditions. His very name evokes the Arabic شيطان, or Shayṭān, the Devil in Islamic traditions. The ending ‘-a’ acts as a feminization, indicating an additional gendered threat. As the wife of a pre-eminent archaeologist, Christie was almost certainly aware of this. While Poirot’s military moustache and Catholic religion are European ‘not-me’s’, Shaitana is linked with traditions outside of Europe altogether. He is therefore more unknown, artificial, and dangerous than Poirot: he becomes the ‘not-me’ of Poirot’s potentially problematic masculinity, which gives Poirot some of the authority of respectability. Shaitana is defined against all normativity that is in the text.

Three of Shaitana’s ‘exhibits’ are described as worldly-wise. Dr Roberts, who turns out to be the murderer, has an equally cultivated image and is introduced entering the room ‘with a kind of parody of a brisk bedside manner’, his ‘cheerful and confident’ persona inspiring the suggestion that he is ‘a man of

the world' (15). Mrs Lorrimer, an elderly widow, 'seems to have led a perfectly normal respectable life, the life of a woman of the world' (129), aligning uneventful respectability with worldliness. Major Despard, a colonial adventurer, whom we shall discuss shortly, is the only one of the four who escapes the novel with his life. A policeman sings his praises early on, warning Poirot not to probe too deeply into his past: 'Very fine Army record [...] Travelled a lot, too. Not many parts of the world he doesn't know about' (52). Despard is a man who has brought the British Empire to most parts of the world, then, and can accordingly claim knowledge of the world. Shaitana, as Poirot puts it, is 'a man [...] possessed of vast stores of knowledge. A remarkable man. That man knew many secrets' (136), and his unknown secrets represent a threat to those partygoers whose past he may or may not be about to reveal.

Ultimately, Shaitana is threatening because he is unknown – or he is a consciously non-specific embodiment of the 'oriental' threat. Moreover, the nature of his secret knowledge is unknowable, which is why he is killed by one of the respectable four. Without presenting 'evidence' or even clarifying his 'suspicions', Shaitana *de facto* undermines all the suspects' secure normality, because they all have secrets. As Sedgwick has explained, a lack of certain knowledge licences fear, uncertainty, and potential upheaval.³⁸⁸ 'What a queer man he is,' says the pretty Miss Meredith, a guest who once fed hat-paint to her employer:

'There's always something a little frightening about him, I think. You never know what would strike him as amusing. It might [...] be something *cruel*.'

'Such as fox-hunting, eh?' [said Poirot.]

'I meant – oh! something *Oriental*. [...] I don't think I like him frightfully.' (17-18. Both emphases original)

The emphasis on not knowing about Shaitana is key to his 'frightening' hold over polite society. His unknowability is explicitly un-English: Poirot's interjection about fox-hunting highlights barbarity in a quintessentially English sport,

³⁸⁸ Sedgwick, 'Privilege of Unknowing', 25; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 4.

described in a 1935 newsreel as ‘the healthiest and most exciting’ pursuit for ‘Englishmen’.³⁸⁹ Bringing this noble pursuit onto the same level as the ‘frightening’ Shaitana, emphasizing the cruelty from which amusement derives, Christie forces a comparison and presents Meredith’s unsupported description of Shaitana as ‘Oriental’ as, at best, a hypocritical generalization.

In the 1930s, when Christie wrote *Cards*, the East represented devious, threatening, alluring exoticism. In the West, the International Court of Justice had enshrined in law a distinction between ‘civilized nations’ and non-Christian, non-European states, something largely unchallenged in Britain before the Second World War.³⁹⁰ Sax Rohmer, who tapped into the ‘yellow peril’ theme in depicting the arch-villain Fu-Manchu between 1913 and 1959, was open about exploiting nationalistic fears and stereotypes in order to sell more books.³⁹¹ Joseph Massad argues that Eastern cultures have long posed a threat to the West because homo/heterosexual binaries are potentially undermined by a wide range of unnamed sexual activity and behaviour.³⁹²

Massad notes ‘[t]he exercise of political power to repress, if not destroy, existing non-Western subjectivities and produce new ones that accord with the west.’³⁹³ The political dynamic Massad discusses is evidenced by a surge of novels and memoirs in the first half of the twentieth century presenting the colonies as sites of ignorance that could be reimagined by British men. If Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* implied that ‘what one cannot accomplish in one’s own Western environment [...] one can do abroad’,³⁹⁴ then those lands beyond the grasp of Europe and the Empire could hold, as the historian Joseph Boone asserts, sometimes ‘erotic [...] fantasies of a decadent and lawless East’ that ‘put into crisis assumptions about male sexual desire, masculinity, and

³⁸⁹ *Foxhunting Season Opens: In the Heythrop Country at Lower Swell, near Stow-in-the-Wold*, Gloucestershire (dir.) (British Pathe, 1935).

³⁹⁰ Jean Allain, ‘Slavery and the League of Nations: Ethiopia as a Civilised Nation’, *Journal of the History of International Law*, 8 (2006)..

³⁹¹ Urmila Seshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 54.

³⁹² Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁹⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, New York: Vintage, 1994), 192.

heterosexuality that are specific to Western culture.³⁹⁵ The East was perceived as a 'world with its own dynamics, different from those of the West,' where sexuality posed a threat that mingled nonheterosexual activity with murderousness and danger.³⁹⁶

As Ahmed notes, British constructions of the Orient as generally 'not-Europe' allow subjects to safely conceive of limitless possibilities for '*romance, sexuality, and sensuality*' – jettisoned as 'other,' so that the subject does not themselves overstep civilized bounds.³⁹⁷ In the first description of Shaitana, Christie introduces a number of themes that will permeate the novel: names, the power of knowledge, and queerness.

Every healthy Englishman who saw him longed earnestly and fervently to kick him! They said, with a singular lack of originality, 'There's that damned Dago, Shaitana!'

Their wives, daughters, sisters, aunts, mothers, and even grandmothers said, varying the idiom according to their generation, words to this effect – 'I know, my dear. Of course he is *too* terrible. But so rich! [...] And he's always got something amusing and spiteful to tell you about people.'

Whether Mr Shaitana was an Argentine or a Portuguese or a Greek, or some other nationality rightly despised by the insular Briton, nobody knew.

But three facts were quite certain:

He existed richly and beautifully in a super flat in Park Lane.

He gave wonderful[, ...] definitely 'queer' parties.

He was a man of whom nearly everybody was a little afraid.

Why this last was so can hardly be stated in definite words. There was a feeling, perhaps, that he knew a little too much about everybody. (*Cards*, 10)

³⁹⁵ Joseph A. Boone, 'Vacation Cruises; or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism', *PMLA*, 110 (1995), 90.

³⁹⁶ Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality*, 119.

³⁹⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 114. Emphasis original.

Like the Gunman of Christie's childhood, Shaitana's powerful hold cannot be known or explained. He knows things, but what he knows, or how much he knows, can only be felt, because he cannot himself be understood. If Shaitana knows 'a little too much about everybody', he is in a position of power over a society that he can easily play: he lives in wealth and luxury, so people visit him at his 'wonderful parties'. If Shaitana represents knowledge, 'the insular Briton' or 'healthy Englishman' stands for the power of ignorance – or resistance to becoming a subject to Shaitana's Subject. What can be known about Shaitana is that he is immensely rich and fashionable, gives "queer" parties', and inspires fear: in 1935 these could all be seen as hallmarks of the homosexual man and of other perceived exotic threats to normality.

Some of Shaitana's parties are costume parties, his favourite costume being Mephistopheles (67, 98). Such gatherings at this time were infamously prone to being gate-crashed by men-seeking-men. This was so much the case that, from 1935, 'Lady Malcolm's Servants Ball' issued tickets bearing the proviso: 'NO MAN IMPERSONATING A WOMAN AND NO PERSON UNSUITABLY ATTIRED WILL BE ADMITTED.' Still, in 1938 one partygoer noted the high number of 'homo-sexuals' who attended these events, and eventually the balls stopped altogether.³⁹⁸ The infamous 'Lady Austin' drag event of 1932 was described as being 'for men who prefer to love each other'; when arrested for 'conspiracy to corrupt morals', participants alarmed male police officers by calling them 'my dear.'³⁹⁹ Shaitana, who wears make-up and perfume and calls Poirot 'my dear,' (10) might be connected with such parties. The 'amusing and spiteful' things he has to say certainly relates him to those gossiping effeminate men in middlebrow literature, like Tony Baring in Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927), who terrify women and threaten men by being 'unmasculine' and calling each other 'my dear.'⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 268.

³⁹⁹ *Rex v. Salmon, Austin, and Others*. 7 Feb. 1933. Records of the Central Criminal Court (National Archives, Kew). Files No. CRIM 1/638 and CRIM 1/639.

⁴⁰⁰ Rosamond Lehmann, *Dusty Answer* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 95-96.

It is men, not women, who try to brand Shaitana by wanting to kick him, or calling him names. The other of a respectable Englishman, a 'damned Dago,' Shaitana therefore falls short of English masculinity. The mention of 'an Argentine or a Portuguese or a Greek' indicates a narrow worldview, as Shaitana is clearly nothing so close to home. He is probably Syrian (58), one of the 'other nationalit[ies]', but this is never made clear. In another novel, written around the same time, Poirot critiques Hastings' 'insular prejudice against the Argentines, the Portuguese and the Greeks' (*Dumb*, 189), so it can be inferred that for Christie these nationalities represented familiar threats to the insularity valued in Britain. The suggestion that foreign nationalities are 'rightly despised' is clearly ironic – as Colin Watson points out – but Watson's casual suggestion that Christie implies 'her own disapproval' by mentioning 'a singular lack of originality' invites comment.⁴⁰¹

Shortly after the murder, Major Despard uses virtually the same language as the hypothetical 'healthy Englishman', confirming the implied author's, and later Poirot's, suggestion that men, unlike women, are systematically unoriginal (*Cards*, 56). In any formulaic detective story, after the first murder the characters' statements and memories are used to reconstruct an impression of the victim. Asked for his opinion on Shaitana, Despard says: 'I would have thoroughly enjoyed kicking him [...] because he was the sort of Dago who needed kicking badly. He used to make the toe of my boot fairly itch' (47). This obsessive, and repeated, desire to kick Shaitana indicates the importance of physical violence in asserting masculinity – and what masculinity is defining itself against quickly follows. Asked about tangible reasons for wanting to kick Shaitana, Despard responds: 'He was too well-dressed – he wore his hair too long – and he smelt of scent' (47), three key markers of the homosexual or insufficiently masculine man, the 'painted and perfumed

⁴⁰¹ Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, 174-75.

travest[y]' whose 'disease' was a 'vile canker sweeping through the nation's manhood'.⁴⁰²

Despard then distances himself from fashion and the social game:

I like it for very short periods. To come back from the wilds to lighted rooms and women in lovely clothes, to dancing and good food and laughter [...] then the insincerity of it all sickens me, and I want to be off again. (47)

Like Shaitana, the major is above the 'insincerity of it all' but his response is to go along with it 'for very short periods', broken up with spreading Englishness abroad – rather than spreading foreignness in England, as Shaitana does. Shaitana's deliberate effects are shown to be contrived: for example, he makes his drawing room look savage and fire-lit, but achieves this with expensive lighting (22). There is a double standard at work: Despard's desire to 'be off' ennobles him, whereas Shaitana's refusal to stay far away in whatever land he comes from is terrifying. 'General opinion of the white races is that Despard is a pukka sahib', says the policeman before reiterating that Despard is too noble a man to be the murderer (123, 125), so the voices of people of colour are considered unimportant. Despard talks of 'women in lovely clothes' which, coming straight after his criticism of Shaitana as 'too well-dressed', reinforces traditional gender roles.

Women are constantly fighting to be a 'distressed damsel' and impress Despard (178), with the implication that it would be impossible not to fall in love with him. His wit – 'If I were only to dine in houses where I thoroughly approved of my host, [...] I shouldn't dine out very much' (47) – elevates him above those without self-knowledge and endorses the social game that he sees through but still enjoys. Despard is the only one of Shaitana's exhibits who is not entirely guilty (he did shoot a man, who was dying anyway, in a jungle, by accident and the natives were so 'devoted to [him],' they helped cover it up [143]), and the only one who survives the novel. In fact, he returns, briefly, in *The Pale Horse*

⁴⁰² *The World* quoted in Cook, 'Queer Conflicts', 145; 'She-Men: Peter Ross Calls a Crusade', *Referee* (19 Jun. 1938). Quoted in Cook, 'Queer Conflicts', 165.

(1961). Poirot observes of Despard that his vision is 'purposely limited [...] He sees only what blends and harmonises with the bent of his mind' (132).

This may read like a critique of colonial masculinity as a closed and narrow "vision" that denies the other expression; in a way, it is. However, it is said in the middle of a discussion of detective fiction, and *Cards* is, supremely, a detective story. Christie understands the genre as one that depends on a pre-ordained idea, one that is "unoriginal", presented uniquely, but fundamentally comfortable and familiar: as Mrs Oliver says, each plot is really 'exactly the same' (132). Therefore, there is not necessarily 'disapproval' inherent in the suggestion that Shaitana was branded a 'Dago' with a 'lack of originality', but rather advocacy of safe and familiar prejudice in the face of the threatening Oriental other.

Nonetheless, the conclusion is not altogether reassuring for colonial masculinity. While the novel ends with Despard deciding to marry one of the women who are in love with him, it is not he who sets order right. Despard remains a killer, albeit one whom everybody forgives, whereas early on, Poirot has suggested that no human being has the right to call killing justified under any circumstances (31). The girl on Despard's arm is only there because his original choice, Miss Meredith, has been exposed as a murderer and drowned: this knowledge threatened to fracture his manhood, and his second choice is only suitable because she can 'do the sympathetic friend act' (178) while nothing bad is known about her. In this sense, Poirot still represents a threat to this completeness: it is Poirot who seems to know everything, as Shaitana knew a dangerously unspecified amount.

Regularly in the course of the novel, Poirot compares himself to Shaitana (11, 135). However, the difference is made apparent when Poirot claims that:

I am as the good God made me [... Others] have tried to improve on his pattern. Mr Shaitana, for instance[, ...] had a very pretty taste in *objets de vertus* and bric-a-brac; he should have been content with that (78).

This dialogue occurs almost half-way through the novel, which places the distinction literally at the centre. Here, Poirot defends his own quirks as things he was born with, and suggests that Shaitana's danger lay not in his uniqueness or strange interests, but in the lengths to which he took them. Christie advocates Poirot's brand of foreign anti-masculinity – a collection of familiar, European stereotypes – in the face of the dark, controlling, and unknown threat represented by the 'Mephistophelian' Shaitana.

The novel ends in a typically self-reflexive and melancholy-cheerful way. Poirot, it is revealed, has lied about having evidence in order to force a confession out of the murderer. Despard and his girlfriend, Rhoda, are shocked:

'I saw,' said Poirot. 'With the eyes of the mind one can see more than with the eyes of the body. One leans back and closes the eyes –'

Despard said cheerfully:

'Let's stab him, Rhoda, and see if his ghost can come back and find out who did it.' (191-2)

In evidence here is Poirot's alternative knowledge and exaggerated otherness. He sees unconventionally – 'eyes of the mind', like all the clichés Poirot espouses, does not relate to the common way of doing things. Poirot leans back, amused, which directly parallels language used of Shaitana early in the novel, who 'leant back', 'smiling', his eyelids flickering in the firelight, ready to be killed (23). This reminds the reader that s/he is still uncertain as to whether Shaitana intended to be killed – a question that is asked repeatedly early on ('did he want to die?' [53]) – and therefore of his continuing power, as an unknowable other. The couple can never feel quite secure as long as Shaitana, alive or dead, exerts his intangible power.

Despard's reaction, though a joke, indicates repetition and a dependence on the familiar. First, the desire is for intimate, penetrative violence, just as he wanted 'to kick' Shaitana. Second and more obviously, stabbing is how Shaitana was killed. Poirot, then, is being forced into the role of victim with a consciousness that it is a role he ill fits: 'his ghost' may 'come back and find out

who did it.' On the one hand, this points to the comforting pattern of detective fiction: readers in 1936 could be assured that there would be more murders to come, and that Poirot, or someone else, would explain them neatly enough. On the other, Poirot remains an uncomfortable reminder that the imperial subject and the Other cannot be defined without being distinguished. The text's heterosexual conclusion is not so secure or lucid as it first appears.

Men Rejecting Men in *Murder is Easy* (1939) and 'Three Blind Mice' (1948)

In the late 1930s, Christie's presentation of men who fail to fulfil the masculine standard changed. Such men became marginalized, both in terms of narrative importance and as characters in their fictional communities. Mr Satterthwaite, Christie's petite artistic sleuth whose 'womanish' tendency to gossip gives him 'an insight into the feminine mind' that 'manly men' lack (*Three-Act*, 27), makes no appearance after *Three-Act Tragedy* in 1935. Even Poirot changed, becoming less foreign, and more reserved: in *Five Little Pigs* (1942), for example, he speaks virtually no French, uses pure logic, not domestic knowledge, to solve the crime, and never feigns ignorance of English. He does not admire male beauty between 1940 ('The Cretan Bull') and 1967 (*Hallowe'en Party*), by which point he reflects that '[o]ne didn't think of young men that way nowadays'.⁴⁰³

When less-than-manly men do appear, they are no longer victims, like Shaitana or Lord Edgware – of *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) – who, with his 'macabre' interest in torture and the Marquis de Sade, and implied sadomasochistic relations with his god-like butler, is positively a gothic monster, 'near the border of madness' (30-34). Instead, they are minor characters, like the gossipy Mr Pye in *The Moving Finger* (1942), who will be considered further in Chapter Five. Pye is hardly integral to the story, and some editions omit him altogether.

⁴⁰³ Agatha Christie, *Hallowe'en Party* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 93-4. Further references to this source appear as *Hallowe'en*.

Murder is Easy (1939) and 'Three Blind Mice' (1948) were written exactly a decade apart, one before and one after the Second World War, and both feature young men described as 'womanish', artistic, sceptic, and spiteful. This is not a positive stereotype for effeminate men, and Curran reads these characters together as an illustration of Christie's intolerant attitude towards homosexuality.⁴⁰⁴ Certainly, at a time when the Bishop of Chelmsford could claim that 'a great service would be done [...] if we could break all stained glass windows depicting Jesus as a pale, weak, effeminate and unmanly figure', and with male effeminacy being highlighted as a threat to the nation's manhood with increasing melodrama as war approached, any perpetuation of the 'nasty' effeminate male stereotype which is not polemically supportive of 'sexual inverts' might be regarded as vitriolic.⁴⁰⁵

However, there is a great deal of difference between Mr Ellsworthy, who 'dabble[s] in black magic' and invites the hero of *Murder is Easy* to enjoy a 'deliciously mad – perverted' life with him (*Easy*, 61, 80) and Christopher Wren, 'a deserter from the army' who rates the armed forces in terms of which is more 'tolerant', licks his lips at the 'delicious' policeman, and weepily talks of childhood trauma ('Mice', 70, 54, 13). Both are suspected of murder on account of their 'abnormality' (*Easy*, 119; 'Mice', 36), but neither is guilty. They are relatively minor characters who act chiefly as red herrings and to allow the male protagonists' assertion of their own manly masculinity by comparison. However, in doing this, Christie does not present her conventional heroes as positively as she did Despard; they are exposed as prejudiced individuals whose ignorance permits or requires them to repress others.

In *Murder is Easy*, an ex-policeman who has been away in the East returns to England and, after a chance encounter on a train, ends up in a sleepy

⁴⁰⁴ Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, 178-79.

⁴⁰⁵ 'Travestied in Stained Glass', *Morning Post* (27 Feb. 1933). Quoted in Cook, 'Queer Conflicts', 165. Cook also cites a 1938 report in *Reynolds*, which suggested that gas chambers should be introduced to deal with 'sex perverts', briefly indicating that the theatre (and, presumably, literature) offered public sites of resistance to this paranoia (ibid.). Cook does not explore art and literature, which I maintain are essential in the construction of masculinity in public consciousness. As we are seeing, a middlebrow novel could be a key arena for something between resistance, parody, and perpetuation, and as such is a valuable historical document.

village where he finds as much spite and adventure as in any reaches of the empire. There is a serial killer at work; most of the locals – and, for a long time the protagonist, Luke – suspect Mr Ellsworthy. The local ‘pervert’, Ellsworthy is a ‘womanish’ antiques dealer whose artistic effeminacy, bony fingers, and all-night orgies are much-discussed (‘Won’t have that irreligious mumbo-jumbo going on down here!’ [134]). However, Luke finally discovers that an elderly spinster, a church warden, was taking revenge on Lord Whitfield, a self-made millionaire who refused to marry her, by murdering all Whitfield’s enemies so that he would appear to be a homicidal maniac. By solving the case, Luke is also able to charm Whitfield’s young fiancé, a gold-digger called Bridget, into marrying him instead.

Ellsworthy, who ‘keeps the new antique shop, but [...] is actually a gentleman’ (45), is introduced as:

a very exquisite young man dressed in a colour scheme of russet brown. He had a long pale face with a womanish mouth, long black artistic hair and a mincing walk.

Luke was introduced and Mr Ellsworthy immediately transferred his attention to him.

‘Genuine old English slipware. Delicious, isn’t it?’ (49)

That he ‘immediately’ focuses on Luke indicates the threat that inverted men were said to pose – directly to manhood, as typified by the stolid and world-wise Luke. The word ‘delicious’ was one frequently associated with artistic male inverts, and used with increasingly sexual connotations in Robert Scully’s homoerotic novel, *The Scarlet Pansy* (1933).⁴⁰⁶ Ellsworthy plays to the codes of the day, being comparable to Lehmann’s creation mentioned above, who has ‘a wide mouth with beautiful sensuous lips, thick black hair and a broad white forehead’, a ‘soft and precious’ voice, and ‘thin unmasculine hands – queer

⁴⁰⁶ Robert Scully, *The Scarlet Pansy: A Classic of Gay Male Erotica* ([n.p.]: Renaissance, 2005), 25, 61, 99, 212. The book was heavily publicised, marketed as the male equivalent of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* – ‘what [Hall] did for the man-woman, this most unusual tale does for the woman-man’ – and read by ‘a general reading public’ as well as underground communities [Quoted in Jay A. Gertzman, ‘A Scarlet Pansy Goes to War: Subversion, Schlock, and an Early Gay Classic’, *The Journal of American Culture*, 33 (2010), 230]. In Christie’s *Death in the Clouds* (1935), an effeminate author called Daniel Clancy tells Poirot that he knows all about blowpipes from ‘an artist friend’ who helped him write *The Scarlet Petal* (41).

hands'.⁴⁰⁷ As Humble notes, we are never allowed to see beneath the surface of such characters,⁴⁰⁸ but Christie positively dwells on surfaces. Ellsworthy, too, has 'long white hands' (*Easy*, 49) that transfix Luke: he calls them 'very unpleasant hands' (50), 'curious, unpleasant hands' with an undefinable 'queer magic' (74), and worries about Bridget, 'alone with that man whose hands had that unhealthy hue of decomposing flesh' (77). Ellsworthy's hands are connected with death, decay, and decomposition, and it is implied that anything he touches might be contaminated and moribund.

It is only men, and Bridget, who dismiss Ellsworthy. He is, like Shaitana, attractive or at least interesting to women (92). Like Shaitana, Ellsworthy is described as a 'long-haired purring chap', the kind a crusty major claims to 'hate' (92) but also like Shaitana there is an expressed fear that Ellsworthy has corrupted a missing maidservant: he is listed alongside her boyfriend among 'men Amy was involved with' (113) and the narrator assumes that, as '[h]e was abnormal and had possibly a perverted personality[, h]e might easily be a "lust killer", who dispatched the girl (118). The nature of this lust is not elaborated, nor does it need to be: Ellsworthy is a pagan with a womanish mince and long, artistic fingers, so he is a threat to masculinity and the nature of this threat need not be specified.

The major who dismisses him as a 'nasty' 'long-haired purring type' also uses perhaps the only homophobic slur that exists in Christie's interwar work: 'He doesn't play golf. Much too much of a Miss Nancy' (91). As Houlbrook notes, police in the 1930s connected 'Nancy' men with 'effeminacy' and 'lisp[s]'.⁴⁰⁹ A 1934 complaint from patrons of a drag ball that 'you call us "nancies" and "bum boys",' indicates that 'Nancy' could be associated with homosexuality and sexual decadence.⁴¹⁰ In this case, the Major pooh-poohs the idea that Ellsworthy could be a sporting Englishman, on the grounds of his effeminacy, which is linked several times with a 'perverted personality' (*Easy*,

⁴⁰⁷ Lehmann, *Dusty Answer*, 95.

⁴⁰⁸ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 235.

⁴⁰⁹ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, 41.

⁴¹⁰ Jen Newby, 'Lady Austin's Camp Boys: A Night at a 1930s Transvestite Club', *Writing Women's History* (25 Dec. 2010), 1.

118). 'Homosexual' codes are interplayed with other codes to create an incoherent sense of perversion.

Paranoia surrounds Ellsworthy, and every time unusual people appear in the village, they are suspected of being his friends ('Three extraordinary looking people have arrived [...] here will be gay doings in Witches' Meadow tonight' [134]). He is presented as mad, not an unusual technique for depicting men who threaten masculine conventions. On the night of the final murder, Midsummer Eve, Luke is searching Ellsworthy's bedroom, obsessed by a need to know 'every available nook and corner' of the suspicious man's life (136), when Ellsworthy returns home, eyes 'alight with a strange mad exaltation', and prances past Luke, his hands blood-stained (137). In two other novels, *The Moving Finger* (1943) and *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), Christie presents effeminate men as having mad, flashing eyes, and in the 1940 novel *Fear and Miss Betony*, Dorothy Bowers does the same to describe a threatening but usually charming oriental cult leader, whose madness is only revealed in this glare.

Fears surrounding Ellsworthy directly relate to his friends and the suspicion that he is corrupting local girls, who might otherwise start families with respectable men, with his 'irreligious mumbo jumbo' (134). Ellsworthy accepts that he is mad, and embraces it:

I abhor Nature. Such a coarse, unimaginative wench. I have always [...] put Nature in her place [...] One must be mad – deliciously mad – perverted – slightly twisted – then one sees life from a new and entrancing angle (79-80).

The outburst horrifies Luke, who worries that Bridget may be seduced towards a perspective that is both 'new and entrancing'. Here, madness is perversion and decadence in the late-nineteenth century mould, when polemics 'against Nature' insisted that 'imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience.'⁴¹¹ Notably, Ellsworthy speaks as a

⁴¹¹ J.K. Huysmans, *Against Nature: A New Translation of a-Rebours* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin, 1966), 35. Or, as Wilde put it, 'Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life.' Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (London, New York, Toronto: Penguin, 2003), 26.

man, personifying 'Nature' as his subjugated woman – he is not threatening because he has adopted a position of womanly passivity, but because his masculinity is unorthodox and alternative. In Luke's paranoid narrative, Ellsworthy exercises 'a new and entrancing' power over weak individuals who need to be governed by strict, assertive masculinity.

The novel's conclusion is conventional, as Luke and Bridget suddenly realize that, not only do they love each other, they like each other too. This means that they will not 'get tired of each other and then want to marry someone else' (*Easy*, 190). The remark that makes Bridget finally like Luke is one that appeals to existing hierarchies. Luke tells her: 'I think something unpleasant is going to happen to our Mr Ellsworthy. [Superintendent] Battle is planning a little surprise' (189). The 'little surprise' promised from authority is sadistic, in a genre when, usually, 'anything short of murder is [...] hushed up' and forgiven (*Nile*, 189). Luke's use of 'our' is typically condescending, implying a subtle sense of ownership but also trivializing Ellsworthy's threat, speaking of him as an animal (or colony?), now domesticated and under control.

In this way, Christie clearly does not deny that a man who prances around with 'little dancing steps' (*Easy*, 137) and is 'definitely queer' (82) can be 'a dangerous maniac' (141) whose queerness must be punished. The promise of punishment is one of the ways in which Luke constructs his own desirable masculinity at the end – it is what makes him the ultimate hero; the one that got the girl. The light, introspective irony with which Shaitana is sketched is lighter still in the presentation of Ellsworthy – his othering is not questioned or subverted. Instead, at this important moment in the build-up to an inevitable Second World War, Christie depicts these 'others' as unknowable and therefore threatening, but if a process of abjection is supposed to create a stable sense of masculinity, she also exposes this as fractured. Ellsworthy is not allowed to remain unpunished for his 'new and entrancing' masculinity, but since, in Christie's genre, guilt and innocence are only important in terms of murder, there is an element of superfluity in his punishment. The obvious paranoia with which the narrator, Luke, constructs his own heroic identity, is the most

significant element of his descriptions of a 'queer', 'womanish' 'irreligious' 'Miss Nancy.'

'Three Blind Mice,' a novella, was written ten years later and based on a 1947 radio script. A running theme is the effects of war on identity and relationships. The central couple, Molly and Giles, made a hasty wartime marriage, since Giles was serving in the Royal Air Force, and as a result, neither knows who the other really is (74): 'You're just a stranger', Molly tells her husband. 'A man who lies to me' (79). Molly still considers herself 'Miss Wainwright' (91), while Giles does not recognize his military title (77). Repeat-references to tins, ration books, fuel shortages, and identity cards serve as reminders throughout that the narrative's world is one where individuals are reconstructing their senses of self and nation: they even have to reconfigure meals, using available resources to counterfeit the lavish spreads of memory (8). In this context, excesses and indulgences must be agreed upon beforehand, transport and communication are limited, and identity depends explicitly upon written and presented documents.

Molly and Giles are opening a guesthouse. The first guest to arrive, in a snowdrift, is Christopher Wren, a youth with 'restless eyes' (11), who skips and minces and calls people 'my dear.' Other guests then arrive: an old major, a stern woman called Mrs Boyle, and a 'queer foreigner', Mr Paravicini (53). A policeman appears and explains that one of them is a murderer, a young man driven mad when his brother was killed: 'He was said to have always been a bit – queer. He joined up in the army at eighteen. Later he deserted. Since then he's disappeared. The army psychiatrist says definitely that he's not normal' (48). By military and psychiatric standards, the wanted man has failed as a man, and is 'not normal.' Giles, who has taken an instant dislike to Wren, immediately suspects that he is the madman, and refuses to let him near Molly. Molly eventually realises that this is not so much fear on her account as fear that she will realise that Giles is also 'the right age' to be suspected (75). Finally, after a murder, it turns out that the policeman was the 'queer' child, in disguise so he could mingle unsuspected. Almost every character is there under

a false name, so ultimately the novella questions the possibility of certainty or security in the immediate post-war years.

Wren, like Ellsworthy, has 'long bony fingers' (12) and is spectacularly camp: his first requests upon arrival are for 'wax flowers' and 'a four-poster [bed] with little chintz roses' (11, 13). By the 1940s, the 'Pansy Craze' in the United States had become known in Britain and flowers in general had become, in some contexts, a symbol for male homosexuality.⁴¹² Even outside of that context, these pursuits can be considered anti-masculine. 'Did he like the pretty oak furniture?' Giles asks of Wren, before mumbling 'something that ended, "...young twerp"', and emphasizing his disapproval (14): in other words, liking 'the pretty oak furniture' is not a manly thing to do; it is not something to be approved and, crucially, it is not what Giles does. Wren lists designers' names and period hallmarks (11), and presumably Giles, the furniture's owner, knows these, too, but his reference to 'pretty furniture' emphasizes an implied ignorance of these feminine details. However, while Ellsworthy is a thoroughly two-dimensional character who advocates being 'deliciously mad – perverted' and stages satanic orgies that are queerer than Shaitana's 'definitely "queer" parties', Wren does not seem to have any friends and is presented as a twitchy, neurotic youth whose interest in the macabre has alienated him from others. Unlike his predecessors, Wren is not happy and not successful or powerful: other characters consider him a joke, not a threat.

Again unlike Ellsworthy, Christopher Wren is explicitly attracted to men. Upon meeting Sergeant Trotter he cries in a 'shrill' voice: 'He's very handsome, don't you think so? I always think policemen are terribly attractive' (43), a remark that every other character ignores. A Mass Observation Survey carried out in 1948, the year 'Mice' was written, indicated that sixty per cent of those interviewed regarded male homosexuality with 'disdain': 'absolutely detestable' was one response, and 'I should not think they're human' was another.⁴¹³ However, Christie gives Wren a more prominent role in 'Mice' than Ellsworthy or

⁴¹² Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, Boulder, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 19-39.

⁴¹³ Cook, 'Queer Conflicts', 167.

Pye had in the previous novels, and stresses his humanity, beginning with similarities to Molly, from whose point of view the story is told, and who repeatedly defends him.⁴¹⁴ There is, he notes, 'a kind of sympathy between us. Possibly because we've both – been up against it' (72).

'Christopher Wren' is not his real name but 'a pleasant whimsy' (72). A name, as Butler puts it, creates and stabilises an identity.⁴¹⁵ It 'confers a social durability' and 'recognizability' onto an individual, and 'does not only bear the law, but institutes the law' – when changed or displaced this can in turn displace stable social bases.⁴¹⁶ 'They used to jeer at me and call me Christopher Robin at school. Robin – Wren – association of ideas' ('Mice', 72): the association is not merely in bird imagery, but Christopher Robin being an eternal child, and Christopher Wren an historical figure, both names suggest going into the past, as well as reclamation of the name Christopher. However, Wren's potentially subversive gesture has failed because, as an architect, he notes, 'I will never be *the* Christopher Wren' (14). With his very name, then, Wren is defined by existing codes and structures – the structures that literally surround him in London and speak of nationalism and tradition: Mrs Boyle insists on discussing 'Sir Christopher Wren [who] built St. Paul's Cathedral' (36), not 'Chris Wren's Pre-Fab nests' (14).

After Wren has described the policeman's announcement as 'deliciously macabre' and skipped out of the room, Mrs Boyle calls him 'singularly ill-mannered and neurotic [...] Probably a conscientious objector' (55). Boyle's name reflects her status as an irritation – she is an intensely efficient woman whom 'war activities had suited [...] down to the ground' (29); having described her as a woman who expects comfort and enjoys complaining (28), Christie courts her readers' sympathy when Boyle instantly rejects Wren as 'disgusting' and 'unbalanced' (30). The suggestion that he was 'a conscientious objector' puts the measurement of masculinity by military standards into the mouth of this

⁴¹⁴ 'He's an extremely brilliant young architect', she tells the dismissive Mrs Boyle, when in fact, having just met him, she has no idea how good or bad his work is (36).

⁴¹⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 151.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 152, 53, 54.

unsympathetic – and intrinsically English – character. Here, Christie taps into contemporary concerns about the ‘increasingly threatened’ masculinity of the ‘soldier hero’: during the Second World War, soldiers’ bodies were considered, like British soil, vulnerable to foreign influences, and part of the army’s self-defence training focussed on resisting ‘homosex’.⁴¹⁷

It conspires that Wren had ‘a reputation for being rather cool under fire’ and an excellent military record but that he left the army when his mother’s death in an air raid left him ‘very confused’ (73). It is not, then, that Wren has failed to fulfil the masculine military standard, but as in numerous First World War narratives, the damages of war have taken their toll on his nerves. In fact, he is sensitive *as well as*, not instead of, being manly and heroic: rather like Ellsworthy, although in different ways, Wren is testament to complexity in masculinity. Moreover, Christie implicates those ‘bullies’ who judge men against this superficial standard when Molly reminds Mrs Boyle that she knows exactly the same amount about Wren as she does about Boyle: ‘both you and he are paying us seven guineas a week. That’s really all I need to know’ (37). Thereby, Christie highlights both the irrelevance of sexuality in everyday relationships, and the hasty double standard underlying the designation of others as ‘preposterous’, ‘unbalanced’, or ‘not normal’ (30, 48).

A greater critic of Wren is Molly’s husband, Giles, who is in the Navy, and is ‘insanely jealous’ of Wren’s friendship with Molly (95). In fact, he constructs Wren as the other of his masculinity with a series of ‘do-not’s: Wren ‘may not’ stay in the room with the prettiest furniture (14), and he must ‘keep out of the kitchen’ (76). The latter is because Giles is afraid Wren will kill Molly, but even before murder has been mentioned, when Wren first arrives and helps Molly with the washing up, Giles voices his disapproval (‘Giles had not liked it at all’, 15). The kitchen is a designated feminine sphere, and the antithesis of battlefields where men are ‘made.’ Christie explains that ‘from time immemorial, women had cooked for their men. Woman, in her kitchen, was safe – eternally

⁴¹⁷ Matt Houlbrook, ‘Soldier Heroes and Rent Boys: Homosex, Masculinities, and Britishness in the Brigade of Guards, Circa 1900–1960’, *Journal of British Studies*, 42 (2003), 377-78.

safe' (68). If Woman is safe, than masculinity, of which 'Woman' is the traditional other, is secure; these are Molly's thoughts, and in the next sentence she is interrupted by Wren's entrance into the kitchen. '[K]eep out of the kitchen', then, means 'I am masculine. You are a man and should not be Woman.'

It is increasingly evident that Giles needs to construct Wren as an other because the two are physically similar. Before Wren has even entered the guesthouse, his silhouette causes Molly to note '[h]ow alike [...] were all men in their livery of civilization. Dark overcoat, grey hat, muffler around the neck' (11) a comparison with the clothes Giles has just shed, which makes the subsequent reference to a 'high-pitched, almost querulous voice', intense eyes, and utterances of 'my dear' and 'delicious' (11) striking. Although the initial description of the wanted man 'seems to point to Christopher' (67), this is only on account of his neuroticism; he is simply not, as Giles claims, the 'one person who fits the bill' (66). As Wren tells Molly, Giles and he 'are much of an age. He seems [...] much older [...] but I suppose he isn't, really. Yes, Giles might fit the bill equally well' (75). By labelling and incriminating Wren, Giles has also suggested a distance between Wren's character – and presumed guilt – and himself. However, with Wren suggested that Giles is not what he appears – in this case, an older man – Christie forces a direct comparison between the two men who are physically alike and also think similarly: both characters use the expression 'fit the bill.'

At the end of 'Three Blind Mice', Giles admits: 'I was insanely jealous of that neurotic ass. I must have been mad. Forgive me, darling' (95). Giles's confession indicates an accommodating tone at the end of the narrative, once the 'rather queer' threat – the policeman – and his corrupt and intensely English victim have been removed: Giles accepts proverbial insanity as his own lot, whereas before he has told Molly that she 'must be insane' for liking Wren (66). The term 'neurotic ass' is also slightly affectionate, or at least not entirely

hostile, as young men of Christie's era referred to members of their own social circles, and rarely enemies, as 'asses.'⁴¹⁸

The final lines are an exchange between Wren and the couple:

Christopher Wren poked a diffident head in. 'My dears,' he said, 'I hope I'm not intruding, but there's a terrible smell of burning from the kitchen. Ought I to *do* something about it?'

With an anguished cry of '*My pie!*' Molly fled from the room. (95. Both emphases original)

Wren is still 'stay[ing] out of the kitchen' so is respecting his place as abjected, standing in Man's, not Woman's, space. However, he remains the point of reference against which Giles defines himself as Man. Still, since Molly's pie is burning, perhaps he should have 'do[ne] something'. Instead, Molly runs off to her conventional womanly habitat and, presumably, a burnt pie. Without questions around where Wren is allowed to go and what he can do or be, the characters would not be discussing the pie; they would be eating it.

Conclusion

By the time she finished writing 'Three Blind Mice', Christie knew it would become a play, *The Mousetrap*, which is why it has never been published in the United Kingdom. In this theatrically-conceived text, Giles and Wren are left together, Wren 'pok[ing his] head in' and Giles effectively centre stage, so all three are fulfilling conventional spatial rolls. However, while Ellsworthy in *Easy* ends up entirely absent and under threat of mysterious punishment, Wren in 'Mice' ends up visible in the domestic, heterosexual bliss that Molly and Giles

⁴¹⁸ Geoffrey Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World* ([n.p.]: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 12.

are establishing for themselves, and he is able to express himself as homosexual with the words 'my dears'.⁴¹⁹

In this post-war period, more than before, homosexuality was becoming a matter for the police: Scotland Yard's commissioner later wrote that whereas, previously, police had 'limited their intervention to cases of open scandal or corruption of boys and young men', there was a danger of the multicultural entertainment industry failing to induce 'the same repugnance as in the past' in the uneducated 'populace'.⁴²⁰ By now, of course, language like 'homosexual', previously the terrain of medical and scientific volumes, was entering common usage. In this paranoid post-war context, Christie deliberately puts queerness at the heart of respectability, exposing individuals labelled 'perverted' as victims of scapegoating. Also, of course, the Other is included in the final scene, allowed into the kitchen, admittedly on the periphery, but not punished for lying, prying, or being less manly than the hero. In a genre that demands neat resolution and restoration of conservative order, this is a more inclusive and confident ending than that of *Easy*.

In this chapter, I have explored Christie's presentation of masculinity as a construct that only exists insofar as it is threatened. I have found a self-conscious understanding of fractured and paranoid ideologies, struggling for life by creating necessarily nebulous others to be branded with 'queerness.' Like the Gunman who haunted Christie's childhood constructions of family, the outsider haunts her prose as a discomfiting symbol of the secret power of 'other' knowledge. Exposing the necessity of assumed or pretended ignorance in maintaining the status quo, through the figure of Poirot, Christie satirizes, not foreign, dandified, or domestic models of masculinity, but those institutions and structures that set these up as 'other', and the process of 'not-me'ing. I have avoided describing Poirot as nonsexual or asexual, which many others have

⁴¹⁹ Such a scene may not have been allowed past the Lord Chamberlain's sensors in 1950s Britain – notably, in the 1952 stage version, it is the Major, really an undercover policeman, who saves Molly's pie. Wren has no 'reputation for being cool under fire' and is simply childish and flouncing; his campiness is balanced by the inclusion of a 'manly' woman character, and, as Dan Rebellato observes, the script hints at an hereditary explanation for homosexuality [Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 236].

⁴²⁰ Scott, *Scotland Yard*, 66.

done,⁴²¹ because there is no textual indication that he does not desire people sexually, and linking celibacy or a lack of stated sexual preference with asexuality is problematic. Moreover, the word 'asexual' has had wildly different connotations at different stages of the twentieth century.⁴²² It is, perhaps, more sensible to claim Poirot as sexually queer: often, if not always, he enacts the opposite of what is expected of a 'normal' hero.

As a mockery of Sherlock Holmes, who emerges as more macho from Christie's pen than from his creator's, Poirot enables a pillory of generic masculinity, traditionally unquestioned but asserted with insistent paranoia. By turning the microscope onto the unpleasant, un-masculine, and terrifyingly powerful victim, Shaitana, Christie playfully reveals the mechanics that put that microscope there in the first place. She also reflects, self-consciously, on Poirot's popularity. The otherness he encapsulates is reassuring and close-to-home; the novel's guilty survivors are happy when he replaces the more exotic Shaitana. Figures like Shaitana indicate the terrifying hold and threat of power that alternative masculinities held over interwar Britain, and while the neat, 'heterosexual conclusions' are never so watertight as they seem, Christie taps into existing stereotypes about men who threaten masculine respectability as read by the 'healthy Englishman', who 'sees only what blends and harmonises with the bent of his mind' (*Cards*, 10, 132). In the world Christie writes about, cards are never on the table.

Exploiting this tendency to scapegoat 'unmasculine' men, Christie creates such figures and makes them not guilty of murder, instead implicating more conventionally respectable characters, which allows readers to question the fundamental concepts of normality and normativity. Homosexuality becomes

⁴²¹ For example, Daphne Watson, *Their Own Worst Enemies: Women Writers of Women's Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 65; J. Kenneth Van Dover, *We Must Have Certainty: Four Essays on the Detective Story* (Cranbury: Associated University Press, 2010), 102.

The actor David Suchet, well-known for his portrayal of Poirot on television, has described the character as 'asexual', explaining that 'if a young lady was drunk in the street at two o'clock in the morning [...] he would be totally honourable.' [See Emma Saunders, 'Poirot: David Suchet Bids a Fond Farewell', *BBC News* (13 Nov. 2013). Accessed online (9 June 2014): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-24817590>]. I discuss the heterosexual coding of Suchet's performance in Chapter Five.

⁴²² Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, 'New Orientations: Asexuality and Its Implications for Theory and Practice', *Feminist Studies*, 36.3 (2010), 650-664 (653).

visible in Christie's prose at a critical time, when masculine bodies, penetrated by war, are at their most vulnerable. In Christie's prose, queerness is never on the margins, although characters labelled 'queer' increasingly become so. Depending as the genre does on reading, re-reading, and interpreting – or ignoring – codes, Christie grants her readers scope to rethink pathologies, perversions, and the 'normal' – to rethink masculinity, mindful of the lie of the 'healthy Englishman'.

‘What Should a Woman Want With These?’: Femininity and Masquerade⁴²³

Moreso than men [...] women are body.
More body so more writing.

Hélène Cixous⁴²⁴

Pagett held up a safety razor and a stick of shaving soap. ‘What should a woman want with these?’

*The Man in the Brown Suit*⁴²⁵

Introduction

In *The Man in the Brown Suit*, a bogus clergyman disguises himself as a woman, secures a job as a secretary, and spies on his eccentric millionaire employer, Eustace Pedlar. Pedlar’s other secretary, a man called Pagett, is suspicious of ‘Miss Pettigrew’ and begins to suspect that her odd behaviour is down to her not really being a woman. Producing soap and a razor, Pagett asks, ‘What should a woman want with these?’, prompting Pedlar to reflect: ‘I don’t suppose Pagett ever reads the advertisements in the high-class ladies’ papers. I do.’ With the knowledge he has gained from such advertisements, Pedlar refuses ‘to accept the presence of the razor as proof positive of Miss Pettigrew’s sex’, noting that Pagett is ‘hopelessly behind the times. I should not have been at all surprised if he had produced a cigarette case to support his theory’ (*Brown*, 165).

With these lines, Christie draws attention towards a common desire to know a person essentially, and to label them accordingly. The question of ‘Miss Pettigrew’s sex’ is not yet answered: merely the idea that one element of her everyday behaviour could constitute ‘proof positive’ is gently ridiculed. Playfully,

⁴²³ Elements of this chapter have been published in article form. See J.C. Bernthal, “‘If Not Yourself, Who Would You Be?’ Writing the Female Body in Agatha Christie’s Second World War Detective Fiction”, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26.1-2 (2015).

⁴²⁴ Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 889.

⁴²⁵ *Brown*, 165.

Christie depicts a powerful man according the same attention to popular documents like 'women's papers' as one might to traditional sources of 'proof'. Claims to certain knowledge are connected with ignorance: Pagett has only seen women with 'nice legs' (101), and never had to think about their shaving. Knowledge is something gained by engaging with the performance. By stressing that men and women need to adjust their bodies in similar ways in order to pass as 'a woman,' Christie does not dwell on the desire to know that a female impersonator is 'really' a man, instead hinting at ideas about womanhood as cosmetic and cultural constructions.

Notwithstanding his reading matter, Pedlar is later duped by the heroine discussed in Chapter One. He supposes that, in a pocketless dress, she has nowhere to hide a gun; it is in her stocking. Despite Pedlar's assertion that 'I should have studied women more' (178), Christie indicates that there is no substitute for the lived experience of womanhood, innately tied up with wearing clothes. Simone de Beauvoir claimed in 1949 that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'⁴²⁶ It is possible to see similar claims in the playfulness and theatricality with which Christie contributed to the field of detective fiction.

In this chapter, I suggest that Christie is not concerned with illuminating any 'true,' biologically- or otherwise-defined model of womanliness. Instead, she presents women, particularly those whose femininity is conventionally attractive, in terms of vestments and accessories. All of this lends radical complexity to the genre's dependence on absolute resolution and certain knowledge. Moreover, it allows the texts to undermine existing formulations of femininity and womanliness by presuming that they are artificial, rather than directly making a case for their artificiality – because, as so many writers of the time insisted, a detective novel could 'never be a novel of ideas.'⁴²⁷ When the tools by which masquerade is accomplished are highlighted as 'clues,' readers are able to problematize and rethink apparently essential identity qualities. By the end of a detective novel, fixed identity labels will have been distributed – 'murderer,'

⁴²⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London, New York: Vintage, 2010), 293.

⁴²⁷ Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, 254.

'detective,' 'victim' – but with femininity appearing as a masquerade within a larger social masquerade, and with these labels' fictional status referenced multiple times within the text, stable identity and knowable truth appear as fantasy concepts.

Much has changed since the genre historian Julian Symons called Christie's 'cardboard characters' 'bad' writing, and claims that her novels 'tell us something about manners, but nothing about life.'⁴²⁸ '[M]anners' can be as interesting as 'life', especially if most everyday life is composed of such 'manners'. Research into Christie's women has traditionally recognized a degree of self-conscious artifice in their presentation, but it tends to focus on looking for models of desirable or undesirable femininity beneath the social disguise.⁴²⁹ This chapter, however, engages with the masquerade itself, rather than treating the characters as individuals. While contemporary psychoanalysts, such as Joan Riviere, claimed that 'womanliness' and 'masquerade' were 'the same thing',⁴³⁰ Christie presented characters like Miss Pettigrew, so unreal that they draw attention towards the unreality of 'woman' itself.

The exuberant Countess Vera Rossakoff, who appears in short stories between 1923 and 1947, blurs multiple binaries, including man/woman, and is of an uncertain nationality and class. She provides a dynamic and forceful, yet inconsistent, sense of femininity that stresses the need for fun and flamboyance, rather than coherence, in the propagation of gendered identity. An exploration of the murderer in *Lord Edgware Dies*, an actress who does not seem to exist outside of her performances, suggests that Christie undermines the generic requirement to present an attractive and coherent truth, offering an exaggerated and paranoid sense of artifice in addition to a neat solution. Finally, I consider the victim in *Evil Under the Sun*, a woman misread by other characters as powerful and threatening, but who is, ultimately and necessarily, a victim. Butler has highlighted the subversive potential in a drag artist's

⁴²⁸ Julian Symons, 'Hercule Poirot: Il Est Mort', *New York Times* (12 Oct. 1975).

⁴²⁹ See particularly Gill, *Agatha Christie*; Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*; Makinen, *Agatha Christie*.

⁴³⁰ Joan Riviere, 'Femininity as Masquerade', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 10 (1929), 38.

exaggerated performance of feminine excess.⁴³¹ I suggest that new, parodic, subversive femininities can also be explored in conservative, non-political, 'straight' literary texts such as Golden Age detective novels, of which Christie provides the supreme example.

Reading Christie, Reading Women

Christie's relationship with women's liberation movements has been considered in scholarship at least since 1974.⁴³² However, it is only since the 1990s that her engagement with femininity has been taken seriously enough to warrant close-reading. As discussed in the introduction, the publication of Gill's analytical biography, and Light's *Forever England*, claiming Christie as a writer of substance who 'offers a modern sense of the unstable limits of respectability', both in 1991, heralded increased opportunities for textual analysis and application.⁴³³

As is inevitable when academic scholarship discovers a woman writer, the relevance of feminism to Christie's work became something of a scholarly fixation in subsequent years. Arguments focussed on whether Christie's books could be considered 'feminist or [...] anti-feminist.'⁴³⁴ Knepper claimed that 'Christie obviously respects women and has feminist sympathies'; Roberta S. Klein offered 'a feminist reassessment'; James noted a lack of professional women in the 1930s titles and concluded a latent hostility to feminism; while Thompson identified 'unconscious' feminism.⁴³⁵ Majority opinion, following Light, stresses that, as Christie reflects upon a war-torn, dissolving social order, her

⁴³¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 186-9.

⁴³² Margot Peters and Agate Nesaule Krouse, 'Women and Crime: Sexism in Allingham, Sayers, and Christie', *Southwest Review* (1974); Michelle Slung, 'Women in Detective Fiction', in *The Mystery Story*, ed. by John Ball (San Diego: University of California, 1976), 125-41.

⁴³³ Gill, Agatha Christie; Light, *Forever England*, 61-62.

⁴³⁴ Marty S. Knepper, 'Agatha Christie - Feminist', *The Armchair Detective*, 16 (1983), 398. Knepper's somewhat polemical defence of women in Christie, including her insistence that the author should incontrovertibly be considered 'a feminist', belongs to the pre-Light era of scholarship in which passages are generalized and cited from memory. Her subsequent work in the same field, specifically relating to Marple, exhibits a welcome turn to textual analysis.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 399; Klein, *Agatha Christie*; James, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, 99; Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, 26.

limited approach to femininity is 'in accord with [contemporary] feminist agendas.'⁴³⁶ Makinen, for instance, considers Christie in terms of 'the performativity of femininity, as masquerade'.⁴³⁷

If Christie's work encourages readers to view the dissolution of conservative notions of stability as part of modernity's 'socio-cultural masquerade',⁴³⁸ then femininity may well be considered part of this masquerade. After all, Christie was fascinated by masks and performance (*Autobiography*, 432). Notably, her first Poirot short story, 'The Affair at the Victory Ball', is set at a masquerade ball in which various corrupt aristocrats hide behind each others' masks, while her favourite of her own detectives was a harlequin whose every gesture theatrically exposes the performativity of everyday life.⁴³⁹ As discussed in Chapter One, Rowland has made much of Christie and other crime writers introducing sensitive male heroes into a masculine-coded genre.⁴⁴⁰ This understanding of the Golden Age as intrinsically feminized, however, depends on accepting masculinity as cold, logical, and stereotypically manly, and femininity as its other: Poirot becomes the licenced feminine other of the law.⁴⁴¹ For this reason, Rowland consistently defines Christie's women in terms of their refutation of masculinity, and explains womanhood as one of the general cultural masks on which Golden Age detective novelists reflect.⁴⁴²

Makinen goes further, claiming Christie as 'sympathetic' to feminist agendas, and therefore considering women in Christie as rounded characters, whose essential womanhood is visible through the masquerade of femininity – positively, or at least maturely, demarked. Because of the numerous and conflicting 'types' of women in these texts, Makinen suggests several character-types which, though diverse, all partake of an undefined essential sense of

⁴³⁶ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 22.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴³⁸ Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction*, 106.

⁴³⁹ A number of the Harley Quin stories are set in theatres, and Quin's partner, a 'womanish' man, is described as watching life from 'the stalls' (*Three-Act*, 27).

⁴⁴⁰ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 19.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21ff.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 28, 60, 20.

shared identity. She explains that the colourful Vera Rossakoff, discussed below, begins life as a brutish, manly character, but that when Rossakoff exhibits maternal instincts she is 'reabsorbed into [...] respectable femininity'.⁴⁴³ Moreover, because Rossakoff's title may not be real – Makinen, like Christie's narrator, Captain Hastings, assumes that she is not really a countess – Christie 'liberally' indicates that class privilege can be assumed as well as inherited.⁴⁴⁴

While this is an inspiring reading, it is difficult to attribute such affirmative motives to an author whose criticism of society's everyday rituals glares out of most pages: for instance, the *nouveau riche* Roger Ackroyd is described as 'more impossibly like a country squire than any real country squire' (*Ackroyd*, 12), not indicating that he can earn his social status, but that the status itself has become (or has always been) meaningless masquerade. The suggestion may be that class can be assumed and performed – but, with the implication that people whose identities have been assumed are somehow inauthentic, this is less a 'liberal' than a conservative reflection on evolving social dynamics. Indeed, Christie never reveals whether Rossakoff is a 'real' countess, a 'real' Russian, or even a 'real' woman: she leaves these questions unanswered, depicts almost exclusively male characters pondering them, and revels in outlining Rossakoff's 'flamboyant' performance as a foreign aristocratic woman.

Both Rowland and Makinen are bound by their theses to explain Christie's female characters as coherent and consistent. This essentialist perspective leads Makinen to consider 'a variety of available feminine positions within the books' and 'an array of positive feminine representations',⁴⁴⁵ arguing that Christie offers her readers a choice between several models of appropriate womanhood. Such an approach, though, risks neglecting the surface details, the elements of the mask, on which Christie focuses. There is no objective necessity to defend Christie as worthy of academic study if and only if her characters have depth, when this neglects her crafty depiction of artifice. As Christie writes more than once, the most elegant tailored frock 'look[s] (but only

⁴⁴³ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 120. See also, 33.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

look[s]) simple' (*Nile*, 5. Emphasis original. See also *Three-Act*, 28). Makinen's suggestion that Christie's murderers who are women are all 'accorded dignity and the responsibility of culpability'⁴⁴⁶ ignores the equally 'positive portrayal' of murderers who are men,⁴⁴⁷ and the fact that some of Christie's murderous women are almost hyperbolically devoid of moral awareness, being, as is claimed of the killer in *Lord Edgware Dies*, 'completely conscienceless' (189).

With scholarship vacillating between 'feminist' and 'anti-feminist' readings, the walking female bodies in Christie's work are read as means to an end: commentators do not look at how the characters are presented but at the (stereo)types of femininity they apparently signify. These bodies are looked *through*, and not *at*. Rather than trying to discover which model/s of femininity might be deemed 'acceptable' or unacceptable in Christie's prose,⁴⁴⁸ I propose to explore the masquerade of femininity itself. If we can read women's bodies in these texts as consciously and externally constructed, then questions of which specific model of womanhood is endorsed by the text, and of the narratives' relationship with women's control and liberation, cease to occupy us. In short, Christie, and therefore this chapter, is not concerned with individuals or even 'types', but with the process through which types, groups, and categories are constructed.

When I mention looking *at* and *through* bodies, I am indebted to Marjorie Garber, who popularized academic discussion of looking at, not through, cross-dressed bodies in her 1992 study, *Vested Interests*. Garber argues that transvestism 'puts into question' the very 'notion of naturalness':⁴⁴⁹ 'class, gender, sexuality, and even race and ethnicity – the determinate categories [...] – are themselves brought to crisis' as a cross-dresser, whose presented sex is the binary opposite to the gender identity presented through vestments (in Garber's analysis), destabilizes the usual signifiers, or 'clues' to identity.⁴⁵⁰ As

⁴⁴⁶ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 3. See also, 155.

⁴⁴⁷ For example, in *Cards on the Table*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, *Taken at the Flood*, and *They Do It With Mirrors*.

⁴⁴⁸ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 6, 120.

⁴⁴⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 40.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

Garber explains in her introduction, while granting the cross-dresser ‘status as a sign of the constructedness of gender categories, researchers and critics have tended ‘to look *through*, rather than *at*, the cross-dresser.’⁴⁵¹ This means that the cross-dressed body is understood as a sign rather than a body that matters. If ‘*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*[, ...] not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself’,⁴⁵² then clothes and gender performance are clearly loaded signifiers, complexly in dialogue with the bodies they adorn and the social bodies they perform to/in/for/as they legitimize them. As Gill Plain, following Garber, has considered Christie’s corpses as something more than ‘empty signifiers’,⁴⁵³ I suggest that the mobile, breathing female bodies in detective fiction are similarly sites of construction, performativity, and parody, acting as springboards from which clothes and mannerisms enact gendered identity and create ‘woman.’

In a chapter devoted to detective fiction, Garber emphasizes that the genre depends on there being one definitive, correct way of seeing things, itself based on reading and misreading clues, ‘making a false assumption at first.’⁴⁵⁴ After all, as York notes, Christie can hardly be credited with the postmodern view that truth is flexible.⁴⁵⁵ A murder mystery requires only two things: a victim and a criminal – even the detective can be omitted, as in *And Then There Were None*. In the Christean tradition, of course, a murder must be named, categorized, and submitted to punishment before the narrative can close (usually with a birth, or young innocents’ betrothal). In short, detective fiction can tell readers how to interpret situations, events, and people, reassuring them of the reading’s moral authority. However, as intimated in previous chapters, the stereotyped women who occupy Christie’s narratives are neither simplistic nor consistent. Labelled ‘victim,’ ‘murderer,’ ‘detective,’ or ‘innocent,’ Christie’s women have a tendency to enact stereotypes consistent with labels that have not been applied to them. Moreover, the self-conscious way in which Christie

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 9. Emphasis original.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 17. Emphasis original.

⁴⁵³ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 31.

⁴⁵⁴ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 187.

⁴⁵⁵ York, *Agatha Christie*, 23.

draws attention towards her characters' artificiality demands attention: in this chapter, I connect it and the motif of reading with 'womanly' masquerade.

The concept of 'womanliness as masquerade' owes much to a brief essay by Riviere, published in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1929. According to Riviere, in a world structured and imbued with meaning by men, women must wear a mask, femininity, in order to succeed, hiding their own desire for masculine power.⁴⁵⁶ Riviere compares a woman who 'possesses masculinity' to 'a thief' possessing 'stolen goods', argues that 'womanliness' is a 'mask' and 'device for avoiding [the] anxiety' that comes from being discovered 'possessing masculinity', and applies this understanding to all women. All women, for Riviere, 'wish to be men themselves.'⁴⁵⁷ For Riviere, masquerade is not an extreme or optional version of womanliness:

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference [...] They are the same thing.⁴⁵⁸

In Jacques Lacan's reading of Riviere, 'womanliness' is the result of the masquerade of femininity, the latter providing 'the very definition of' masquerade, 'because it is constructed with reference to the male sign' and cannot exist in its own right.⁴⁵⁹ If 'there is no prediscursive reality' underlying performances of femininity, 'no feminine outside language',⁴⁶⁰ then the woman's body is policed and reconstructed by discourse into something other than what it is.

Irigaray understands masquerade 'as what women do in order to [...] participate in man's desire, but at the price of renouncing their own', connecting masquerade with 'what Freud calls "femininity".' That is, '[t]he belief [...] that it is necessary to *become* a woman, a "normal" one at that, whereas a man is a man

⁴⁵⁶ Riviere, 'Femininity as Masquerade'.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁵⁸ Riviere, 'Femininity as Masquerade', 38.

⁴⁵⁹ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London, New York: Verso, 1987), 67.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

from the outset'.⁴⁶¹ In this sense, 'woman' is not simply a product of discourse but a fiction which needs to be 'normal': judgeable, measurable normalness is part of the performative fiction of 'woman.' Irigaray suggests that an original condition or identity is renounced so that the fictional one can take over. If this desire is renounced by women, but not men, then masculinity remains disordered and uncontrolled by the stipulation of a not fully-expressed normality.

Fundamental male identity, in this conception, can only exist as masculinity insofar as it is regulated and controlled by the feminine, structured as its other. However, Butler suggests that, rather than serving 'to conceal or repress a pre-given [essence or desire that would] expose the necessary failure of masculinity', masquerade might be considered 'the means by which femininity itself is *first* established, the exclusionary practise of identity formation in which the masculine is [...] instated as outside the boundaries of a feminine gender position'.⁴⁶² In this conception, essential femininity or womanliness, which gives masculinity its licence, exists only insofar as it is enacted, and there is no 'pre-given' gender beyond masquerade.

For Butler, gender exists as a 'stylized repetition of acts'.⁴⁶³ The male/female binary, like that of masculine/feminine, is given currency and actuality as it is enacted, performed, or fulfilled. An individual is 'girled', made into a girl and ushered into the order of experience that embracing, subverting, or resisting a gendered identity entails, as soon as they have been so-named.⁴⁶⁴ Butler insists that

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender [...] must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

⁴⁶¹ Lece Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 133-34. Emphasis original.

⁴⁶² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 65. Emphasis original.

⁴⁶³ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. by Seung-Kyung Kim and Carole R. McCann (New York, London: Routledge, 2013), 461-73 (462).

⁴⁶⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 7.

[... T]o be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign⁴⁶⁵

The repeated, 'mundane' actions of the human body in society create 'an illusion' of an enduring stable sense of gender, and for Butler gender cannot exist outside of everyday communication, which takes on an almost theatrical significance. Butler mentions drag, a performance of gender that emphasizes the incongruence of the performer's perceived sex with their perceived gender – for example, a drag queen will wear obviously fake breasts, gaudy make-up, and an elaborate wig.⁴⁶⁶ In Butler's understanding, drag, 'mocking' the 'mechanisms of gender', offers a parodic example of gender performance, stressing the mechanics and artifice by which all of gender is performative.⁴⁶⁷

'Reveal[ing] the imitative structure of gender itself,' drag is a parody 'of the very notion of an original': 'parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities.'⁴⁶⁸ Exposing the theatricality of everyday political masquerade in gender, drag can therefore be considered with profit in a variety of contexts in which the artifice of 'normality' is exposed and 'naturalness' is undermined. It is also worth considering as we read Christie, who has rarely been read through Butler, but for whom the theatricality of everyday life is 'a basic concern'.⁴⁶⁹ Drag's exposing function invites a reading of Christie's most excessive and comical characters, sketched with a sense of irreverence. Therefore, before discussing the relatively dense roles of 'murderer' and 'victim' in *Lord Edgware Dies* and *Evil Under the Sun*, let us consider, in terms of drag, a character whose narrative role provides Christie with more freedom to explore and develop ideas about artifice and gender: Poirot's early romantic interest, the Countess Vera Rossakoff. We must consider what Christie exposes before considering how she undermines it.

⁴⁶⁵ Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 462, 64. Emphasis original.

⁴⁶⁶ As opposed to cross-dressing, which, for the highly limited purposes of this chapter means assuming clothes in order to suggest femininity if the subject does not identify as female, or masculinity if the subject does not identify as male.

⁴⁶⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 186.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 187, 88. Emphasis original.

⁴⁶⁹ York, *Agatha Christie*, 41.

Vera Rossakoff in 'The Double Clue' (1923)

Sheila Jeffreys has critiqued the suggestion that women can drag up as women in Butler's sense:

Femininity is something women have thrust upon them, and suffer severe penalties for escaping, rather than a joyous opportunity to perform. If women do dress up as 'drag queens,' the parodic aspect would not be obvious to the man or woman in the street.⁴⁷⁰

It must be noted that Jeffreys has been criticized for her essentialist equation of 'female biology' with womanhood.⁴⁷¹ Moreover, a Butlerian stance does not view gender as mere performance, or as a case of dressing-up, and Butler 'never [claimed] that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman.'⁴⁷² Rather, drag as Butler describes it can be interpreted in a way that critiques the apparent innateness of gender itself.

One of Christie's characters, a dubious Russian countess known as Vera Rossakoff, represents a 'joyous' assumption of femininity, deliberately excessive and stagily parodic. Rossakoff revels in artifice, expressing her gender and sexuality in terms of it. A wholly exuberant character, she leaves the question of 'true' identity both unresolved and loudly unraised.

'The countess', Bargainnier has stated, 'fascinates Poirot; she is his Irene Adler.' For Bargainnier, this means that Rossakoff occupies a crucial narrative position, representing alluring femininity that appeals to 'the brilliant bachelor detective' in a non-physical sense, so that the detective can be masculine enough to admire women without being distracted from his *raison d'être* by the need to make love.⁴⁷³ Appearing in one story, Irene Adler is one of Arthur Conan Doyle's most popular characters, being the only woman his

⁴⁷⁰ Jeffreys, 'The Queer Disappearance of Lesbians: Sexuality in the Academy', 461.

⁴⁷¹ Talia Bettcher and Ann Garry, 'Transgender Studies and Feminism: Theories, Politics, and Gendered Realities', *Hypatia*, 24 (2009), 6.

⁴⁷² Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 231.

⁴⁷³ Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 53.

detective, Holmes, admires.⁴⁷⁴ Adler, a fairly androgynous jewel thief and blackmailer, outwits Holmes by dressing as a boy in 'A Scandal in Bohemia'. She earns his respect, permission to flee justice with a lover, and the accolade 'the woman', distinguishing her from the rest of her sex, but also, of course, making her a figurehead for palatable womanliness in the series.⁴⁷⁵

Small men, Christie writes on three occasions, are bound to be enamoured with 'big, flamboyant women'.⁴⁷⁶ Each time, she is explaining Poirot's attraction to Rossakoff. Poirot is an effeminate, dandified European detective in and responding to 'the Sherlock Holmes tradition' (*Autobiography*, 282). If he is Christie's response to Holmes, Rossakoff is a response to Adler. Also a jewel thief, Rossakoff is extravagantly excessive – more 'foreign' than Poirot – and she represents a heightened femininity that is performed rather than innate. Whereas Doyle regretted not having injected humour into his fiction, Christie's portrayal of Poirot's 'flamboyant' object of desire is, as we shall discuss, evidently comical.⁴⁷⁷ By exaggerating Rossakoff's ornaments of femininity, and her feminine appeal to Poirot, Christie is able to mock a range of conventions, from femininity to class prejudice and the character's narrative function as Poirot's Adler.

Noting Christie's adjectives for Rossakoff, '*voluptuous, lush, exotic, and highly coloured*,' Bargainnier has observed that 'Poirot's taste in women is the exact opposite of that in furnishings'.⁴⁷⁸ This, he concludes, is why Rossakoff disappears after only a few appearances: she does not fit into Poirot's world.⁴⁷⁹ Bargainnier's analysis insightfully draws attention towards the burlesque, unruly, extroverted nature of Rossakoff's character and appearance. However, her incongruence with the rest of Poirot's tastes is hardly an authorial mistake that

⁴⁷⁴ Watt and Green, *The Alternative Sherlock Holmes*, 179.

⁴⁷⁵ Garber discusses Adler's continued abjection in a section titled 'Goodnight, Irene' [Garber, *Vested Interests*, 191-96].

⁴⁷⁶ Christie, *Four*, 211; Agatha Christie, 'The Capture of Cerberus', in *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks: Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making*, ed. by John Curran (London: HarperCollins, 2009), 425-52 (434); Agatha Christie, 'The Capture of Cerberus', in *Hercule Poirot: The Complete Short Stories* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 831-51 (851). Further references to these sources will appear as 'Cerberus A' and 'Cerberus B.'

⁴⁷⁷ Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, 108; Agatha Christie, 'The Double Clue', in *Hercule Poirot: The Complete Short Stories* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), 282-90 (286). Further references to this source will appear as 'Double.'

⁴⁷⁸ Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 53. Emphasis original.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

Christie tried to undo by removing the character: as indicated above, she enjoyed pointing out that ‘small men’ are attracted to ‘big, flamboyant women.’ In this sense – if only in this sense – Christie presents Poirot’s attraction to Rossakoff as a deviation from his usual primness that is entirely consistent. The character’s ‘voluptuous’ and ‘exotic’ nature stands for over-the-top femininity. It draws attention not merely to the artifice of womanhood but also to the unreality of the Irene Adler role within detective fiction. As Poirot himself routinely fails as a masculine hero, the type of woman who attracts him has to be more feminine than he is, lest he also be considered a failed heterosexual. As a result, however, Rossakoff’s performance of femininity is so heightened that it becomes self-parodic; a drag act, as shall be discussed. Like other prominent authors of the classical ‘whodunit’, Christie disapproved of detectives’ need for a ‘female interest’.⁴⁸⁰ By making Rossakoff forcefully feminine and incongruent with Poirot’s other interests, Christie draws attention towards the mechanical insincerity of sexual attraction in popular literature.

Rossakoff is introduced in ‘The Double Clue’, a 1923 short story. Jewels have been stolen, and Poirot believes the most likely suspect to be a Russian countess about whom little is known: she may be an imposter, he reasons (‘Double’, 285). However, after meeting Rossakoff, he revises his opinion. Although Poirot usually visits suspects, Rossakoff invades his space by calling on him and Hastings at home. She is introduced as:

a whirlwind in human form [who] invaded our privacy, bringing with her a swirl of sables (it was as cold as only an English June day could be) and a hat rampant with slaughtered ospreys. Countess Vera Rossakoff was a somewhat disturbing personality. (286)

As presented, the woman is something more than human, her intimidating ‘personality’ initially presented through reference to her clothes and subsequently in terms of her vocal ‘flood of volubility’ (*Four*, 60) and the ‘exotic scent’ she leaves upon sweeping out of the room (‘Double’, 287).

⁴⁸⁰ Christie, *Writers*, xi; Sayers, ‘An Omnibus of Crime’, 78-79.

Like a male drag artist, Rossakoff takes normal feminine signifiers to discordant excess. She does not simply have a sable coat, but ‘a swirl of sables’ which connects with her body, as the swirling makes it part of the ‘whirlwind in human form’ that Hastings claims she is. Even her hat is personified when it is described as ‘rampant’, and not just with feathers but with ‘slaughtered ospreys’: Christie, who had a passion for sable coats and was no campaigner for animal rights, draws attention to life and action in relation to traditionally static objects of clothing. Animals’ corpses here contribute to the countess’s vitality and quality of life: Christie presents one living body constructed out of other bodies. The coat also prompts Hastings’ aside, a clichéd remark about English weather, so as an object it introduces an introspective gaze from the narrator asserting his gendered and national identity. On Rossakoff, bodies are theatrical properties, creating ‘disturbing’ power.

Like Lord Edgware’s killer, discussed below, the countess is exposed as a criminal via the written word. The eponymous ‘Double Clue’, betraying Rossakoff as a thief, is a cigarette case. It contains initials, first thought to be a man’s, but because they are in the Cyrillic alphabet, ‘BP’ translates as ‘VR’, or ‘Vera Rossakoff.’ Poirot is smitten and covers up her criminal activities, instead blaming a spiteful artistic youth whose initials are BP and whose masculinity is compromised by his ladylike dressing gown (285). In this way, Poirot rejects an alternative way of reading the clue, and insists on a conservative, ignorant but familiar model of interpretation that allows for Rossakoff, whose femininity is hyperbolic, to avoid public shame, but scapegoats a man who perverts or is potentially unbound by his gender. Susan Sontag has discussed ‘truth’ as something that only really exists when spoken by somebody ‘to whom [the person listening] is inclined to listen’.⁴⁸¹ In conventional formal detective stories, the detective needs to be honest and to arrive at truth.⁴⁸² Like Holmes, Poirot

⁴⁸¹ Susan Sontag, ‘Unextinguished: The Case for Victor Serge’, in *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007), 57-88 (75).

⁴⁸² The crime writer P.D. James is clear about this: ‘I don’t think the genre could work at all unless the [detectives/heroes] are honest. You have to know they are honest, or there is no resolution; it is mere nonsense’ (personal conversation).

uses his position as detective to complicate narrative truth by letting Rossakoff escape justice, but unlike Holmes, he assigns blame elsewhere. While Christie may not have had consciously radical social motives in writing short fiction, she was able, through the narrative surrounding Rossakoff, to draw attention towards the ways in which people read other human beings, othering, scapegoating, and depending on arbitrary, essentialist stereotypes.

Rossakoff's 'personality' is 'somewhat disturbing' because she immediately renegotiates power dynamics between men and women, while performing a heightened femininity. In her short scene with Poirot, who does not get to speak, Rossakoff describes the police's suspect, a powerful man, as a 'chicken', a 'lamb' (animals again), and an 'idiot', branding him both intellectually and emotionally her inferior. In her final appearance in 1947 ('Cerberus B'), Rossakoff owns a youth-based night club called Hell, which only admits fabulously rich clientele (on the grounds that only the poor can enter Heaven), indicating an assumed and subversive authority over youth, money, business, and even conventional Christian morality, all traditional arenas of what Riviere considers desirable, 'masculine power'.⁴⁸³ Despite being more eccentric, foreign, and feminine than Poirot – 'let us be gay and sit in the sun and drink vodka' ('Cerberus A', 451) – Rossakoff is also more authoritative: having 'invaded our space' she makes numerous demands of the detective, leaving him uttering, 'what a woman! [She is] a woman in a thousand' ('Double', 287; *Four*, 188). Like Holmes, Poirot indicates that he has found an unusually stimulating woman, but this is the beginning, not the end, of the story. The two men and one woman are involved in a conversation that is also a spectacle, and traditional power dynamics are mocked as they watch Rossakoff's eccentric routine. She invites an audience, turning an assertion of feminine authority into a theatrical spectacle.

Rossakoff's intimidating presence and the emphasis on clothes in establishing her character represent extremes of confidence, exoticism, and artistic allure akin to those in a drag performance. A male drag artist who

⁴⁸³ Riviere, 'Femininity as Masquerade', 39.

exaggerates the ornaments of femininity thereby emphasizes her own maleness beneath the dress, so drag can 'mock traditional femininity and heterosexuality'.⁴⁸⁴ For a male-to-female drag act to be successful, the spectator must be convinced that beneath the woman's clothes sit men's genitals: part of the performance is the recognition of 'the man beneath the skirt',⁴⁸⁵ untwining sex and gender, exposing femininity as mere artifice. Drag takes the performative aspects of gender to hyperbolic excess, undermining the spectacle of gender itself. Gail Hawkes claims that:

If 'drag' is verbal shorthand for the performative use of gendered dress codes to subvert the hegemonic twining of gender and sexuality, then we can speak in this sense, of dress as performance, of women 'dragging up as women', or of men 'dragging up as men'.⁴⁸⁶

Robert Tyler suggests that the actress '[Greta] Garbo "got in drag" whenever she took some heavy glamour part'.⁴⁸⁷ Acting, for Tyler, is 'resplendent' and 'all *impersonation*, whether the sex underneath is true or not'.⁴⁸⁸ To an extent, Rossakoff's whole character can be considered a 'heavy glamour part'. Exaggeratedly performing a certain class, nationality, and sex, Rossakoff exerts power over men and draws attention to the elements of her identity that allow this.

Before meeting her, Poirot is able to suggest that Rossakoff may be not a real countess but one of many 'immigrants': 'Any woman can call herself a Russian countess' ('Double', 285). After their first meeting, he comments on her 'real enough' sable: 'Could a spurious countess have real furs? My little joke, Hastings... No, she is truly Russian, I fancy' (286). This may be a 'joke' but Poirot insists that Rossakoff is 'truly Russian' whereas before he had doubted that she was truly a countess. In fact, Rossakoff is described with the same

⁴⁸⁴ Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Cambridge, London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 136.

⁴⁸⁵ Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (New York: Cassell, 1994), 157.

⁴⁸⁶ Quoted in Moya Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power and Politics* (London: Sage, 2005), 136.

⁴⁸⁷ Quoted in Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 108.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Emphasis original.

language used of contemporary burlesque and drag artists.⁴⁸⁹ The female impersonator Bert Savoy, who died the year 'Double' was published, was described by one contemporary critic as 'flamboyant, loud, bawdy' and 'swish'.⁴⁹⁰ 'He would wear jewellery of an exaggerated size'.⁴⁹¹ The 'overt sexuality' of his female persona was emphasized by the exaggerated nature of his corset, wig, and draping gowns. This is equally a description of Rossakoff, the woman whose 'very flamboyance attract[s] Poirot' (*Four*, 188), whose 'magnificent shoulders' are carried with 'a magnificent gesture' (189), as she appears in 'Double.' Rossakoff here must necessarily be an exotic fantasy: for the notoriously bourgeois Poirot, this means being an aristocrat. Poirot discounts his suspicion that Rossakoff might not be a real countess without admitting to the fact that she seems inauthentic. Rossakoff's '*femme du monde*' femininity ('Cerberus B', 844), is only attractive insofar as it is caricatured.

When Christie wrote 'Double', Russia was still in the wake of its 1917 revolutions. The idea of a mysteriously benevolent, even divine, monarch had been undermined by rumours of sexual corruption surrounding Tsar Nicholas II, and his execution.⁴⁹² The increasing relevance of communism, and the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, meant that Russia was regarded as a dangerous place politically, with a 'sham' government.⁴⁹³ In British propaganda, Russian politics were presented as the Other of British politics. The British presentation of Soviet politics was one of deception and mechanics, as Russian workers were compared to the parts of a machine.⁴⁹⁴ This sense of lost mystique means that the Russian monarchy – and old social order – had romantic connotations in the face of perceived soulless communism, evidenced by the popularity in Britain of romantic stories

⁴⁸⁹ For Christie's fondness of pantomime dames and other such female impersonators, see *Autobiography* (140).

⁴⁹⁰ J.D. Doyle, 'More Bert Savoy', *Queer Music Heritage* (2004).

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹² Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskiĭ, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: Language and Symbols of 1917* (Cambridge: Yale University Press, 1999), 9-29.

⁴⁹³ Alfred Emmott, 'Russia Today: The Breakdown of Communism: Experiments That Failed', *The Times* (31 Dec. 1924).

⁴⁹⁴ Figes and Kolonitskiĭ, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, 108-09.

surrounding the Grand Duchess Anastasia, who was killed in 1918, but popularly believed to be still alive.⁴⁹⁵

When Poirot says of Rossakoff that she is probably an 'immigrant' masquerading as a countess, he indicates an awareness that the old order is as illusory as the new 'sham' politics. However, in the end, Rossakoff's class remains consciously unquestioned. Twenty-four years later, in 'Cerberus B', Poirot refuses to speak to a man who questions Rossakoff's mysterious noble lineage and describes her instead in terms of concrete psychological complexes ('Cerberus B', 845, 851). Rather than suggesting, as Makinen has it, that 'class can be assumed rather than inherited',⁴⁹⁶ Christie illustrates sentiment overtaking knowledge and logic in the interpretation of a theatrical social reality. As a man, Poirot believes what he hopes to believe and sees the performance he expects to see.

The exotically Russian Rossakoff is Christie's contribution to a standard literary cliché in the 1920s. There has long been, as Brian James Baer notes, a Western mythology of Russia as a state where the political climate eclipses concerns about gender and sexuality (generally understood as the cornerstones of Western identities), allowing erotics to flow, sensual and unbridled.⁴⁹⁷ E. Phillips Oppenheim's *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* (1927) features a devilish Russian conspiracy wherein the noble, intellectual aristocrats are forced to the margins of anarchy,⁴⁹⁸ In this way, Oppenheim illustrates, by proxy, the political freedoms of the Western, female protagonist. Christie considered herself a better writer than Oppenheim, mocking his title *Anna the Adventuress* (1904) in her third novel (*Brown*, 18, as discussed), so her Russian aristocrat, clearly not a noble innocent, might be something of a reaction to such popular literary devices.

⁴⁹⁵ John D. Klier and Helen Mingay, *The Search for Anastasia* (Philadelphia: Smith Gryphon, 1995).

⁴⁹⁶ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 119.

⁴⁹⁷ Brian James Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 71.

⁴⁹⁸ E. Phillips Oppenheim, *Miss Brown of X.Y.O.* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1927), 81.

More literary novelists used clichés like vodka and exuberant clothes, sourced from the pages of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, to set up Russia as a site of otherness. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) features a Russian princess, Sasha, who represents the erotic allure of the exotic to the protagonist before he is able to ascertain her sex.⁴⁹⁹ Sasha is 'sheer fantasy',⁵⁰⁰ deliberately obscure, with the protagonist able only to speak to her in a mutual foreign language, French, and to describe her through metaphors, never in her own right.⁵⁰¹ Towards the end of *Orlando*, she returns as 'a whiff of scent' and 'a semblance of a grey woman in fur',⁵⁰² so the Russian aristocracy exists – hyperbolically – as a depersonalised collection of excesses (fur, scent, manners) without direction or relevance. With Rossakoff, Christie, like Woolf, mocks contemporary class and gender stereotypes about Russia by highlighting the character's elaborate, discomfiting otherness.

Rossakoff is labelled as the culprit, but evades punishment, so never has to confess: Christie is able to focus upon her performance and to celebrate her femininity, oblivious to the idea of character essence. The criminal in *Lord Edgware Dies* is apprehended and made to confess, granting Christie scope to engage with the idea of individual, knowable identity. As we shall consider, the exploration of identity is inextricable from questions over the nature of successful femininity.

Lady Edgware in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933)

For Christie, aristocratic and upper-middle class rituals are as elaborate and fantastic as any other masquerade. A strong example of masqueraded femininity that is sexy, alluring, and dangerous to men, the murderer in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) has generally been neglected by Christie scholars who

⁴⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 36-37.

⁵⁰⁰ Darya Protopopova, 'Virginia Woolf and the Russians: Readings of Russian Literature in British Modernism' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Oxford University, 2010), 11.

⁵⁰¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 45, 46.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 289. Sasha appears in *Orlando's* index as 'Princess, the Russian', rather than under her own name, further indicating the self-consciousness with which Woolf presents her identity as one looked *through*, not *at*.

focus on woman detectives and corpses.⁵⁰³ One of Christie's most self-conscious novels, *Edgware* interacts with contemporary criticisms of womanliness and femininity as masquerade. With numerous references to words and reading, and a sexy Hollywood actress for a murderer, the narrative presents a woman who is defined by a 'husky' voice and expensive clothes. These are not only everyday signifiers by which spectators at the cinema or cabaret and in aristocratic circles understand Lady Edgware. They are also textual clues, in turn encouraging the reader to imagine her as 'innocent,' 'victim,' and 'murderer,' as Lady Edgware commits the crime in disguise as herself (explained below).

Unlike Rossakoff, Lady Edgware accepts responsibility for her crimes, but she seems still to be playing a part after her apprehension and confession. The character resonates with contemporary fears about transgressing identity boundaries, which are even critiqued in the text as artificial. As with the enigmatic Miss Pettigrew in *Brown*, Lady Edgware complicates readability by remaining artificial and devoid of knowable essence even after she has been identified as 'the murderer.'

Edgware is one of Christie's nine post-1930 novels featuring a Watson-like narrator (Hastings). This means that the plot and characters are necessarily described subjectively. As Bayard notes, in such accounts there can never be 'complete truth,' but only one version or interpretation.⁵⁰⁴ Christie emphasizes the lack of omniscience in this perspective when Lady Edgware, known by her stage name, Jane Wilkinson, is introduced in terms of Hastings' emotional reaction to another performer's impersonation of her. The plot revolves around performance and ritual, and on two levels it begins with imitation: Christie 'got the idea' when she saw the impressionist Ruth Draper performing onstage, eventually basing the character Carlotta Adams on Draper (*Autobiography*, 437), and the opening scene is a 'theatrical party' in which Carlotta impersonates Jane. After the show, Jane, who has seen the performance,

⁵⁰³ For example, Makinen (124) mentions 'Lady Edgware', and this novel, only once, to support a general point about 'gold-diggers.'

⁵⁰⁴ Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*, 105.

announces to all her theatrical friends – and Poirot – that she has ‘got to get rid of [her] husband’, Lord Edgware, in order to marry the Duke of Merton (*Edgware*, 15-16).

Poirot visits Edgware, who agrees to a divorce, but is stabbed to death that night. Jane was seen by the butler entering the scene of the crime, but, apart from having no motive, she has an alibi: several guests met her at an aristocratic dinner miles away when the butler claimed to have seen her. Police suspicions that Carlotta went to Edgware disguised as Jane seem confirmed when Carlotta apparently commits suicide. However, after another murder, Poirot realizes that it was Carlotta who went to the dinner, dressed as Jane, while Jane went to her husband. The Anglo-Catholic Duke of Merton would marry a widow, but not a divorcée, so, from Jane’s perspective, Lord Edgware had to die. The novel ends with a signed confession in which Jane claims never to have been as stupid as she seemed and finally asks if ‘they’ll put me in Madame Tussauds’ (192). References to public image and posterity, which occupied the first sentence (‘The memory of the public is short’ [7]), also occupy the last.

Jane is described as ‘a very fascinating lady’ (7), ‘[a] very interesting character’ (18), and ‘really a unique person’ (189), but Christie depicts her femininity as engaging to a vacuous public with a ‘short’ ‘memory’ only so long as it does not appear to conceal any substantial personality. The society Christie illustrates requires this woman to exist as no more than clothes, blonde hair, and a glamorous voice. Before introducing Jane, Hastings describes Carlotta’s ‘imitation’ of this ‘talented young American actress’:

It was really very clever. Inanities slipped off her tongue charged with some powerful emotional appeal so that in spite of yourself you felt that each word was uttered with some potent and fundamental meaning. Her voice, exquisitely toned, with a deep husky note in it, was intoxicating. The restrained gestures, each strangely significant, the slightly swaying body, the impression even, of strong physical beauty – how she did it, I cannot think [...] It was a little uncanny to hear that well-known, slightly husky voice with the fatalistic drop in it that had stirred me so often, and to watch that seemingly poignant gesture of

the slowly closing and unclosing hand, and the sudden throw back of the head [...] that I realised she always gave at the close of a dramatic scene. (8)

The first description of Jane, which is really of Carlotta's 'imitation', establishes terms in which the character is discussed throughout the novel: subsequently, Jane is never described physically apart from what clothes she is wearing and how she smiles. The physical description of an impersonation, as interpreted by Hastings, is referred to as unreal – 'how she did it, I cannot think' – but ultimately doubles as an introduction to the physical Jane. 'Her voice', 'her tongue', and 'her hands' are all both those of an 'intoxicating' character Carlotta is playing, and of the 'intoxicating' Jane herself. Jane is later described in similar terms: 'Her voice was soft, low and deliciously seductive' (17). From the outset, then, Jane's character and body are connected with performance.

Watching the show, it occurs to Hastings that people like Jane must not enjoy Carlotta's 'slightly malicious imitation' because it is essentially 'a deliberate exposing of the tricks of their trade' (9). Jane's 'trade', in the early 1930s, represented an increasingly exotic and dynamic 'other world' as 'talking pictures' grew ever more popular and cinemagoers learned how to fashion their voices in addition to their appearances, so that the Hollywood actress became a more complete – not just bodily – manifestation of attractive womanliness.⁵⁰⁵ In a 1931 interview with Jean Harlow, Hollywood's 'blonde bombshell', a psychoanalyst referred to 'Her Armor of Girlish Purity' and jokingly described

Garbomania – that deadly disease which has caused thousands of our girls to expose their foreheads, fake an accent and keep their eyes half-closed in an effort to appear mysterious and alluring.⁵⁰⁶

Despite the tongue-in-cheek nature of this piece, it nonetheless points towards a popular understanding that beauty, allure, and mysterious sensuality could be counterfeited with a number of superficial gestures. Counterfeiting requires an original, though, and for 'Garbomania' to make sense there has to be an

⁵⁰⁵ Susan Currell, 'Film and Radio', in *American Culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 103-34 (127-33).

⁵⁰⁶ Leonard Hall, 'Spyglass on Jean Harlow, Who Is Also Known As: Hell's Angel', *Photoplay* (1931).

individual (Garbo) who really is ‘mysterious and alluring.’ Garbo was popularly distinguished from most fashionable women emulating her style, and played up to this, responding to journalists who had claimed that ‘[t]he real Garbo and the femininely alluring Garbo of the screen are [...] distinct’,⁵⁰⁷ that ‘it is not scenes I am doing – I am living’.⁵⁰⁸

Garbo notoriously refused to reveal the ‘core’ of her on-screen mystique, remaining, to quote the titles of two of her films, *The Divine Woman* and *The Mysterious Lady* (both 1928). Although Jane is, like Garbo, personally connected with her performances – she can only play herself, according to Poirot, and can only act in a production ‘written *about* her and *for* her’ (10. Emphasis original) – when Carlotta’s techniques are said to ‘expos[e] the tricks of [her] trade’, Christie places the Hollywood actress on a par with the impressionist, making her something of a simulacrum. Later, Christie demands the reader accept that a three-dimensional likeness of Jane’s femininity is based on this superficial performance because it is precisely Carlotta’s stage imitation that works in real life, convincing a dozen pillars of society, plus servants, of her identity. If the reader does not accept this, s/he does not accept the solution to the puzzle, and therefore the novel. Proposing this version of events, Poirot explains: ‘There is the golden hair, the well-known husky voice and manner. Oh! it was quite easy’ (185). The external ‘tricks’ which create Jane’s ‘glamorous’ body, what Poirot calls ‘her individuality’ (185), are sufficient on stage, on screen, and at a dinner party, and regardless of whose body underlies ‘Jane’s’ performance. In this sense, Christie presents feminine allure at its height (Jane is professionally and socially elite, the scandal of divorce granting her a fashionable edge) as a tactical masquerade involving a range of women.

Every time Jane appears, she is described in terms of what she is wearing and how she wears it. For example: ‘The widowed Lady Edgware was trying on hats in front of the glass. She was dressed in a flimsy creation of black

⁵⁰⁷ Rilla Page Palmberg, *The Private Life of Greta Garbo* (London: John Long, 1932), 12.

⁵⁰⁸ Quoted, *ibid.*, 73.

and white. She greeted us with a dazzling smile' (*Edgware*, 48). At one point, the narrator inserts 'a note about fashions' which are crucial in understanding the plot (95) – this being the story of Jane becoming known as a murderer. A woman ruthlessly judged by external signifiers, Jane establishes her alibi by claiming that she never wears black and then turning up at the crime scene in a black dress (54, 60). Despite announcing herself to the butler as 'Lady Edgware', Jane depends here on being remembered as a walking black dress and fashionable hat, nothing more.

Jane's 'strong physical beauty' is described as something she dons with her clothes, a defining adornment: Poirot discusses this with a man who claims to be 'devoted to Jane'. Because she can 'play' her beauty, Jane exercises power:

'One will stand a good deal from a beautiful woman, my friend,' said Poirot with a twinkle. 'If she had the pug nose, the sallow skin, the greasy hair, then – ah! then she would not "get away with it" as you put it.' (27)

As with Rossakoff, Christie here draws attention to the technical and physical effort required to be a woman, at a time when this is gaining increasing recognition across cultures. Sallow skin and greasy hair can both be addressed by make-up, but a 'pug-nose' cannot, although rhinoplasty, cosmetic nose surgery, was gaining popularity among wealthy women who sought the 'perfect', 'Hollywood nose'.⁵⁰⁹ The physical body beneath Jane's clothes and cosmetics takes a form that for many women is not naturally possible and has to be literally fashioned, like Pygmalion's statue. Poirot's use of the article 'the', excused by virtue of his foreignness, allows Christie to list these qualities of womanhood in a depersonalized fashion. The male authority figure in *Edgware*, then, presents Lady Edgware as a collection of features to be talked about and gazed upon. At this early stage in the narrative, Poirot claims to have solved the

⁵⁰⁹ A number of periodicals glamorized plastic surgery as the secret trick of the upper-classes and of Hollywood: 'Are [actresses who employ plastic surgeons] wrong? By no means. Their faces and their voices are their stock in trade. They have as much right to perfect their faces for their business as they have to take voice culture' [Harry Lang, 'Would You Like a New Nose?: How Hollywood Submits to the Knife of the Plastic Surgeon in the Name of Beauty', *Photoplay* (1930)]. See also: 'Nose-Bobbing: Miraculous Operation Brings Happiness to Hundreds', *Click: The National Picture Monthly* (Feb. 1938).

mystery of the hypnotic screen star as, once more, her mystique is connected with a performance, as watched on a screen. Repeatedly, Christie suggests that underneath Jane's façade of femininity there is no innate and secret 'woman,' but more façade.

The idea that womanhood is a masquerade had been expressed by some psychoanalysts of the time, notably Riviere, as discussed above. Christie, who consulted a psychoanalyst in 1927 ('Disappearance'), makes regular references to psychoanalysis and other medical or psychological fashions throughout her work. In *The Psychology of Clothes*, published by the Hogarth Press in 1930, J.C. Flügel had discussed women's clothes as extensions of their bodies, the aesthetic and elaborate other of men.⁵¹⁰ The previous year, Riviere had described 'genuine womanliness' and 'masquerade' as 'the same thing': for Riviere, femininity is a construction and a 'mask' worn by all women to hide latent gender transgression.⁵¹¹ Christie is one of a number of middlebrow writers active during the interwar years who, according to Nicola Humble, exhibit a patronizing hostility towards psychoanalysis.⁵¹² However, Poirot's investigative technique – asking seemingly irrelevant questions and reducing everything that is said or unsaid to a single truth – has been compared with Sigmund Freud's,⁵¹³ and as he often announces, 'I mean to arrive at the truth [...] in spite of you all' (*Ackroyd*, 123).

Christie, though, mocks the idea that life can reduce itself to truths as simple as those offered by the stylized detective story: Poirot frequently berates the 'amazingly normal' Hastings' naivety and suggests that he reads too many detective stories (*Edgware*, 99, 179). Edgware's housekeeper insists: 'All murderers are mentally deficient – of that I am assured [...] Internal gland secretion' (87). In this period, glands and hormones had entered the popular imagination as predetermining identity 'types', allowing for the possibility of

⁵¹⁰ J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 119-21.

⁵¹¹ Riviere, 'Femininity as Masquerade', 38.

⁵¹² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 227-30.

⁵¹³ Evans, 'Croquet and Serial Killers'; Dewi Llyr Evans, 'A Drop of Water from a Stagnant Pool: Agatha Christie's Parapractic Murders', *Crimeculture* (2007) <<http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/Articles-Summer07/Christie.html>>.

certain knowledge that a person could have, for example, criminal tendencies, from birth.⁵¹⁴ Putting these words into the mouth of a servant who has proved herself an unreliable witness, insisting that she saw something she could not have seen, Christie makes this kind of language and its assurance of knowledge sound dubious. Likewise, the aristocratic Sir Montague bores Hastings with a 'performance' that includes talking 'of Persian carpets, of the French impressionists, of modern music, and of the theories of Einstein' (*Edgware*, 102-103). Einstein's theories are no more understood in this scene than are various kinds of art, along with which they are ranked as merely fashionable lifestyle properties. In short, there is a tension between the detective genre's requirement for a clear and satisfying solution, and ever-evolving fashions, which offer but cannot deliver certain knowledge.

Jane kills Edgware in order to marry the Anglo-Catholic Duke of Merton, committing the gravest sin of all to avoid the more visible sin of divorce. Appearing to follow the letter, if not the spirit, of religious lore, Jane is able to masquerade successfully, socially and sexually. Although Merton is 'devoted to his mother', and 'said to have no taste for women' (*Edgware*, 16), Jane does not accept his lack of sexual interest but rather manipulates him into writing devoted love letters (122). Similarly, Edgware, it is said, 'ought never to have married anybody' (15) but Jane depends on his refusing a divorce on grounds of stoicism and tradition in order to get her own way: a divorce would be useless. Jane's marriages are not simply 'rich and advantageous', each a 'step in the successful career of a beautiful woman' (83, 23). They are with men who 'ought never to have married anyone', but whose social standing makes marriage an expectation. Jane's gendered performance, then, is part of a bigger social masquerade. Aristocracy and the ritual of marriage are presented in this novel as more stagey than the performing arts.

The traditional understanding of masquerade, as Butler has critiqued, holds that a woman's 'mask' conceals her desire for male authority. As Jean

⁵¹⁴ Chandak Sengoopta, *The Most Secret Quintessence of Life: Sex, Glands, and Hormones, 1850-1950* (Chicago, New York: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Harlow's autobiographical novel, *Today is Tonight*, written around the same time as *Edgware*, indicates, Hollywood glamour was often understood at the time as a strait for 'real' womanliness.⁵¹⁵ Like Rossakoff's, though, Jane's masquerade consciously creates as it enacts her femininity, in a Butlerian sense, as it responds to the gaze and interpretation of men. Jane poisons Carlotta, but her two male victims are stabbed, each in the base of his skull, with a servant's corn-knife.⁵¹⁶ The gesture of penetrating her 'queer' husband and a young thespian indicates an assertion of masculine power and control, but Carlotta, a woman, is killed in a gentler way. Jane also exercises control over marriage, not only exploiting the 'queer prejudice' of the church (190) against remarriage, but also suppressing her first husband's consent to divorce so that the marriage ends entirely on her terms.⁵¹⁷ However, her performance is exposed when she fails to understand a classical reference to 'the judgement of Paris', responding that New York is a better authority (157). The man who spoke of Paris had discussed the Trojan War with 'Jane' at the dinner party on the day of the murder, and because of her ignorance, he knows that she is not the same woman. The complete performance of vacuous femininity, the substitution for (masculine, learned) classical knowledge with (feminine, superficial) knowledge of fashion, arbitrarily reveals Jane's 'true identity' as the guilty party. In this sense, Christie seems to confirm that there exists an essential femininity, constituted by ignorance of masculine knowledge, beneath 'woman's' masquerade.⁵¹⁸ However, a more nuanced reading is possible if we consider Jane as mere artifice, still performing.

Everything Jane does is heightened. Even her egotism is extreme, paralleling Poirot's arrogance: when she asks if he wants her to be happy, and

⁵¹⁵ The opening scene of Harlow's novel involves her alter ego, Judy, itemizing her body as a tan, a bathing suit, and a hairstyle, reflecting that she needs to 'like' what 'men want', and 'unable to finish her sentence even mentally [...] when she thought of herself, it was like considering another person' [Jean Harlow, *Today Is Tonight* (New York: Dell, 1965), 3].

⁵¹⁶ The weapon is not identified until the end of the novel; the servants are overlooked. As Jane uses an object from a lower-class environment to violently ascend the class system, the threat her crimes pose to class structures themselves is inherently classed.

⁵¹⁷ In this novel, Christie – through Jane – uses 'queer' to describe elements of the aristocracy, the institution of marriage, and the Church, but never the theatre or Lord Edgware's ne'er-do-well nephew. The transatlantic socially mobile character offers a partly defamiliarized perspective on some of Britain's most traditional institutions, finding queerness, the very antithesis of normality, within them.

⁵¹⁸ See Sedgwick, 'Privilege of Unknowing', 25-30.

he proudly claims to 'want everybody to be happy', Jane responds that 'I wasn't thinking of everybody, I was thinking of just me' (16-17). Moreover, Jane is not simply defined by what she is wearing, but this, too, is overdone: the provocative luxury of 'a gossamer negligée that revealed more than it hid' is exacerbated by her description of it as 'a rag' (35). Of course, gossamer 'reveals' flesh through a gauze, so even as an exhibitionist, Jane offers only a controlled, filtered view of her body. The idea that Jane wants to 'fix [her] face' is taken in a non-metaphorical sense by the manly Hastings, who responds that none of her 'perfect' features could be fixed or improved (17-18).

Jane's femininity and its artificiality are exaggerated in her interactions with men. Addressing Poirot, she widens her eyes and speaks in a 'soft, low and deliciously seductive' voice (17); upon hearing of her husband's death she indulges in 'hysterics', 'a pretty bit of acting' so over-the-top it fools nobody (41). She wants to 'get rid of' Edgware because her next husband would have a better title and more money. Jane's insidious, stereotypical femininity allows Christie to craft more than a two-dimensional character; it lets her critique the way in which women's bodies are read, judged, and given meaning in terms of superficial 'feminine' signs.

If her identity is a show, there could be anyone beneath the performance of 'Jane the Murderer' – not just Jane, Carlotta, or even any other woman. During the investigation, Edgware's nephew and successor, Ronald Marsh, reminds Poirot that he could have murdered his uncle, disguised as Jane. After noting that *Lord Edgware Dies* would make a 'good title' and '[l]ook well on a book stall', he mocks his own position as prime suspect:

Oh! yes, case against the Wicked Nephew. Guilt is to be thrown on the hated Aunt by Marriage. Nephew, celebrated at one time for acting female parts, does his supreme histrionic effort. In a girlish voice he announces himself as Lady Edgware and sidles past the butler with mincing steps. No suspicions are aroused. 'Jane,' cries my fond uncle. 'George,' I squeak. I fling my arms about his neck and neatly insert the penknife. The next details are purely medical and can be omitted. Exit the spurious lady. (*Edgware*, 90)

'Spurious' or not, for the intents and purposes of detective fiction, this is a viable explanation for the crime. By 1933 when this novel was published, Christie had used the device of a slightly effeminate male amateur actor disguising as a woman in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) and *The Floating Admiral* (1931), and she parodies this later in *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), in which a neurotic woman is convinced that her (female) nurse is her husband in disguise.

The suggestion that all that is needed for 'no suspicions [to be] aroused' are clothes, a wig, a mince, and a squeaking voice sounds ridiculous but the allusion to the title of the novel and the tongue-in-cheek reference to 'purely medical [details, which] can be omitted' establish the character's mocking relationship with his own fictional nature, and a self-conscious appreciation of the limits of the detective story form. In turn, this reflects on the limited, closed society portrayed, where womanhood is equally superficially constructed. Femininity, which is the totality of Jane's existence as Jane/an actress/Lady Edgware, is, in this sense, tied to artifice and signifiers, independent of sex. Clothes, a voice, hair, and a 'histrionic effort': these are the means by which Carlotta, Ronald, and Jane herself can equally become Lady Edgware.

Despite the novel's emphasis on clothes and fashions, Jane's body is continually and self-consciously constructed via the written word. Willard Huntingdon Wright, who wrote detective fiction as S.S. Van Dine and produced a popular set of rules for writing mysteries, noted above, described the ideal clue as one hidden 'in the printed word, so that if the reader should go back over the book he [sic] would find that the solution had been there all the time'.⁵¹⁹ This emphasis on 'the printed word' is key. The main evidence in Jane's favour is a letter in which Carlotta explains who commissioned her impersonation. Although a page is evidently missing, the next one starts with 'he said I believe it would take in Lord Edgware himself...' (150). However, Poirot reveals that Jane tore an 's' from the beginning of the page, so that 'she' became 'he' and it read like an accusation against a man (182). In other words, Jane hides, not

⁵¹⁹ Quoted in John Irwin, *Unless the Threat of Death Is Behind Them: Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 171.

just behind gendered stereotypes, but behind her sex – behind her apparently indisputable, knowable womanliness – although she can, as Wu notes, ‘forfeit’ that sex when necessary.⁵²⁰ The murderer’s ‘she’-ness exists at the level of the written word, and can be exploited and altered on that level.

Accordingly, the novel ends with ‘A Human Document,’ the signed confession in which Jane accepts Poirot’s assignation of the label ‘murderer’ to her (189-192). The masquerade, though, continues, even to the last line of the text. Jane maintains her womanly mask, describing the pallor and thinness that have come with a murder trial as improvements on her beauty (192). Hastings still insists that Jane’s focus on clothes rather than emotions like grief or guilt ‘was no pose’ (189). The title of this chapter links Jane’s body with the written word, and also stands for the importance of confession in twentieth-century western culture. As Michel Foucault emphasizes, confession has been established in the West as ‘one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth’.⁵²¹

At the ‘heart’ and ‘centre’ of religious, scientific, and political systems, the confession establishes roles within dynamics of power and authority:⁵²² ‘we have singularly become a confessing society[, and] western man [sic] has become a confessing animal.’⁵²³ Foucault describes confession as ‘a ritual of discourse [and] power’, which establishes the speaker as the subject/the sinner/guilty, and the person being confessed to as an authority, ranked above the confessor.⁵²⁴ He also notes that it no longer exists in the context of formal ritual, and has come to pervade everyday power dynamics: it is part of what he calls the historical process of ‘fictionalizing’ – ‘One confesses – or is forced to confess’ according to the demands and values of the context, so that the confession brings cogency to what is being confessed.⁵²⁵ Confession creates

⁵²⁰ Wu, ‘The Importance of Being Cosy’, 94.

⁵²¹ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 56.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 58, 56, 61.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵²⁵ Michel Foucault, ‘Power Affects the Body’, in *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-84*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (New York, Brooklyn: Semiotext(e), 1996), 206-13; Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* 57.

truth as it is uttered, and also creates right and wrong; as acts and thoughts are confessed to, sin is brought into being and assumes force.⁵²⁶

Confession for Foucault is 'a mark of the truth' insofar as it is the vehicle for that truth, in a 'hermeneutical' capacity, making that which must be confessed and formerly 'couldn't be expressed into a sin.'⁵²⁷ Jane's confession, though, does not promote any conclusive truth. Although one character had claimed that 'if she did a murder, she would be caught' (*Edgware*, 18), Jane explains that she is not really so stupid as people think, and in fact has 'real brains' (189). This is a common theme with Christie's women; a sentiment expressed by the female murderer in *The Hollow* and the detective Miss Marple.⁵²⁸ For these characters, concealing knowledge allows them to exploit and undermine patriarchal Britain's various prejudices: nobody takes Marple, a gossipy old woman, seriously, for example, until she, like the murderers in *Hollow* and *Edgware*, confesses her knowledge and intuition at the close of the narrative.

However, after claiming to have possessed secret knowledge, confirming her as the author of the novel's complex criminal masquerade, Jane continues to exhibit the ignorance that had constituted her mask. She goes on to discuss the 'judgement of Paris' incident. The Paris of fashion is 'the only Paris she knows' (186) and Jane accedes that '[e]ven now I don't know who Paris was – and I think it's a silly name for a man' (191). Her womanly ignorance, when it comes to topics men understand,⁵²⁹ continues even after her unmasking and confession. Again, and in her vital confession, Jane here indicates that her lack of masculine knowledge is the truth beneath her masquerade: it is her essential identity. Despite this, though, Jane goes on to

⁵²⁶ Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. by Huck Gutman, Leuther H. Martin, and Patrick H. Hutton (Michigan: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵²⁸ Agatha Christie, *The Hollow* (London, Glasgow: Fontana, 1971), 181; Agatha Christie, *A Murder Is Announced* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 104-05. Further references to these sources will appear as *Hollow* and *Announced*. See also *Autobiography*, 430, in which Christie indicates that she was introduced to this social 'skill' by the actor Francis L. Sullivan.

⁵²⁹ '[S]he does not know history, or geography, nor the classics *sans doute*. The name of Lao Tse would suggest to her a prize Pekingese dog, the name of Molière a *maison de couture*' (*Edgware*, 83).

mock a confessor's guilt, and the surrounding intuitions of sin and religion, as she announces the need to see a chaplain and concludes, 'Yours Forgivingly (because I must forgive my enemies, mustn't I?)' (192). The insincerity of Jane's confession makes it a mockery, and undermines the traditional dynamics of power and identity inherent in the practice. 'The Murderer' is not Jane's true identity at this point, but merely another of her roles. Jane's identity – her ultimate truth – persists, problematically, as perennial masquerade.

Jane Wilkinson is rarely referred to as 'Lady Edgware', despite 'think[ing] very highly of social position' (84), and her name is arguably the strongest signifier of her feminine identity. Significantly, her confession is signed 'Jane Wilkinson', ensuring that, after accepting the role of 'murderer', she remains an individual on her own terms, as before, with autonomy and, as Makinen notes, 'the dignity of responsibility'.⁵³⁰ However, this does not close the book: it is followed by a post-script, so that instead of Jane's own pre-married name, the text ends with 'P.S. Do you think they will put me in Madame Tussauds?' (192), a final gesture towards the wish, or need, to be translated into wax, as an externally-constructed body. Although the form of the classic detective story requires a final revelation of the one truth on which it focuses – assignation of the *culprit* label – this truth is evidently not exhaustive. Jane avoids 'responsibility' as confession becomes another of her dramatic roles: the signature, the final name that embodies responsibility and the assumption of sin, is eclipsed by the reference to 'me', meaning a wax figure, 'in Madame Tussauds', so the masquerade has never stopped.

Indeed, Jane wants to be a fictional killer; the kind whose crime will 'look well on a book stall', rather than being forgotten because, according to the first line of the novel, '[t]he memory of the public is short' (7). The experimental modernist Gertrude Stein tried to write a detective novel in 1933, the year *Edgware* appeared, but gave up because 'a detective story does have to have

⁵³⁰ Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 155.

an ending and my detective story did not have any.⁵³¹ In the manuscript, published as *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*, she makes repeated references to the alleged serial killer Lizzie Borden, who died in 1927, refusing to confess to murders committed in 1892. 'Everybody remembers a crime where nobody finds out anything [and] the person mixed up with it goes on living', Stein explained. '[T]he present generation know[s] the name of Lizzie Borden.'⁵³² The most memorable detective stories, however, are those with absolutely coherent explanations: in life, attractive solutions are less memorable than unsolved cases, but in fiction it is the other way around.⁵³³ Jane's quest, then, for posterity in her 'human document', indicates a self-conscious appeal to artifice as a governing reality. Ultimately, despite *Edgware's* conventional confessional conclusion, there is resonance in the remark made by one character half-way through: Jane could not have committed the murder, according to Edgware's housekeeper, because she is 'somehow [...] too artificial' (87).

Despite assuming one of the major character roles in detective fiction, that of the murderer, Jane Wilkinson never really exists. If her artificiality is a heightened version of femininity's masquerade, then Christie draws attention to the constructed, performed nature of an apparently independent, strong modern femininity. The independent power Jane exerts, penetrating by stabbing Lord Edgware, who represents the degenerated, pathologized old order, is a discursively maintained illusion. Although Poirot's narrative role involves seeking after truth, the identities which emerge at the end are still based on external signifiers: this undermines the genre's need for one fixed truth and in turn questions the practicality of individual identity based on certain truth.

Arlena Stuart in *Evil Under the Sun* (1941)

According to Grella, victims in Christie and her contemporaries must necessarily embody qualities regarded as negative in their context: they 'suffer their violent

⁵³¹ Quoted in John Herbert Gill's introduction to Gertrude Stein, 'Blood on the Dining Room Floor', ed. by John Herbert Gill (Gertrude-Stein.Com, 1982).

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Ibid.

expulsion [from the narrative] because of some breach of the unwritten social or ethical code of the thriller of manners.⁵³⁴ Grella's traditional reading looks, as Plain would put it, 'through' rather than 'at' the victims. However, some of these victims act as vehicles for social commentary: Christie uses the narrative role of 'victim' to explore the 'unwritten social or ethical code[s]' themselves. The victim in *Evil*, for example, is a woman who appears to be powerful, controlling, and dangerously attractive. Unlike Jane, she is mature in age, and is more obviously intelligent; a *femme fatale* in a misogynistic world. However, by the end of the novel, Poirot has branded her an 'eternal and predestined [...] victim' in the hands of men (204): her whole life is defined, and ended, in terms of her effect on men.

During the Second World War (1939-1945), despite the large number of men dying on the battlefield, the majority of victims in Christie's murder mysteries are women. Reading through Plain, for whom a corpse in a detective story would represent, to war-conscious readers, 'the full significance of ritual death', we might expect an escapist detective story published in these years to feature masculine corpses accommodated by the genre's reassuring narrative structure.⁵³⁵ That is to say, with men fighting and dying on a daily basis, it would make sense for detective fiction to give the male body wholeness by featuring male victims whose deaths are explained and punished. However, all ten crime novels Christie published between 1940 and 1945 feature female victims, who outnumber male victims in these texts by fourteen to six.⁵³⁶ Naturally, during wartime, the ratio of female to male domestic readers rose dramatically.⁵³⁷ Wartime domesticity provided Christie with space to consider, more closely than before, women's bodies and social roles.

Cixous once claimed that women in literature will always occupy or confront 'the position of victim':

⁵³⁴ Grella, 'The Formal Detective Novel', 98.

⁵³⁵ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 32.

⁵³⁶ In original sole-authored novels published under her own name between 1920 and 1977, Christie features 120 definite cases of murder. 73 of these victims are male, and 47 are female.

⁵³⁷ 'Books and the Public: A Report for the National Book Council' (Mass Observation, 1944), 89-91.

She is always the Father's daughter, his sacrificial object, guardian of the phallus, upholding the narcissistic fantasy which helps the Father to ward off the threat of castration. Like Electra or Antigone, she is eliminated. Or, like Ophelia, she is [...] buried alive[; which is to say, l]ocked up and put away.'⁵³⁸

Much of Cixous' writing about *écriture féminine*, and the need for a new language of communication when history is wired phallogocentrically, to other and dehumanize women, arose from mid-twentieth century psychoanalytic, literary, and intellectual discussions of law, discourse, and feminine self-expression. Although popular writers neither contributed to nor featured in such discussions, there is a certain strategic usefulness in genre formulae, when stock figures appear self-consciously.

Evil is set on a holiday island off Devon in the early 1930s, the opening description of 'Jolly Roger Bay' establishing a self-conscious concern with escapism and romanticism (7-8). In the first chapter, Poirot, vacationing, looks down upon a group of sunbathers, remarking that 'they are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just – bodies!' (11). People who take part in what the narrative calls 'the great cult of the Seaside' (7) and what Poirot calls 'the sun ritual' (203) are, for Poirot, 'like slabs [of] butcher's meat', devoid of 'all romance – all the mystery!' (12, 11). Poirot laments that, in the modern era, 'everything is *standardised!*' (11. Emphasis original).

Poirot's criticism of the recent fashion for sunbathing appeals to the reserved 'romance' and 'mystery' of European women in bygone times. 'When I was young, one saw barely the ankle. The glimpse of a foamy petticoat, how alluring!' (11), Poirot remarks. On one level, he makes the Foucauldian point that taboos are discursive, suggesting that more clothes, rather than fewer, can provoke as they leave the flesh to the imagination – although, considering Rossakoff's theatricality, one need not equate more clothes with enigma. Moreover, Poirot confirms that women's bodies exist to be looked at. He does

⁵³⁸ Hélène Cixous, 'Aller À La Mer', *Modern Drama*, 27.4 (1984), 548.

not configure individuality or character beyond the body's physical appearance and sexual suggestiveness. Indeed, his first reaction to the sight of Arlena Stuart, the most hypnotic bather on the beach, is sexually coded: just as one man's 'figure stiffen[s]', and another man's 'eyes bulge', Poirot's moustache 'quiver[s] appreciatively' as Arlena emerges from the sea (18-19). In the opening pages of *Evil Under the Sun*, the female body presents, as Wilde put it, a 'work of fiction' rather than 'autobiography'⁵³⁹ – but this fiction is 'standardised', mass-marketed, and widely consumed as a sexual product.

'Arlena Stuart' is a stage name. She is 'really' called Helen Marshall, and has therefore literally made her name as a performer. The assumed name links her with real actresses rising to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s including the Broadway – later Hollywood – star Arlene Francis (1907-2001). As an actress, Arlena makes a career out of pretending to be something she is not, according to the essentialist dictates of the genre. What she 'really' is, however, is configured in terms of her marriage, since Marshall is her husband's name. Arlena's autonomy seems to be in moving away from 'nature,' which is grounded in the patriarchal institution of marriage.

From her assumed sexual power, other characters position Arlena as evil. She is, they say at various points, a 'siren', 'a man-eating tiger', and 'a vamp'. A fanatical vicar denounces Arlena as Jezebel. He says she is 'evil through and through.' Other guests describe her as 'the eternal Circe' and 'the personification of evil' (18, 25, 52, 84, 17, 19, 21). In this sense, Arlena appears as a *femme fatale*, which Lee Horsley describes as a stock-character typical to 'male-authored crime fiction'. The 'transgressor', the 'evil woman' who is the only perceived alternative to 'the good but weak woman who is the [...] victim.'⁵⁴⁰ This is a strong theme in American 'hardboiled' fiction of the period – for instance, the works of Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain.

However, in Christie's more English version of the crime story, a character perceived as evil or immoral often ends up as the victim.

⁵³⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 730.

⁵⁴⁰ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 244.

Paradoxically, as attention is drawn towards Arlena's disarming power over men, the reader comes to regard her as a definite victim, and it comes as no surprise when her murder is announced. Towards the end of the novel, Poirot rethinks the idea that Arlena was 'fatally attractive, to men'. In fact, he claims, she was fatally *attracted* to them: 'to my mind,' he says, 'though evil was present it was not centred on Arlena Marshall at all.' Because of Arlena's obsession with making herself desirable, she became easy prey to swindlers masquerading as lovers. Admitting to viewing Arlena 'very differently' from 'everybody [else]', Poirot claims that he 'saw her first, last and all the time as an eternal and predestined *victim*' (204. Emphasis original). Used by men, and obliged to perform an eroticized feminine masquerade, Arlena is a character who does not exist beyond stereotyped words, images, and gestures.

After her death, Poirot and the investigating officers search Arlena's bedroom for clues:

Here was every kind of cosmetic and unguent known to beauty parlours. Amongst this panoply of woman's affairs, three men moved purposely. [...] Foamy lingerie lay in piles. On a wide shelf were hats [of many varieties. A] faintly indulgent smile came to his lips. He murmured:

'Les femmes!' (125-6)

Poirot, a man, is interested in clothes, but Arlena's possession of various different hats, gowns, and undergarments marks her out as a woman, one of '*les femmes*'. Shortly after this passage, a police officer explains the difference between types of foundation to his superior: notably, then, the men who 'other' women for their use of make-up know all about it. Later on, Poirot only works out where Arlena has been because he recognizes her scent, which is worn by various high class ladies, including another one in the novel. The woman is identified via the purchased cosmetics that link her to the rest of her sex, despite her apparent uniqueness. Arlena, one of the suspects reminds the detectives, relatively early on, 'only lived in the light of a man's admiration' (91).

Before her death, Arlena only appears sunbathing or applying make-up: 'She was dressed in glittering green and looked a little like a mermaid. She was

[...] applying mascara' (*Evil*, 32), the comparison to a mythical creature cementing the woman's fantastic, other-worldly personality, but connecting it with cosmetics. As an apparently successful, independent woman, Arlena has defied nature and created herself anew, but always in an imitative way. Unlike Jane Wilkinson, Arlena is not simply artificial, but her persona is derived from others – the mythical mermaid or 'siren,' or even 'Jezebel' and 'Circe.' These are powerful figures of antiquity, all charged with destroying men, by virtue of hypnotic sexuality. However, as Cixous points out, they are masculine constructions – written to shift culpability; to transfer internalized guilt, and also having the effect of denying agency to women. As she writes,

isn't this fear [of woman, as other] convenient for [men]? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.⁵⁴¹

What looks like Arlena's agency can be seen as submission to the masculine narratives that brand her as dangerous. Franco Moretti famously observed that in an Agatha Christie novel, the only way '[t]o avoid death [is to] conform to a stereotype: in this way, one will never be a victim or a criminal' because it is the individual, the transgressor, who disrupts the status quo and must either be killed or punished.⁵⁴² As men protest their fear of Arlena, they prepare her tanned and dieted body for victimhood.

Arlena is a character who does not exist beyond what men have to say about her. While existing as stereotyped words, images, and gestures can be a strength for Rossakoff, and even for Jane in *Edgware*, for Arlena it signifies a supreme renunciation of personhood. Indeed, it has become commonplace for

⁵⁴¹ Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 885.

⁵⁴² Franco Moretti, 'Clues', in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, David Miller (London: Verso, 1983), 137, 135.

reviewers to note that for a character who is supposed to be transfixing and hypnotic, she is presented with remarkable blandness.⁵⁴³

One reviewer of *Evil* claimed that,

[a]s a woman, Christie takes us into the private world of female gossip, where a young lady's sexual habits (and partners) are subject to the traditional English scrutiny. But Christie is sympathetic, too, toward the actress who finds herself used by men, [...] a victim of their calculated attentions.⁵⁴⁴

The implied masculine audience is, of course, at odds with Christie's widely female wartime readership. The implication that the text merges 'tradition' with an innovative attempt to look closer, at individual women, suggests a possibility of uniquely gendered self-expression. Far from being a successful, independent woman, Arlena is a body in the hands of men and male discourse. Given Arlena's status as one of '*les femmes*' by virtue of her dependence on 'a panoply of' cosmetics, it is fitting that her corpse is played by another woman, made-up with liquid tan. Arlena is killed by her lover, Patrick, who has embezzled all her money. He appears to discover her corpse, and sends a witness off to get help. Once the witness has gone, his 'sickly' wife, Christine, who has been posing as Arlena beneath a sun hat, departs. Patrick strangles Arlena, who has been waiting for him elsewhere, displays her body as before, and has an alibi. 'Body', says Poirot, explaining the solution. 'The word stirred something in my mind – bodies lying on the beach – *all alike*' (203. Emphasis original).

Poirot reflects that '[o]ne moderately well-made young woman is very like another. Two brown legs, two brown arms, a little piece of bathing suit in between – just a body' (203). To bronze her limbs Christine simply requires a bottle of tanning make-up, and despite being a very different woman to Arlena, their bodies are interchangeable. The body that Arlena has devoted her life and career to cultivating can equally come out of a bottle, indicating its supreme

⁵⁴³ Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, 204.

⁵⁴⁴ Bryan Hough, 'Evil under the Sun (1941)', in *The New Bedside, Bathrub and Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie*, ed. by Dick Riley and Pam McAllister (New York: Ungar, 1991), 137-38 (138).

commercial, commodity status. Poirot elaborates that women talking and moving demonstrate ‘personality – individuality. But in the sun ritual – no’ (203). Playing the part of a corpse, Christine equally plays the part of a sunbather, as well as standing in for Arlena’s body on a textual level: as far as the reader is concerned, the woman is already dead. As Arlena has been connected with fashion and with sunbathing throughout, her body is the extent of her characterisation. She is a victim, always denied both ‘personality’ and ‘individuality’.

Arlena’s body is so deindividualized that it need not be human. Her adolescent stepdaughter despises her so much that she attempts black magic, stabbing a wax effigy with a pin; again, Arlena’s body is equated with an artificial likeness (198). The fact that the murder occurs as the model is penetrated ensures that this equation is never fully undermined. A number of characters remark that Arlena is a more natural mistress than a wife, and men tend to get bored with her before marriage can be raised (74). The pinnacle of fashionable feminine vitality, then, Arlena is ‘like meat in a butcher’s shop’, a selection of characters according to male discourse. Bodies in *Evil* are more than a critique of uniformity in fashion. Stylized and self-conscious, the novel’s victim evidences the disruptive potential of feminine sexual expression, and its impossibility in a patriarchal context. Wartime domesticity and the holiday setting’s liminality make this kind of reflection possible.

Conclusion

Plain points out that ‘[g]ender transgression and the disruption of “normative” sexuality have always been an integral part of crime narrative’.⁵⁴⁵ Heather Worthington adds that, traditionally, such concerns have centred on female bodies and the feminine.⁵⁴⁶ To summarize this chapter’s findings, a comparison of the three fictional women considered above is germane. While Rossakoff

⁵⁴⁵ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 6.

⁵⁴⁶ Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, 41-42.

celebrates the artifice that makes her a woman, Jane does not exist beyond it, and Arlena is its victim. If, as Butler claims, 'woman' only exists insofar as she is performed and signified, then Rossakoff celebrates the use of make-up and clothes – the performance of gender – as key to her individuality. Jane, though, is not an exotic 'other,' celebrating 'woman' through a stereotypically 'European concern with "experience" itself':⁵⁴⁷ she is defined through her various labelled identities, as an actress, a social climber, and a murderer. Written in a specific context, Arlena stands for victimhood, which is *lack* misread as *agency*. Christie evidently matures as a writer and reflects a distinctly modern sense of paranoia regarding identities' unstable, insecure, and increasingly inadequate parameters.

Rossakoff's last appearance is in 'The Capture of Cerberus', of which two versions exist, written in 1940 and 1946. By the time of this last appearance, the character's identity is not equated with her 'swirl of sables' as in 'Double'. Here, Rossakoff defends femininity as a dying art in the face of women's expanding rights and autonomy in professional matters:

[Young women] do not try any more to please – always in my youth, I tried – the colours that suited me – a little padding in the frocks – the corset laced tight round the waist – the hair, perhaps a more interesting shade –'

She pushed back the heavy Titian tresses from her forehead – it was undeniable that she, at least, was still trying and trying hard!

'To be content with what Nature has given you, that – that is stupid! It is also arrogant!' ('Cerberus B', 849)

References to 'colours', 'padding', 'shades', the artistic 'Titian tresses', and the mention of a 'corset', considered unhealthy and no longer widely used by the 1940s,⁵⁴⁸ presents the fashions of her youth in a theatrical way. Rossakoff depends on these external properties to create an artistic body for herself. The body she was born with is merely a product of gifts from 'Nature' and 'Sex', both reified with capital letters, and to construct an identity requires 'trying hard'

⁵⁴⁷ David Leavitt, quoted in Brian James Baer, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 1.3 (2000), 615.

⁵⁴⁸ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New York: Yale University Press, 2005), 156.

without recourse to 'stupid', 'arrogant' essentialism. Rossakoff presents once-common fashion as an artistic pursuit and a performative duty. Hers is a hedonistic approach to identity whereby one selects external signifiers and constructs oneself accordingly.

Here, it could be argued that Rossakoff is attractive to Poirot because she is able to express hyper-femininity as Poirot cannot. Because she is perceived to be a woman, Vera Rossakoff can take feminine self-expression to elaborate lengths, while Poirot is bound by his status as a male hero to embody, at best, a feminized kind of masculinity. The gender-essentialist equation of femininity with the female body and with womanhood, which also equates masculinity with the male body and with manhood, is, perhaps, tragically mocked if we read Rossakoff as a drag artist. Poirot's insistence that she really is a Countess and really is Russian, as well as his refusal to consider evidence to the contrary, becomes in this reading symptomatic of heterosexual panic, in the Sedgwickian, rather than the legal, sense. Just as Hastings accepts more physical affection from Poirot than from his wife, so too does Poirot refuse to consider the absence of essence in his own equivalent of '*the woman.*'

However, in *Evil*, also written in the 1940s, Christie specifically denies the idea – or fear – that cosmetic and artistic approaches to femininity are themselves tickets to joyous self-expression. Using the generically required 'victim,' Christie illustrates such femininities as always generated by and within masculine discourse. Arlena's body is 'girl'd' (or 'womaned') as she herself is 'vamped': through 'cosmetics and unguents' but also the value-laden testament of men. If Arlena is 'the eternal Circe,' then Circe is seen as a victim role – a scapegoat of male insecurity. The product of capitalist demand, Arlena does not just lack agency: she lacks life, whether she lies strangled, sunbathing, or hiding offstage.

Jane, too, allows Christie to call into question the notion of absolute truth in constructions of 'woman' as an identity. Rather than presenting a character who might be read as a playful drag-act, though, the author creates a woman who takes her performative womanhood to potentially subversive extreme by

accepting numerous identities from the men around her. Penetrating the man who gave her a title and position, maintaining ignorance of the classics, and arranging her alibis through clothes, she encourages men to look at her and tell her what she is. Both the countess and Jane are exposed as criminals via a few printed characters: BP and S/HE. The former requires knowledge of two languages and the ability to switch between English and Russian. The latter is a doctored, not passive, text, which requires imaginative reconstruction. A detective story needs a culprit, but here 'culprit' is just another of Jane's roles, as she finally equates herself with an embodied image, asking the *man* who has branded her culprit if 'they'll put me in Madame Tussauds'.

Are there any real women in Christie's prose? 'Women' exist as masquerades of femininity, with varying degrees of cogency and varying levels of insistence, but Christie does not examine any essential, underlying truth beneath the enacted identity. For this reason, trying to read endorsed or discouraged models of womanhood in these texts is not advisable. Instead, the texts reveal that stable identity, and stable womanhood, cannot be known: in Christie's fiction, life can be an unsubstantiated masquerade. With Jane Wilkinson in *Lord Edgware Dies*, Christie draws attention to the too-convenient, arbitrariness of essential truth. With Vera Rossakoff, she celebrates femininity as a performance that can be undermined, subverted, and mocked as it is perpetuated. With Arlena Stuart, she provides serious caveats about the impossibility of feminine self-expression, and the difficulty of subversion, in a social order coded against it. In summary, such women allow us to look at cosmetics and other weapons and ask, like the secretary in *The Man in the Brown Suit*, 'What should a woman want with these?'

Crooked Houses: Families and Growth after the Second World War

And it might be all one life, with no escape.

T.S. Eliot, 'The Family Reunion'⁵⁴⁹

Queer lives would not follow the scripts of convention.

Sara Ahmed⁵⁵⁰

You'll think I'm hysterical or queer or something.

Gwenda in *Sleeping Murder*⁵⁵¹

Introduction

Masculinity exists insofar as it is threatened; femininity is a masquerade. The worlds in and of which Christie writes are not conservatively stable; they brim with illusion and insecurity. This much we have gleaned, and before considering Christie's relevance in other times and other media, it is worth exploring her approach to the family, in an important post-war historical moment. The family is, as queer theorists have recognized at least since Sedgwick, the context in which individual identities are first constructed and delineated.⁵⁵² Traditionally, the family is the subject's introduction to wider social structures that will be grown into, and to human relationships.⁵⁵³ More specifically, a family home provides a physical representation of the family and identity-formation therein, in terms of location, containment, size, and decoration. Therefore, the present chapter considers Christie's presentation of the family unit in the period following the Second World War. While numerous commentators have observed that the author's approach to families is far from static, existing

⁵⁴⁹ T.S. Eliot, 'The Family Reunion', in *The Complete Plays of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 55-122 (78).

⁵⁵⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 177.

⁵⁵¹ Agatha Christie, *Sleeping Murder* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 38. Further references to this source will appear as *Sleeping*.

⁵⁵² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'How to Bring Your Kids up Gay', *Social Theory*, 29 (1991).

⁵⁵³ Sedgwick, 'Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in *the Importance of Being Earnest*', 52.

treatments of the theme have rarely been historicized, homogenizing texts written between 1916 and 1973.

This chapter accordingly focuses on three novels Christie published in the decade after 1945. That decade has been neglected in Christie scholarship, perhaps because it marks a transitory period in the author's style: gone is the flamboyant, colourful playfulness of her early texts, and yet to appear is the paranoid wariness of youth that dominates her late novels.⁵⁵⁴ In these years, families – smaller than in previous times – provided crucial rhetorical fodder when it came to futurity and recovery from tragedy on a national scale. Now, the conventional nuclear family has long been regarded, 'for all its remarkable capacity to cushion its members in times of stress, [as being far from] particularly healthy'.⁵⁵⁵

In this chapter, I argue that Christie participated in contemporary debates about the nature and even the relevance of the traditional, 'normal,' or 'ideal' family. Families emerge in these texts as anything but knowable, secure, and nostalgically traditional: they are as confused and inconsistent as the societies with which they dialogue. After outlining some pertinent theory, this chapter looks at three things: (1) incest in *Sleeping Murder* (1976, but written around 1945);⁵⁵⁶ (2) the innocence of childhood in *Crooked House* (1949); (3) adoption in *They Do it with Mirrors* (1952). In *Sleeping Murder*, Christie focuses on the need to come to terms with the past in order to move on and create one's own future, as the murder being investigated occurred eighteen years previously. The protagonist must come to terms with the incestuous desire that has led a family friend to murder his sister, and which is presented through literary allusions.

⁵⁵⁴ *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) probably typifies the former, and *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970) certainly typifies the latter.

⁵⁵⁵ Michael Humphrey and Heather Humphrey, *Families with a Difference: Varieties of Surrogate Parenthood* (London: Routledge, 1988), 1.

⁵⁵⁶ The exact date of composition has been disputed (see Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, 245-57). Archived letters suggest that, under its original title, *Murder in Retrospect*, the novel was first drafted in the early 1940s and continually revised as late as 1962 (Agatha Christie Business Correspondence Archive, University of Exeter, File EUL MS 99/1/1941 and EUL MS 99/1/1962. See also Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 369). Dating the text is tricky, since it is set in the 1930s. Nonetheless, because of a recurring reference in the novel to John Gielgud's production of *The Duchess of Malfi*, which ran from 1945-6, we can suppose that the bulk of *Sleeping Murder* in its present state was written around that time.

The house is where the child grows up and is conditioned, and in *Crooked*, Christie grapples with the idea of childhood innocence. Lee Edelman has described a political tendency to hold up the figure of the child as an emblem of innocence that needs to be protected against corruptive influences. This, he claims, establishes the child – a product of heterosexual reproduction – as correct, and positions the queer as dangerous.⁵⁵⁷ *Crooked* undermines the thesis of the innocent child by having an eleven-year-old murder her grandfather; it also presents a family that can endure because, eventually, it branches out of the family home. Old families are presented as sick, stagey, and ritualistic. Successful families adapt to new contexts, sometimes fundamentally.

Theatricality is a theme in both *Sleeping Murder* and *Crooked House*, and it dominates *They Do it with Mirrors*, the title of which links the central murder to a conjuring trick. An ‘audience’ of houseguests experiences a family quarrel, distracted from a murder occurring in another room. In addition to conscious theatricality, Christie presents the rather fragmentary family in that novel theatrically: everyone is playing a part. The family is a product of several marriages and adoptions both formal and unofficial, and the family home is shared with juvenile delinquents, one of whom turns out to be an illegitimate relative. With complex dialogues focussed on sexuality and generational haziness between adoptive relatives, *Mirrors* reflects a post-war suspicion that the conventional family is as much of a façade as the neo-gothic mansion in which this one lives. A ‘normal’ family emerges as an impossibility, as all kinds of boundaries between desire and duty reach their crisis. Moreover, Christie shows that the nuclear family model is ill-suited to a world where values, priorities, and, therefore, families are developing.

Each of these novels ends with a young couple embarking on a happy marriage. Notably for Christie, all three couples are already together at the beginning, meaning that the texts grant them space to adapt to their new spousal identities. These are effectively honeymoon texts but set in old family

⁵⁵⁷ Edelman, *No Future*, 1-32.

homes that draw attention to the impossibility of complete autonomy in creating one's identity by making literal the influences of childhood and the past on current gestures of selfhood. For example, Sophia refuses to marry Charles in *Crooked* until he has lived in her house, observed her family, and decided which member killed her grandfather. The premise of *Crooked* is, apparently, the need to come to terms with one's heredity in order to start one's own family. While the family always survives in Christie it is not always finally recognizable: Charles and Sophia move to another country and 'forget the Crooked Little House' in which Sophia grew up (*Crooked*, 187). Christie, then, does not dispute the need for family to exist, but does challenge the idea that 'family' can have a static definition and explores the need for new models of kinship.

Reading Christie, Reading Families

Since Light's discussion of 'conservative modernity' and interwar women writers, it has become commonplace to describe Christie as a semi-satirical commentator on the decline of class fixity and pre-war conservatism. On her apparently escapist pages, claims Mary Anne Ackershoek, aristocratic families face decline, destruction, and irrelevance, like their symbolically and literally crumbling homes.⁵⁵⁸ Rowland, too, connects the façade of intergenerational family unity and stability in these novels with criminal deceptions, noting 'a dangerous collapse of familial boundaries of identity and passion' within the house's confusing mock-Gothic architecture.⁵⁵⁹ Given the breadth of her study, Rowland is unable to devote much space to *Mirrors*, where this theme is elaborated. I will, however, discuss *Mirrors* in due course, interrogating the productiveness of Rowland's claim in relation to what makes a post-war family for Christie. When we consider, as Brittain Bright points out, that the country house in Christie is not simply a convenient setting in which disparate strangers

⁵⁵⁸ Mary Anne Ackershoek, "'The Daughters of His Manhood': Christie and the Golden Age of Detective Fiction", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. by Ruth Priogozy and Jerome Delemater (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 119-228.

⁵⁵⁹ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 12, 123.

can congregate, but rather a *family* home,⁵⁶⁰ we come to appreciate important questions: those of continuity and futurity. Christie once defended her tendency to write about country houses, arguing that ‘you *have* to be concerned with a house: with where people *live*.’⁵⁶¹ If big houses are facades, disingenuously nostalgic, structurally and economically unviable, then the families within must grow outwards, where there is space to grow, or face collapse.

Like a number of scholars and commentators, Rowland seems to position Christie in an interwar vacuum. Christie scholarship to date is remarkably reluctant to historicize, so, dealing with the relevant question of whether ‘birth might [be said to] determine character’ in Christie, York cites, in a single paragraph, texts from 1945, 1950, 1941, 1952, 1971, 1958, 1938, 1972, 1956, and 1964, concluding that Christie seems ‘uncertain’ as to what to think about heredity.⁵⁶² York does in fact mention that it is ‘later books’ which include ‘denials of hereditary vice’ but does not give the dates of any of the cited titles, and the statement does not seem to inform the rest of his argument.⁵⁶³ An historicized discussion of adoption, something most topical in the post-war period, but so far treated biographically and ahistorically in Christie scholarship, assists us in imagining a post-war understanding of family identity.⁵⁶⁴

Families rarely emerge from Christie scholarship as stable or attractive. Nonetheless, as I have indicated, families survive the novels, which usually end with marriage and the promise of a new generation. The families have been changed and undermined but endings are tinged with optimistic futurism, a fact rarely noted in attempts to reclaim Christie as socially keyed-in before Humble. Humble’s argument that ‘Eccentric Families’ survive novels like Christie’s because they can adapt to the changing demands of the twentieth century while

⁵⁶⁰ Brittain Bright, ‘Agatha Christie’s Reconstructions of the Country House’, *The Country House in Britain, 1914-2014* (conference at Newcastle University, 2014).

⁵⁶¹ Quoted in Wyndham, ‘Agatha Christie Writes Animated Algebra’, 9. Emphasis original.

⁵⁶² York, *Agatha Christie*, 75-76.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁶⁴ See, for example, Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, 11-14, 125-26.

also standing for a nineteenth century ideal of sprawling opulence will be explored more fully in the next section.⁵⁶⁵

But what constitutes a family? As George Behlmer notes, offering a 'universal definition' 'would be an exercise in cultural myopia': the word's diversity of connotations, even in a given temporal and geographical context, 'is enormous.'⁵⁶⁶ Since I am maintaining that, in line with the efforts of a number of post-war middlebrow novelists,⁵⁶⁷ Christie is interested in confronting what Sedgwick calls 'a hygienic western fantasy' of the happy and simple 'biological' family,⁵⁶⁸ queer approaches to that institution in which identities are first negotiated will prove germane.

A contemporary strand of queer theory interrogates the ideal of the 'nuclear' family; that is, traditionally, the heterosexual married couple living with their two biologically conceived children.⁵⁶⁹ The scope of even the nuclear family has broadened with the rise of adoption within the middle-classes, the increasing respectability of remarriage, and state-sanctioned same-sex unions. Still, these gestures confer authority on the original nuclear model by encouraging its emulation: same-sex couples can become like married heterosexuals, and an adopted child can be made to feel like a biological child. Same-sex marriage debates, Butler reminds us, draw heavily upon 'profound and abiding investments' both in heterosexual monogamy and in legitimate/illegitimate binaries when it comes to sexual cohabitation.⁵⁷⁰ 'Equal marriage' is an oppressive exercise in conformity which promotes a specific family model as trans-contextually ideal. The development of sexuality is a feature of identity that marks the individual's growth *beyond* the family unit, rather than being

⁵⁶⁵ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 149-96.

⁵⁶⁶ George K. Behlmer, *Friends of the Family: The English Home and Its Guardians, 1860-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3.

⁵⁶⁷ Perhaps most prominently Dodie Smith and Elizabeth Taylor, both discussed briefly below and less briefly in studies by Humble and her imitators.

⁵⁶⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 42.

⁵⁶⁹ I use this brutally limited definition advisedly. Any ideology that aspires to a nuclear standard is by its nature brutally limiting. For more on the origins and potential uses of the term, see Vern L. Bengtson, 'Beyond the Nuclear Family: The Increasing Importance of Multigenerational Bonds', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63.1 (2001).

⁵⁷⁰ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 105.

defined wholly by the family itself,⁵⁷¹ which means that it is at least potentially subdued by the powerful rhetoric of the nuclear family.

The child of heterosexual union is the lynchpin of the nuclear family. For this reason a number of commentators, particularly within queer studies, have focussed their attacks on the family on that figure. While proponents of 'queer optimism,' most notably Michael Snediker and Michael Cobb, have argued that the child 'can liven up queer theory',⁵⁷² Edelman's war-cry rings louder: 'Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net', and so on.⁵⁷³ For Edelman, 'the Child' stands for 'reproductive futurity' – the lynchpin of nuclear 'family values' and heterosexuality with a social conscience. The orphan Annie, who sings of hope 'Tomorrow,' embodies something influentially noted by Sedgwick: the presentation of ignorance as innocence, and an implicit normalisation of whiteness, gender essentialism, and reproductive heterosexual parenthood that produces the child.⁵⁷⁴ The hope for 'Tomorrow' is the hope that this will continue, and the suggestion that it should, as it masquerades as untarnished and instinctual; as human default. 'Not for nothing,' Edelman writes, are villains in children's literature traditionally 'unmarried men' whose connection with death makes them represent 'the destruction of the Child' who must triumph and affirm futurity.⁵⁷⁵

Sociologists have long recognized 'that much of what is said about children and childhood is not really about children and childhood.'⁵⁷⁶ Chris Jenks describes 'the child' as 'a device to propound versions of society and social cohesion.'⁵⁷⁷ In sexuality studies, James Kincaid has provocatively argued that innocence is a myth 'inculcated and enforced' upon children so as

⁵⁷¹ Altman, *The End of the Homosexual?*, 119-20.

⁵⁷² Michael Cobb, 'Childlike: Queer Theory and Its Children', *Criticism*, 47 (2005), 120. See also Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁵⁷³ Edelman, *No Future*, 29.

⁵⁷⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'A Poem Is Being Written', in *Representations* (London: Routledge, 1987), 110-43.

⁵⁷⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 21.

⁵⁷⁶ Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

to strip the child of agency.⁵⁷⁸ The idea of childhood as ‘a blank slate’ appeals, he claims, ‘because it does not interfere with our own projections’:⁵⁷⁹ the adult has some freedom in interpreting what qualities the child is ‘innocent’ in relation to. Youthful innocence is, in this understanding, ‘a co-ordinate set of have-nots’:⁵⁸⁰ it is the perceived absence of experience, awareness, or some other quality inherent in the perceiver’s adulthood. Childhood, then, is fetishized since:

[t]he child carries for us things we somehow cannot carry for ourselves, sometimes anxieties we want to be divorced from and sometimes pleasures so great we would not, without the child, know how to contain them.⁵⁸¹

To this extent, for Kincaid, the Child is a fantasy; an externalized retreat from personal growth and responsibility. Nonetheless, internalizing deferred guilt as ‘innocence’, the child also becomes a site of potential and anti-identity.

If ‘growing up’ is a child’s societal duty, and as Freud understood it, a process of inscribing the psyche with codes and sentiments which suppress natural instincts that otherwise become incestuous,⁵⁸² then Kathryn Bond Stockton does not merely attack the (default straight) child. She looks at alternatives and resistances – queering, or finding the queer, children. For Stockton,

perhaps we stay focussed on safeguarding children because we fear them. Perhaps we are threatened by the spectre of their longings that are maddeningly, palpably opaque; their leisure-time activities that often don’t include us; and their robust consumer wishes that lessen our control.⁵⁸³

⁵⁷⁸ James R. Kincaid, *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.

⁵⁷⁹ James R. Kincaid, ‘Producing Erotic Children’, in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 9-10 (10). This quote partially appears, and is developed, in Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 12.

⁵⁸⁰ Kincaid, ‘Producing Erotic Children’, 10.

⁵⁸¹ Kincaid, *Child Loving*, 79.

⁵⁸² Sigmund Freud, ‘The Finding of an Object’, in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works* (London, New York, Camberwell: Penguin, 1991), 144-54 (148).

⁵⁸³ Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 126.

In this conception, the 'blank slate' is less appealing than alarming and unknowable to the adult who will never become a child. The child remains a crucial element in the construction of adult identity, as the displaced other, representing both possibility and impossibility for the adult; a site for polemical but also fearful projections.

Stockton's concept of 'growing sideways' is, she claims, a more attractive proposal. Related to Edelman's ideas, but 'not reducible to' them, it is 'something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and emotion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive.'⁵⁸⁴ 'One does not "grow up"', Stockton reminds us, 'from innocence to a position of protecting it.'⁵⁸⁵ Innocence is a problematic, even dangerous, concept in this respect, as we have discussed with reference to Sedgwick and Edelman. 'Growing up' suggests one direction and a point to which one aspires, the point of supposed full identity in adulthood, and hence the identity of the child is always temporally qualified with reference to adult identity, but 'growing sideways' brings "adults" and "children" into lateral contact of surprising sorts.'⁵⁸⁶

A birth creates more than a child, as Rachel Bowlby points out in her study of parenthood in twentieth-century literature. Although the child may appear 'unique and central, charged with any number of possible and fascinating futures' while 'parental characters [seem to] flatly fulfil [...] a prescribed part', there is a 'sheer peculiarity of parenthood' that can be teased out of twentieth-century narratives.⁵⁸⁷ Bowlby's approach reminds us that literary families and approaches to the family can be more complicated than they appear – and it is worth considering in the texts I will explore, which are evidently concerned with ideas of childhood and innocence. In *Sleeping Murder*, for example, the protagonist discovers that her father committed suicide when she was an infant, so that she could grow up ignorant of her stepmother's murder, and the 'kink' in the family's heredity could be smoothed over. Here,

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁸⁷ Rachel Bowlby, *A Child of One's Own: Parental Stories* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

the child represents 'a repository of hope, yet a site of instrumentalisation for the future.'⁵⁸⁸ As a symbol, the child is crucial in constructions of individuality and of the family.

There is, then, queerness to be a found within limited governing structures and institutions such as the family. It is important to react against oppressive institutions, but sometimes it is also important to reconceptualize and reconfigure those institutions. It may, for example, prove productive to 'debunk [...] the nuclear family' while still accepting the importance of 'a common identity uniting people' which is also a context in which identities and individualities are delineated.⁵⁸⁹ Valerie Lehr, for instance, suggests rethinking the family along non-biological lines: for instance, as 'a community of friends'.⁵⁹⁰ What I read in Christie is not so much a focus on futurity as one on survival, optimism, and productivity over reproductivity. As Holly Furneaux sought to 'open up new ways of conceptualising queer in relation to the domestic' by reading Charles Dickens' families as queer-but-affirmative,⁵⁹¹ I suggest that in Christie's post-war detective fiction, the stable, 'traditional' family is presumed not to exist. Indeed the families in a number of post-war detective novels, and certainly the children, are possessed of queer potential.

Some Context

In 1967, the anthropologist Edmund Leach outed the family as 'the source of all our discontents', a bastion of 'narrow privacy and tawdry secrets' rather than 'the basis of the good society'.⁵⁹² However, Leach was hardly alone in configuring the family as oppressive. Published and archived responses to Leach's refutation of 'soppy propaganda about the virtue of united family life'⁵⁹³

⁵⁸⁸ Erica Burman, *Child, Image, Nation* (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.

⁵⁸⁹ Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 43.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

⁵⁹¹ Furneaux, *Queer Dickens*, 14.

⁵⁹² Edmund Leach, *A Runaway World?: The Reith Lectures, 1967* (London, 1968), 44.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

indicate that a number of individuals, particularly wives and mothers, privately questioned the 'soppy propaganda' as far back as the 1940s, but felt unable to take action.⁵⁹⁴ Deborah Cohen notes that published criticism of the family was 'not entirely novel' prior to Leach's lecture, but 'was confined to an avant-garde.'⁵⁹⁵ For Cohen, this pent-up resistance to an apparent established way of things added fuel to the fires that challenged conventional family configurations and meant that by the 1970s the institution of the family was conceived as 'powerful and destructive, perhaps even unnecessary.'⁵⁹⁶ By the late twentieth century, numerous commentators had accused the family as an institution of compromising, rather than nurturing, individuality. Much of their mistrust was seeded in the wartime and post-war years, when the intellectuals and activists of the 1980s and 1990s were growing up.

Materials in the Mass Observation Archive suggest that in the years following the Second World War, the nuclear family was widely considered 'ideal': 'The two-child family', claimed the British Institute of Public Opinion in a 1947 press-release, 'heads the poll[s]' as 'the ideal family', despite rising birth-rates.⁵⁹⁷ A 1949 questionnaire, too, mostly returned responses in favour of families with two children (a boy and a girl) or three (two boys and one girl).⁵⁹⁸ Citing Jeffrey Weeks, Humble notes that 'the statistically average middle-class family had reduced in size from the typical six children of the Victorian period to just over two' as early as the 1920s, putting this down to the rise in birth control.⁵⁹⁹ Humble also observes the 'surprising' fact that middlebrow fiction in the first half of the twentieth century does not directly illustrate this development. In these texts, she notes, 'we find instead the multitudinous,

⁵⁹⁴ See Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁵⁹⁷ 'The Ideal Family: In Britain It Is Still Two Children', *News Chronicle* (3 May 1947). In *TC Family Planning 1944-49* (Mass Observation Archive. Box 3, 3-3-H: Births, Marriages, and Divorces). Retrieved online: <http://massobservation.amdigital.co.uk>

⁵⁹⁸ Various responses to the 'Ideal Family' survey have been collected in the Mass Observation Archive, file 3107. There is still more consensus in responses to the question, 'what would be the most desirable age difference between each of the children [in an ideal family]? With few exceptions, respondents answered 'two,' 'three,' or 'two to three years.' See responses to the 'Ideal Family' survey, Mass Observation Archive (February 1949), dated 1st April 1949. File 3107: 'The Ideal Family'. *Mass Observation Archive*. Retrieved online (10 July 2013): <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk>

⁵⁹⁹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 150.

unfashionable, uneconomic family that belonged to the Victorian past.⁶⁰⁰ The family as described by popular women writers into the 1950s, Humble claims, is 'a profoundly eccentric organization',⁶⁰¹ stylized in fiction as something unfashionable and unlikely.

This is not surprising when we consider a pervasive nostalgia in post-First- and Second World War Britain. One respondent to the 1949 survey claimed that 'a really ideal family would be huge [...] but this would be entirely impractical without [...] Victorian [economic and social] conditions'. Although this respondent said that a girl and a boy would form the basis of an 'ideal family' 'today,' she also observed that, given the family's role in 'developing [...] the] individuality of children, I think the larger and more mixed as to sex the better.'⁶⁰² The Victorian past represented the ideal, respondents largely claimed, 'but this is economically unachievable' 'for most of us'.⁶⁰³ What this means is that unfashionably large families in the escapist prose of Christie and her contemporaries represented a fashionable fantasy. Rather than providing apolitical escapism, they offer social commentary: a nostalgic vision of the past that highlights what has changed.

Humble's 'Eccentric Family' chapter features analyses of two detective novels, including Christie's *Crooked House*. For Humble, *Crooked*, in which an eleven-year-old murders her grandfather, posits 'the unnaturalness of the extended family' and a 'destruction of notions of childish innocence'.⁶⁰⁴ It ends, though, with a marriage, securing the family's survival. Humble demonstrates that several novels depict a laundered class, surviving modernity despite an eccentric attachment to old structures and values, because its anachronistic values can adapt to meet the changing demands of twentieth-century Britain.⁶⁰⁵ This is certainly abundant in pre-1945 detective fiction. For example, Marsh's *A Surfeit of Lampreys* (1940) features a family that everyone adores, living in

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 150-151.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁰² 'Ideal Family' survey.

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 188.

⁶⁰⁵ Novels Humble considers in that chapter include, among others, *Crooked*, Ngaio Marsh's *A Surfeit of Lampreys*, Elizabeth Taylor's *A Game of Hide and Seek*, and Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontes Went to Woolworths*.

unviable liveried luxury ('you really ought to see the house [...] All Victorian gloom and glaring stuffed animals. *Too perfect*').⁶⁰⁶ The Lampreys ultimately stop lying to the police, allowing the detective into their home to apprehend the criminal. Likewise, in Allingham's *Police at the Funeral* (1931), the colourful and 'Victorian' family without a telephone plays jokes on the police, mocking-up clues, but the member who takes family attachment too far and tries to stop business transactions or marriage outside the household conveniently commits suicide. Such sprawling and dysfunctional families, for Humble, provide a 'fantasy of class authority.'⁶⁰⁷ The idea that the upper classes remain socially and morally in charge is 'bolstered' by the presentation of foibles and quirks that ultimately do not allow the status quo to change.⁶⁰⁸

Humble's arguments are compelling and her conclusions about detective fiction, specifically *Crooked*, inform my own. However, as Humble herself notes, the period between the 1920s and the 1950s was anything but stable and consistent.⁶⁰⁹ Humble disputes the notion that the Second World War effected drastic change in ideologies of domesticity and demonstrates that interwar constructions of domesticity and femininity did not suddenly cease to be relevant after 1945.⁶¹⁰ It seems clear, however, that the immediate post-war years were characterized by a national preoccupation with rebuilding what was said to have been lost or compromised by war.

The new government's welfare initiatives ensured that the State took a direct interest in how families were run.⁶¹¹ As Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield note:

Central to the aims of the post-war social reconstruction was the desire to consolidate family life after the disruptive

⁶⁰⁶ Ngaio Marsh, *A Surfeit of Lampreys*, in *The Inspector Alleyn Mysteries: Surfeit of Lampreys, Death and the Dancing Footman, Colour Scheme* (London: HarperCollins, 2009) (142). Emphasis original.

⁶⁰⁷ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 191.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁶¹¹ The Family Allowances Act (1945) introduced tax-based benefits for parents of children under eighteen or in full-time education. It arose from the 1942 Beveridge report which identified Western society's 'giant evils': squalor, ignorance, want, disease, and idleness. The Family Allowances Act, an influential document in forming the post-war 'Welfare State,' remains the basis of present laws about child benefits (as of 2015).

effects of war and to build a future in which marriage and the home would be the foundations of a better life. [...] In much of the official and semi-official literature of the period, [emphasis was upon] the consolidation of stable family life, based upon the type of relationship between marriage partners which itself was suited to the post-war world.⁶¹²

British wives were encouraged to feel that their husbands had been so changed by war that it fell to them to preserve pre-war standards of harmony and integrity by rebuilding families in the traditional mould. The onus, said one wife, was 'to start a family myself.'⁶¹³

Re-integrating into family life was difficult for a number of men returning from combat. 'Strange people turn up among your acquaintances and you realise you left them as children', one reported,⁶¹⁴ indicating that he had missed out on growing up in peacetime and was therefore not the same – or the complete – person he could have been had he grown up at home. This almost uncanny description of the soldier's return to the world of his childhood implies a lack of upwards growth. The implication reflects ideas about national recovery from war. After all, Freud had influentially maintained that the development of a child's 'natural' sexuality depends on early identification with both parents. 'If there are quarrels between the parents or if their marriage is unhappy, the ground will be prepared in their children for the severest predisposition to a disturbance of sexual development', he claimed.⁶¹⁵ 'normal sexual behaviour is [...] a result of organic changes and physical inhibitions' developing as a result of an 'original' 'disposition to perversions'.⁶¹⁶ For Freud, the barrier against incest has to be erected with adolescence⁶¹⁷ but not before the child has developed a sexual identity with reference to both parents as objects of

⁶¹² Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, 'Social Reconstruction and the Emergence of Compassionate Marriage, 1945-59', in *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne*, ed. by David Clark (London: Routledge, 2005), 6-27 (6).

⁶¹³ 'Monica' quoted in Julie Summers, *Stranger in the House: Women's Stories of Men Returning from the Second World War* (London, Sydney, New York: Pocket Books, 2009), 148.

⁶¹⁴ Lieutenant Frank Stewart, quoted, *ibid.*, 5.

⁶¹⁵ Freud, 'The Finding of an Object', 152.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 155

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

desire.⁶¹⁸ If, then, a generation of parents and young men were displaced from the domestic sphere to the battlefield, both the practise of parenting and the Child, as a symbol of potential for growth, became important in questions of national futurity.

In this vein, some of the most popular female-authored fiction produced in the decade following the Second World War concerns families and specifically childhood within those families. Elizabeth Taylor, in particular, was preoccupied by the idea of 'growing up' and in *A Wreath of Roses* (1949) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1953), she considers the impact of irresponsible parenting on the child and the family, while her second novel, *Palladian* (1946), features relatives who do not communicate effectively. Because of their secrets inside the family home, their identities in the wider world constitute as much of a façade as their property. We find similar themes in Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1949), Diane Tutton's *Guard Your Daughters* (1953), and most directly expressed in Daphne du Maurier's theatrical, illogical, and claustrophobic novel about the 'triplely pathetic' children in a theatrical family, *The Parasites* (1949).⁶¹⁹

Taylor – like Christie – was also interested in 'problem-children,' children with behavioural problems. In *A Game Of Hide And Seek* (1951) one character ironically reflects that it is a good thing there were no 'problem-children' during the war because they would not have survived without the special provisions developed in its wake. The character is then said to be more attracted to the 'new term' of 'problem-child' than to have philanthropic impulses or sociological thoughts.⁶²⁰ These writers are interested in the issues affecting their society, and also, of course, in how these issues are understood and discussed. Deborah Cohen's observation that '[i]n the aftermath of the Second World War, the family was widely regarded as a vulnerable but vital building block of society' is

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 238.

⁶¹⁹ Daphne du Maurier, *The Parasites* (London: Virago, 2009), 13.

⁶²⁰ Elizabeth Taylor, *A Game of Hide and Seek* (London: Virago, 2008), 127.

accurate.⁶²¹ We might add that ‘family’ itself was a widely explored concept both in news media and in popular fiction.

Christie was fascinated by children, especially boys, and by families, particularly her own. Hers was a conventional upper-middle-class household but, as numerous biographers have noted, an almost entirely female one.⁶²² Her father died when she was nine, so until her marriage Christie lived with her mother, her sister, her aesthetic and lackadaisical brother, her ‘Auntie-Grannie’, a governess, and a handful of servants. Christie’s mother, a close relative of her father before their marriage, was adopted and always felt unloved as a result, which may be why she lavished a lot of attention upon her children.⁶²³ Because her parents did not believe girls should be educated, Christie taught herself to read and write and had no friends outside the family before she was six.⁶²⁴ She was taught to regard “‘wordly’ children’ with suspicion, not knowing exactly what ‘worldly’ meant, but aware that a local girl who seemed to have more fun than she did should be shunned, as ‘the quintessence of wordliness’ (*Autobiography*, 96). A lack of exposure to young boys when herself a child seems to have spurred an enduring fascination with them. Indeed, when she came to write a detective story, Christie originally planned for a ‘schoolboy’ detective (256). The close nature of her own large family may also go towards explaining Christie’s career-long tendency to present families as closed units, with detectives acting as outsiders, like Poirot, or interlopers, like Marple.

Incestuous Desire and Sideways Growth in *Sleeping Murder* (circa. 1946)⁶²⁵

Since the psychoanalyst Otto Rank published his encyclopaedic *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend* in 1912, the task of highlighting incestuous

⁶²¹ Cohen, *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain*, 229.

⁶²² Patricia D. Maida, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie’s Detective Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982), 8; Gill, *Agatha Christie*, 34. Makinen notes that this does not stop most biographers viewing Christie as ‘conservatively patriarchal’ [Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 13].

⁶²³ Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, 9-11.

⁶²⁴ Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 20.

⁶²⁵ Published posthumously in 1976.

themes or subthemes in literature has proven popular. Incest has also, evidently, fascinated a variety of writers throughout the twentieth century, and at other times.⁶²⁶ As Zia Hasan notes, the typical response to the idea of incest is, at least initially, ambivalence: an internalized tension between clear-cut social taboos and the complex nature of human sexuality may be responsible for this.⁶²⁷ In fiction about families, active or desired incest can serve as a device to showcase conflicts between societal structures and the family unit as both the world in microcosm, and the space in which individual identities are first negotiated. The sociologist Talcott Parsons noted in 1951: '[nuclear] families [...] are "factories" producing human personalities'.⁶²⁸

Family was important to Christie, whose autobiography details her 'first [...] proposal of marriage', from a nephew, who did not understand different kinds of love, in childhood (*Autobiography*, 140). The reference is to a childish game and is recounted jokingly, but it evidences the role of the family in preparing its members for social rituals – and Christie goes on to describe marriage proposals received from more eligible suitors as equally ridiculous (175). Given her own family's closeness, it is understandable that she became interested in exploring boundaries and barriers in a variety of family structures. In the 1920s, Christie wrote, in her words, 'a gloomy play about incest', rejected by 'every manager [she] sent it to', although this has been lost (194). An unpublished late play, *Miss Perry*, features a debate between characters who have read John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*: a comically conservative woman refers to it as 'filth' but more sympathetic characters defend it as 'artistic'.⁶²⁹ Ford's Jacobean tragedy concerns sexual love between a brother

⁶²⁶ Numerous lengthy works have highlighted the importance of this theme in literature, both in obvious manifestations, as in Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, and less obvious manifestations, as in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. See Peter Nesteruk, 'Referentiality and Transgression: Representations of Incest and Child Sexual Abuse in American Literature of the Twentieth Century' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 1994); Jane M. Ford, *Patriarchy and Incest from Shakespeare to Joyce* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998).

⁶²⁷ Zia S. Hasan, 'A Castle of Sand: The Incest Theme in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and the *Alexandria Quartet*', *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 26.1-2 (2003), 1.

⁶²⁸ Talcott Parsons, *Family: A Socialization and Interaction Process* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 16.

⁶²⁹ Agatha Christie, 'Miss Perry: A Play in Three Acts' (Private Collection of Ralf Sultiens, [n.d., probably circa. 1964]), 3-4. Further references to this source will appear as 'Perry.'

and sister. Misunderstood and overly emotional, the couple dies, as do the people they are set to marry, and several others.

Sibling passion as presented in the Jacobean theatre also informs *Sleeping Murder*, although incest is neither named nor enacted in the novel. The plot of *Sleeping Murder* is worth sketching before we go any further. A newlywed from New Zealand, Gwenda Reed, comes to England with her husband and falls in love with a seaside house in Dillmouth, a town 'good families' retire to (*Sleeping*, 155). They buy it, and immediately Gwenda has visions of small domestic things, like wallpaper, or steps in the garden, which turn out to have existed in the house years before. At a performance of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the line 'Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young' prompts a breakdown as Gwenda has a vision of a woman called Helen strangled by a man with monkey's paws, at the foot of the stairs in her new home. She visits Marple, who advises that all these visions, including that of the murder, are probably memories.

Gwenda discovers that she lived in the house, briefly, as an infant. However, she was sent to New Zealand when her father committed himself to 'a mental sanatorium,' convinced that he had killed his second wife, Helen, whom everyone else assumed had disappeared with another man. Nobody ever found a body, and Helen's older brother, a doctor, received letters from the 'man mad' woman saying she was starting a new life (266). Despite warnings that 'skeletons should remain in their cupboards' (60), Gwenda, her husband Giles, and Marple set about tracking down all the men Helen might have been involved with. It emerges that Helen was killed by her brother, jealous of her getting married and leaving him. The lines from *Malfi* were, Marple suggests, quoted ritualistically: they are the words of a man who has 'contrived the death of' the sister to whom he is unhealthily devoted (297). Now Helen is 'at peace', Gwenda feels able to start her own family in the house to which she was drawn (303).

If *Sleeping* begins and ends with Gwenda making a home in the house, it is equally the story of Helen's search for identity. Throughout, Gwenda is linked

with her stepmother: both are blonde; Helen was around twenty when she died, the age Gwenda is now; and both are attracted to conventional, colonial, 'old-fashioned' English men (17, 177-178). Helen also seems to have been childish for her years, since many of the games she played with Gwenda were as much for her own benefit as for Gwenda's (145), and, typically in Christie, Gwenda feels able to understand Helen's mentality better than the men who knew and remember her, by virtue of her sex: she knows 'with the assurance of those admitted to a freemasonry from which men were excluded' (134).⁶³⁰ Towards the end of *Sleeping Murder*, Dr Kennedy (Helen's brother) introduces the final parallel, explaining, 'I'll have to kill you. Like I killed Helen...'. He tries to strangle Gwenda in the room where he strangled his sister (289). In this, he is foiled, and Gwenda is finally able to walk through the crime scene without shuddering. Helen 'isn't there any more', she says; the house is her own. This will become important as we consider the conventional family structure denied to Helen but available to Gwenda. Significantly, Gwenda has returned to the scene of her childhood and chosen to revisit events of the period, having grown up as Helen never did.

Although Kennedy's descriptions of his sister lead Gwenda to assume she was 'a nymphomaniac' (266), Helen finally emerges as a character seeking structure and convention. It is her desire for a husband, rather than a flagrant lust for men, that upsets Helen's brother and drives him to kill her. Fulfilling her usual role of *angelus-ex-machina*, Marple is offended by Gwenda's offhand assumption that Helen was 'man mad' (266), pointing out that all evidence for this comes from Dr Kennedy, 'and it is very dangerous to believe people' (299). Far from being a licentious hussy, says Marple, Helen was an 'ordinary girl' with 'normal' desires: to flirt, marry, and settle down with a man (292). Monogamous, reproductive heterosexuality is normative in this world, and Helen's first, bungled, elopement is with a solicitor who owns '[q]uite an old-fashioned family firm' (107), further indicating a pursuit of conventional structure. This is the

⁶³⁰ Vita Sackville-West had previously described, in an influential novel, 'the freemasonry among women, which was always prying and personal', and 'very different from' men's relationships [Vita Sackville-West, *All Passion Spent* (London: Virago, 1993), 154].

structure that Gwenda seems to have grasped by the time she comes to return to the details surrounding Helen's death: Gwenda is, after all, married to a man with a highly paid job, who has taken her out of her native heath to England, the governing state which, 'like most New Zealanders, she called home' (8). The 'new' house even comes with inherited and traditional furniture (9); Gwenda's life is quintessentially structured.

Confirming that active heterosexuality is the 'ordinary' consequence of a girl's proper upbringing, Marple explains to Gwenda that:

[Helen] couldn't meet young men in the ordinary normal way [...] Her brother was 'strict' and 'old-fashioned.' It is vaguely reminiscent, is it not, of Mr Barrett of Wimpole Street? (292)

Unable to 'meet young men in the ordinary normal way', Helen has tried to become absorbed into an existing family structure, by marrying Major Halliday, an older man whose wife, Gwenda's mother, died young. In so doing, she performs the role of Mrs Halliday to the extent of dying young like her predecessor, and her disappearance means that Halliday disappears to a mental asylum (believing he has killed her) and Gwenda is carted off to New Zealand – in fact, the nuclear model she tries to enter collapses. Gwenda, however, has returned, married a man her own age, and is on the verge of beginning a new family before she becomes preoccupied with trying to find (the truth about) her own father. There are no living fathers in *Sleeping*, and even Helen only had substitutes in her older brother and older husband. While the world of the novel is clearly one of female assertion and expression, it is also consciously one of lack and substitution when it comes to the father.

The reference to 'Mr Barrett of Wimpole Street' is most significant. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was a 1930 play and, more successfully, a 1934 film (remade in 1947, around the time *Sleeping* was written). Written by Rudolph Besier, it concerned the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning's romance with Robert Browning. 'Mr Barrett' is her father; strict, old-fashioned, and tyrannical, discouraging any frivolity and insisting that Elizabeth is too ill to socialise. Besier implied incestuous motives behind this, the play's most widely discussed

element.⁶³¹ The first film production removed direct allusions to incest, but the subtext was widely understood, and something Christie was surely aware of: Charles Laughton, a close friend, played the father and famously claimed that ‘they can’t censor the gleam in my eye.’⁶³² It is not outlandish, then, to suggest that, comparing Dr Kennedy to Mr Barrett, Christie implies incestuous desire in the former. If Helen is an ‘ordinary’ woman, the brother who makes her appear ‘mad’ is himself ‘not normal’ (*Sleeping*, 160).

He also fails to fulfil a conventional role in the nuclear family – obviously by refusing to let his sister take a(nother) lover, but also in the much-emphasized age gap that makes him come across as a distant father, and later a Mr Barrett-style father (‘she’d been an only child [...] her brother was years and years older’ [154]). Moreover, Kennedy seems unsure himself as to whether Helen was his sister or half-sister, using both terms (85). As soon as they hear about Helen’s supposed fondness for men, Giles and Gwenda ask themselves, ‘*Who were the men in her life?*’ and set out to interview the three men they think she may have run off with (120. Emphasis original). The shock value of Kennedy-as-murderer lies in the presumption that he does not count as a man in Helen’s life.

The cook recalls Helen’s words to an unidentified person who was not her husband:

I’ve been afraid of you for a long time. You’re mad. You’re not normal. Go away and leave me alone. You must leave me alone. I’m frightened. I think, underneath, I’ve always been frightened of you. (160)

It occurs to nobody that she is not speaking to a sexual partner, until Marple connects the words with Helen’s possessive brother. There is, of course, no one else she has ‘always’ known. Being a doctor, a pillar of society who is supposed to make people better, Kennedy is too respectable to be suspected of perversion at first. A significant number of Christie’s killers belong to the

⁶³¹ Henry R. Luce, ‘The Movies Enter Another Censorship Fight, This Time with a Clean Record’ ([Inp]: 1938), 52.

⁶³² Margarita Landazuri, ‘The Barretts of Wimpole Street (1934)’, *Turner Classic Movies* (2013).

medical profession, revealing a paranoid fascination with the idea that regulators of health may themselves be unhealthy.⁶³³ The doctor pathologizes his sister's 'normal' tendencies into hints of nymphomania: he sexualises his sister's need for structure and stability, hiding his own 'abnormal' fixations behind medical authority. Kennedy's unconventional passions are, moreover, referred to via literary allusions (to Webster and Besier). The word 'incest' never appears, as if *Sleeping's* world is ill-equipped to openly name and accommodate it. Again, something is allowed to fester, hidden in plain sight. The words 'You must leave me alone' suggest that Helen needs to break away from the stifling intimacy of the home she grew up in and forge an independent identity as a 'normal' woman. In this sense, Kennedy's refusal to let go of his relationship with his sister and his subsequent attempt to be 'all the men in her life' (131) stop her from growing into an independent person.

Kennedy's old age, and his antique outlook, are repeatedly emphasized. Introduced as 'a grey-haired elderly man with shrewd eyes under tufted brows' whose house is cold because he 'scorn[s] such modern inventions as central heating' (*Sleeping*, 81), he is 'old-fashioned' (292) and much older than Helen. His 'Victorian disapproval of [...] gay ways' (101) and his desire for his sister culminates in physical activity: not sex or rape, but murder (although, as Gill has argued, murder and rape are semantically linked in the Marple novels, as both can concern the silencing of women who have refused consent).⁶³⁴ In this, too, Christie presents the doctor with reference to the past: the mad doctor, and the older man lusting after a young female relative, as villains, are gothic constructions, like the house in which Helen dies.⁶³⁵

Gwenda remembers seeing, through the banisters as a child, a man with monkey's paws strangling a blonde woman and reciting the lines by Webster.

⁶³³ *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *Death in the Clouds* (1935), *Cards on the Table* (1936), *And Then There Were None* (1939), *Sad Cypress* (1941), *4.50 From Paddington* (1957), *Sleeping Murder* (1976), and various short stories feature murderous medical practitioners. In earlier texts, motives tend to concern money and respectability, while in later texts, they tend to concern love and passion.

⁶³⁴ Gill, *Agatha Christie*, 197-201.

⁶³⁵ See, for instance, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).

Nobody understand what she means by ‘paws’ (‘his hands – grey, wrinkled – not hands – monkey’s paws... It was horrible’ [39]). It is assumed that she dreamt this up, a clear example of a memory that does not fit familiar ways of thinking being dismissed as childish and explained away (67). In fact, only Marple, acting as a kind of *deus-ex-machina*, encourages Gwenda to listen to her memories (46). Towards the end of the novel, Gwenda is wearing gardening gloves (‘wet, glistening, a queer pinkish grey – they reminded her of something...’). When Kennedy enters and complains of being ‘dazzled’ by the sun, Gwenda understands what she saw as a child: ‘Looking at those smooth monkey’s paws and hearing that voice in the hall – “It was you,” she gasped’ (289). This final remarkable coincidence is technically unnecessary: the words ‘my eyes are dazzled’ in isolation would have been sufficient in this context, and the reference to ‘monkey’s paws’ or gardening gloves exceeds plausibility. It has, then, a function outside of providing another layer to the riddle; we might consider the effect of monkey-paws on Kennedy’s characterization.⁶³⁶

The monkey theme dates back to Edgar Allan Poe’s influential first detective story, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841) which had as its villain an orang-utan. The choice of culprit was made in the context of increasing biological interest in similarities between humans and primates; Georges Cuvier had called the Orang-utan ‘nearly equal to Man.’⁶³⁷ The implication, then, was that humans are fundamentally like (if not actually) animals, albeit a more evolved form – this is most influentially pronounced in Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* in 1859. In fiction, Sheridan Le Fanu’s gothic horror, ‘Green Tea’ (1869), had featured a demonic primate, ‘a character of malignity’, coded as foreign and threatening.⁶³⁸ Moreover, in nineteenth-century literature, villains such as Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula and James Carker in Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* were described in terms that were both sexual and animalistic

⁶³⁶ Especially alongside the lines from *Malfi*, spoken by a character long-interpreted as incestuous [Frank Whigham, ‘Sexual and Social Mobility in *the Duchess of Malfi*’, in *Incest and the Literary Imagination*, ed. by Elizabeth Barnes (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 59-93 (]). Even Christie’s conservative ‘fan’-scholar Charles Osborne concedes that ‘[i]ncest does play a part in *Sleeping Murder* as well as in Webster’s play’ [Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*, 376].

⁶³⁷ Quoted in Lawrence Frank, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue: Edgar Allan Poe’s Evolutionary Reverie’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 50.2 (1995), 179.

⁶³⁸ [Sheridan Le Fanu] Anonymous, ‘Green Tea’, *All Year Round*, 2.52 (1869), 551.

– they might be likened to cats, with penetrating teeth and an unhealthy appetite for maidens. Deborah Lutz notes a late nineteenth-century fashion for vampire literature, and links between ‘the vampire’ and ‘the dandy’ (effeminate and un-masculine) in this vein.⁶³⁹ The murderer’s animalism in *Sleeping Murder* harkens back, then, to outmoded models of villainy and terror, configuring Dr Kennedy’s threat melodramatically and anachronistically, as well as contradicting the neatly medical vocabulary he relies upon to identify ‘obsession and delusion’ in Halliday (113). It is, after all, the doctor who has, in Marple’s words, ‘passed the borderline between sanity and madness’ (296).

As a doctor, Kennedy has had – in the past – the power to break up the family that is trying to restructure itself via remarriage: he has been able to convince Gwenda’s father that he was suffering from various pathologies. As a result of words from Kennedy and drugs used to induce hysteria, Kennedy has struggled to name his ‘underlying childish fixation’ (116), asked himself, ‘Was I in love with my mother?’ (117), and been driven to suicide, while Gwenda has been sent to another country to grow up. Kennedy has also, of course, stopped Helen from bringing more children into the Halliday family. Traditionally, incest has been considered the privilege, even the responsibility, of the noblest families: if a woman is the king’s sister, no husband but her brother could match her in station, and the child of no other union could have blood so pure. In the context of heredity, this behaviour ‘is simply hypergyny pushed to its ultimate conclusion’⁶⁴⁰ but connected, as in *Sleeping Murder*, with a fear of change, presented as dangerous, monstrous, and unreciprocated, Kennedy’s desire illustrates the stifling and repressive function of a family model that does not fit its members and which fails to adapt to changing times.

In the end, futurity triumphs and Gwenda accepts the past but overcomes it, having grown up as Helen could not. As with *Nemesis* (1971), a more mature re-writing of this novel, there is a running motif of gardening. Both

⁶³⁹ Deborah Lutz, *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative* (Cleveland: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 84-85.

⁶⁴⁰ Pierre L. Van Den Berghe and Gene M. Meshner, ‘Royal Incest and Inclusive Fitness’, *American Ethnologist*, 7.2 (1980), 303.

novels culminate with the family garden being dug up and the victim's body discovered beneath a flower bed. Also as in *Nemesis* (and in *Crooked* and *Mirrors*, the two other novels discussed in this chapter), gardeners note that the house is covered with 'insidious bindweed' (*Sleeping*, 201). Bindweed chokes other plants and overruns them, an obvious analogy to the smothering suffocation of the family home. Cutting the weed is 'only a minor victory, since beneath the surface the bindweed remained in possession' (201): 'its roots [...] run along underneath the soil' just as the family murder goes '[a] long way back' (280). Encouraging Gwenda to have the garden dug up, Marple allows Helen's body to be discovered, which discredits the stories Kennedy told about her being alive, having run away with a man, and so on. The dead woman is allowed to speak, as a forensic exhibit and through female agents who can reconstruct the past. Also, Gwenda is able to move into the house, symbolically renamed, where she can build her own family.

So far, I have discussed Dr Kennedy and, more specifically, his sister's victimization. Now I would like to consider Gwenda's relevance in all of this. Gwenda, I suggest, exists in this novel as a grown-up child for post-war readers. When she comes to know her father, through his journal entries, Gwenda discovers that he died for her sake. Convinced that he murdered Helen because of 'a kink' in his heredity, Halliday concludes that suicide is

the best way [...] best for the child. I can't go on. Not year after year. I must take the short way out. Gwennie will [...] never know her father was a murderer. (118-119)

Halliday acts to smooth the kink in the interests of 'the child', Gwenda. She is called 'the child' before she is called 'Gwennie,' because it is as the child in Halliday's family – and attempted restructure of the family – rather than as Gwennie the individual that Gwenda is important. As 'the child,' she represents innocence; in Stockton's words, 'the act of adults looking back' to 'a ghostly, unreachable fancy'.⁶⁴¹

⁶⁴¹ Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 5.

Stockton also discusses a conflicting tendency in twentieth-century texts to present queer-coded adults espousing childish traits.⁶⁴² This is certainly visible in Christie's detective fiction, most famously 'Three Blind Mice' (1948/1950)/'The Mousetrap' (1952), in which the murderer is a young adult avenging a childhood trauma from which he never recovered, and which has stunted his mental growth. In *Sleeping Murder*, however, the apparently non-queer Gwenda takes a childlike role by revisiting memories, recalling a vanished nursery and a crime glimpsed through banisters. Being 'uninterested in childish complexes', and opining that every psychiatrist may be 'a little mad himself' (112, 116), Gwenda espouses a view of 'normality' as natural and somehow essential. She seems to agree with her father who suspects that psychiatry and psychoanalysis are 'poppycock' (117), and her adventure culminates in Helen being recognized as 'a perfectly normal young girl' with 'ordinary' sexual appetites that would have culminated in 'settl[ing] down' outside the family – as Gwenda has done (293). By revisiting childhood, Gwenda gets to know, and identify with, her young stepmother. This means that Helen, too, becomes identified with the fantasy innocence of childhood.

In scholarship, the 'subtle paralleling of Gwenda and Helen' has been noted by Rowland, for whom the story is of Helen's vindication by Marple. The presence of Gwenda, says Rowland, counters 'the impression of deviant female desire' that would otherwise form the totality of Helen's character before the solution reveals it to be a (masculine) construction.⁶⁴³ In her (also brief) reading of *Sleeping Murder*, Marty Knepper calls Gwenda an 'incest victim', presumably because she has been traumatized by the consequences of Kennedy's passion for his sister.⁶⁴⁴ By living with flashbacks, panic attacks, and a haunted sensation, Gwenda may be said to have taken on Helen's victim status. Without Helen's body or testimony there is no record of her brother's actions. As a married adult, Gwenda is planning to start a family, in the home of her childhood. She is able to do so once she considers Helen to be 'happy now'. Tellingly, she

⁶⁴² Ibid., 57.

⁶⁴³ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 171.

⁶⁴⁴ Knepper, 'Reading Agatha Christie's Miss Marple Series', 51.

phrases this to her husband as, 'We can go back if we like' (*Sleeping*, 303); after all, as 'the child' for whom her father died, and whom she had to recall in order to bring wholeness to 'Poor lovely Helen, who died young' (303), Gwenda has stood for both the past and the future. Gwenda and the reader know that 'Poor lovely Helen' would have 'settle[d] down' with a husband and child or children had she not died young. Both women are linked as spectres of the innocent child; what Edelman calls 'a fantasy figure', promising 'to restore an imaginary past in a future endlessly deferred.'⁶⁴⁵

Gwenda the Child stands for something more than innocence, though. Having witnessed the murder as a small person whose presence at the scene was overlooked, and who could see things uniquely through, rather than over, banisters, Gwenda has knowledge that is key to the investigation. When Kennedy tries to strangle her in the same location towards the end of the text, he is trying to kill Helen again, and to keep 'Little Gwennie' unvocal, as she was. It is Gwenda's visual memory of the crime that begins the quest for Helen's narrative, always conceived through anecdotes, literary references, and memories of the house's architecture – structure again, with the theme of going back. It is an existing theatrical narrative that activates Gwenda's sense of trauma and imbues existing disparate memories with that significance.

The Freudian concept of retro-causality is relevant here: the conception of childhood trauma becoming traumatic only later in life through certain triggers. In Freud's understanding, events and emotions are written onto 'the subconscious' 'lying behind the perceptual system',⁶⁴⁶ but consciousness acts like 'a blank sheet' where emotions and memories need only surface briefly.⁶⁴⁷ As the child whose innocence is central to Major and Mrs Halliday's configurations of family and duty, Gwenda acts as 'a blank sheet' – but beneath the bland innocence events are inscribed which threaten the Kennedy's preservational instincts and are activated as trauma. Acting out a delayed

⁶⁴⁵ Lee Edelman, 'Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's out of Joint', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62.2 (2011), 148.

⁶⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'A Note Upon the "Mystic Writing Pad"', in *General Psychological Theory: Theories on Paranoia, Masochism, Repression, Melancholia, the Unconscious, the Libido, and Other Aspects of the Human Psyche* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 207-12 (208).

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

response to her experiences, Gwenda gives voice to the trauma that Helen could never narrativize due to the secrecy of her brother's passions. She also sets in motion the series of events which lead to the appearance of Helen's body and the articulation of her own version of events, according to Marple, who acts as a kind of avenger of femininity from *Sleeping onwards*.⁶⁴⁸

Sleeping is a novel in which a conventional heroine spends her honeymoon period tying up the loose ends and traumas of her past, in order to begin a smoothly structured life as an English housewife. It is secret, un-tabulated knowledge held in childhood that threatens to disturb her structured life's stability. Narratives through which she reveals her knowledge – old plays, gothic novels, and so on – are adult constructions that have to be decoded. Her position puts her in what Freud called a 'strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know a thing at the same time.'⁶⁴⁹ The novel clearly illustrates the perceived importance of coming to terms with the past in order to 'grow up.' Dr Kennedy's obsessive love for his sister manifests an unflinching attachment to the past which prevents the contemporary 'ideal' family unit from establishing itself. To grow up here is to translate the secret knowledge of childhood into the language of adulthood and society generally, via existing literary and other narratives. Growing up is also about perpetuating received structures and values, fulfilling the parents' fantasy of the child as a blank page which absorbs, repeats, and endures. Perhaps, at this stage, Christie presents this as a dynamic more desirable than natural – but in subsequent texts she begins tackling the very idea of growth. Stockton's discussions of 'growing sideways' can be brought with merit to a reading of the queer child in *Crooked House*.

The Not-Yet-Straight Child in *Crooked House* (1949)

⁶⁴⁸ The later Marple novels – particularly *4.50 From Paddington* (1957), *At Bertram's Hotel* (1966), and *Nemesis* (1971) – afford prominence to the theme of 'normal' but misunderstood femininity, with Marple defending the rights of women to give up academia and take up housework professionally, of schoolgirls to flirt with lesbianism, and so on.

⁶⁴⁹ Quoted in Rose, *Sexuality in the Field and Vision*, 109.

While 'the Child' as an ideological symbol is relevant in *Sleeping Murder*, the related fantasy of the child's innocence is explored with more sophistication in Christie's favourite of her novels. *Crooked* was serialized in magazines in 1948, and published in 1949. It is notable as perhaps the only example of traditional 'Golden Age' detective fiction in which a child is revealed as the murderer.⁶⁵⁰

The family in *Crooked* combines the glammers of exoticism and anachronism in that it is Anglo-Greek and not small. Heredity plays an important part in the novel, and in post-war British approaches to the family more generally. Before the Second World War, the idea of good families and bad families – good genetics and bad genetics – held serious sway. Eugenists held that certain superior mental and physical qualities 'were inherited, and thus a rough equation could be drawn between social standing and hereditary worth.' The 'unfit' of the race, then, needed breeding out, and decisions for action followed: 'positive eugenics' (those with good heredity should marry and breed) and 'negative eugenics' (those with inheritable disabilities should be sterilized or discouraged from marrying).⁶⁵¹ Medical and political notaries such as James Crichton-Brown and Winston Churchill described the need to sweep away 'our social rubbish' and stop 'multiplication of the Feeble-Minded' as a 'danger to our race'.⁶⁵² Before compulsory sterilization and genocide, in Nazi Germany, after which these initiatives were 'quietly forgotten',⁶⁵³ fashionable science and pseudo-science dictated that some families were better and more worthy of survival than others. This was, of course, inextricably linked with the image of the child, the production of which could be seen as the point of marriage. The

⁶⁵⁰ It is certainly the best-known and I have not been able to find any other example. Helen McCloy's *The One that Got Away* (1945) begins with a child-killer and, according to the American psychological tradition, explores the child's psychology and motivations, in the context of fascism. In Britain, Q. Patrick's 'Portrait of a Murderer' (1942) concerns a public schoolboy who kills as a result of an over-attentive father and an under-attentive mother. However, this short story was written as a 'reverse mystery' in which the solution comes first and the crime comes last. **Appendix** details Christie's approach, throughout her career, to child victims and children who kill.

⁶⁵¹ Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 70-1.

⁶⁵² James Crichton-Browne, 'Man's Right to Live 100 Years: Full Text of Sir James Crichton-Browne's Address', 'New York Times' (1905); Winston Churchill, quoted in Desmond King and Randall Hansen, 'Experts at Work: State Autonomy, Social Learning and Eugenic Sterilization in 1930s Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1999), 82.

⁶⁵³ King and Hansen, 'Experts at Work', 86.

national interest, it was said, depended on this child inheriting the most desirable genetic qualities.⁶⁵⁴

When eugenics ceased to be fashionable, much of the language of heredity remained, although with less unapologetic force than before. Across the political board in post-war Britain, concerns for futurity, survival, and the child as an emblem of these remained prominent. In 1945, with an emphasis on survival and re-structuring, William Beveridge's welfare reform proposals were enshrined in law: as well as supporting widows, the bereaved, the ill, and the unemployed, taxes contributed to a basic family allowance of five to eight shillings per child.⁶⁵⁵ A different kind of focus on the survival of the family, and the survival of the next generation within the family, was paramount, and with the Family Allowance Act families and society became mutually dependent, invested, and accountable. To the extent that children are supposed to be the future, they are consistently renegotiated products of the contemporary; and the unproblematic innocence of childhood is always a curious construction.

The first edition cover of *Crooked House* was illustrated with a childish drawing of a house, and the very title suggests immaturity. A well-known nursery-rhyme, quoted in the course of the novel, begins: 'There was a crooked man'. It ends: 'And they all lived together in a little crooked house.' Christie frequently took her titles and plot-structures from nursery-rhymes, especially in later novels.⁶⁵⁶ For Curran, these rhymes' 'attraction [for Christie] is obvious – the juxtaposition of the childlike and the chilling, the twisting of the mundane into the macabre' in most nursery-rhymes.⁶⁵⁷ In this context, 'childlike' seems to mean 'innocent.' It is true that nursery rhymes can be morbid, although they are

⁶⁵⁴ Marie Stopes, who popularized discussions of birth control, was convinced by eugenicists' arguments, arguing for 'sterilization of the hopelessly rotten and racially diseased' [quoted in Susan Klausen and Alison Bashford, 'Fertility Control: Eugenics, Neo-Malthusianism, and Feminism', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. by Philippa Lavine and Alison Bashford (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 98-116 (108)].

⁶⁵⁵ Family Allowances Act (1945).

⁶⁵⁶ 'Sing a Song of Sixpence' (1929); *And Then There Were None* (1939); *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940); 'Four and Twenty Blackbirds' (1940); *Five Little Pigs* (1943); 'Three Blind Mice' (1947/1948, adapted into 'The Mousetrap,' 1952); *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952); *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953); *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955).

⁶⁵⁷ Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, 105-06.

rarely treated as such by guardians.⁶⁵⁸ As Christie was aware, having spent more of her childhood in the family home with storybooks than outside with friends, children's imagination can access hidden realms of brutality, to which adult-authored texts for children can provide avenues, or glosses.⁶⁵⁹

The violence of nursery rhymes is contained within a simple, usually didactic narrative. There is a comparison to be drawn between some children's literature and detective stories, since both are structured entertainments which can, perhaps surprisingly, draw on death and violence (surprising since both genres require clear resolution and moral conformity with the dominant worldview). Christie asserts in her *Autobiography* that, at least when she started writing, '[t]he detective story [...] was the old Everyman Morality Tale' (437). Although she considered that the World Wars had caused readers 'to wallow in psychology', she identified one key element of detective fiction: 'the hunting down of Evil by Good.' Despite Christie's distaste for psychological obfuscations of 'clear-cut and [...] simple' definitions of good and evil (437), she recognizes that her detective fiction essentially sanitizes broader, complicated debates around ethical questions: in a detective novel, everything is neat. However, this safety and innocence can only be, at best, disingenuous.

Lacking one of Christie's recurring detectives, *Crooked House* is narrated by a policeman's son, Charles Hayward, who has returned to England from diplomatic service 'out East.'⁶⁶⁰ Like *Sleeping Murder*, then, not to mention most titles discussed in this dissertation, *Crooked House* has as its hero someone who enters an intimate world from outside. Having arrived, Charles resumes his engagement to marry Sophia Leonides, whom he met in Egypt. Sophia looks, to Charles, 'refreshingly English' (7), but hails from an old Greek family which she calls 'queer' and 'crooked'. They live together:

⁶⁵⁸ To take the one Christie used most iconically, 'Ten Little Niggers' systematically lists ten deaths through instructive rhyme.

⁶⁵⁹ See the lengthy didactic passages in her final novel, in which secret murder codes are encrypted on the pages of children's novels [Agatha Christie, *Postern of Fate* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 13-34. Further references to this source will appear as *Postern*].

⁶⁶⁰ Agatha Christie, *Crooked House* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1990), 7. Further references to this source will appear as *Crooked*.

One brother, one sister, a mother, a father, an uncle, an aunt by marriage, a grandfather, a great-aunt, and a step grandmother. [...] Of course, we don't normally all live together. The war and blitzes have brought that about. But [...] perhaps spiritually the family has always lived together – under my grandfather's eye and protection. (9)

Sophia's grandfather, Aristide Leonides, eighty-seven years old, who made a fortune through various barely-legal business enterprises, has been poisoned. Since he was his family's sole source of income, and provided for everyone more amply in life than he could in death, none of his sprawling family had much motive to kill him.

Sophia and the investigating police officer, who happens to be Charles's father, both suggest that everything will be alright 'as long as the right person killed him' (13, similar words on p. 16). 'The right person' is Brenda, Aristide's gold-digging new wife, who is having a romantic fling with the children's tutor. Brenda even positions herself apart from the family: 'Beasts! I hate them all!' (61). Nobody really believes she did it, though. With her grandfather dead and his killer's identity unresolved, Sophia feels she lacks structure, complaining that without 'the Original Crooked Little Man', 'the Crooked Little House had lost its meaning' (55). Charles can solve the case for Sophia because he can see things 'from an outside point of view' (17), a traditional rationale for the amateur sleuth in this genre,⁶⁶¹ although Sophia then goes on to show her fiancé everything 'from the inside', too (*Crooked*, 26). She refuses to marry Charles before she knows how her grandfather died, and who in her family killed him.

In the tradition of popular fiction about families by women (see Humble's 'Eccentric Family' chapter, discussed above), Christie reminds readers several times that the Leonides household is eccentric. Even without the direct assertions ('exotic and dynamic' [18], 'it is a queer household' [124]), the divergence of character types suggests tension, eclecticism, and colour. Sophia's mother is an actress who treats every family scene as a performance ('I *think* I played that properly' [46. Emphasis original]) and tries to mark

⁶⁶¹ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 59.

Aristide's murder with a theatrical production; Sophia's younger brother is a sulky victim of polio who cannot escape the family home; their younger sister, Josephine, treats the incidents like so many chapters of a detective story. Roger, Aristide's son and business-heir, is incompetent ('a ridiculous individual [...] in every sense a repressed individual' [110, 118]); and his wife is a phenomenally intelligent scientist. Even the house has 'a strange air of being distorted', described by the narrator as 'a country cottage through a gigantic magnifying glass', something that seemed to have 'grown like a mushroom in the night', and 'a Greek restaurateur's idea of something English' (25). Sophia insists: 'we're a very queer family' (26).

The family's queerness partly lies in its failure to follow conventions all the way through. Aristide seems to have encouraged his wife to fall in love with the grandchildren's 'delicate' tutor – 'A beautiful, soulful friendship tinged with melancholy that would stop Brenda from having a real affair with someone outside' (65). Successful marriage is kept within the home but other traditional tenets of that institution, such as age and fidelity, are more fluid (though still limited). Brenda's affair is not 'real' because it is with someone who is not very manly and is presumably more spiritual than sexual, but also because it stays, on literal and psychological levels, within the family home. Aristide goes further, leaving all his money to Sophia, despite having two sons and a grandson, because she is his only relative who 'seems to have the positive qualities required' to 'watch over the family and shield them from harm' (134, 135). As Humble notes, the gesture 'deals a death blow to the English code of primogeniture' and suggests that the most suitable person, not the traditionally entitled one, should accept appropriate responsibilities for the family's survival.⁶⁶²

Most characters are troubled by their ideas about the all-absorbing family. Christie uses one of her stock metaphors, bindweed: 'Worst weed there is! Choking, entangling – and you can't get at it properly, runs along underground' (*Crooked*, 30). In this case, the matriarch, Sophia's great aunt, who ends up

⁶⁶² Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 188.

killing herself and the murderer, asking the narrator to hide the truth, is introduced grinding the bindweed beneath her heel, 'deep' underground (30). Sophia complains that the family is 'a bit twisted and twining [...]like bindweed' (115), and from the outset the weed is not dealt with but made to grow further entangled and insidious and its disappearance is only superficial. The novel is also, as Humble suggests, concerned with notions of heredity. Sophia is scared of marriage because she is afraid of being a potentially dangerous person. Her grandfather, she explains, was 'ruthless' in a way – driven to success at the expense of moral scruples – and her grandmother is 'full of rectitude and arrogance', possessing an unimaginative, 'shoot-em-down type' of 'ruthlessness' (27-28). Sophia, then, has inherited 'different kinds of ruthlessness. That's what's so disturbing' (27). It is also this, she suggests, that makes her family 'queer', the mix of Greek and English 'kinds of ruthlessness'. Not knowing herself, Christie's heroine feels unable to fulfil the post-war duty of starting a family, or accepting responsibility for the upkeep of her own, until the generic need for resolution and explanation – for knowledge – has been fulfilled, even if this means 'the right person' did not do it.

Returning to another familiar Christie image, Charles's father notes: 'Most families have got a defect, a chink in their armour. Most people can deal with one weakness – but they might not be able to deal with two'. At this point, Charles has asked if murderousness is an inheritable characteristic. 'I wouldn't worry your head about heredity,' his father concludes. 'Much too tricky and complicated a subject' (94). For Humble, Christie is addressing the reader as Charles's father is addressing Charles.⁶⁶³ However, the idea of heredity is a serious concern in the novel: the whole conclusion directly addresses the idea that 'different kinds of ruthlessness', clashing chinks in the armour, can be fatal or productive for families. Also, Charles is, like Sophia, trying to find out what skills and interests he has inherited from his police-commissioner father, by practising as an amateur detective. Like Aristide's first son Roger, who quickly leads the family business into 'Queer Street' (81), Charles fails to identify the murderer (183) and therefore fails as his father's son. In a sense, *Crooked*

⁶⁶³ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 189.

House deals with post-war family survival as, through murder, execution, and marriage, the sprawling family model is downsized.

Central to these issues of heredity and futurity is the child in the novel. Josephine, aged 'about eleven' (26), is described as an ugly girl whom Charles instinctively dislikes. Josephine is not very feminine: she takes lessons with her brother, is offended when he calls her a girl, and does not shy away from physical violence (183).⁶⁶⁴ Josephine pries, snoops, and absorbs clues others have ignored ('That child,' Sophia says, 'is a bit of a problem' [p. 80]). Upon the police's arrival, she proclaims herself Sherlock Holmes and tells Charles he is Watson, as she follows the family around with a black notebook, playing at solving the crime. The pair's unlikeliness as allies is repeatedly stressed: Josephine tells Charles she cannot work with him because he does not observe the hallowed 'rules' of detective fiction (97), while Charles considers her efforts 'childish nonsense' (138). On the other hand, the supposed 'nonsense' of the childish mind is what makes Josephine attractive to Charles: it seems as though in a 'crooked house' where personalities are so distinct and heredity so dangerous, the only trustworthy figure is the child, in whom 'kinks' are yet to emerge. Children are, we suppose, incapable of 'adult' identity choices like having a sexuality or having the *mens rea* for murder.⁶⁶⁵

'The child' is by default innocent – which seems to mean incapable of transgressing morality according to our culture – until their identities can be applied retrospectively. As Stockton considers in relation to Sedgwick's concept of the 'protogay child,' an actual child is unlikely to be considered 'gay,' but most homosexual adults are asked what it was like being a 'gay child'; hence,

all children are first presumed straight and are only allowed to come out as gay, or queer, or homosexual when it is thought they could know their sexuality [...] 'gay child' acts as a gravestone marking a death: the point at which one's future as a straight adult expired [...] From

⁶⁶⁴ In an age when tomboys were young women rather than girls, this is almost shorthand for Josephine's being problematic. As Sedgwick reminds us, one of the strongest fears attached to children in the West is that they will 'turn out gay' or contribute to the existence of a world that is not 'hygeinic[ally]' straight (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 41-43).

⁶⁶⁵ 'Can a child be threatening? Or ever feel like killing?' asks Stockton (*The Queer Child*, 156).

this death, at this point of death, the gay child is born, even if one is eighteen or forty-five.⁶⁶⁶

‘Such a child’, claims Stockton, ‘is like an explanation unavailable to itself in the present tense.’⁶⁶⁷ Moreover, the child may consider itself gay, or otherwise deviant, but this will be dismissed as a phase, or a misunderstanding, until they have grown up and become ‘what they latently “were”’.⁶⁶⁸ From a technical perspective, Christie was always looking for characters who could hold vital knowledge in plain sight, but whom other people, including the reader, could routinely misinterpret. As a child, Josephine can act with ghoulish and amoral morbidity, but not be connected with murder because of her age.⁶⁶⁹

To arrive at an honest solution, Charles needs to suspect everyone, including Sophia (*Crooked*, 159), but he does not consider the child as a suspect and, desperately, he takes her into his confidence. Teaming up with Josephine, Charles exhibits a post-war need for security and, moreover, a need to trust in innocence and futurity. Unlike Magda, whose attempts to turn the murder into a theatrical event are deemed tasteless, Josephine’s habit is indulged: ‘in accordance with the canons of the best detectives,’ Charles tells his father, the girl ‘has licked the police hollow’ (81). It is precisely Josephine’s lack of moral or legal awareness – manifested in the refusal to understand that her grandfather’s murder is not a detective story – that brings hope to the family at a moment in time when it lacks structure and resolution.

However, for Christie, an adult’s identity begins with their actions in childhood. She tells a story halfway through *Crooked House* that also appears in *And Then There Were None* (1939), *Curtain* (probably written in 1940), and *Towards Zero* (1944).

A child is angry with its kitten, says ‘I’ll kill you,’ and hits it on the head with a hammer – and then breaks its heart because the kitten doesn’t come alive again! Lots of kids

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 158.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁶⁹ It is clear from **Appendix** that children in Christie, when connected with death, are also connected with knowledge of secret identities – that is, with alternative lives.

try to take a baby out of a pram and 'drown it', because it usurps attention – or interferes with their pleasures. They get – very early – to a stage when they know that it is 'wrong' – that is, that it will be punished. Later, they get to *feel* that it is wrong. But some people, I suspect, remain morally immature. They continue to be aware that murder is wrong, but they do not feel it. [...] And that, perhaps is the mark of Cain. (92-93. Emphasis original)

Like Freud, Christie here argues for urges pronounced in childhood and moderated only by societal custom.⁶⁷⁰ One learns *that* something is 'wrong' and later comes 'to *feel* that it is wrong', presumably a further consequence of learning. Also like Freud, this passage does not challenge the rightness of governing codes and barriers. Christie presents the child as something conditioned, not corrupted, by society. The child is absolutely not *innocent* in this conception. Childish innocence can only be retroactively imposed, and must be, as Stockton has it, 'impossible'.⁶⁷¹

Stockton also identifies a related queer child, which she terms 'the child queered by Freud.' That is, the 'not-yet-straight child' who, 'if all goes well', will turn out straight, but who has a dangerous tendency to self-expression despite not possessing a sexual identity. This child, who expresses sexual knowledge without expressing the codes and formulae of any sexuality, possesses a strange kind of power, lacked by adults. Translating this, somewhat, to detective fiction, Josephine's inability to grasp the assumed significance of murder beyond her immediate experiences and pleasures presents the knowledge she possesses as disarming. She understands the same things as everyone else, sometimes more deeply, but expresses that understanding differently.

Josephine turns out to be the murderer. She killed her grandfather because he would not let her take ballet lessons (spelt 'bally dancing' in her confession [*Crooked*, 185]), and killed another person because it was getting boring and the best detective stories have multiple murders (186). These inadequate motives are feasible as the child's here: as Stockton emphasizes, the murderous child is often credited with simple desires rather than full-blown

⁶⁷⁰ Freud, 'The Finding of an Object', 148.

⁶⁷¹ Stockton, *The Queer Child* 12.

motives for killing. It means that adults can reduce complex urges behind violent acts to a basic, understandable level, without fear of judgment over this simplicity. The figure of the child allows the adult to explore the potential of desire and feeling 'unspoilt', unfettered by taboo.⁶⁷² During the Second World War, Christie began connecting children with murder in earnest, writing a total of three novels which involve children who kill in some way, and five novels and plays in which children are killed.⁶⁷³ The contrast to the genre in the interwar period is profound. Ngaio Marsh, probably Christie's closest contemporary in camp conservatism, put a twelve year-old boy who irritates the police into *A Surfeit of Lampreys* (1940). He is annoying, reads too many detective stories, and is always right, like Josephine. Marsh's character, Michael Lamprey, ends up as a police commissioner in a later novel, an optimistic note for futurity.⁶⁷⁴ Josephine in *Crooked*, however, is unmasked as the villain of the piece.

Charles and the reader find out who Josephine is when the great aunt takes her on a car journey and deliberately crashes, fatally. She leaves Charles two wrapped items: a letter explaining that she had to stop Josephine because the law would not, and the child's notebook, which holds details of the murders: 'Today I killed grandfather...' (*Crooked*, 185). Like the son giving up the family business because it does not suit his mind, and the granddaughter inheriting everything, then, Josephine's execution by her great-aunt is a gesture of pruning the overreaching family tree. This has to be done from within: the police commissioner reveals at the end that he has known the 'poor child' to be guilty 'for some time' but said nothing (188). As Foucault points out, a child's knowledge and agency – the 'little black book' in which Josephine records her secrets is oddly fetishized – has a unique status as 'virgin territory.' It is othered as lost and unreachable.⁶⁷⁵ However, Josephine is, ultimately, treated like any

⁶⁷² Ibid., 158. See also 155-58.

⁶⁷³ See **Appendix**.

⁶⁷⁴ See Marsh's *A Surfeit of Lampreys* (1941) and *Opening Night* (1951). Christie parodies the character in *The Body in the Library* (1942) which (as mentioned in ch. 1) includes an annoying child who devours detective fiction and collects autographs from all his favourite detective writers, including 'Dorothy Sayers Dickson Carr and Agatha Christie', but not Ngaio Marsh.

⁶⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, Jean Denet, and Guy Hocquengheim, 'The Danger of Children's Sexuality', in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (New York, Brooklyn: Semiotext(e), 1996), 264-74 (267).

other murderer who threatens the established order in a detective novel: she is destroyed, rather than put through juvenile courts or reformatories. The idea of underlying innocence which equals morality is here pirouetted.

Christie once claimed that her publishers asked her to change the solution to *Crooked*; Dennis Sanders and Len Lovallo suggest this may be why it was her favourite of her own titles.⁶⁷⁶ Christie repeatedly ranked *Crooked* high. Although, unlike with *Curtain*, there is no material in the business correspondence archive suggesting that Christie's publishers asked her to substantially alter the manuscript, there is evidence that a television production company, having secured the rights to film *Crooked House*, abandoned the project once they realized that this would involve presenting a child as a killer, an 'unsuitable' prospect for Sunday night viewing.⁶⁷⁷ Josephine-the-murderer, then, does not simply help shatter the idea of good families and bad families; she undermines a belief in children's innocence and exposes that very concept as a social construct.

Still, *Crooked* ends traditionally. Charles commands Sophia to marry him:

'And you, Sophia [...] will marry me. I've just heard I'm appointed to Persia. We will go out there together, and you will forget the little Crooked House. Your mother can put on plays and your father can buy more books and Eustace will soon go to a university. Don't worry about them any more. Think of me. [...] In poor little Josephine all the worst of the family came together. In you, Sophia, I fully believe that all that is bravest and best in the Leonides family has been handed down [...] Hold up your head, my darling. The future is ours.'

'I will, Charles. I love you and I'll marry you and make you happy.' She looked down at the note-book. 'Poor Josephine.' (187)

Here, the black-and-white idea that blood is good or bad is collapsed. The Leonides family has not emerged thriving or accomplished, but it has survived, at the expense of its erstwhile structure; and, as his father's son, Charles has

⁶⁷⁶ Dennis Sanders and Len Lovallo, *The Agatha Christie Companion* (London: W.H. Allen, 1985), 187.

⁶⁷⁷ Letter from Edmund Cork to Agatha Christie, 20 Oct. 1949. Archived at the University of Exeter Special Collections, Agatha Christie Business Archive. File EUL MS 99/1/1949.

failed, but as a nonspecific insider/outsider he has done well. Like all the relatives listed, Sophia is being offered independence outside of the legal-but-crooked house.

Stockton's concept of sideways growth, exploring non-reproductive pleasures and experiences in rejecting the rhetoric of growing up, and queering the child, resonates when we consider the role Josephine plays in *Crooked*. Crucially, there is no suggestion at the end of the novel that Charles and Sophia will have or want a child – there is only 'poor Josephine' – and the family reaches beyond its elaborate home. The child as a (fictional, stylized) murderer on a par with any other prime villain in detective fiction addresses the thesis of children's innocence with remarkable directness. The not-so-Victorian, not-so-nostalgic family in this immediately post-war novel, then, illustrates the smothering and toxic nature of tradition, observed or created. There is a lingering, but compromised, sense of optimistic futurism in its conclusion as Sophia, whose has previously aroused her fiancé's suspicion for appearing to 'have the perfection of a stage performance' (7) is taken out of her house and out of her country. Partly in line with dominant post-Second World War rhetoric, the couple's aim is to start a family, built on tradition but on a fresh page – with or without children.

Adoption in *They Do It with Mirrors* (1952)

'The child is burdened with guilt if he does not fulfil [his parent's] hopes', Christie claims in her autobiography. 'I often feel that it is for one's *own* prestige that one wants one's children to succeed' whereas a 'dispassionate' calculation of the child's aptitudes and capabilities would be more productive (*Autobiography*, 46. Emphasis original). *Crooked* seems to advocate reconceptualizing the family as the sum of its individual members, not tied to a tradition or location, in the historical context of post-war change. With 'poor Josephine' dead and Sophia beginning a family of her own, Christie presents two extremes of heredity, the 'worst' and the 'best' of the Leonides' ruthlessness, put to appropriate ends

outside the environment they grew up in, a house tangled in bindweed, where the outside world does not intrude unless it can be represented in a stage production or a detective story. However, in the 1950s, Christie goes on to look at ‘modernized’ post-Second World War family models. Specifically, she looks at ‘problem children’ and adoption. Questions about biology and heredity confront ethical questions about the impact of environment on a child’s development. Christie’s understanding of ‘family’ in the 1950s suggests danger, contradiction, and fundamental insecurity.

Adoption was a popular topic in the 1950s, which have traditionally been understood, in Nick Thomas’s words, as ‘an interim period between the decades standing on either side’ (i.e. the war-torn 1940s and the free-and-easy 1960s), but are increasingly coming to be understood as a dynamic and influential decade.⁶⁷⁸ Although for Jenny Keating adoption had become ‘an established way of setting up a family’ by 1945,⁶⁷⁹ the Adoption Act in Britain was not passed until 1958. The initial report that informed the Act, in 1954, had stressed that marriage was the only possible background for a child to be adopted into, but this had been relaxed by the time the act was passed, suggesting a dynamic decade indeed.⁶⁸⁰ Christie’s ever-popular prose reflects these changes. In the 1950s, adoption became a definite theme.⁶⁸¹

York notes that adoption ‘is an obfuscation of “true” biological parentage, a disguise of biological origins.’⁶⁸² He understands the theme in Christie as inherently negative and obfuscating: adoptions ‘do not satisfy’ adults who want children, the artificial relationships – as York understands them in Christie – can simply exacerbate a parent’s lust for control, and there is always a question of ‘sinister origins’; all in all, adoption can create ‘a strained family situation’.⁶⁸³ York’s reading is in line with those biographers, cited above, who tend to note

⁶⁷⁸ Nick Thomas, ‘Will the Real 1950s Please Stand Up? Views of a Contradictory Decade’, *Culture and Social History*, 5 (2008), 227.

⁶⁷⁹ Jenny Keating, *A Child for Keeps: The History of Adoption in England, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 195.

⁶⁸⁰ O. M. Stone, ‘The Adoption Act, 1958’, *The Modern Law Review*, 22 (1959).

⁶⁸¹ Adoption features in *Mirrors* (1952), *McGinty* (1953), *Ordeal by Innocence* (1957), *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1956), and *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959)

⁶⁸² York, *Agatha Christie*, 76-7.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, 77.

Christie's mother's background and subsequent distress. However, there is a difference between gifting a child the family cannot afford to rich relations in the 1860s and the regulated, institutionalized, and newly respectable practice of adoption in the mid-twentieth century. There is certainly a sense of a family that has built itself not being so 'real' as the nuclear triad,⁶⁸⁴ but a reading of *Mirrors* (1952) indicates that Christie's answer is not to go back to biological ties. Rather, the texts imply a need to look for new ways of thinking about the family, even if there are no definitive solutions.

Always, Christie's 'new' families appear conventional. In *Ordeal by Innocence* (1957), for example, Rachel Argyle has adopted several children who live with herself and her husband. Never, though, does Christie let a character think of their adoptive parents as 'real': '[Mrs Argyle] was determined to [...] give [her adoptive children] a real home, be a real mother to them [but] it can never work out [since] the blood-tie *does* matter', says that woman's husband in *Ordeal by Innocence*.⁶⁸⁵ When one of the children expresses anger at her, he is told by his sister that he is simply displacing anger for his 'real mother', since he discovered that he was sold to the Argyles for £100 and consequently feels unwanted (119-23). Rachel Argyle, who is the murder victim, is routinely criticised throughout the novel for being carried away by her ideals and treating her family like a hobby ('A very fine thing to do [...] only it can never work out' [136]). The inference that nothing can replace blood ties seems clear, and is apparently cemented when, at the end of the novel, two of the Argyles' adoptive children, raised as siblings, decide to marry (192). The laws of incest do not apply when the family structure, and therefore the siblings' relationship, are not considered 'real'.

From its first page, *Mirrors* illustrates a world of theatricality, artifice, and performance. Theatrical imagery is an underlying theme in *Sleeping* and

⁶⁸⁴ See below.

⁶⁸⁵ Agatha Christie, *Ordeal by Innocence* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1983), 136. Emphasis original. Further references to this source appear as *Ordeal*.

Crooked, which comes into its element in the 1950s novels.⁶⁸⁶ The first character, Ruth, an aunt of the family in this book, who only features at the beginning and end, is introduced with the observation that ‘to imagine what she would be like in a natural state’ would be impossible: make-up, diet, and exercise have obscured her ‘natural’ body (9). Her maid is ‘the only woman who knows what [Ruth] really look[s] like’ (10). Ruth asks Miss Marple to go and visit an old mutual friend, Carrie-Louise, whom most people believe to have ‘deliberately turned her back on reality’ (77). Something, says Ruth, is wrong with Carrie-Louise, whose lack of grounding in ‘reality’ renders her vulnerable. Marple agrees to visit the family home, under the guise of an old friend who has fallen on hard times and wants some company (14).

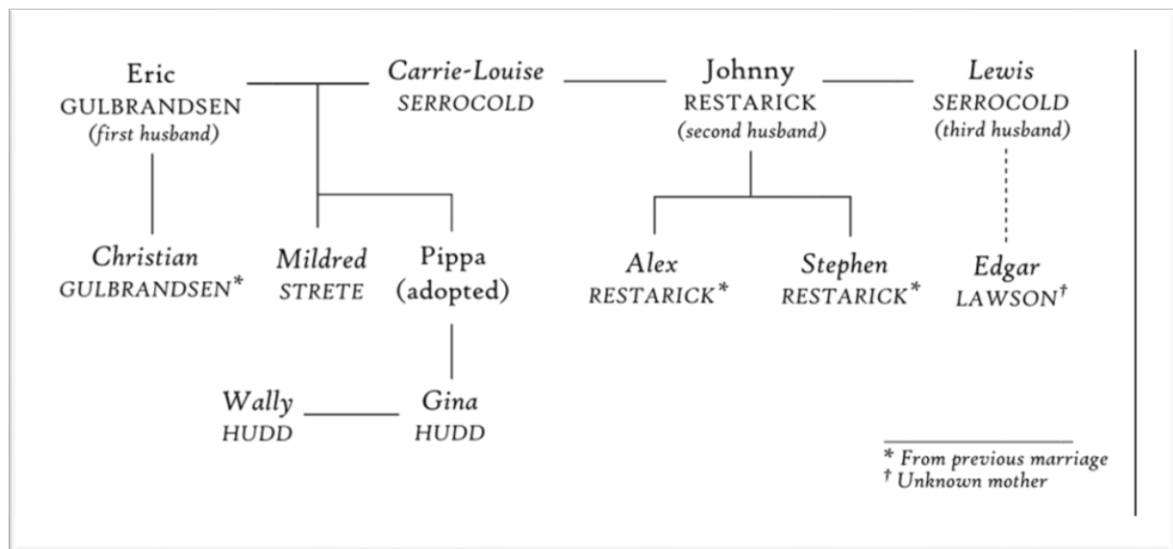
The house Marple visits is even more artificial and anachronistic than that in *Crooked*. Stoneygates is, at first, all gothic façade (‘Best Victorian Lavatory Period’, says a bright young character [28-9]). Built ‘when electricity was a novelty’, it has since been half-heartedly modernized, with ‘nothing properly done’ (56). Carrie-Louise, who has married three times, lives there with her present husband (Lewis Serrocold), a biological daughter from a previous marriage (Mildred Strete), the daughter of an adoptive daughter from the same previous marriage and her American husband (Gina and Wally Hudd), and twin sons Carrie-Louise acquired from another previous husband’s prior marriage (Alex and Stephen Restarick).⁶⁸⁷ Lewis is a philanthropist passionate about

⁶⁸⁶ Theatricality is a theme in *A Murder is Announced* (1950), *They do it with Mirrors* (1952), *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* (1953), *After the Funeral* (1953), *Dead Man’s Folly* (1956), and *4.50 From Paddington* (1957). One gets the impression that Christie only really shied away from the theme of theatricality in the 1950s in her theatrical play-scripts.

⁶⁸⁷ See **Figure 1**, a condensed family tree. The dotted line between Lewis and Edgar indicates unacknowledged paternity. After this complicated abbreviation, one might sympathize with Carrie-Louise’s paid companion, who laments that ‘this is a crazy kind of household’ (32).

reforming juvenile delinquents by encouraging them to put on plays. This has meant adding ‘various wings and outbuildings’ to Stoneygates ‘which, while not positively dissimilar in style, had robbed the structure as a whole of any cohesion or purpose’, according to the omniscient narrator (30). The house is rather betwixt and between – not quite gothic, not quite modern, and untailed to its owner, whose family grows and changes with every marriage.

Theatricality continues to dominate the novel. Before arriving at Stoneygates, Marple is met at the station by Edgar Lawson, a nervous youth who claims to be ‘helping Mr Serrocold’ (27). He is one of the juveniles in the attached reformatory but Lewis has given him some work to keep him happy and ‘[m]ake [him] feel like one of the family’ (29-30). Phrases like ‘amateur dramatics’, ‘dramatizing himself’ (78), ‘madly theatrical’ (144), ‘theatrically’ (76), ‘play-acting’ (109), ‘ham’ (144), ‘almost ridiculous’, and ‘the air of a star performer’ (76) accompany his appearances throughout the text. Edgar is a neurotic type who claims to be the son of Winston Churchill (48) and Lord Montgomery (‘Doesn’t seem likely to me. Not *Monty!* From all I’ve heard about him’, says one character [49. Emphasis original]).⁶⁸⁸ This, he later says, is because his father was unimportant and he is ashamed of his illegitimacy (58, 157). Finally, he saunters into the drawing room where everyone has gathered,



⁶⁸⁸ Lord Montgomery’s sexuality was a matter of some speculation. See Nigel Hamilton, *The Full Monty: Montgomery of Alamein, 1887-1942* (London: Peter Joseph, 2001), xv-xvii, 167-70.

cries, 'I have found you, O mine enemy!' and accuses Lewis of being his father (76).

The lights fuse and Edgar leads Lewis into a study, locks the door, and starts screaming, before firing a revolver. Eventually, the lights come back on and Lewis unlocks the door. He is fine, there is a bullet-hole in the wall, and Edgar is an apologetic nervous wreck. Meanwhile, Carrie-Louise's step-son, elsewhere in the house on a flying visit, has been killed. Everybody was distracted by the scene in the study. Lewis explains that Christian Gulbrandsen, the step-son, had confided in him that he believed Carrie-Louise was being slowly poisoned. Carrie-Louise refuses to accept that this is true (187). Marple is suspicious of the way things appear, pointing out that 'one so often looks at the wrong thing' whether by chance or 'misdirection' (98), and soon she realises that Edgar is too theatrical: 'he was actually a normal young man playing the part of a schizophrenic', and therefore always 'a little larger than life', says Marple (211). The realization that Carrie-Louise was right about Edgar meaning no harm leads Marple to realise that she is right about other things, and not 'out of touch with reality' (210). Accordingly, 'if I was to go by [Carrie-Louise],' says Marple, 'all the things that *seemed* to be true were only illusions'; illusions, moreover, 'created for a definite purpose' (210-211. Emphasis original).

It turns out that Edgar really is Lewis's illegitimate son, his theatrical proclamation calculated to stop people suspecting that it is true. He shouted behind the closed study door to give Lewis time to run through the courtyard and shoot Gulbrandsen. Carrie-Louise was not being poisoned; Lewis was embezzling money from Gulbrandsen's business ventures in order to fund his juvenile-reforming initiatives. He killed Gulbrandsen to stop the story from getting out, and invented the poison story. To explain things, Marple re-imagines the drawing-room and study as parts of a theatrical set. In this she is influenced by one of the step-sons, a theatrical producer, who encourages her to '[t]hink of it in terms of a stage set. Lighting entrances, exits. Dramatis personae. Noises off.' 'I was thinking', he tells her, 'in terms of the theatre. Not reality, but artificiality' (189), before being killed himself. Since 'a stage-set's real enough [...] made of real materials – canvas and wood and paint and cardboard' (181),

Marple reminds everyone that they were 'the audience' in the drawing room: 'just like on stage there are entrances and exits' (205). However, she points out, one never questions where the actors are going when they exit – when one asks where Lewis was when he went off-stage, rather than where he said it was, it all becomes clear; alternatively, she suggests, they had only seen one half of the 'stage' (206). The theatrical house and theatrical murders provide a backdrop for considering the theatrical constellation of Carrie-Louise's family life.

The night before the murder, Marple realizes that only she calls Carrie-Louise by that name:

To her husband, she was Caroline. To Miss Bellever [the paid companion], Cara. Stephen Restarick usually addressed her as Madonna. To Wally she was formally Mrs Serrocold, and Gina elected to address her as Grandam – a mixture, she had explained, of Grande Dame and Grandmamma.

Was there some significance, perhaps, in the various names that were found for Caroline Louise Serrocold? Was she to all of them a symbol and not quite a real person? (62-3)

Carrie-Louise is different things to different people and, everyone supposes, she is divorced from reality. 'But actually', Marple claims, 'it was reality [that Carrie-Louise was] in touch with, and not the illusion' (210). The attempted murder of Carrie-Louise, who is the one constant point in the ever-changing family dynamic at Stoneygates, is a fiction. The danger actually centres on Lewis, who has tried to admit his illegitimate son into the household without acknowledging paternity, and to embezzle money from Carrie-Louise's former marriage. He has tried to gloss over the family's disordered messiness.

Amidst the theatricality, one character insists on the importance of 'blood'; of biological relationships. Mildred, who thinks that 'this whole place is impossible' and remarks on the untended garden ('the weeds—the overgrowth') as a metaphor for her own neglect ('Lewis thinks of nothing but these criminals. And mother thinks of nothing but him') (55-6), regularly reminds others that she is the victim's only 'blood relation' (154), and the only biological relative of Carrie-Louise (54-6). Mildred, however, despite being the child of Carrie-

Louise's first marriage, and therefore the lynchpin of nuclear futurity, is not at all stable, sympathetic, or reliable. She is enthusiastic about heredity, at one point referring to her half-brother Christian as 'my brother' three times in one sentence (66), emphasizing the closeness of their relationship, rather than their different mothers and ages. This enthusiasm manifests itself, though, as spiteful resentment.

Mildred resents Gina, the daughter of Pippa, her adoptive sister. Pippa had been adopted, aged two, because Carrie-Louise and her first husband thought they could not conceive children (21). However, as soon as they had adopted Pippa, Carrie-Louise had conceived Mildred (22), a common phenomenon highlighted in Lulie Shaw's study of 1951 adoptions.⁶⁸⁹ 'Relief of tension, maybe, and then Nature can do its work', Marple opines (*Mirrors*, 43). As a result, Carrie-Louise 'tended to overindulge Pippa and pass over Mildred', eager to make the adoptive relative a valued member of the family (23). Throughout the novel, Mildred and Gina are contrasted. Mildred is middle-aged and frumpy while Gina is young and handsome. The contrast manifests in opposing approaches to mourning. Gina brings 'an exotic glow' to 'the Gothic gloom of the library' (143), her colourful outfit making her stand out (144). However, the Inspector notes, 'Mrs Strete fitted into the library much better than Gina Hudd had done. There was nothing exotic about Mrs Strete. She wore black' (148). Attached to tradition – the wearing of black, a suitability to the 'Gothic gloom', and a prudish disapproval of everything Gina stands for – Mildred's jealousy colours her conservative claim of being more entitled than others to a place in the family.

'You must have had – a difficult childhood', Marple suggests, prying for information (54). Mildred replies:

I'm so glad that somebody appreciates that. People don't really know what children go through. Pippa, you see, was the pretty one. [...] Both father and mother encouraged her

⁶⁸⁹ Lulie A. Shaw, 'Following Up Adoptions', *British Journal of Psychiatric Adoption* 2.8, 1953. Cited in Alexina Mary McWhinnie, *Adopted Children: How They Grow Up: A Study of Their Adjustments as Adults* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 41.

[...] to show off. I was always the quiet one. I was shy – Pippa didn't know what shyness was. A child can suffer a great deal, Aunt Jane. (54)

The emphasis on prettiness and self-promotion suggests that Pippa has been desired, that she was chosen and considered worth paying for, and that the biologically conceived child is therefore undervalued. This was a common superstition surrounding adoption in these early years of its mainstream respectability: that 'natural' children might be overlooked in favour of more attractive children who had been imported into the family.⁶⁹⁰ However, it also indicates the frailty of the family unit to which Mildred is so attached: the final appeal to 'Aunt Jane' betrays a need for kinship beyond one's biological relatives. Even though Mildred defends the nuclear triad excessively, refusing to let Gina call her 'Aunt Mildred' ('I'm no aunt of yours, thank goodness. No blood relation' [185]), like Gina (145), she calls Marple 'Aunt Jane'.

'It was unfair', Mildred claims:

'I was their own child, Pippa was only adopted. I was the daughter of the house. She was – nobody. [...] A child whose own parents didn't want her – or more probably illegitimate. [...] It's come out in Gina. There's bad blood there. Blood will tell. Lewis can have what theories he likes about environment. Bad blood does tell. Look at Gina. (55)

The emphasis on 'blood' is two-fold, confirming both Mildred's status as the authentic child and Gina's status as a bad lot, sharing her mother's mysterious lineage. A prominent social worker in the 1950s, Jane Rowe, claimed that '[e]veryone connected with adoption must be concerned with heredity',⁶⁹¹ citing various case studies in which families had worried that the adopted child of an 'undesirable' type might introduce a kink into the family's bloodline.⁶⁹² Rowe noted that '[m]any widely accepted beliefs about heredity are known to be completely erroneous, but they continue to be held with obstinate tenacity'.⁶⁹³ The triple emphasis on 'bad blood' in the above passage makes Mildred's point

⁶⁹⁰ Joint UN/WHO Meeting of Experts on the Mental-Health Aspects of Adoption: final report (1953), 4.

⁶⁹¹ Jane Rowe, *Parents, Children and Adoption: A Handbook for Adoption Workers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1966), 87.

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*, 87-9.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

resemble a desperate chant rather than a credible theory. There is no objectivity to her suggestion that Gina's mother's potential illegitimacy might degrade the family that lives in Stoneygates.

While Gina appears exotic, Edgar's theatrical complexes and neuroses are more recognizable manifestations of an unknown origin. 'All very typical', a doctor assures Marple (*Mirrors*, 58), but it turns out to be affectation. His choice of famous fathers taps into a cliché about illegitimate people: that the need to know one's past is the need to narrativize one's origins. Margaret Homans has demonstrated that in a number of twentieth-century texts, the quest for 'lost biological origins' is 'the endeavor to make or reconstruct an origin that meets the present needs'.⁶⁹⁴ 'the adoptive compulsion to search for origins becomes a compulsion to create them'.⁶⁹⁵ This is what Edgar initially reflects, dramatizing himself and elevating his history. When Edgar himself is exposed as playing a part, though, his search for neat narratives is exposed as an element of his performance. By asserting that he knows his biological origins, Edgar consciously performs the part of someone who does not know about their origins – on multiple levels, his identity is theatrically structured, as is the very concept of authentic identity. Gina, however, is happy to know only that her mother comes from an adoption agency (*Mirrors*, 25). Gina, as the child of an adoptee, has a more authentic approach to her origins than the others have to theirs, and it is Mildred who is concerned with dramatizing Pippa's background.⁶⁹⁶

Carrie-Louise reveals that Pippa's mother was a hanged murderer (169). Serious suspicion subsequently attaches to Gina. Since her mother introduced murderous blood into the family, it is only natural, the police suppose, that Gina has introduced murder itself. Gina's exotic heritage also makes her a suspicious member of the family: 'she's half Italian, you know,' the policeman reminds Marple, 'and the Italians have that unconscious vein of cruelty' (140).

⁶⁹⁴ Margaret Homans, 'Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins', *Narrative*, 14.1 (2006), 10, 23.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁹⁶ Speculating wildly about origins is, of course, a form of wilful ignorance, because the uncertainty surrounding birth licenses any number of projections rooted in the here and now.

Repeatedly, Mildred seeks to present her niece (and therefore her sister) as 'other,' insisting: 'you don't even know who your mother is or where she came from!' (185). When she catches Gina kissing Alex (her step-uncle, but more importantly not her husband), Mildred deduces that Gina must be the murderer: her bad blood is showing (185).

However, Gina proves not to have inherited murderous tendencies when it emerges that the respectable Lewis, and not she, is the killer. She also remains with her husband – Marple, and therefore the implied reader, does not judge her negatively for having a little fun with Alex – and moves to America to help him with farming. The husband is, incidentally, one that Carrie-Louise notes Gina would not 'normally' have met – but she was evacuated to America during the war (164). Only Carrie-Louise believes that Gina will stay with her husband ('You don't belong together', Alex tells her, and 'Wally's not happy here' [176, 177]). However, as a result of her evacuation and surprising marriage, Gina emerges happy at the end of *Mirrors*. The postscript is her letter to Ruth, in which Gina says that Mildred, whom she can finally call 'Aunt Mildred', 'seems much nicer now – and not so peculiar' (217). The family is more attractive to Gina, and she has found her place in it, once she has moved out of the stagey, artificial family home. In *Sleeping*, theatrical narratives give body and voice to the house's queer ghosts; in *Crooked*, the family receives the outside world only via performance and make-believe; in *Mirrors*, it is theatrically that the twining, tangled family presents itself to the world. Reading *Mirrors* as the story of Gina, whose place in a complicated family is far from obvious, means reading an explicitly post-war discussion of the roles of tradition and kinship in daily family life.

As a novel, *Mirrors* engages with contemporary debates about heredity and environment – the 'nature and nurture' question that Lionel Pembrose famously said was 'much charged with emotion' in 1955⁶⁹⁷ – but it makes a wider point about the nature of family. Christie does not define 'family' in the

⁶⁹⁷ L.S. Penrose, 'Heredity and Environment in Human Affairs', in *The Convocation Lecture 1955* (National Children's Home, 1955) (9).

novel, although several characters try to do so. The presence of juvenile delinquents in Stoneygates reflects a post-war pursuit of structure focussed on youth and the future. The concept of juvenile reform embodies the notion of creating anew what has been made before (*re-forming*). The Stoneygates reformatory's slogan is 'RECOVER ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE' (*Mirrors*, 60), reworking a received expression, but this kind of philanthropy is treated as '[f]ashion' and 'a fad' (15), not as a real solution. The family home is anachronistic, ever-growing, and far from consistent. The old priorities ('blood ties') count for less than bonds of emotion and of money, and the character who prioritises 'blood' is gently ridiculed.

There is, however, constancy in the family: Carrie-Louise, though misunderstood, remains the only character 'in touch with [reality], and not the illusion' (*Mirrors*, 210). Since Carrie-Louise's insights help Marple to solve the murder and bring about the text's resolution, her in-touch-ness breaks through the artifice and theatricality to create a simplified, harmonious family, not tied to Stoneygates. By the end of the novel, Miss Marple is still Aunt Jane and Mildred is happy to be Aunt Mildred to Gina. Christie's ambitious claim in *Mirrors* is that when families are expanding and developing, and social mores are changing, to try and cling to old traditions is to indulge a fantasy. From this text, in line with post-war debates and discussions, emerges a need to reconceptualize 'the family' altogether if it is to survive.

Conclusion

Adoption raises questions about the happiness of 'the child' as well as the role of 'the Child' in family narratives. This in turn consciously affects all identities within the nuclear family and those units aspiring to the nuclear structure. The first text discussed, *Sleeping*, was written during or immediately after the Second World War. In it, Christie presents incest as a hidden and unnamed passion that becomes dangerous when more conventional desires and relationships are expressed. The dangerous passions of Dr Kennedy are bound

up with his sister's marital home, and can only become known through literary allusions, to Webster, Besier, and Poe. His crime is remembered by a grown-up child, Gwenda, who, investigating, grants Helen a 'normal,' adult voice and sexuality. Like the good Freudian child, Helen is, finally, allowed to grow up into heterosexuality.

The queer child in *Crooked* is not allowed to grow up. Her passions, pleasures, and knowledge make her so queer, so 'ugly' and *outré*, that she is a danger who is, finally, executed by an older family member. Killing her grandfather, Josephine finally breaks up the crooked house's 'twisted and twining' family. It is not a family that has adapted to changing times but, rather, a misfit one that plays to the letter but not the spirit of the law. By contrast, the expanding, adapting, and fashionably ill-defined family in *Mirrors* is at home, but uncomfortably, in the modernized Gothicism of Stoneygates. If the institution of the family is to be reconceived as relevant in the latter half of the twentieth century, it must let go of the past. The post-war family must be rethought; in a period of national recovery, adaptation is more important than going back. Rather than offering answers, Christie highlights the importance of alternative perspectives, and the child is a crucial symbol and rhetorical device in all this.

Reading these novels in context, it is impossible to maintain a reading of Christie's work as entirely plot-oriented. Curran expresses his surprise at discovering that *Crooked House* began in notebooks as a series of observations about the Leonides family, and that Christie experimented with various solutions before settling on the one that was published:

I had visualised Agatha Christie at her typewriter smiling craftily as she sat down in 1948 to write the next 'Christie for Christmas' and weaving a novel around the device of an eleven year-old girl as a cold-blooded murderer.⁶⁹⁸

The idea that the novel was dashed off quickly around a shock solution, and the mass-production connotations of 'Christie for Christmas', appeal to the image of Christie discussed in Chapter One. However, Christie's notes for the novel

⁶⁹⁸ Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, 99.

began with a (very probably market-orientated) idea about heredity, notes for a 'family' that are 'out of this world' and whose 'lack of moral fibre' is a driving issue for the plot. It is the focus on heredity that led her to consider Josephine as the killer of the piece: 'yes – not normal – wants power.'⁶⁹⁹

Paradoxically, by appealing to old-fashioned family models – large and sprawling – Christie mounts a progressive critique of conservatism by showing these families branching out of their houses and into the wider world. Increasingly in the three texts under discussion, 'growing up' has been configured as performative and ritualistic. Adult human identities crafted within the family emerge as theatrical and founded on suppressed secrets and desires. There is no such thing as innocence, a notion on which the whole genre of detective fiction relies. In the face of a nostalgic post-war emphasis on family traditions and histories Christie is critical of the use of the (biologically conceived) child as a disingenuous symbol for innocent futurity.

The family does not simply emerge as stifling, or choking and insidious, like bindweed; it emerges as something that cannot be the same across time and space. Different families might need to be fundamentally, radically, different. Engaging with contemporary debates about the relative significance of heredity and environment in an individual's make-up, behaviour, and family life, Christie's prose insists that if the family is to remain a viable organism in mobile post-war Britain, then ideals about the family need to adapt with the individuals that make up and come out of families themselves. All in all, innocence is a social construct and a projection, and there is no such thing as a normal family. Christie is not merely an escapist entertainer, but an important participant in post-war debates and negotiations concerning the relevance of the family.

The queer child, a multifaceted and fearful figure, haunts Christie's post-war family homes. As my appendix demonstrates, in the postwar years Christie increasingly problematized her previous understanding of childish innocence, and connected this concept with the theme of secret knowledge – or the fear of

⁶⁹⁹ Quoted, *ibid.*, 145-46.

secret knowledge. Theoretically, when Kincaid refers to the 'have-nots' of childhood (the understanding that children exist as bodies against which such adult qualities as knowledge, experience, and fear are defined), he establishes 'the Child' as a social construct by which adults define themselves. It is small wonder that queer theorists have embraced this particular idea of Kincaid's; his discussion of 'have-nots' resonates with Butler's later discussion of 'not-me's,' the process of labelling others as the deviant things one is, thereby, not.⁷⁰⁰ Even within tight family units where identities are formed, individuals are othered for the sake of 'normality.'

There is no solution in Christie to the issue of a family's strangeness – something emphasized by the generic requirement for a solution in every text. However, the very suggestion that if families are to survive they must change fundamentally, in line with what is contemporary, queerly indicates that context creates conservative units. As Ahmed points out, using the language of family to describe gatherings that are self-consciously 'new' 'has the uncanny effect of a familiar form being strange'; it also involves questioning whether the family is a sturdy and essential institution after all.⁷⁰¹ In asserting the authority of the family unit, Christie undermines its fixity and allows readers to reassess presumptions about authenticity.

This chapter has not been the first acknowledgement of Christie's critical edge when it comes to happy families, but in exploring the queer potential of her crooked family houses, it covers new ground. In the three texts discussed, individuals within families are searching for structure. The need for a stable and knowable environment in which to develop and establish an identity means several characters resort to theatrical narratives, and Christie herself explores existing narratives' inadequacies as truthful accounts. All of this is moving us on as we consider identity and essence in Christie's detective fiction. So far, I have considered Christie's literary constructions of straightness and the pursuit of 'normal' identity and structure. However, in the final chapter, I will explore

⁷⁰⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, 144. This is discussed more fully in Chapter Two.

⁷⁰¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 177.

characters who are supposed to be essentially 'queer.' These characters do not feature in the literary texts but in twenty-first century television adaptations. I will compare and contrast these adaptations' focus on colourful stereotypes and their nostalgic vision of a simpler Britain with Christie's inward focus on the frailty of contemporary normativity. This will enable us to form a conclusion about the queer value and potential of Christie's writing in exploring twentieth and twenty-first century identity constructions.

'Barking Up the Wrong Tree': Male Sexuality in *Agatha Christie's Poirot* and *Agatha Christie's Marple*

[I]t's not like today's violence. It's yesteryear violence. It's not gritty killing – it's glamorous killing.

Amanda Burton, promoting *Marple* in 2009⁷⁰²

Barking up the wrong tree, I'm afraid.

Tim in *Poirot: Death on the Nile*⁷⁰³

Introduction

Is there queer potential in Agatha Christie? Were the answer a simple 'yes' or 'no,' this thesis would be considerably shorter. Addressing the question, and mindful of our conclusions about authorship in Chapter One, it is necessary to acknowledge that 'Agatha Christie' in the twenty-first century is at least partly a televisual phenomenon. Knight has observed that television adaptations tend to 'lay heavier stress on period nostalgia than on the puzzle itself', and, indeed, '[Christie's] novels have for most people now taken on a primarily period interest.'⁷⁰⁴ While Knight does not accept that Christie is significant only for writing good puzzles, he suggests that the books' 'simplistic and jingoistic' language has led to a twenty-first century context in which the stories themselves can only be popular mediated through nostalgic adaptations.⁷⁰⁵ In this final chapter, I consider how queer readings of 'Agatha Christie' can be influenced by that name's shifting multimedia significance. Focussing on masculinity, heterosexuality, and homosexuality, this chapter draws on examples from two long-running television series to consider the presentation of queerness in popular contemporary versions of Christie.

⁷⁰² Quoted, ITV, '*Nemesis: Press Pack*' (2009) [accessed 23 Jul. 2009].

⁷⁰³ Andy Wilson (dir.), '*Death on the Nile*', *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 9.3 (Granada, 2004). Broadcast on ITV1 on 12 Apr. 2004.

⁷⁰⁴ Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800*, 92.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

Both *Agatha Christie's Poirot* (1989-2013) and *Agatha Christie's Marple* (2004-2014) have proven popular in the UK, USA, and Europe, and have become virtually synonymous with the Agatha Christie brand. Following an Agatha Christie Ltd rebranding initiative in 2004, both series have made concerted efforts to 'update' the plots, drawing explicitly on 'queer' themes. In this chapter, I ask whether some subversive potential in the literary texts is lost as 'queer' concerns are brought – deliberately, explicitly, and therefore limitedly – to the twenty-first century adaptations.

To be sure, 'queerer' Christie adaptations than these mainstream projects exist. From computer games to manga and pornography, a variety of texts bear Christie's name.⁷⁰⁶ Some of these explicitly contribute to discussions surrounding queer communities and visibility; for instance, James Lear's homoerotic novel, *The Back Passage* (2006), was marketed as an 'homage to [...] Christie'.⁷⁰⁷ However, being the 'authoritative' products of Agatha Christie Ltd.⁷⁰⁸ – commissioned and endorsed by Christie's estate, and widely used in publishing and marketing⁷⁰⁹ – the television adaptations uniquely set out to define what 'Agatha Christie' looks like, at least in Britain. After considering the relationship between Christie's literary texts, television adaptations, and the state of scholarship, this chapter turns first to constructions of male sexuality in *Poirot* adaptations, and then to the political relevance of 'camp' in *Marple*.

In Chapter Two, I discussed Hercule Poirot as something of a pantomime of the masculine hero in British detective fiction, and in this chapter I consider the character as he appears on television. I make the surprising claim that in translation Poirot has become a more straightforwardly masculine hero. In addition, I suggest that *Marple's* controversial turn to 'updated' themes – featuring sexually explicit references and homosexual kisses – has a

⁷⁰⁶ Lee Sheldon, 'And Then There Were None', ed. by Agatha Christie Adventure Games (The Adventure Company, 2005); Yukiyooshi Oohashi, Syouji Yonemura, and Morihiko Ishikawa, *Agasa Kurisutī No Meitantei Powaro to Māpuru* (Tokyo: NHK, 2004-5); John Seeman (dir.), *Ten Little Maidens* (Excalibur, 1985).

⁷⁰⁷ Rupert Smith, 'James Lear', *Rupert Smith* ([n.d.]).

⁷⁰⁸ Ben Dowell, 'David Walliams Heralds New Era for B.B.C. As the New Home of Agatha Christie Adaptations', *Radio Times* (28 Feb. 2014).

⁷⁰⁹ For instance, actors from the *Poirot* television series provide the voices for HarperCollins' Christie audiobooks, and 'TV tie-in' books have been issued as a matter of course since 1989.

conservative effect, limiting readings of the source texts as anti-queer spaces which require this new and specific intervention if they are to have queer currency. Readings in this chapter are influenced by, among others, Doan, who has argued that looking for gay men, lesbians, or other minority figures in existing narratives can be like ‘sitting [...] amid hundreds of murmuring observers but [hearing] only one conversation, our attention drifting away when things seem incomprehensible or irrelevant’.⁷¹⁰

The television adaptations are all positioned in relation to an implied originating authority – the conservative, unambitious, and benevolently ladylike ‘Agatha Christie’ discussed in Chapter One. Having unpacked the construction of a conservative authority figure in the television adaptations, as we have done in relation to the books, we can contrast the presentation of identity ‘types’: on screen, readings are more limited as the nature of the media and adaptors’ decisions do not problematize the concept of absolute truth.

Watching Christie, Reading Sex

Traditionally, as we have seen, Christie’s detective fiction has been understood as reassuring and conservative. The final pages in one of her novels, Grella claimed in 1976, ‘represent society as it should be, cleansed of guilt’.⁷¹¹ The end of a Christie is set up as it was at the beginning, only with the ‘complications and obstacles’ represented by the victim, and ‘guilty’ corruption represented by the murderer, removed.⁷¹² Now, such interpretations are unpopular, even unacceptable, in scholarship.⁷¹³ Nonetheless, in wider arenas, Christie is still discussed in terms of comfort, tradition, and the reassuring certainty of resolution.⁷¹⁴ ‘Bank holidays’, a *Radio Times* editorial claimed in 2004, ‘just wouldn’t be the same without a big chunk of Agatha Christie’, suggesting a

⁷¹⁰ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 22.

⁷¹¹ Grella, ‘The Formal Detective Novel’, 98-99.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Neil McCaw, *Adapting Detective Fiction: Crime, Englishness and the TV Detective* (London, New York: Continuum, 2011), 40.

⁷¹⁴ Supremely, in Lucy Worsley, *A Very British Murder: The Story of a National Obsession* (London: BBC, 2014).

creature comfort.⁷¹⁵ *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, a reviewer assured *Daily Telegraph* readers in the same year, evoking nationalistic stereotypes, offers 'polite and traditional slaughter' as opposed to the grit of Scandinavian police procedurals.⁷¹⁶ Indeed, Christie has developed an 'Establishment' reputation: journalists discuss her West End play *The Mousetrap* as a London attraction on a par with 'Madame Tussauds and the Changing of the Guard', seeing it is 'a quasi-religious ritual' for many.⁷¹⁷

From all these descriptions, one impression emerges: Christie has currency as an escapist luxury, reinforcing a conservative sense of national identity. Her texts are nostalgic, familiar, and without consequence. The pleasure element is notably drawn along privileged lines: reviewing an episode of *Agatha Christie's Marple* in 2004, Alison Graham wrote that 'these jolly mysteries [...] demand [...] they be watched as you're sipping a milky drink and wearing a big pair of fluffy slippers', configuring the implied viewer as one with leisure time and access to luxuries.⁷¹⁸ The texts discussed by these journalists are all adaptations, and as I shall now discuss, Christie's mainstream appeal in twenty-first century Britain is largely televisual.

Light's much-cited reappraisal of Christie begins with a discussion of *Miss Marple* (1984-1992), a then-contemporary BBC television series which, for Light, typified Christie's reputation 'as a part of the "English heritage"'; as 'the high priestess of nostalgia rather than the "Queen of Crime"'.⁷¹⁹ According to Light, the series' genteel nationalism 'was a lively concoction on the part of television producers and owed as much to the Toryism of the 1980s as it did to any conservatism on Christie's part.'⁷²⁰ In the quarter-century following these remarks, Light's claim that Christie was really a modernist who observed the vapidness of nostalgic reassurance has been accepted, developed, and

⁷¹⁵ 'Death on the Nile', *Radio Times* (9-16 April 2004).

⁷¹⁶ James Walton, 'Last Night on Television: How to Make a Killing', *Daily Telegraph* (31 Aug. 2004).

⁷¹⁷ Stephen Moss, 'The Mousetrap at 60: Why Is This the World's Longest Running Play?', *The Guardian* (20 Nov. 2012).

⁷¹⁸ Alison Graham, *Radio Times* (19 Dec. 2004).

⁷¹⁹ Light, *Forever England*, 62.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

contested.⁷²¹ Still, the presence of what is now the Christie brand on television remains strong.

Christie's prose has been adapted for other media almost as long as it has been published. There is some evidence that her first play, staged in 1930, was a rough reworking of her first novel, and written in the early 1920s.⁷²² Morton's stage adaptation of *Ackroyd* appeared in 1928, the same year as the first film adaptations and even a novelization of one of the films.⁷²³ Christie quickly became controlling in these matters; whenever a stage adaptation of her work was proposed, she denied the project flatly or insisted on doing it herself, and she became famous among theatrical directors for being over-involved in rehearsals.⁷²⁴

Despite some high-profile film successes in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Christie rarely allowed her work to be filmed for the cinema once fashions had changed and murder mysteries had ceased to appeal to cinemagoers without *Carry On*-style campery. She regretted, and eventually withdrew from, a contract with MGM, who wished to make twelve light-hearted 'caper' films with Margaret Rutherford; despite admiring Rutherford's performance, Christie strongly objected to receiving fan-mail that identified her as the series' creator.⁷²⁵ According to Shaw and Vanacker, Christie refused to accept 'the eclipsing of [the original] character by the personality of an actress' on the screen.⁷²⁶ However, Christie was perhaps more concerned with not seeming to cheapen her name, or brand – she allowed the films to continue until her name began to dominate publicity. Of the first instalment, she wrote to her agent that

⁷²¹ Ibid., 100-06. See Makinen, *Agatha Christie; Plain, Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*; Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction*.

⁷²² John Curran, 'Agatha Christie's Black Coffee: A Mystery within a Mystery', *CADS: Crime and Detective Stories*, 67 (2014).

⁷²³ Michael Morton, 'Alibi: A Play in Three Acts.' (London, New York: Samuel French, 1929); Fred Sauer (dir.), *Die Abenteuer G.M.B.H.* (Orplid, 1929). ; Julius Hagen and Leslie S. Hiscott (dir.), *The Passing of Mr Quinn* (Julius Hagen, 1928). ; G. Roy McRae, *The Passing of Mr Quinn* (London Book Company, 1929). Archived copy in the British Library, London (accessed 12 Oct. 2012).

⁷²⁴ Letter from Agatha Christie to Edmund Cork, 15 Jan. 1940. Archived at the University of Exeter Special Collections, Agatha Christie Business Archive. File EUL MS 99/1/1940; Gregg, *Agatha Christie and All That Mousetrap*.

⁷²⁵ Max Mallowan, *Mallowan's Memoirs: Agatha and the Archaeologist* (London: Harper, 2010), 214-15.

⁷²⁶ Shaw and Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, 91.

she was 'not' at all 'upset by it' because the film was 'more or less what [she] expected.' She wrote: 'I do think it's a bad script (*I* could have made it more exciting). [...] I have been spared a good deal by keeping aloof from films.'⁷²⁷

In the 1970s, partly seduced by the prospect of a royal premiere, Christie allowed *Murder on the Orient Express* to be filmed. The result was then the most hyped, and highest-grossing, film in history, with an all-star cast and an expensive period setting, evoking the 1930s as a decadent lost era.⁷²⁸ The *Times* review, which Christie's husband liked to quote, called the film 'touchingly loyal.'⁷²⁹ These two words establish what an Agatha Christie media feature 'should' be: sentimental, nostalgic, and affiliated with a concept of 'Agatha Christie'; here designating a period drama approach to nation and Empire, lost and glamorous. After Christie's death in 1976, a series of lavish films followed along similar lines, and in the 1980s, television series received the Christie estate's blessing. Christie's grandson, Mathew Prichard, who is also the head of Agatha Christie Ltd., insists that he is highly selective with film rights, only granting them to projects that promise to be 'faithful to [his] grandmother.'⁷³⁰ Perhaps more so than with any other fictional detective, cultural productions concerning 'Hercule Poirot' or 'Miss Marple' equally concern the image of the author – 'Agatha Christie.'

On a commercial level, it is unsurprising that Christie is the sum of her media success. The name alone is perhaps more readily signified in British popular culture through television productions than through literary texts. A glance at Christie's 'official' website reveals multiple photographs of actors and news items concerning episodes of *Poirot*, *Marple*, and *Partners in Crime* (BBC, 2015) before any indication that these series also exist as books.⁷³¹ Similarly, Christie's Facebook profile is awash with discussions of media adaptations,

⁷²⁷ Quoted in Morgan, *Agatha Christie*, 328. Emphasis original.

⁷²⁸ See Sarah Street, 'Heritage Crime: The Case of Agatha Christie', in *Seventies British Cinema*, ed. by Robert Shail (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 105-16.

⁷²⁹ Quoted in Mallowan, *Mallowan's Memoirs*, 214.

⁷³⁰ Speaking at 'Agatha Christie at the BBC', as part of the *International Agatha Christie Festival* (Torquay, 11 Sep. 2014).

⁷³¹ RLJ Entertainment and Acorn Media, 'Agatha Christie Online' (2010).

especially from ‘fans.’⁷³² As a researcher active on social media, I am frequently asked for my opinion on recent adaptations, or whether I have met David Suchet, the actor who played Poirot on screen between 1989 and 2013. Such questions do not come from ‘fans’ alone; they are barely less common in academic circles. While Light used the 1980s BBC series as an example of what she considered the distortion of Christie’s ‘real’ significance, ‘Christie’ today, in Britain, evidently signifies a phenomenon that is more than literary.

Indeed, Angela Devas has insisted, in postmodern style, that ‘Christie is so well known that television productions of her work fall into the remit of her authorship’, discussing one novel and its two dramatizations as ‘three Christie texts’.⁷³³ This approach clearly has its merits when discussing the political relevance of ‘the middlebrow,’ but in the present study it would be inappropriate to congeal different kinds of text, as continues to happen on a level less conscious and productive than Devas’s. Adaptors are, after all, as Hutcheon writes in *A Theory of Adaptation*, ‘first interpreters, then creators’.⁷³⁴ While an adaptation’s first aim is not fidelity to a previous text’s agenda but the creation of a new text with its own agenda and agency, the process is, Hutcheon suggests, quoting Susan Bassnett, ‘an act of both inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication’.⁷³⁵ Like Christie’s novels, the television products adapted from them are ‘framed in a context – a time and a place, a society and a culture.’⁷³⁶ As Hutcheon points out, no adaptations ‘exist in a vacuum. Fashions, not to mention value systems, are context-dependent.’⁷³⁷

It is a truism that all texts are palimpsests.⁷³⁸ Not only will a re-reading of a text be indelibly shaped by the reader’s response to adaptations and even other, related prose; no single text will ever be consumed twice in subjectively identical contexts. In the context of detective fiction, as Neil McCaw notes, a

⁷³² ‘Agatha Christie’ (*Facebook*, 2010).

⁷³³ Angela Devas, ‘Murder, Mass Culture, and the Feminine: A View from the 4.50 from Paddington’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 2.2 (2002), 252.

⁷³⁴ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 18.

⁷³⁵ Quoted, *ibid.*, 16.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁸ See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

successful television series will often come to re/define the literary series that inspires it.⁷³⁹ Considering Freud's discussion of retro-causality in 'A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad,' discussed in Chapter Four, it is possible here to make the Freudian argument that adaptations 'screen' the adapted text in two senses of the word. That is, our experiences of adaptations mediate our memories of and experiences of even initial encounters with the adapted text. Robert M. Polmhus has made suggestions along these lines in relation to Charles Dickens adaptations and the films of Woody Allen.⁷⁴⁰ However, even some media experts, such as Mark Aldridge, continue to uphold the concept of 'Christie's original' while insisting that the *Poirot* and *Marple* television series are close enough to the novels to make no critical difference.⁷⁴¹

Adaptation, though, always involves self-conscious revisiting and often revision. There is no simple linear or even boomerang relationship between Text A and Text B. Adrienne Rich, whose discussions of women and writing I have touched on in previous chapters, describes 're-vision' as:

the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. [...] We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.⁷⁴²

Rich's call, in the context of feminine writing and the renegotiation of patriarchal history, means that seemingly inviolate narratives – history, society, culture itself – can have their victims – women – spearheaded into them with subversive potential. In self-conscious acts of re-writing, from Jean Rhys to Angela Carter, masculine certainty is clearly undermined as 'the Other,' the 'us,' is asserted, reframing 'the writing of the past'. However, in adaptation, the reverse may be true since novels are often adapted for broader audiences and media with more immediate mainstream currency than the literary text.

⁷³⁹ McCaw, *Adapting Detective Fiction*, 9.

⁷⁴⁰ Robert M. Polhemus, 'Screen Memories in Dickens and Woody Allen', in *Dickens on Screen*, ed. by John Glavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 72-86.

⁷⁴¹ Mark Aldridge, 'Love, Crime and Agatha Christie', in *Screening the Dark Side of Love: From Euro-Horror to American Cinema*, ed. by Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Karen Randall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 83-94 (92).

⁷⁴² Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34.1 (1972), 18.

Moreover, a screen adaptation will provide, via promotional and later reproduced images of actors or scenery, a kind of cultural shorthand for the product, something less common with literary texts. Finally, an adaptation, which necessarily has a 'source,' usually named, establishes (even if contesting) the concept of an 'original' – a primary, true authority text.

Jane Arthurs states that '[t]elevision is a primary public forum for the conduct of [debates about sexuality and public morality] across both fictional and factual genres'.⁷⁴³ Public and private sexuality, the rights of sexual minorities, and 'changing patterns of family life' are all the subjects of discussion in news, reality television, sitcoms, and dramas. With the 'global reach' of cable and digital television, the medium has entered 'a new era of "abundance",' increasingly interactive and multifocal.⁷⁴⁴ It is, Arthurs claims, 'the digital revolution' that has led to a diversity in mainstream constructions of gender and sexuality.⁷⁴⁵ While Arthurs' discussion is strategically optimistic – she suggests that television has the political agency and potential to take 'sexual citizenship [...] beyond the puritan restrictions of the past'⁷⁴⁶ – we should also think of television, in these terms, as a regulating agent. If television is the primary source for up-to-date public representations of human diversity, then what is banned, censored, or removed is as important as what is actively promoted.⁷⁴⁷

In the following sections, I will consider how queer potential – that is, the potential for hostility to normativity that I have explored so far – can be extended, opened up, undermined, or erased in adaptation. As Foucault famously points out, suppressing or forbidding something creates discussions around it, promoting certain kinds of discourse.⁷⁴⁸ This 'incitement to talk about sex' establishes and cements identity 'categories': an individual becomes at least partly defined by their 'sexual orientation' rather than being known by their

⁷⁴³ Jane Arthurs, *Television and Sexuality: Regulation and the Politics of Taste* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), 3.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid, 3-5.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁷⁴⁷ Barrie Gunter, Jackie Harrison, and Maggie Wykes, *Violence on Television: Distribution, Form, Context, and Themes* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), 121-22.

⁷⁴⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 6-11.

conduct.⁷⁴⁹ Similarly, when television dramas present sexual and social minority characters, in a nod to diversity, through ‘deeply patriarchal and conservative’ caricatures, this can solidify stereotypes and the marginality of queer people.⁷⁵⁰ A UCLA Film and Television Archive report in 2011 found that, despite decades of activism and political progress, ‘stereotypes continue to resurface and perpetuate, and the full diversity of the LGBT community is more often than not underrepresented in the mass media.’ The history of LGBT+ representation on television, it found, remains one ‘of stereotypes and inexplicable invisibility.’⁷⁵¹ It is important, then, to consider the role of television as a medium in considering the adaptation of sexuality and/or queerness.

When a series, particularly a major one, is historical, it allows viewers to indulge a fantasy of experiencing the mores of the past, and comparing them to their current circumstances. When historical dramas take contemporary character stereotypes and situate them in the past, they present these types as fixed, and the surrounding social attitudes as flexible. They undermine the former’s status as a product of the latter. That is to say, an early twenty-first century presentation of homosexuality in the 1930s will inevitably be influenced by early twenty-first century context-specific understandings of homosexuality, despite these constructions being unavailable to anyone in the 1930s. On at least two levels, then, gazing into history can be an exercise in wilful ignorance, and when this is done as an adaptation, questions of authorship and authority enter the mix: who is the implied author, and in what context is their meaning established? By considering episodes of *Poirot* and *Marple* as adaptations, we can consider which elements of the source texts have been replaced or manipulated or removed, and also what has been brought to the text. This enables a discussion of how sexuality is constructed in nostalgic re/visions of Agatha Christie.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid, 23-4.

⁷⁵⁰ Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, 51.

⁷⁵¹ ‘Study Guide: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Television: Sitcoms and Episodic Dramas’, *UCLA Film & Television Archive* (Los Angeles: Archive Research and Study Centre, 2011), 1.

Straight Poirot in Context

In this section I begin to consider Poirot's heterosexuality in context. The discussion centres mainly around other characters in the television series; as we have established, sexuality, especially normative masculine sexuality, is primarily constructed and asserted via the construction and assertion of a network of 'others.' While *Agatha Christie's Poirot* has rarely been cited academically, a wealth of journalism and 'fan scholarship' has emerged since the first episode, 'The Adventure of the Clapham Cook', aired on 8 January 1989. The series is widely regarded as a visual version of the books, and the lead actor as the 'authentic,' definitive Poirot.⁷⁵² Indeed, Suchet often mentions that Christie's daughter chose him for the role.⁷⁵³ *Agatha Christie's Poirot* began in the same vein of nostalgia for Little England as the BBC's *Miss Marple*, then at the height of its success. The two series remain widely paired, in DVD releases and media commentary, as 'authentic' Christie products.⁷⁵⁴ By contrast, ITV's *Agatha Christie's Marple* is generally considered an experiment and not, as the BBC claimed when advertising DVD releases of their series, 'Proper Marple.'⁷⁵⁵

Episodes of ITV's *Marple* are frequently contrasted, rather than coupled, by journalists to the 'faithful' *Poirot* adaptations. They are said to be infused with irreverence and 'naughtiness,' and supposed to 'reposition both sleuth and creator for a 21st-century audience' by virtue of colourful costumes, celebrity cameos, and jaunty homosexual subplots.⁷⁵⁶ In the twenty-first century, *Poirot* went through some changes, including more sombre reflections on homosexuality, but it continued to connect with straight-faced conservatism, rather than the camp playfulness reviewers detected in *Marple*.

⁷⁵² For example, Charlotte Runcie, 'How to Play Poirot: David Suchet's Method Acting Tricks', *Daily Telegraph* (13 Nov. 2013); Mark Lawson, 'David Suchet's Final Poirot Episodes: The End of One of TV's Great Castings', *Guardian* (23 Oct. 2013).

⁷⁵³ David Suchet and Geoffrey Wansell, *Poirot and Me* (London: Headline, 2013), 39-40, 126-27, 204, 59, 87.

⁷⁵⁴ Agatha Christie: Poirot & Marple: Twenty-One Confounding Cases, Two Sensational Sleuths, One Legendary Writer (A&E Home DVD Video, 2009); Lawson, 'David Suchet's Final Poirot Episodes'.

⁷⁵⁵ 'BBC Miss Marple DVDs: Ooh! Proper Marple DVDs Released on 20 June', *BBC Cult* (2005) <<http://bbc.adactio.com/cult/news/cult/2005/05/25/19556.shtml>> [accessed 29 Mar. 2014].

⁷⁵⁶ Daphne Lockyer, 'Old Maid New: Miss Marple's Makeover', *Times Online* (11 Dec. 2004).

Suchet, who considers himself ‘the custodian of Dame Agatha’s creation’, has consistently claimed an interest in portraying Christie’s ‘authentic’ Poirot.⁷⁵⁷ As an increasingly powerful producer attached to the series, Suchet developed the character over years to make Poirot more sombre and less colourful. Suchet, it was claimed, took Poirot directly from the page to the screen – and the stories were transferred similarly: the series defined itself as a serious and respectful alternative to previous adaptations for the silver screen. In promotional materials, Suchet dismissed Austin Trevor’s 1934 portrayal of Poirot as ‘a comical French detective’, Tony Randall’s 1965 portrayal of ‘an egocentric creep’, and Albert Finney’s ‘fat, oily-haired fellow’ in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974).⁷⁵⁸ None of these Poirots, Suchet claimed, were ‘what Christie put in the book.’⁷⁵⁹ Unlike Peter Ustinov, who played Poirot as an assortment of ‘ticks and mannerisms’ in *Death on the Nile* (1978), in a way that, for Suchet, ‘wasn’t rooted in Christie’, Suchet claimed to be ‘truthful to the original’.⁷⁶⁰

Camp and colourful films, he suggested, were not respectful: ‘we’ve now got a generation who knows Poirot visually rather than through the literature, so what Agatha Christie wrote became my anchor’.⁷⁶¹ Moreover, he demanded that the character’s religion and sexual frustrations be highlighted in twenty-first century episodes particularly. In discussing this, Suchet describes himself as a servant of the character: ‘as his protector and guardian’, Suchet claims in his memoir, ‘I [let Poirot] reveal more and more of himself to the watching audience.’⁷⁶² The emphasized faithfulness to ‘the original’ has the effect of presenting a high authority to appeal to: decisions to focus on religion and sexuality therefore have some implied connection to an implied canon or ‘anchor.’ At least, there is an extent to which such decisions are being presented as transhistorical, and less mutable than products that are purely contemporary.

⁷⁵⁷ Suchet and Wansell, *Poirot and Me*, 91; BFI Events, ‘*Dead Man’s Folly* Q&A’, *YouTube* (12 Nov. 2013).

⁷⁵⁸ Haining, *Murder in Four Acts*, 96, 101, 03, 12; Peter Haining, *Agatha Christie’s Poirot* (London: LWT and Boxtree, 1995), 107. Ironically, Christie herself described Poirot as ‘an egocentric creep’ [Quoted in John Gross, *The New Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 266-67].

⁷⁵⁹ Quoted in Laura Barton, ‘Poirot and Me: An Interview with David Suchet’, *Guardian* (19 May 2009), 14.

⁷⁶⁰ Quoted, Haining, *Murder in Four Acts*, 117.

⁷⁶¹ Quoted, *ibid.*, 114-6.

⁷⁶² Suchet and Wansell, *Poirot and Me*, 217.

What interests me most about Poirot's character in the programme is his heterosexuality. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, the literary Poirot does not have a sexuality; sexuality is an insecure, frail, and gently mocked construction that belongs to his foil, Captain Hastings. However, the television Poirot, who was known as something of a middle-aged 'sex symbol' in the early 1990s,⁷⁶³ is a surprisingly virile and conventional hero, despite his accent and mannerisms. Poirot's heterosexuality is made explicit from the third series when he has a romance with the Countess Vera Rossakoff.⁷⁶⁴ In previous episodes, he simply expresses infatuation with 'nice English girls', exchanging gifts or flowers and the occasional kiss.⁷⁶⁵ By the eighth series, and Anthony Horowitz's adaptation of *Lord Edgware Dies*, Poirot has even considered marrying Lady Edgware, no longer the 'husky' Hollywood bombshell of the novel but a demure English stage actress. When she turns out to be a murderer with 'a power over men', Poirot considers himself to have had 'the lucky escape'.⁷⁶⁶ It is, though, the character of Rossakoff who translates this interest in beautiful women into explicit heterosexuality.⁷⁶⁷

In Chapter Three, I considered Rossakoff as a character in the 1923 short story 'The Double Clue.' An elaborate and exaggeratedly feminine countess, her appeal to Poirot is based on 1920s stereotypes about Russian women being overly erotic. Repeatedly described as 'flamboyant', Rossakoff is probably not really an aristocrat, but Poirot refuses to accept this. He insists on believing all she says, and agrees to frame a 'nasty', effeminate man for a jewel theft she committed. Suchet describes the story in his memoirs as 'the most poignant' of all, and does not mention Rossakoff's class, race, or femininity,

⁷⁶³ Haining, *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 19.

⁷⁶⁴ Andrew Piddington (dir.), *The Double Clue*, *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 3.7 (Twickenham Studios, 1991). Broadcast on ITV on 10 Feb. 1991.

⁷⁶⁵ David Suchet quoted in Haining, *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 19; Ken Grieve (dir.), 'The Chocolate Box', *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 5.6 (LWT, 1993). Broadcast on ITV on 21 Feb. 1993.

⁷⁶⁶ Brian Farnham (dir.), 'Lord Edgware Dies', *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 8.2 (Carnival Films, 2000). Broadcast on ITV on 19 Feb. 2000. The Lady Edgware of the novel is discussed in Chapter Three, although, apart from the name and a few lines of dialogue, Horowitz's character is quite distinct.

⁷⁶⁷ The literary Poirot's fascination with beautiful men, evident in 'The Arcadian Dear' (1940), 'The Cretan Bull' (1940), *Third Girl* (1966), and *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), does not translate to the screen. This element of Poirot's character has long troubled conservative commentators who may find solace in Charles Osborne's solution: 'Poirot is not unnaturally interested in men [...] we should probably remind ourselves [...] that] his creator is female,' and probably getting forgetful with old age [Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie*, 326, 36].

describing her as ‘the one woman with whom Poirot falls in love.’⁷⁶⁸ Indeed, Suchet compares Rossakoff to Doyle’s Irene Adler,⁷⁶⁹ but concludes that, unlike Adler, Rossakoff ‘does not outwit [Poirot]. Instead, he allows her to get away with her crimes’.⁷⁷⁰ Playing into the cultural myth that Christie moulded her characters around plots, and that therefore finer points of character are less important than the finer points of the puzzle, Suchet here considers Rossakoff as submissively feminine. In Suchet’s reading, Rossakoff depends on Poirot’s love and authority to ‘get away with her crimes’, and – like Poirot – Suchet does not question anything else about the character: he does not entertain the notion that Rossakoff’s whole identity, or at least her class, or Russianness, or femininity, is a performance. The character, as portrayed by Kika Markham in the relevant episode of *Poirot*, has no elaborate class, gender, or racial identity. In the short story, Rossakoff is feminine, aristocratic, and foreign to the point of comic implausibility, but there is no suggestion of artifice in the television character, and no other character discusses Rossakoff’s class, race, or gender.

Suchet claims that Markham was cast because of her ‘reputation at that time for playing strong women’; that she brought ‘glamour and dignity’ to the role, and ‘certainly made the Countess all the more attractive to Poirot.’⁷⁷¹ Markham’s reputation was for playing eccentric, wealthy women, such as Catherin Petkoff, a grand Bulgarian aristocrat in *Arms and the Man* (1988). However, in ‘The Double Clue’, she speaks softly, with downcast eyes, and expresses nothing but admiration for Poirot. Rossakoff’s Russianness appears to be underplayed, perhaps because in the 1990s a Russian character on British television was likely to carry specific implications. There was a tendency in British television in the 1990s to present Soviet women as conventionally sexy and passively feminine, the exotic ‘other woman’ hailing from the ultra-conservative results of the Cold War, and in contrast to ‘demanding, selfish,

⁷⁶⁸ Suchet and Wansell, *Poirot and Me*, 113.

⁷⁶⁹ This character, an androgynous jewel thief who tricks Sherlock Holmes and becomes known as ‘the woman’ in ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ (1891), has been discussed in relation to Rossakoff in Chapter Three.

⁷⁷⁰ Suchet and Wansell, *Poirot and Me*, 113.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*

career-oriented and feminist Western women.⁷⁷² The Rossakoff character in *Poirot*, however, bears no relation to this kind of cultural appropriation. Instead, she holds power by virtue of her ornate passivity, and is suited to Poirot because she is ladylike, with a slight European accent. In contrast to the parodic figure of Christie's prose, *Poirot's* Rossakoff does not revel in an aristocratic identity that is probably feigned and certainly anachronistic, but rather she sighs that 'life [...] has taken everything I have,' to be comforted by Poirot.⁷⁷³ Moreover, this character would never incite Poirot to 'be gay and sit in the sun and drink vodka' ('Cerberus A', p. 451). In fact, she may only have committed theft because she had no guiding masculine presence in her life; towards the end of the episode, Poirot makes sure that Rossakoff is always accompanied by gentlemen, 'for her protection.' Rossakoff is Russian only so far as the plot demands.⁷⁷⁴ Far from mocking her femininity, the episode invests in it, deeply.

In the adaptation, Rossakoff seems to be less a clearly-defined character in her own right than a factor in the development of Poirot's character: she exists insofar as she provides Poirot with heterosexual romance and heterosexual heartbreak. The most flamboyant stereotypes Christie draws upon to sketch the character do not translate to the screen, but other stereotypes, about the passivity and understated beauty of attractive femininity, do. Markham described her character as one charged, like a conventional wife, with 'want[ing] to change' Poirot.⁷⁷⁵ Her motivations are not really explored, though, and Suchet quotes Poirot from the screenplay: 'You are the most remarkable, the most unique woman I have ever met [...] but m]arriage is not for me.'⁷⁷⁶

Suchet compares the final scene to *Brief Encounter* (1945): 'The end of the film has him effectively saying goodbye to any chance of love, and – as he waves the Countess away, [...] condemned to remain wrapped forever in his

⁷⁷² Karin Sarsenov, 'Russian Marital Migrants in Contemporary Film', in *Russia and Its Other(S) on Film: Screening Intercultural Dialogue* ed. by Stephen Hutchings (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave, 2008), 184-98 (188).

⁷⁷³ Piddington, 'The Double Clue.'

⁷⁷⁴ To the extent that her initials, VR, in the Cyrillic alphabet, can be read as BP, providing the promised 'double clue.'

⁷⁷⁵ Quoted, Haining, *Agatha Christie Poirot*, 19.

⁷⁷⁶ Quoted, Suchet and Wansell, *Poirot and Me*, 113-4.

own loneliness.⁷⁷⁷ For Suchet, Rossakoff is significant only to draw out Poirot's 'deep regret at never having truly experienced love'.⁷⁷⁸ There is nothing playful and less still irreverent in the relationship – it accords with a reassurance Suchet frequently makes in promotional interviews about *Poirot*: that he is, 'Lord knows, emphatically not a "luvvie"'.⁷⁷⁹ 'I hope and pray', Suchet claimed towards the end of his time in *Poirot*, 'that I never crossed the line' between laughing *with* Poirot and laughing *at* him: 'I had to be faithful to Agatha Christie.'⁷⁸⁰ Decisions in adaptation and Suchet's performance establish Poirot as a heterosexual figure, rewriting the satire that underscores his relationship with the Countess in Christie's prose.

When *Poirot*, as part of Agatha Christie Ltd., was rebranded in 2003, Suchet became a producer and took a more active role in developing the character. In a letter to me, he claimed to 'take everything from the books' but also to be 'keen to explore Poirot's loneliness, and his wish that he had married.'⁷⁸¹ The most prominent episode of *Poirot's* 'comeback' series, with a cinematic budget and a blaze of publicity, was *Death on the Nile*. Suchet describes it in his memoirs:

Death on the Nile also gave me an opportunity to deepen my portrait of Poirot, and to understand his particular sense of vulnerability and loneliness. There is one scene, in particular, where he is standing at the stern of the steamer, looking into the falling dusk. I believe that it conveys something of the sadness and loneliness that Poirot feels because he never had a domestic life, nor had he ever been able to love a woman with such intensity.⁷⁸²

While Poirot in the early books is a pantomimic figure, a collection of stereotypes about foreign men said to threaten the security of English manhood, the twenty-first century television Poirot is more serious. His position outside of British society, masculine normativity, and heterosexual family life, is presented as a tragic loss. Rather than mocking the hypocrisies of British prejudice, this

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., 114.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁷⁹ Quoted, Phil Penfold, 'A Passion for Poirot', *Yours* (Apr. 2004), 6.

⁷⁸⁰ 'Dead Man's Folly Q&A', in *BFI Events* (YouTube, 2013).

⁷⁸¹ Unpublished letter from David Suchet to James Bernthal, 7 Jul. 2011.

⁷⁸² Suchet and Wansell, *Poirot and Me*, 216.

character, being great-but-unfulfilled, confirms traditional values and configurations as fulfilling. The presentation is in line with Christie's reputation for reassuring conservatism, and depends upon a version of history that is in line with dominant British identity politics in the 2000s.

Nile was dramatized by Kevin Elyot, whose reputation had been established in 1994 with the AIDS-themed 'gay play' 'My Night With Reg'.⁷⁸³ Elyot's stage plays throughout the 1990s and 2000s had notably depicted gay male experiences in different historical periods: in 'Reg,' the AIDS crisis of the 1980s is represented by three deaths in different years, and scenes from 'In the Day I Stood Still' (1996) switch between the 1980s, the late 1990s, and gay liberation struggles of the 1960s. In a review, the critic Michael Billington described Elyot's 'terrain' as 'a desolate emotional landscape filled with guilt, loss and unrequited passion'.⁷⁸⁴ There is a sense that prejudice against gay men has turned them into monsters, especially evident in his television drama *Clapham Junction* (2007), commissioned by Channel 4 to spearhead its 'Gay Rights Season,' marking the fortieth anniversary of homosexuality's decriminalization.⁷⁸⁵

'Elyot', Billington claimed in his review, 'is clearly writing about the destructiveness of unfulfilled passion',⁷⁸⁶ and after his death in 2014 he was remembered for having dealt with 'being haunted by past pleasures, and how, perversely, realising one's desires can doom you to a life living in the shadow of past fulfilments – or even, in the age of Aids, in fear of paying the ultimate price'.⁷⁸⁷ As a writer, then, Elyot was partly connected publicly with male homosexuality and gay liberation'; the celebration of 'gay rights.' The approach is in line with dominant gay and lesbian activist movements which have been

⁷⁸³ Michael Coveney, 'Kevin Elyot Obituary: Television Scriptwriter and Playwright Who Made His Name with the Smash Hit Tragicomedy *My Night with Reg*', *Guardian* (9 Jun. 2014).

⁷⁸⁴ Michael Billington. Review of *Forty Winks* at the Royal Court, London. *Guardian* (4 Nov. 2004).

⁷⁸⁵ While *Clapham Junction* celebrates gay marriage and other advances in law, the characters getting married have seemingly endless affairs, including at their wedding, while other gay characters are presented as paedophiles, home-wreckers, and violent murderers. A central character takes a lot of drugs and attacks young men because he is so disgusted at his own sexuality.

⁷⁸⁶ Billington, review of *Forty Winks*.

⁷⁸⁷ Simon Farquhar, 'Kevin Elyot: Playwright Whose Tender, Witty Piece "My Night with Reg" Captured the Anxieties of the Age of Aids', *Independent* (20 Jun. 2014).

critiqued by Lisa Duggan and others as ‘homonormative.’ Duggan describes homonormativity as:

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.⁷⁸⁸

It is absorption into institutions that are inherently heterosexist, in the name of ‘equality,’ that Duggan critiques. As contested in Chapter Four, such politics clearly position nuclear heterosexuality as natural and superior, while configuring queer people as, at best, good imitators of their straight superiors. While Elyot’s work – like much liberation politics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – gives platforms to some marginalized voices, it is haunted by a sense of otherness in non-normativity which is inherently value-weighted. His writing is further characterized, in part, by a sense of bleakness when ‘normal’ family life is denied to gay people because of social, institutional, and structural hostility.

Adapting *Nile*, Elyot was impressed by Poirot’s position as an outcast victim of prejudice: the theme, he claimed, was ‘full of potential dramatically’, but underexplored in the novel.⁷⁸⁹ Elyot’s approach is unsurprising, given his writing history, and while he would never have been allowed to make Poirot a gay man,⁷⁹⁰ he explores Poirot’s outsiderism partly via parallel characters, including a gay youth called Tim Allerton. In the novel, Tim has a limp wrist, uses words like ‘darling,’ carries a rosary, and is unhealthily devoted to his mother. ‘There’s only one woman in the world I’ve got [...] respect and admiration for,’ he tells her early in the text. ‘And I think, Mrs Allerton, you know who that is’ (*Nile*, 28). While Tim’s use of ‘Mrs Allerton’ does not quite suggest

⁷⁸⁸ Lisa Duggan, *The Incredible Shrinking Public: Sexual Politics and the Decline of Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 179. See also Lisa Duggan, ‘The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism’, in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. by Dana D. Nielson and Russ Castronovo (New York: Duke University Press, 2002), 174-94.

⁷⁸⁹ Quoted, ‘Behind the Scenes on Death on the Nile’, *David Suchet* (2008).

⁷⁹⁰ For one thing, Suchet, Poirot’s self-designated ‘custodian’, would have vetoed any perceived tinkering with the character who so clearly wants to marry a ‘nice English girl’ or the demure Vera Rossakoff.

incest, it implies a stronger than usual attachment to his mother and a lack of interest in other kinds of relationships with women.

Towards the end of the novel, Tim asks another passenger, whose alcoholic mother has been killed, to marry him: 'you're so utterly lovely. Darling, would you – you know what I mean?' The couple finds Tim's mother, who looks at them and says: 'Oh my dears ... I always hoped' (304). In the adaptation, however, Tim and Rosalie do not marry. Tim is cattier and more gossipy, talking of nothing but women's clothes and handsome men. Rosalie, whom he appears set to marry in the novel, makes advances towards Tim in the adaptation. He squeezes her hand, whispers, 'barking up the wrong tree,' and minces towards his mother, who has been watching. He is clearly not fond of his mother, but is under her thumb. Rosalie weeps and the music gets louder, mirroring the scene in which Poirot gazes out on the river.⁷⁹¹ The differences between the Tims and Rosalies of the novel and of the adaptation are particularly relevant to discussions of sexuality and queer space, when we consider the contexts in which these two texts were produced.

In the 1937 novel, Tim and Rosalie do not mirror Poirot on a textual level; rather, their relationship contrasts that of the central couple, a wealthy socialite and her dashing husband who eventually kills her for the money. While the victim's marriage is repeatedly likened to a fairy-tale, the word 'marriage' is unspoken around Tim and Rosalie. With Britain expecting 'a second and more desperate [world] war' (*Curtain*, 5), Christie predicts a realistic need to place faith in less conventional partnerships than the socialite and her husband. The dashing young men of that world may be wiped out in this grander war, and for the social order to survive, hope must rest with less conventional couples. The novel ends with Poirot watching the couple on the sand, 'thank[ing] God [for their] happiness' (*Nile*, 333).

Broadcast six decades after the Second World War, *Poirot: Death on the Nile* is also all about marriage. However, the discussions surrounding marriage

⁷⁹¹ Wilson, 'Death on the Nile'.

have changed with the times. The episode opens with an engaged couple having sex, and concludes with that couple, identified as murderers, lying dead in one another's arms. Everybody wants to get married and couples who do not marry do not end well. While the novel takes for granted that marriage is important, the adaptation presents heterosexual marriage as a brutally limiting convention of its time – and that time is cold and hostile. Poirot's loneliness, as a foreigner and a single man, is paralleled by the misery of Rosalie, who is 'stuck up [because she has] forgotten how to be nice', and Tim's inability to express his sexuality or accept a beneficial marriage proposal.

Elyot's interest in isolation is important considering that, in 2004, a lot happened for homosexual people in the media. Civil partnerships, largely seen as a stepping stone to equal marriage, were introduced, and the date of *Death on the Nile*'s first broadcast on ITV is significant. On 12 April 2004, in the slot before *Poirot*, the first episode of *Coronation Street* featuring a gay kiss was controversially aired. Only commercials lay between viewers seeing this kiss and the heterosexual sex scene that opens this *Poirot*. Rewriting Tim's stereotypical unmanliness into effeminacy and non-heterosexuality, the adaptation suggests that because of it, he and the woman who desires him are lonely: Elyot paints a picture of sexual unfulfilment in the 1930s. While Christie's Nile steamer travels into a brave new world, Elyot's isolates a group of strangers too repressed to progress. By contrast, the presence of gay people in family soaps starts to look enlightened, and gay rights appear as the necessary future result of progress. However, archaic essentialist stereotypes about male effeminacy, as the only alternative to heterosexual masculinity, are confirmed. Moreover, the nuclear marriage model's desirability is unchallenged.

Poirot: Cards on the Table (2006)

To bring the adaptations into line with the general connotations 'Agatha Christie' carries, the entire series was set in 1936.⁷⁹² The year was selected for

⁷⁹² Exceptions: 'The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1990) was set in 1916, 'The Chocolate Box' (1993) was set in 1904, 'Sad Cypress' (2005) was set in 1937, and 'Curtain' (2013) was set in 1939.

representing a time 'of drama and change': the abdication of King Edward VIII, the Nazis' occupation of the Rhineland, the outbreak of civil war in Spain, and the first television broadcast were all cited by *Poirot's* producer as evidence of this.⁷⁹³ The year, standing for 'a watershed period of history', 'became the driving force of the way [Brian Eastman, the first producer] designed the series.'⁷⁹⁴ 1936 emerges from Eastman's description as a year of change, but change largely unrealized: war has not yet broken out, transport has not yet been improved, and technology has not yet taken off. Clinging to remnants of ignorance before inevitable development, 1936 as a setting allows screenwriters and directors to present an innocent world on the cusp of knowledge. If we accept Auden's well-established reading of Golden Age detective fiction as taking the reader back to the Garden of Eden and a world without guilt, then these adaptations present a worldview more Edenic than interwar fiction itself, since it is written back, with hindsight that the innocent state will not last.

Indeed, this nostalgic element of *Poirot* is significant in how it presents late twentieth and early twenty-first century sexual stereotypes. Here, I am interested in Tiffany Bergin's appropriation of the concept of 'wilful nostalgia.' The term was coined by Jonathan Simon, discussing neo-conservative military education.⁷⁹⁵ Defining it as 'nostalgia for a past one has glimpsed in films and cultural products, but not actually experienced,'⁷⁹⁶ Bergin uses the concept to read the rural detective drama *Midsomer Murders* (first episode, 1997) as representing a new sense of British identity in the global media. This new identity is influenced by an idyllic picture of the countryside, where transgression is made quaint, punished, and not allowed to disrupt village routines. Sharing a reputation for coziness, and a large audience, with *Midsomer Murders*, *Poirot* nonetheless contains no episode that is not an adaptation, and is set in the past. It has, then, a conscious appeal to history,

⁷⁹³ Haining, *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 14.

⁷⁹⁴ Brian Eastman, quoted, *ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁹⁵ Jonathan Simon, 'They Died with Their Boots On: The Boot Camp and the Limits of Modern Penalty', *Social Justice*, 22 (1995).

⁷⁹⁶ Tiffany Bergin, 'Identity and Nostalgia in a Globalised World: Investigating the International Popularity of *Midsomer Murders*', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 9.1 (2013), 90.

appearing to present something more authentically *of* the past than new and imagined, because each episode has an identifiable source text. In this sense, since the series has a stated historical element, history can be presented in certain ways through the episodes, and adaptors' decisions represent a strategic rewriting of history.

When the Christie franchise was rebranded, episodes of *Poirot* became darker in tone and more expressly supposed to draw out themes of the texts that, apparently, could not be elaborated in Christie's time. In this it was contrasted to *Marple*, made by the same people and discussed below. *Marple* was advertised as irreverently 'updated' while *Poirot* was said to change the focus of texts but not their substance.⁷⁹⁷ However, small changes radically altered the political tones of some novels, as discussed above.

The success of *Death on the Nile* and other episodes ensured *Poirot* a tenth series, which was launched with an adaptation of a lesser-known Poirot novel. As discussed in Chapter Three, *Cards on the Table* (1936) features as its victim an exotic and non-specifically sinister man called Mr Shaitana. Shaitana invites four 'murderers' who 'got away with it', and four 'detectives,' including Poirot, to dinner and bridge (*Cards*, 11-12). Towards the end of the evening, Shaitana is killed by one of the murderers. The novel explores the frailty of 'English' polite society and its insularity. It is couched in the language of a declining empire, and is influenced by colonial themes. The adaptation, an episode of the rebranded *Poirot*, was broadcast on 19 March 2006. A seven-decade distance between the two texts means that their language and underlying assumptions are inevitably at odds.

According to Nick Dear, *Cards*' dramatist, he was commissioned in 2002 'to "modernise" the glamour of the story [...] Not to update it. [...] I say modernise, I don't mean update the story, I mean update the grammar, and sometimes the pace.'⁷⁹⁸ Part of this 'updating' involves creating a version of the past on contemporary terms. Dear highlights the impression of 'murkiness'

⁷⁹⁷ Tom Leonard, 'Meet the New Miss Marple with a Past and a Lesbian Plot', *Daily Telegraph* (22 Oct. 2004).

⁷⁹⁸ Roger Crow, 'A Herculean Task: Adapting Poirot for TV', *Huffington post* (22 Nov. 2013).

beneath a 'veneer of respectability' as the most appealing aspect of Christie's fiction.⁷⁹⁹ *Cards* was written, filmed, and previewed between 2004 and 2005 when laws surrounding civil partnerships were introduced and enacted in Britain. According to Dear, 'the demands of popular television' meant that nothing could be so 'clear-cut' on-screen as it could in the texts: in other words, Dear claims that the television adaptation is necessarily more complex and ambitious than the novel, suggesting that questions raised (and their answers) in the latter can be simplistic.⁸⁰⁰ The decision to emphasize some of the novel's concerns with sexual impropriety, with explicit mention of homosexuality, accord with Dear's stated brief to 'bring [the stories] into the modern world'.⁸⁰¹

In so doing, Dear uses the Poirot character to connect the dots between the old-world setting and the modern themes. The adaptation is largely related from the perspective of the lonely, heterosexual Poirot. He is presented as an old-fashioned man, whose refusal to understand modernity lets him see essential corruption beneath social rituals. The first spoken line is delivered by Ariadne Oliver (Zoe Wanamaker) to Poirot, who is confused by an avant-garde sculpture in a gallery: 'We really must try and broaden your horizons a little.'⁸⁰² Poirot then meets Shaitana and the story begins. The final line starkly contrasts the last line of the novel, which involves two survivors joking about stabbing Poirot as he sits in Shaitana's chair (*Cards*, 192). On screen, the last line is spoken by Poirot, in the same gallery, as he stands beneath a photograph of Shaitana. 'The game is over', Poirot states. 'And Hercule Poirot, he has won.'⁸⁰³ Since this is Poirot's story, his success in solving Shaitana's murder is also a success in resisting the allure of Shaitana's modern, artistic world (explained further, below). In this nostalgic text that recognizes discordance beneath history's veneer but nonetheless venerates that veneer considerably, the

⁷⁹⁹ Quoted, *ibid.*

⁸⁰⁰ Quoted, Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table: Marple Tie-In* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 323. Note: although *Cards* is a Poirot title, and an episode of *Poirot*, this book is listed internally as a *Marple* tie-in.

⁸⁰¹ Quoted in Crow, 'A Herculean Task'.

⁸⁰² Sarah Harding (dir.), 'Cards on the Table', *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, 10.2 (Granada, 2005). Broadcast on ITV1 on 16 Mar. 2006.

⁸⁰³ *Ibid.*

heroically conservative Poirot has not 'broaden[ed his] horizons', and this is his victory.

While Poirot and Shaitana are compared in the novel several times, the adaptation distinguishes them throughout. Shaitana is not vaguely effeminate and sinister but is presented as threatening in his lifestyle. The nature of his lifestyle is made clear when he declares an interest in 'artistic photography': 'It is my passion'. It is made explicit when he looks appreciatively at every man who shares a camera shot with him, and taps a servant inappropriately with the line, 'There's a good boy.'⁸⁰⁴ In addition to glancing disapprovingly each time, Poirot is shown squirming in an art studio when a camp photographer friend of Shaitana's, wearing a green carnation, looks him up and down, and calls him 'handsome.'⁸⁰⁵ In short, Shaitana is presented according to stereotypes about homosexual men as predatory rather than effeminate, and Poirot's heterosexuality is affirmed by his disapproving gaze. It is summarized by the line, 'There's something about [Shaitana] that's not quite right [...] It's sinister. [...] *Oriental*.' Although in the novel this line is spoken by one of the guests, who turns out to be a murderer, in the adaptation it is spoken by Poirot's above-suspicion friend Oliver. Poirot – and with him, the implied audience – nods agreement. Here, 'Oriental' means dangerously excessive, and labelling Shaitana in this way suggests that the speakers lack his exotic unruliness.

In the world of the adaptation, the only improprieties are sexual, and the only kind of sexual impropriety is homosexual. Shaitana is threatening because of his photography hobby, and through it he has taken to blackmail. This is clearly a gesture to make the threat that Shaitana exposes concrete and identifiable. With it, the 1930s are reimagined in contrast to the 2000s as a time when photography was new and domestic photography unknown.⁸⁰⁶ While in the novel, Shaitana is powerful for representing the unknown, with its

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid. In the nineteenth century, famously, green carnations signified male homosexuality. See Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1996), 78. The connection remains; the Green Carnation prize for literature is awarded to writers who deal with LGBTQ+ themes.

⁸⁰⁶ The idea is more artistic than historical. See Jae Emerling, *Photography: History and Theory* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2012), 1-15.

threateningly nonspecific 'stores of knowledge' (*Cards*, 136), in Dear's version he is powerful because his lifestyle lets him in on the secrets beneath English propriety. He has a specific, tailored kind of knowledge. In fact, since Shaitana keeps permanent mementos of the transgressions of others, which he might show to their peers, it is his refusal to be strategically ignorant with regards to his special knowledge that makes him a threat. This means that Shaitana stands for change, the loss of freedom as people's actions are surveyed, photographed, and followed up. To an extent, he represents the intrusion of the present on the order of the past.

It is, of course, a nostalgic construction of the past on specifically twenty-first century terms. As queer historians frequently point out, 'homosexuality, as it is understood today, is not a transhistorical phenomenon.'⁸⁰⁷ Indeed, as I discussed in Chapter Two above, the language of sexual categorizations was not widely available in the early twentieth century, and homogenous definitions have never existed. Moreover, social problems surrounding same-sex activity or desire will not have looked the same in 1936 as in any other period. With the photography/blackmail theme, the adaptation puts itself in conversation with Basil Dearden's 1961 film *Victim*, which famously included the first use of the word 'homosexual' in English-language cinema, and presented homosexual men as victims of intolerance who have been driven to secrecy and self-destruction.⁸⁰⁸ Pre-empting gay liberation movements of the 1960s, *Victim* is both a product of its time and a recognizable symbol of gay identity in the West: it signifies the early stages of what 'gay' has come to mean in post-twentieth century identity politics.

The film has long been criticized by LGBT+ activists for representing homosexuality as a homogenous and pitiable aberration.⁸⁰⁹ In *Victim*, a number of prominent men are being blackmailed with photographs proving homosexual liaisons or relationships. After a suicide, a barrister investigates the blackmailing

⁸⁰⁷ Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 15.

⁸⁰⁸ Basil Dearden (dir.), *Victim* (Rank, 1961).

⁸⁰⁹ Richard Dyer, 'Victim: Hegemonic Project', in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 2013), 71-88.

ring, eventually confronting his own homosexual urges. In the end, his wife stands by him, and both agree that the prejudice against homosexuality is destructive. Similarly, in the *Cards* episode of *Poirot*, an outsider who is himself perverted stalks respectable people with photographs exposing them as gay. Similarly, this turns the gay men into monsters. The blackmailers are othered, in *Victim* along class lines and in *Cards* racially, making their homosexuality unsurprising (if still unacceptable, but they are already unsavoury). Shaitana's murderer, Dr Roberts, is played by Alex Jennings, his hairstyle and costume resembling those of Dirk Bogarde as the barrister in *Victim*.⁸¹⁰ However, unlike Bogarde's character, Roberts does not get married but maintains his homosexual lifestyle, which is what leads to his downfall.

Unlike the hero of *Victim*, the villain in *Cards* will not burn incriminating documents and conform to society's expectations of its citizens and it is this that has turned him into a villain. In this episode of *Poirot*, sexuality is binary, the perspective is masculine, and although homosexuality is a threat on the horizon of a green and pleasant 1936, it can be safely swept away to the fringes by the right kind of hero. *Victim*'s sympathy for homosexuals is coupled with an implied disapproval of homosexuality that reflects the demands of censors and limited political space for discussion, but the same approach almost five decades later does not reflect change and is merely conservative.

In Christie's literary text, all the suspected murderers were guilty in the past, but in Dear's version only Roberts, who kills Shaitana, was. After all, sex, not murder, is the real secret in this world. Shaitana's murderer is, as in the source text, a physician called Roberts; Shaitana knew Roberts had killed a female patient. In the novel, Roberts and his patient were having an affair, and his sexual exploits are known from the beginning, helping to constitute the web of hypocrisy spun by high society. The title is a mockery as well as a pun: cards are never on the table, because respectable civility is always built upon antisocial desires or actions and deception. The motif finds its culmination in the

⁸¹⁰ Jennings, a prominent stage actor, was at that time best known for his forthcoming appearance as the Prince of Wales, whose adultery was connected with national instability, in the Stephen Frears' much-hyped and anticipated *The Queen* (2006).

bridge party Shaitana has orchestrated, where four respectable murderers play a fashionable game in opulent surroundings, seated between their murdered host and four detectives. In the adaptation, however, Shaitana was wrong about all the guests but Roberts, whose affair was with another man. This is only revealed when he is named as the murderer.

In the denouement, Poirot turns to the doctor and says:

You killed Madame Craddock because she had discovered that you were in a relationship with her husband that was sexual. You still are. [... S]he found out, she threatened to expose you.

[Roberts replies:] That's rubbish, I'm a ladies' man. Anyone will tell you that.⁸¹¹

Poirot dismisses Roberts' claim on the grounds that a real ladies' man would find Roberts' secretary 'irresistible. But you never even "tried your luck" with her.' On this evidence, Poirot rests his case. Unlike Shaitana, whose foreignness means that he can make suggestive glances at footmen the least explicit indicators of his homosexuality, Roberts has to have his sexuality made explicit through his approach to women. Viewers are presented with one type of woman and told that if a man does not make sexual advances towards her, he is: a) not heterosexual, b) hiding something, and c) definitely actively homosexual. Dear's *Cards* presents the world of 1936 and the complexities of human sexuality through the male gaze, and lacks Christie's ironic insularity. Once Poirot has accused the doctor of homosexuality, the character of Roberts' secretary becomes, retroactively, an erotic object only. Certainly, the adaptation rewrites Christie's tentative foray into gender politics to confirm that women are, as Mulvey puts it, 'bodies' which chiefly exist 'eroticised [...] in the male gaze.'⁸¹² In the world of the adaptation, she exists purely to test Roberts' sexual drive, and therefore his sexual orientation and by extension guilt or innocence.

⁸¹¹ Harding, 'Cards on the Table.'

⁸¹² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. by Constance Penley (New York, London: Routledge, 1988), 57-68. There is further illustration in this adaptation of *Cards*. One of the suspects is a young woman called Anne who lives with her friend Rhoda, and they are both in love with the same man. Anne is pretty and Rhoda is ugly. In the novel, Anne emerges as a thief and murderer. In the

Roberts breaks down when Poirot reminds him that 'M. Shaitana [took] photographs. *Photographs*, Dr Roberts.'⁸¹³ In an entertainment structured by 'gender imbalance' where women 'connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*', Mulvey highlights an 'active/male and 'passive/female' binary.⁸¹⁴ Shaitana's intrusion with the camera does not simply violate British privacy and potentially disturb order based on repression and ignorance. It also threatens to emasculate the society in which Shaitana is an alien, as he watches, records, and exercises power over others. As an almost explicitly perverted man who belongs to the bohemian subcultures where abject sexualities could be tolerated as knowing their place, this power is a threat to the male gaze that drives the production. When Roberts is arrested, his attack on Shaitana is barely mentioned – his sexuality is the chief concern.

With Roberts arrested, Poirot takes the investigating officer aside and explains that he, Superintendent Wheeler, was a suspect because Shaitana had photographs of him that proved his homosexuality. 'If you wish to behave this way, it is up to you,' Poirot tells Wheeler. 'But please do not let men like Shaitana take the pictures.' A photograph captures a moment, making a story, or a sexuality, into something tangible and Shaitana's intrusive wielding of the camera threatens the stability of a social order built around the closet – that is, the perceived political need to conceal sexualities considered deviant. As Sedgwick highlights, the closet continues to shape the lives of most people in Western societies who do not feel heterosexual, as long as heterosexuality is perceived as normative.⁸¹⁵ As Foucault claimed, the incitement to hide and make secrets of other sexualities gives the sexual categories themselves power: Sedgwick configures this power in terms of escalating hidden passions and of the surrounding culture to label, ascribe value judgements, and exercise

dramatization, it is Rhoda who committed murder in the past, Anne shouldering both guilt and mild romantic advances from her friend. The Rhoda of the adaptation is not the survivor of Christie's text, rewarded with the (problematic) bounty of marriage to an adventurer; she is simply Anne's 'other': Rhoda's guilt and adoration confirm Anne's purity and desirability. The situation is captured by Oliver's line in the novel: 'It's lucky it's not in a book. They don't really like the young and beautiful girl to have done it.' (*Cards*, 45). No 'young and beautiful girl' has agency in this version of 1936: it is men and the male gaze that count.

⁸¹³ Harding, 'Cards on the Table'.

⁸¹⁴ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 62. Emphasis original.

⁸¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67-8.

control over these passions.⁸¹⁶ In Christie's novel, there are four suspects and four unimpeachable investigators, but in the adaptation investigators also become suspects. It is a more paranoid vision, in which sinister sexuality underlies everything – but once again, sinister sexuality equals homosexuality. It is presented as a corruption that should not resurface and belongs beneath a 'straight' veneer.

Sexuality is physical and absolute in this adaptation. If a man does not express his heterosexuality physically, he must be sexually active in a same-sex relationship. There is no spectrum of sexuality here, simply homo and hetero. Poirot tells the policeman to keep being an active homo – but not to get caught, setting up the world of 1936 as one with a glass closet. Poirot, and with him the series *Poirot*, appears to express a forward-thinking attitude towards sexuality, telling the policeman that how he behaves is not wrong, but setting up the society as so intolerant that it creates monsters out of its victims. This is achieved by presenting a narrative set in the 1930s according to a twenty-first century understanding of identity categories, with which the viewers, but not the characters, are familiar. In *Poirot*, the world of 2005 looks enlightened compared to that of 1936.

However, the hidden threat in this world is the monster lurking within, perhaps created by, the closet. The sentiment recalls Wainwright Churchill's remark during the days of Stonewall riots and gay liberation: "the "closet queen" or so-called latent homosexual [is] a menace not only to himself but eventually to the entire community."⁸¹⁷ While in the book Shaitana is connected with stereotypes around 'other' sexuality, in the adaptation he is recognizably homosexual and is better dead, while the villain is a pillar of the community who will not cease sexual relations with another man. Homosexuality is always linked with physical activity, which has the effect of making explicit – and specific – something that is not named in the literary text.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid., 78-86.

⁸¹⁷ Wainwright Churchill, *Homosexual Behavior Among Males: A Cross-Cultural and Cross-Species Investigation* (New York: Hawthorne, 1967), 184. The passage has become notorious since it was cited in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2007.

The adaptation is intended to bring Christie in line with modern concerns, but it does more than thrust contemporary understandings of homosexuality into a nostalgic vision of 1936 – it perpetuates a construction of Christie-the-author as conservative. Viewer responses confirm Christie’s reputation for conservatism. As soon as the episode had been broadcast, viewers took to the internet to express outrage: ‘I was so disappointed’, wrote ariadnepoirotmarple on *Agatha Christie Online*, describing the changes as ‘unnecessary’, ‘ridiculous’, ‘dreadful and disgusting. [...] I am proud to say I have become an AC purist.’⁸¹⁸ According to ariadnepoirotmarple, homosexuality does not appear in Christie’s prose, and it never should.⁸¹⁹ On the *Internet Movie Database*, user Minyalad lamented the insertion of ‘gay porn into the story’: ‘Agatha Christie rarely ever alluded to homosexuality [...] and it is very easy to miss. Here, it comes with a sledge-hammer’.⁸²⁰

Dismissing the episode’s ‘political correctness’ as ‘crap’, Minyalad concludes their review with

a note to the producers: If you want to make movies about homosexuality in the 1930s, fine. If you want to make movies from Agatha Christies [*sic*] books, also fine. Just stop mixing up the two.⁸²¹

The response is representative of negative reviews on the *IMDB*. Minyalad’s elevation of Roberts’ affair with an unseen man to the status of ‘gay porn’ suggests an emotional response to the changes made: if homosexuality exists as something coded and ‘easy to miss’, any visible representation is effectively as extreme and gratuitous as pornography. In Elyot’s adaption of *The Body in*

⁸¹⁸ Ariadnepoirotmarple, comment on ‘Have Your Say: Cards on the Table (Suchet)’, *Agatha Christie Online* (23 Jan. 2009). Retrieved online (24 Mar. 2014): <http://legacy.agathachristie.com/forum/have-your-say/television-and-film/cards-on-the-table-suchet/>

⁸¹⁹ The coded references to sexual inversion and perversion, as well as heterosexual adultery, several more murders, domestic violence, and crude stereotypes about working class people which adorn Christie’s *Cards on the Table* are all acceptable.

⁸²⁰ Minyalad, ‘Dreadful, Despite the Excellent Cast’ (review of *Cards on the Table*), *Internet Movie Database* (5 May 2006). Retrieved online (31 Mar. 2014): <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0478226/reviews> (p. 1, para. 3).

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*

the Library, which features lesbian murderers, an old colonel gives voice to this attitude: 'But – but, these things don't *happen*.'⁸²²

In their responses, these viewers agree with Suchet's Poirot that such things as homosexuality, while a reality, should not be brought to the surface. The appeal to 'Christies books' as authoritative and with 'easy to miss' sexual coding creates a hidden homosexual presence in the texts in the same way as the adaptation does, while defending this version of oppression over and above dramatists' apparent tolerance. Like the screenplay, these not uncommon viewer-responses configure a homosexual camera-wielding Shaitana as a twenty-first century intrusion into Poirot's traditional world, where everyone keeps up a standard of behaviour. However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, Christie does not simply give readers a choice between understanding or ignoring some always-accessible set of codes; she plays with varied, often conflicting stereotypes, creating a world of artifice and performance that invites a potentially unlimited number of interpretations: there lies the books' queer potential. The earnestly nostalgic 'Agatha Christie' worldview is one that contains and limits human diversity, perceiving its free expression as a twenty-first century development, rather than as a work in progress.

Constructing Closets in St Mary Meade

More controversial than the 'disgusting and dreadful' homosexual character in *Poirot* was the decision to launch *Marple* as a camp, 'updated' series. Marple was given a romantic history involving a married man and full homosexual subplots were added to most episodes in the first two series.⁸²³ McCaw follows tradition in calling this series a 'rework[ing]' of Christie's plots 'in contemporary livery'.⁸²⁴ He goes further, suggesting that each episode takes the most radical elements of Christie and gives them a prominence denied by her 'more

⁸²² Andy Wilson (dir.), 'The Body in the Library', *Agatha Christie's Marple*, 1.1 (Granada, 2004). Broadcast on ITV1 on 12 Dec. 2004.

⁸²³ As usual, bisexuality and other examples of sexual diversity do not exist in the world of *Marple*.

⁸²⁴ McCaw, *Adapting Detective Fiction*, 40.

traditional' literary format.⁸²⁵ However, in many ways, *Marple* is a conscious reworking of the BBC's *Miss Marple*. For one thing, both series begin with versions of *The Body in the Library*, followed in each case by *The Murder at the Vicarage* and then *A Murder is Announced*, which does not reflect Christie's chronology. For another, both series are set in the 1950s.

The BBC's decision to use this time-frame, in the context of Margaret Thatcher's claims that the 1950s were a 'golden age for suburbia', was, like much of 1980s British television, wilfully nostalgic and nationalistic.⁸²⁶ The ITV series makes the same decision, despite the source texts having been published and set between the 1920s and 1970s. An unnamed 'ITV' official promised journalists that the 'glossy, star-studded adaptations' would form a series "'less twee" than the BBC version'.⁸²⁷ However, despite its stronger reliance on slapstick and celebrity, the series exploits the same 'combination [...] of the aesthetic and ascetic', evoking 'a Britain that has somehow slipped away', and invests in the same kind of nostalgia.⁸²⁸

Marple draws upon its nature as a visual entertainment more than *Poirot* does. Stylish camera zooms, montages, and on-screen lettering reminiscent of BBC dramas such as *Sherlock* and *Dr Who* draw attention towards clues and, especially in the denouements, subtext as a previous scene can be replayed, with a minor element emphasized. The series' historical setting is widely discussed in promotional materials as affording opportunities for 'full on glamour': as one cast-member claimed in a press-release, 'the costumes are amazing. I had such fun dressing up – [...] there wasn't a single dowdy moment' because the world of *Marple* represents 'a little capsule of time'.⁸²⁹ Asked about the period setting, another cast member replied: 'lots of pretty girls and handsome men. What more could you want?', suggesting that *Marple's* period

⁸²⁵ Ibid., 44, 48-9.

⁸²⁶ See Simon Barker, "'Period" Detective Drama and the Limits of Contemporary Nostalgia: *Inspector Morse* and the Strange Case of a Lost England', *Critical Survey*, 6.2 (1994).

⁸²⁷ Quoted in Leonard, 'Meet the New Miss Marple', 3.

⁸²⁸ Barker, "'Period" Detective Drama and the Limits of Contemporary Nostalgia', 238.

⁸²⁹ Ronnie Ancona, quoted, '*Nemesis*: Press Pack', 7.

setting makes it an aesthetic delight: that because it is set in the past, it must be filled with beautiful things.⁸³⁰

The actor Ruth Wilson spoke positively of her work on *Marple* because it represented a ‘fun’, ‘younger’, more ‘fresh’ worldview than *Poirot*: ‘it’s that camp factor that everyone loves’, she claimed. ‘I get to drive a 1950s coach in these fabulous outfits.’⁸³¹ Here, ‘camp’ is about looking ‘fabulous’ and having fun with heritage and tradition. The series has been consistently discussed in promotional materials as something fun, and that fun is consistently aesthetic: connected with flawless make-up, beautiful clothes and locations, and nostalgia. Each episode is more colourful than most television, because in filming the colour filter was at a higher capacity than in most ITV programmes: this has the effect of making the on-screen world appear ‘enchanted’, and like a ‘fairy-tale’.⁸³² The ‘fairy-tale’ effect is clearly deliberate: at the end of early episodes, the colourful handwritten words ‘The End’ fill the screen, evoking ‘The End’ in children’s storybooks. If the nostalgic element of *Agatha Christie’s Marple* is pronounced, it is also not devoid of self-aware humour – everything is heightened, and *Marple* revels in its nostalgia. Its knowingness can strengthen *Marple’s* nostalgic appeal, rather than undermining it, because of the supposed ‘camp’ aspect.

‘Camp’ is hard to define, both as a concept and as a sensibility: this is the only thing on which everyone agrees.⁸³³ Camp is a sensibility, ‘in the eye of the beholder.’⁸³⁴ According to Sontag’s influential ‘Notes on Camp’, it is ‘a vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated’ which ‘converts the serious into the frivolous.’⁸³⁵ For Sontag, a camp reading is one that puts ‘sincerity’ in inverted commas, and ‘realises that “sincerity” is not enough.’⁸³⁶ ‘Nothing in Nature can be Camp’, because camp is

⁸³⁰ Alan Davis, quoted, *ibid.*, 23.

⁸³¹ Quoted, *ibid.*, 12.

⁸³² See Michael Wylie, ‘Production Design of *Pushing Daisies*’, in *Pushing Pixels: Leaving No Pixel Behind* (2012), 1.

⁸³³ David Bergman, ‘Camp’, in *GLBTQ: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture* (Chicago: GLBTQ Inc., 2007), accessed online (8 Apr. 2012): <http://www.glbtq.com/literature/camp.html> (1).

⁸³⁴ Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth* (London: Plexus, 1984), 9.

⁸³⁵ Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on Camp’, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 275-92.

⁸³⁶ *Ibid.*, 288.

artifice.⁸³⁷ I have already discussed how a focus on artifice can undermine ideas about, and even the concept of, essential truths. In Sontagian camp, this is taken further as sincerity itself is ironized in terms of artifice. As Sontag claims, 'the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious': 'one can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.'⁸³⁸ According to Bergman, camp humour has long been 'a way of coping with a hostile dominant environment', since gay men find fun in elaborate theatricality by acting campily, in a hyperfeminine way.⁸³⁹ However, in 1976 Richard Dyer noted the prominence of 'straight camp', the non-queer use of camp style, language, or humour,⁸⁴⁰ and varieties of camp are now recognized across queer and straight communities.

Marple asserted itself as a (straight) 'camp' series from the outset, partly in promotional materials but also in casting choices. The pilot episode featured a number of actors well-known for their 'camp' appeal, including Joanna Lumley and David Walliams. Walliams, in particular, having enacted numerous homophobic and transphobic stereotypes in the television sketch series *Little Britain* (2003-2006), was a bastion of 'straight camp', insisting that cross-dressing and acting effeminately did not compromise 'the distinction between being camp and being gay' and frequently citing his 'supermodel wife' as evidence of heterosexuality.⁸⁴¹ Walliams, whose memoir is titled *Camp David*, was since cast as the detective in a similar series of Christie adaptations, *Partners in Crime* (2015). It provides further evidence of the Christie brand's deliberate association with 'straight camp.'⁸⁴²

Straight appropriations of the camp sensibility are problematic. For Dyer, straight camp has been 'twist[ed] away from its radical/progressive/critical potential'.⁸⁴³ After all, 'revelling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial'

⁸³⁷ Ibid., 279.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 288.

⁸³⁹ Bergman, 'Camp', 1.

⁸⁴⁰ Richard Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 110-16 (115).

⁸⁴¹ J.J. Anisiobi, 'David Walliams Admits He Is Camp: David Walliams Opens up About Sexuality in a Revealing New Interview', *Daily Mail* (3 Jan. 2013).

⁸⁴² 'Agatha Christie Dramas Planned to Mark Anniversary', *BBC News: Entertainment and Arts*, BBC (2014).

⁸⁴³ Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going', 115.

can be 'corrosive' when 'taken over by straights':⁸⁴⁴ mainstream or straight camp 'loses its cutting edge, its identification with the gay experience, its distance from the straight sexual worldview' and by deriving pleasure out of elaborate or incongruous images of, say, effeminate masculinity, it becomes a heterosexist mockery of the subculture it appropriates.⁸⁴⁵ Dyer suggested that gay camp needed 'new, positively valued [stereo]types' to play with rather than old homophobic ones.⁸⁴⁶ By 1999, when Fabio Cleto published the second major edited collection devoted to camp,⁸⁴⁷ its death had already been proclaimed in the academy, and no major volume on the subject has been published subsequently.⁸⁴⁸

I do not wish, here, to uphold any gay/straight camp binary, but rather to draw attention towards the existence of 'camp' as a straight methodology in mainstream entertainment. If we have to distinguish types of camping, it is perhaps best to agree with Sontag, Philip Core, and others, that camp should be 'in the eye of the beholder'; an act of interpretation that 'dethrone[s] the serious' – that a deliberately 'camp' text is an inherently limited and potentially dangerous one. It is now worth exploring how *Agatha Christie's Marple* employs stereotypes about sexual minorities under the guise of 'camp', to present a heterosexist nostalgic view of British heritage which complements that presented in *Poirot*. This enables us to assess Agatha Christie's currency as a straight nostalgic institution.

In promotional materials and interviews, ITV revealed that the solution to *Library*, the first episode, had been rewritten to involve lesbians. Instead of a secretly married couple committing the murder, it is carried out by a secret lesbian couple. Interviewed about this, Christie's grandson, Mathew Prichard, stated:

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid, 116,

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid, 115.

⁸⁴⁶ Richard Dyer, 'Gays in Film', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 18 (1978).

⁸⁴⁷ Fabio Cleto, 'Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject' (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). The previous reader had been Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (New York: Routledge, 1994). At the time of writing (January 2015) no other major reader has been published or announced.

⁸⁴⁸ See Caryl Flynn, 'The Deaths of Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 433-57.

you can't always stick rigidly to what she wrote. What she wanted to do was entertain and this is very entertaining. [...] Of course my grandmother was aware of sexual preferences. If you read the books carefully, it's all there. This is just more overt.⁸⁴⁹

In some ways, Prichard's language mirror's Dear's, when discussing the 'modernise[d] glamour' (or 'grammar') of *Poirot*. Both men claim that the focus, and not the meaning, of source texts change. However, Prichard states a need to rewrite Christie besides repackaging the texts. The idea, though, that *Marple's* gay subplots are 'just more overt' versions of an 'awareness' already in the source text tends to rely on negatively-weighted stereotypes which are implicit in late twentieth-century gay liberation narratives and subsequent identity politics. However, Prichard's remarks refer, interestingly, to 'sexual preferences' rather than to sexuality: he acknowledges a diversity of opportunities for readers. In itself, this understanding of the texts as relatively open and adaptable credits them with strong potential. However, the suggestion that what the adaptations draw out is what 'is [...] there if you look carefully'; suggests that homosexual stereotypes, as presented on the screen, are the ultimate representation of diverse 'sexual preferences', and moreover that this kind of visibility has always been possible for those who wished to see. As Sedgwick so often reminds us, structural ignorance is not simply a lack of knowledge of visibility, nor is it arbitrary: it is a kind of power that, in the case of queer invisibility, causes stigma and oppression.

When characters in *Marple* (and in later episodes of *Poirot*, such as *Hallowe'en Party* [2010]) are presented as homosexual, the presentation will be inspired by something in the source text. Through the screening lens of adaptations with gay characters, it is possible to read *A Murder is Announced* (1950), *The Moving Finger* (1943), *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931), and *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* (1962) as containing coded references to homosexuality – if one agrees with the dramatists that effeminate men, manly women, cohabiting people of the same gender, and a woman who rejects a

⁸⁴⁹ Quoted in Leonard, 'Meet the New Miss Marple', 3.

conventional hero's marriage proposal are all homosexuals.⁸⁵⁰ In promotional interviews for *A Murder is Announced* (2005), the dramatist discussed '[t]he challenge of adapting the novel to the screen[,] to keep the dialogue fresh and make the characters psychologically true-to-life',⁸⁵¹ while actors discuss reclaiming their 'misunderstood characters'.⁸⁵²

Speaking of her character's on-screen kisses with another woman, the actor Claire Skinner claims that, in the novel, '[t]hey are very discreet and it's not really referred to, although it's patently obvious that they are a couple.'⁸⁵³ It is a 'decidedly modern' gesture, according to a well-rehearsed interview with lead actor Geraldine McEwan, of which 'the author would have approved.'⁸⁵⁴ The couple's on-screen kiss is configured as a natural extension of its 'patently obvious' subtext, although it is also a kind of progression, as their relationship is moved from subtext to text. Significantly, the kiss occurs in the couple's farmyard: outside. Appearing in a conservative 1950s village with Miss Marple, a character who 'doesn't judge them for it',⁸⁵⁵ the women appear to come out of their literary closet.

As in Prichard's remarks, the idea of characters 'coming out' on-screen, as 'patently obvious' homosexuality becomes a 'more overt' spectacle, erects a closet out of literary texts. The novels in which these characters appear are said to conceal and encode homosexuality. In this way, any human diversity, beyond a homo/hetero binary expressed via gender stereotypes, is denied. Not only is the binary a limited expression of sexual diversity, the construction of the closet is also problematic because it translates patriarchal gender stereotypes into proof of an essential sexual identity. For instance, the manly woman who loves the woman she lives with is supposed to be 'patently' homosexual. There can be no discussion of 'masculinity' or 'femininity' when these have become

⁸⁵⁰ *A Murder is Announced* provides the most clear-cut example of Christie writing about a homosexual couple. Since its publication in 1950, very few people have claimed that the two women who live together in *Announced* are just good friends.

⁸⁵¹ Stewart Harcourt, quoted in Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced: Marple Tie-In* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 387.

⁸⁵² Frances Barber, quoted, *ibid.*, 400.

⁸⁵³ Claire Skinner, quoted, *ibid.*, 405.

⁸⁵⁴ Cassandra Jardine, 'Fishnets, Tarty Wigs - I Love All That', *Daily Telegraph Features* (8 Dec. 2004).

⁸⁵⁵ Claire Skinner, quoted in Christie, *A Murder is Announced: Marple Tie-In*, 405.

shorthand for 'homosexuality' or 'heterosexuality' depending on the character's assumed gender. As Doan discusses, queer approaches to identity should be harder to pin down: they should be 'slippery and elastic' in the face of that very 'coherence' that characterizes normative identities.⁸⁵⁶ Moreover, as Butler significantly argues, coming out can create and consolidate the shameful secrecy of the homosexual identity that has been claimed⁸⁵⁷ – and there should be no 'last word on homosexuality.'⁸⁵⁸ The closet is far from a space of infinite freedom in abjection. It is not, as Barbara Brown claims, 'full of reminders of who [its inhabitants] are',⁸⁵⁹ but is, instead, full of reminders of who/what the person who 'comes out' will be: identities shaped by the closet.

However, coming out of the closet can be a way of disarming the stigma that makes an individual abject. As Sedgwick writes, it is never a 'purely hermetic' experience, since it involves proclaiming oneself at odds with governing norms, and expressing this in a way tailored to one's audience, in political and in personal terms.⁸⁶⁰ Coming out positions the past as a time of veils and confusion, and the present – where the subject has accepted a negatively-valued identity role – as one of truth and triumph.⁸⁶¹ Kathryn Dindia points out that, like any strategic 'disclosure of risky information', coming out as homosexual does not involve presenting the world with essential truth, but relaying previously personal information as if it is an essential truth.⁸⁶² As such, coming out is not simply a case of queer people becoming visible and being known, but is a significant political gesture, unique to oppressed individuals who can express their identities in the language of oppressors. Frank Moorhouse observes that in the times of the Stonewall riots, coming out 'was a strategic

⁸⁵⁶ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, 192.

⁸⁵⁷ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 123-6.

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸⁵⁹ Barbara Brown, 'Coming out of My Closet', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 8.3-4 (2004), 21.

⁸⁶⁰ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 80.

⁸⁶¹ See Bidy Martin, 'Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[S]', in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* ed. by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David E. Halperin (New York, Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 274-93 (280-81).

⁸⁶² Kathryn Dindia, "'Going into and Coming out of the Closet": The Dialectics of Stigma Disclosure', in *Dialectical Approaches to Studying Personal Relationships*, ed. by Barbara M. Montgomery and Leslie A. Baxter (Hove: Psychology Press, 2008), 83-109.

abandonment of privacy as a way of confronting and disarming a stigma'.⁸⁶³ In a politically urgent context, then, coming out is about proclaiming an identity that has been given deviant status.

Outing literary characters as homosexual in mainstream television is, arguably, supposed to illustrate oppressions and hidden complexities beneath a nostalgic vision of national heritage. It is also in line with a number of early twenty-first century initiatives to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues: for example, the charity 'Schools Out!' organized a government-backed national campaign for LGBT History month in 2005 to 'highlight the hidden history of household names who would probably today identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, such as William Shakespeare'.⁸⁶⁴ However, as Heather Love has pointed out, '[p]ride and visibility', which 'offer antidotes to shame and the legacy of the closet', are therefore 'made in the image of specific forms of denigration', which must always be borne in mind.⁸⁶⁵ Moreover, as part of the Agatha Christie franchise, which depends upon a nostalgic vision of national history for its success, the 'outing' gesture risks appropriating and devaluing coming out, once a tool for queer visibility. As I shall demonstrate through a discussion of one character in *The Moving Finger*, a representative adaptation from 2006, negative stereotypes are emphasized and extended as homosexuality is explicitly named. Here, the Christie brand represents a nostalgia that confirms the value of binaries and the relevance of the closet.

Marple: The Moving Finger (2006)

The second episode of the second series, *The Moving Finger*, is based on Christie's 1943 novel. Besides being one of the most colourful episodes, it contains one explicitly homosexual male character, while its source text is arguably Christie's queerest Marple novel. In the following discussion, I suggest

⁸⁶³ Frank Moorhouse, 'Beyond Stigma', *Griffith Review* (25 May 2011), 11.

⁸⁶⁴ Luke Layfield, 'Gay History Month to "out" Newton and Nightingale', *Guardian* (18 Jan. 2005).

⁸⁶⁵ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

that queer potential in Christie's novel – accessible through a reading based on earlier chapters' discussions – is diminished in the television adaptation which ostensibly brings a homosexual character out of the closet and celebrates the Christie brand's campiness.

Christie described *Finger* as one of the few books she was 'really pleased with' (*Autobiography*, 520), and claimed that its characters were among her best-delineated: 'If [they] walked into my drawing-room, I should know [them]'.⁸⁶⁶ On the surface, it is more forcefully heterosexist than other texts, even *Cards*. Indeed, Bargainnier suggests that *Finger's* conclusion offers 'the most blatant examples of feminine subservience and male domination in Christie's fiction.'⁸⁶⁷ The novel begins with its satirically heroic narrator, Jerry Burton, moving to a sleepy village, Lymstock, to 'recover' from war wounds.⁸⁶⁸ Burton's name alone is a combination of Second World War slang: 'Jerry' referred to German officers, while 'Burton' referred to dead British officers in the Royal Air Force.⁸⁶⁹ As the protagonist of an escapist wartime novel, his name serves as a double reminder of military threats to Britain. Moving with his sister from London, Jerry is, at first, bored by Lymstock and emotionally attached to his stylish, independent sister, Joanna. By the end of the novel, Jerry has recovered his strength and married a twenty-year old woman called Megan, whom he thinks of as a child.

Meanwhile, Joanna has married an incompetent doctor, to keep him safe. There is another village pairing: the doctor's 'manly' sister goes on a cruise with a previously repressed 'Victorian' spinster who never went cruising before because she never had a husband to go with. This is all beside the point of the murder, which is committed by the most upstanding member of the community. A middle-aged solicitor develops an obsession with his children's governess

⁸⁶⁶ Agatha Christie, *The Moving Finger* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 6. Since the Penguin edition of *The Moving Finger* is based on a condensed and slightly rewritten magazine serial, rather than the most common manuscript, I will be citing two editions. Further references to this edition will appear as 'Moving'.

⁸⁶⁷ Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 139.

⁸⁶⁸ Agatha Christie, *The Moving Finger* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 8. Further references to this source will appear as *Finger*.

⁸⁶⁹ Eric Partridge and Paul Beale, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 485, 616-17.

and devises an elaborate scheme to obscure the fact that he wanted his wife dead so he could remarry. The scheme involves sending anonymous letters all around the village, as a kind of 'smokescreen', but Marple discovers the truth by 'disregard[ing] the smoke and com[ing] to the fire' (*Finger*, 287). However, despite its critique of the nuclear family ideal, in the revelation that a professional man's desire for a conventionally attractive wife and children can be deadly, the story of the crime is not my concern. I am less interested in 'the fire' than in part of the 'smokescreen'.

Of interest here are presentations of masculinity and sexuality in the novel and its 2006 adaptation. One character, in particular, the effeminate Mr Pye, invites comment. Pye is a minor character in the novel – an example of the village's 'queerness,' whose eccentricity is contrasted to his friend Miss Barton's 'Victorian' prudishness. In this sense, he is almost Poirot to Barton's Hastings, although as a minor character he lacks Poirot's narrative prominence. In the adaptation, Pye, played by John Sessions, is a prime suspect for the murders. Both versions of the character draw on contemporary stereotypes surrounding gender and, in the adaptation's case, sexuality. In turn, both Pyes contribute to the self-conscious construction of Jerry Burton's heroic manliness, although in different ways. To discuss Pye in earnest, we must first discuss Jerry.

In the novel, Jerry is in Lymstock in order to 'recover' from a war wound, having seen 'doctors [who] pulled me about to their hearts' content' (8, 7). His body, symbolically damaged in combat, has been handled by others in a way that Jerry translates as 'pull[ing] *me* about' (emphasis added). In other words, people do not know what to do with Jerry's wounded body, and therefore he himself lacks stability or certainty. If not in flux, the narrator's masculinity is at least not clear-cut. A contemporary reviewer, writing for the *Times*, expressed alarm that, as a soldier hero, Jerry could devote whole paragraphs to the 'delicious' China tea and 'plates of sandwiches and [...] little cakes' (152).⁸⁷⁰ Christie, the reviewer suggested, needed to learn how men think.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁷⁰ *Times Literary Supplement*, quoted in Sanders and Lovallo, *The Agatha Christie Companion*, 208.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Nonetheless, this passage occurs shortly after Jerry has criticised his hostess's 'mental picture of men as interminably consuming whisky-and-sodas and smoking cigars, and in the intervals dropping out to do a few seductions of village maidens' (151-2), suggesting that manly passions may not be the carnal things they once were and may now lie in attention to domestic details. His hostess may be 'the perfect spinster of village tradition' ('Moving', 9), but Jerry has yet to find his 'type.' As a narrator whose heroism is vague, down to his name, Jerry is constantly negotiating his masculinity until the end, when he finds a woman to master.

The twenty-first century television Jerry is a different kind of man. Rather than being lightly sketched, he is given a backstory and the grey areas of his heroism are rounded into three dimensions. Perhaps because of the new post-war setting, Jerry's injury is now a result of a motorcycle crash, rather than an RAF wound. It is strongly hinted throughout the adaptation that Jerry was trying to commit suicide, and as he learns to walk without crutches, he also regains a love of life. The feeling is connected with his growing attraction to Megan, whom he marries: symbolically, he relies on crutches less and less in each scene the couple share. Unlike in the novel, however, attraction to Megan comes as a surprise to him at the end. While *Finger's* Jerry configures his sexuality purely in terms of a kind of aggressive paternalism – it takes an attempt on Megan's life for him to successfully propose marriage – *Marple's* Jerry is a more acceptable kind of man in the twenty-first century. Most women in the adaptation throw him appreciative glances, and Megan dresses herself up, rather than being dressed up by him: this Jerry does not say, 'Shut up [...] You're coming to London with me and when I've done with you you won't know yourself' (p. 240), but agrees with a partygoer who says 'she scrubs up well'.

At this point, Jerry transfers his attentions from another woman – who does not interest him in the novel – and pursues Megan. Rather than taking Megan out of the village, as in the book, he witnesses Megan take it on herself to get a make-over. In the adaptation Jerry has brought London to the village, which begins to embrace a cosmopolitan spirit of change. However, the gender politics remain conservative: a change of costume turns a woman who has

been viewed as an unwanted, androgynous child into a sexual object with high value. Jerry is therefore able to ride his motorcycle into the sunset in the final scene, Megan strapped to his back, while he proclaims in voice-over, 'another morning, another girl', and the words 'The End' fill the screen. Megan has achieved her status as 'another girl' in a man's fairy tale, and Jerry is a red-blooded hero.

Christie's novel has Jerry finally fitting into a village of 'types' and 'labels,' learning to use his city life to turn Megan, a true, antisocial outsider, into a conventional pretty wife, when he finally becomes a hero at the text's conclusion. By contrast, in the adaptation, Jerry and a glamourized Megan finally *escape from* the village: they are evading all their queer neighbours. The 'girl' has helped Jerry to rediscover his own heroic manliness, and to start again; he has not become a stock character in order to fit in, as in the novel, but has become the stock hero he always was. Therefore, viewers of the adaptation lack the potential that the novel's readers have, of understanding this heroic identity as inauthentic. In both texts, the characters have become equally conventional stereotypes, but the adaptation gives these heterosexual heroic types a value judgement, as superior to the 'backward lot' in the village (*Finger*, 122).

The source text has the village's queerness sculpting the hero into a more credible, yet still stereotypically masculine, individual than he was at the beginning. Jerry considers his time in the village to be 'one of the queerest times I have ever passed through' (221), noting that despite seeming 'as peaceful and innocent as the Garden of Eden', the village is 'full of festering poison': to this, another character replies that even in Eden, 'there was a serpent' (129). Like Eden, with its serpent, the village of Lymstock stands for reassuring conservatism and structure, which does not adequately contain or limit its queerness, corruption, or diversity. Seeking to 'heal his wounds', Jerry is clearly trying to get the structure and security that he and his cosmopolitan sister lack, and to bring some consistency to his masculine identity. The 'wobbly knees' he complains of, and the feeling of being a 'baby learning to toddle' (8) can be read in the context of Jerry's modernity: away from pacey city life, he is

immersed in old structures in order to find his feet. After all, '[e]verybody in Lymstock had a label – rather like Happy Families' ('Moving', 8).⁸⁷² That is to say, as a village full of stock characters, Lymstock should provide no surprises and nurture convention and 'normality' in a wounded man.

Christie's villages are usually queer. Marple repeatedly explains that living in a village has allowed her to experience the world in microcosm: its smallness has let her see 'so many people [as] a little queer' (*Vicarage*, 245), and to learn about 'perversions of all kinds', including those unknown to 'clever young men from Oxford' (*Caribbean*, 6). That '[e]verybody in Lymstock had a label' does not mean that everything is orderly and understandable – it suggests, instead, a veneer. By the end of the novel, there are signs of the veneer wearing thin, since the solicitor has been caught attempting murder and Miss Barton, 'the perfect spinster of village tradition' ('Moving', 9) is on her cruise. From the outset, one of these 'types', 'the born gossip' Mr Pye (*Finger*, 47), provides evidence of the village's strange colour, by being, recognizably, a confirmed bachelor.

Pye is introduced as 'an extremely ladylike plump little man, devoted to his *petit point* chairs, his Dresden shepherdesses and his collection of bric-a-brac'. He lives in 'a very exquisite house' that is 'hardly a man's house' (45). As well as using this fairly common language suggesting gender inversion, Christie depicts Pye according to an available stereotype for homosexual men: as a collector. Jerry says that his house resembles 'a museum' and describes Pye 'quiver[ing] with sensibility' and achieving 'a falsetto squeak' as he discusses his treasures (46).⁸⁷³ According to Ronald Gregg, by the 1930s, gossip magazines could refer to a male celebrity's 'interest in interior decoration and collecting art and antiques', or 'his superior interior decorating taste', in order to suggest

⁸⁷² Notably, the quotes I have sourced from 'Moving' – a shorter, edited manuscript – in this chapter tend to draw attention directly towards the 'types' and caricatures that populate Lymstock. Perhaps Christie felt the need to emphasize this aspect, when she had to cut out longer passages that might illustrate it.

⁸⁷³ In the magazine serial and American edition, the word 'sensibility' was changed to 'excitement' ('Moving', p. 26), perhaps to lessen the suggestion of a deviant sexual sensibility.

homosexuality to a large percentage of readers.⁸⁷⁴ The proverbial link between art collection, a cult of beauty, and homosexual subcultures was long-established by the 1940s, as Emmanuel Cooper demonstrates in numerous case-studies.⁸⁷⁵ Jerry considers Pye 'queer, perverse, artistic' (*Finger*, 195), and when the police are said to suspect 'a middle-aged spinster', Joanna suspects Pye on the grounds that 'Mr Pye is a middle-aged spinster' (195. Emphasis original).

Decades of scholarship have claimed Pye as a gay man, from Bargainnier in 1981 to Altman in 2013.⁸⁷⁶ As a character, he is sufficiently underwritten to accommodate any thesis about Christie and homosexuality: Pye has been read as proof of his creator's homophobia and as proof of her liberalism.⁸⁷⁷ The 1985 BBC adaptation of *Finger* presents Pye as an equally tangential figure, who quotes Oscar Wilde, declares himself a pacifist, and discusses having been left by 'my – my *partner*'.⁸⁷⁸ Homosexuality is, in this adaptation, the love that loudly 'dare not speak its name.' That famous line is paraphrased by the character himself in the 2006 adaptation. Pye, who has been given a first name, Cardew, is no aesthete and no preservationist in *Marple: The Moving Finger*. He is quite openly, in the words of Sessions who plays him, 'a bitchy malicious, gossipy old queen'.⁸⁷⁹ Any sign of Jerry's effeminacy in the novel is given to Pye in the adaptation – for example, it is Pye who has dainty china and afternoon tea, which Jerry handles gruffly and without delicacy. No sooner have Jerry and Joanna sat down with him then he is identifying Joanna's exact type of make-up and gossiping about local women's cosmetic choices. Sessions claimed to enjoy playing 'a screaming queen', and Pye's queenliness screams from the outset.⁸⁸⁰

⁸⁷⁴ Ronald Gregg, 'Gay Culture, Studio Publicity, and the Management of Star Discourse: The Homosexualization of William Haines in Pre-Code Hollywood', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 20.2 (2003), 90.

⁸⁷⁵ Emmanuel Cooper, *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 52-69.

⁸⁷⁶ Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 133; Altman, *The End of the Homosexual?*, 130.

⁸⁷⁷ Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*, 99-100; Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 133.

⁸⁷⁸ Roy Boulting (dir.), 'The Moving Finger', *Miss Marple*, 3 (1985). Broadcast on BBC1 on 21 and 28 Feb. 1985.

⁸⁷⁹ Quoted, 'The Moving Finger: Production Notes', *PBS Mystery!* (2006), 1.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

The novel's 'perverted' artistic male invert is one of the queer things about the village: these are clichéd characters peppering an old-fashioned scene that Jerry does not fit. However, he is not the same kind of 'misfit' as Pye, and applying the term to Pye he gives himself some authority in the move towards asserting manly dominance by the end of the text. After all, the woman whom Jerry takes and changes – giving her a makeover in a capital city – is considered 'stupid and ugly' (122), and Pye professes a hatred of 'ugliness'. As a collector, he wants to preserve everything in the village 'under glass', and surround himself with 'beauty' alone (47). Jerry asserts himself as being not – among other things – Mr Pye. In the adaptation, however, Jerry's heterosexuality is presumed from the fact that he is presented as attractive. Pye flirts with Jerry in the adaptation, fingering a teacup suggestively, mentioning the Greeks, and asking, 'where do your passions lie?', which prompts Jerry to declare that Pye 'could pout for England'. He is also known to the police for conduct 'of a hardly savoury nature.' Again, in bringing the character out of the closet, the production relies upon conservative stereotypes about active sexual expression. The closeted man is not one who is shy about expressing his proclivities, and is not presented as very repressed by his conservative environment, but as someone who enjoys its dramatic secrecy.

When Pye describes the 'love he dared not express', towards the end of the adaptation, it has already occurred to most viewers: indeed, in his first scene, Pye takes pride in being 'a little queer', with a suggestive look at Jerry, who spits out his tea. Pye's coming out gesture is dramatic and elaborate. It occurs at a party where all the major characters have gathered. He stops the music, stands before everyone and describes a past relationship with a now dead local. His partner, who committed suicide, is Colonel Appleton, a minor character in the novel here given the exuberant Greek first name Heracles: Pye proclaims, 'I, for one, will always remember him.' An elderly vicar has palpitations while the solicitor has his children removed from the room and other characters bolt their drinks.

Everyone has accepted Pye's obvious homosexuality as long as he did not name it. Once again, homosexuality here equals a male-male relationship,

not just proclivities, which the character never hides. The problem with this for queer viewers is that it sets up the closet as an arbitrary thing that is purely about language and that will become irrelevant as times and values change. If the homophobia Pye faces only manifests once he has named his sensibility, and has nothing to do with his unsubtle behaviour, then it follows that now, with homosexuality decriminalized, homophobia barely exists, and 'coming out' is no longer a significant gesture. It also problematically suggests something inevitable about Pye's effeminacy: Christie's 'extremely ladylike' individual is presented as obviously and elaborately homosexual and coming out is a natural next step, always available to the character, which he seems to enjoy. Drawing on gay stereotypes for comic value and tying these up to the character's confession, Elyot's screenplay devalues the political relevance of the closet and essentializes homosexuality as 'bitchy' and exhibitionistic.

While *Finger's* Jerry distinguishes himself from Pye by forcing an 'ugly' woman to grow up, in *Marple*, Jerry is presented as gentler and less predatory – in contrast to the effeminate Cardew Pye. Megan appears, dressed up, made-up, and suddenly loveable, at a party that has just been spoiled by Pye's confession, and his behaviour. As one reviewer observed, Pye is "suspiciously" tactile with [another character's] two young boys'.⁸⁸¹ As well as being properly disgusted by homosexuality in others, Jerry is not a paedophile, because he only objectifies a 'girl' once she has ceased to be like a child, and this is contrasted to the behaviour of the homosexual. Male homosexuality has long been connected with paedophilia in some circles – usually rhetorical or quasi-psychological – and by 2006, when this episode of *Marple* was aired, it had become a widespread myth, probably because of the rise of social media and information communication. '[T]he paedophile stereotype', LGBT novelist Paula Martinac noted in 2002, had become a major element of gay identity in the West.⁸⁸² Pseudo-scientific reports claiming that 'pedophiles are invariably males', that the majority of child sex offences are committed by gay men, and

⁸⁸¹ Quoted, Owen Emmerson, 'Queering Agatha Christie', *Headmaster Rituals or Barbarisms Began at Home?* (2012).

⁸⁸² 'Homosexuality and Child Sex Abuse', *Family Research Council* (2002) (1).

that '[p]edophile themes abound in homosexual literature and culture' were widespread in the United States, and then the United Kingdom.⁸⁸³ These claims accorded with sometimes hysterical discussions in the media, largely as a response to sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, and questions about 'equal marriage'.⁸⁸⁴

Some religious activists in particular discussed a threat posed by homosexuality to children: not only did they consider same-sex desire 'unnatural' and psychologically damaging, but they also held that homosexual men liked to 'infect' children with their disease.⁸⁸⁵ At a wider level, a 2011 YouGov poll reported that a significant percentage of British people mistrusted homosexual people around children, either as adoptive parents or as teachers.⁸⁸⁶ Television dramas from *Clapham Junction* (2007) to *Broadchurch* (2014) have continued to portray links between homosexuality, violence, and paedophilia. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, giving Pye an inappropriate interest in children meant tapping into the most vitriolic of available homophobic stereotypes. It also links, perhaps, with common conceptions of Victorian Hellenism, drawn out as the character's aestheticism is emphasized in adaptation. However, the connotations of decadence and celebration inherent in the late nineteenth century model are re-framed via a twenty-first century-style confession of an active gay relationship tinged with the shame of the post-Stonewall closet. Despite the character's innocence in the matter of murder, he is not presented as a victim of homophobia in the 1950s, but as a flamboyantly negative twenty-first century stereotype.

Sessions claims of Pye: 'He is a suspect as he has got a nasty tongue on him. But then, the story is full of red herrings!'⁸⁸⁷ Certainly, the character encapsulates some negative stereotypes surrounding homosexual men. His 'red herring' status could mean that when the 'very upright' murderer is

⁸⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁴ See Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM, 2011), 178.

⁸⁸⁵ Janis Ian, quoted, Michele Kort, 'Queer as Folk Music', *Advocate* (2006).

⁸⁸⁶ YouGov Survey Results (25 Nov. to 5 Dec. 2011).

⁸⁸⁷ Quoted, *The Moving Finger: Production Notes*.

unmasked,⁸⁸⁸ viewers are liberally encouraged to question their judgements of the 'old queen'. However, unlike in the novel, which has Pye providing a wedding gift for Jerry and Megan, he does not reappear after his elaborate confession. As Sessions' description suggests, Pye is not simply different – he is forcefully, even predatorily, homosexual. Nobody decides to live, or enjoys living, with Pye-the-queer in the adaptation: he remains abject and irrelevant to Jerry's fairy tale future. As with the solving of the murder, the absence of Mr Pye is the expungement of unpleasantness. On the motorbike, which he now has control over, Jerry escapes from the village and the villagers, including the emasculated homosexual predator.

While in the novel, Jerry seeks completeness on a stereotypical level, and is absorbed into the village's conservatism to become a manly man with a city background, in the adaptation he is constantly proving an innate manliness to himself and the viewer. Sexual politics in the adaptation appear more egalitarian than in the novel, although there is a curious absence of female variety and sexuality: the governess who inspires the murders is not, as in the text, devoid of 'SA' (p. 42), because sex appeal is equated with her looks. Moreover, of the spinsters who go cruising in the text, one barely features and the other is simply an 'unattractive' woman in glasses, 'stupid' for loving a man who dislikes her. Despite this, the adaptation's colourful unreality and presumed campiness suggests a lack of severity that trivialises its fundamentally conservative values. By constructing a closet and drawing Cardew Pye out of it, the adaptation configures Christie's text as evasive and unselfconscious. It also relies upon stereotypes that are as one-dimensional and essentialist as those they replace. Crucially, these stereotypes are not problematized.

Marple claims an irreverent approach to the source texts, establishing a playful, apparently camp approach to the books and to the 1950s. However, the same contemporary stereotypes about homosexuality and masculinity underscore both contemporary television series, and their nostalgic approaches to the past. *Marple* celebrates the 1950s as a time of colour, glamour, and

⁸⁸⁸ Harry Enfield, describing his character in *Marple*. Quoted, *ibid.*

naivety, as characters do not understand obvious sexual codes, even if these are more appropriate to the twenty-first century. Homophobia is equated to mild awkwardness and embarrassment as the homosexual's claim to a life of miserable secrecy is presented as melodramatic. In Elyot's adaptation of *The Moving Finger*, Jerry does not try to become a hero, in a self-conscious process of stereotyping, but has to prove that he already is one: this means that character 'types' are accepted as essentially real. While Christie may present a woman who 'was a little dubious of Mr Pye', or a man who found a manly feminist 'rather overwhelming' as equally strange figures themselves (*Finger*, 154, 39), Elyot's adaptation takes sides. Therefore, it invites viewers to find comedy value in individual stereotypes, not in the ridiculousness of stereotyping itself.

Conclusion

Dyer's call for new, 'positively valued [queer stereo]types' in camp discourse remains relevant. When negatively-weighted stereotypes are internalized, so too are the binary concepts of masculinity and femininity. In turn, as a 2014 experiment published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* demonstrated, queer men who internalize negatively-weighted stereotypes about other queer people or communities tend also to internalize homophobia.⁸⁸⁹

Poirot's unapologetic conservatism homogenizes Christie texts by presenting a nostalgic nationalistic vision of 1936. Frequent claims in publicity and via historical references to 'authenticity' appear to present, in *Poirot*, a definitive way of reading Christie texts. Despite embracing Christie's emphasis on plot and on lightly sketched characters to facilitate the plot's advancement, the series also invests profoundly in a binary model of masculinity and femininity that presents 'real men' and 'real women' according to certain codes. *Poirot* presents the past as a simpler, overwhelmingly upper-middle-class time,

⁸⁸⁹ C.J. Bishop and others, 'The Association between Gay Men's Stereotypic Beliefs About Drag Queens and Their Endorsement of Hypermasculinity', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61.4 (2014).

when the truth could always be discovered, where right and wrong really did exist, where men were men and women were women, and where any deviation belonged in a ghetto. While the same elements are in Christie's prose, the self-conscious irony with which they are presented is absent in the adaptations, which are more earnest historical dramas.

As prominent examples of straight or deliberate camp – that is, as celebrations of artifice and style that nonetheless value queer stereotypes negatively – episodes of *Marple* promote a heteronormative worldview in their nostalgic revision of the 1950s. Along with *Poirot*, the series adapts Christie's literary texts, and their surrounding cultures, in the context of twenty-first century concerns. In this, both series afford opportunities for contemporary gay and lesbian viewers to trace historical narratives of visibility, and to understand precedents for their marginalized identities. However, in so doing, and in being distinguished from the source texts, the adaptations position Christie's prose as inherently conservative. Episodes construct her narratives as closets; naive spaces where queerness cannot be properly expressed.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have discussed Christie's careful presentation of artifice. With it, she undermines her texts' neat conclusions by presenting all of identity as performative and social structures as vulnerable and inadequate. These twenty-first century adaptations, part of the Christie brand, contribute to a nostalgic vision of national heritage. What the adaptations actively question is the individual stereotypes that Christie uses, suggesting hidden depths by introducing contemporary stereotypes into the stories. Bargainnier claimed in his pioneering 1981 study that Christie certainly espoused 'a great nostalgia for the past', but he added that 'combined with the nostalgia is the realization [...] that it is the result of a rose-colored view of the past.'⁸⁹⁰ Since Bargainnier wrote these words, Christie has become a staple of British television, where this nostalgia became less self-conscious and qualified. Such an approach is evident in *Poirot*, and subtler in *Marple*. Rather than asking

⁸⁹⁰ Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, 33.

how useful stereotypes are in the first place, or pursuing the complexities in their presentation, the adaptations rely upon them.

With the move towards 'straight camp', an appropriation of a queer tool for self-expression and visibility that is 'knowing'-in-inverted-commas, the Christie brand aims to reach a new, youthful demographic. The gesture depends upon configuring the adapted texts as inherently conservative and rather simplistic. As discussed in Chapter One, Christie herself claimed to be a 'low-brow' crowd-pleaser, and likened her books to sausages produced in a factory. Her grandson's remarks, that she was simply 'out to entertain', and that *Marpie* entertains to the same extent, accord with this perspective. However, with television providing the main register for Agatha Christie's relevance in Britain and the USA, adaptations, as new texts, have significance, and even influence, beyond entertainment.

There can be no doubt that in the present age, 'Agatha Christie' does not signify a purely literary phenomenon. The nostalgic power and national conservatism of the Agatha Christie brand cannot be unproblematized as, traditionally in scholarship, they have been. Neither can literary texts and television adaptations be conflated, however knowingly. If Christie writes about the construction of straightness, and focuses on the difficulty of defining the self or knowing one's neighbours, the Christie brand signifies straightness itself, as an essential and necessary part of British heritage. There is, therefore, a stronger potential for queer fertility in Christie's literary texts than in the more worldly adaptations.

Conclusion

He had paused, slightly embarrassed – but surely even dear old Aunt Jane must have heard of queers.

*A Caribbean Mystery*⁸⁹¹

Hubert Gregg, the theatre director whose memoirs presented Christie as a shrewd businessperson with a shyness that was mostly strategic, began his account with these words:

She was born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller. Let me correct that. None of us is born anything. There is that teasing moment of what-is-it speculation as we enter the world. In this case it was known with some certainty whodunit, but which set of names was going to fit?⁸⁹²

The very act of naming is one that turns an 'it' into a 'who.' Growing into a public persona, or a gendered identity – the process of professional development or responses to what Butler calls 'girling'⁸⁹³ – is always a process of fitting the name, not getting the right 'set of names [...] to fit'.

Christie's characters are always resorting to theatrical narratives, or thrusting these narratives upon others. The process never leads to 'truth.' By celebrating her own use of stereotypes and literary clichés, Christie draws attention towards the artificiality of daily life. The texts focus, self-consciously, on normativity, which requires a panoply of exaggerated others who sometimes do not fit their prescribed identities or narrative roles – the prancing homosexual with a strong war record, and so on. Far from being escapist in her conservatism, Christie offers readers a series of narratives in which nothing and nobody makes sense without being considered from multiple perspectives.

⁸⁹¹ Christie, *Caribbean*, 10.

⁸⁹² Gregg, *Agatha Christie and All That Mousetrap*, 20.

⁸⁹³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 7.

I have come to expect two comments from helpful friends when I tell them about this project. The first is a question: 'Is Poirot gay?' The second is a suggestion: 'There is a lesbian couple in *A Murder is Announced*.' Some readers will be disappointed that I have neither given Poirot a sexual orientation nor written about the presentation of Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd, two 'friends' who co-habit in a sleepy post-war village. I would encourage further research into the latter couple, who are sympathetically drawn along gendered marital lines in the context of a host of tabloid newspaper scandals concerning women marrying women. However, despite the couple's queerness, they do not fit this thesis, which concerns the processes through which identities are constructed in the texts; I have not, primarily, sought to identify characters we might consider as sexual minorities. Labelling Poirot's sexuality would positively run counter to my thesis.

The assumption that a queer reading 'outs' homosexual characters according to available stereotypes is rooted in the prejudice that governs contemporary sexual identity categories. Motives can be, and usually are, worthy, but identifying and labelling characters in literary texts according to contemporary understandings of sexuality only gives power to those categories' limiting, prescriptive effect on identity. It is surely queerer to acknowledge diversity in desire, in relationships, and in affect – and to embrace a potential for play, destabilization, and even subversion in Christie's use of recognizable but unlabelled clichés.

This thesis has considered, broadly, 'queer potential', as opposed to some essentialist concept of queer visibility, in Agatha Christie's pre-1953 detective fiction. A premise that Christie self-consciously presented her characters as stereotypes has evolved into a realization that, in these texts, normality is presented as insecure, paranoid, frail, and theatrical. Normativity requires a set of pinpointed queers to define itself against and in the detective fiction of Agatha Christie this is a matter of satire, while identity's artifice is playfully celebrated.

This thesis allows connections between queerness and genre theory to be better explored, as well as making a contribution to debates about the queerness of the middlebrow, around which discussions have opened up in recent years.⁸⁹⁴ However, as I have sought to show with reference to the best selling author in western history, queerness is fundamental to the straightest of texts. The queerness of Hercule Poirot lies, not in his foreignness, his daintiness, or his dandyism, but in the pantomime of his relationship with Captain Hastings: it is a mockery of the homosocial bonding that makes national heroes. Using recognizable stereotypes in jarring ways, Christie both fools the reader as to 'whodunit' and undermines the certainty and reality of normativity. These texts provide readers with space to question systems and structures that oppress, rather than redeeming victims on a case-by-case basis.

As the most recognizable and commercially successful author in a genre traditionally coded as masculine, Christie crafted a deliberately feminine authorial persona. Drawing on contemporary constructions of middle-class domesticity, and an interwar middlebrow hostility to intellectualism, Christie adapted to a changing marketplace, mocking her predecessors and establishing herself as an unorthodox and likeable personality through her alter ego, Ariadne Oliver. Masculinity itself comes under attack, especially in Christie's early novels, as she uses parody to undermine her genre's appeal to both masculine heroism and essential truth. Subtly paralleling male characters, Christie critiques the process through which men define themselves as normal by channelling their insecurities into marginalized individuals. Femininity is presented more seriously but is also less consistent than masculinity in Christie's fiction. In line with psychoanalysis and popular psychology of the time, Christie explores the masquerade of femininity through strategic presentations of women as criminals and victims. Ill-defined and ill-fated, femininity is most pronounced in individuals with strong personalities who nonetheless undermine the idea of essentialism by being self-consciously fictional characters.

⁸⁹⁴ See Humble, 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading'; Jaime Harker, *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

For too long, the word 'escapist' has been applied to Christie's literature. As well as providing a subtle critique of literary quality, as it is value-laden, the word suggests irrelevance; an un-broachable chasm between text and context. However, these texts' popularity has to do with their firm engagement with contemporary concerns and debates. After the Second World War, Christie engaged with dominant rhetoric concerning futurity and national recovery. None of the texts discussed questions the importance of family in providing a framework for an individual to understand and grow into society, but equally none of the texts supports a particular model of kinship. Christie presents a need to rethink the family unit, presenting sprawling old-fashioned families as stifled, incestuous, and maladjusted to the changing times.

Agatha Christie's detective fiction is thoroughly engaged with contemporary debates surrounding sexuality and the relationship between the individual and society, but this issue is lost in the television adaptations I have considered. These approach their source texts from a twenty-first century perspective of wilful nostalgia, coding the past as a time that was simpler and happier because it was more ignorant. Including explicitly gay and lesbian characters in the adaptations, dramatists imply that homosexuality has always existed, but that in the past it could not be expressed as it can in the twenty-first century. However, this gesture, in line with dominant identity politics, has the effect of collating diverse character traits according to a gay-straight binary based on negative stereotypes. Moreover, scope for interpreting the complex coding of masculinity and femininity in the literary texts is limited in the adaptations.

In 2014, the Christie estate announced another ambitious rebranding gesture for the 125th anniversary of Christie's birth, which started with a new Poirot novel, and continued in 2015 with the BBC's launch of several television projects. The Christie estate launched a new website, with an intriguing sub-header that reads: 'Writer, Traveller, Playwright, Wife, Mother, Surfer.'⁸⁹⁵ The effect is twofold. Firstly, it evokes a social media trend for laconic biographies

⁸⁹⁵ RLJ Entertainment and Acorn Media, 'About Christie', *Agatha Christie Online* (2015).

taking the form of lists, which suggests that Christie should be considered as a contemporary celebrity, rather than a dead writer whose media impact is being managed by a committee. Secondly, it implies that Christie is, as her grandson claimed in a press meeting, 'more than a writer',⁸⁹⁶ and accords with a general move towards showcasing 'lesser-known aspects of [her] work.'⁸⁹⁷ The 2015 rebranding initiative is, like the 2004 one, focussed around an authorial personality, but this more nuanced 'Agatha Christie' is both a conventional middle-class woman ('Wife, Mother') and a worldly cosmopolitan ('Traveller, [...] Surfer').

The revisionist approach to Christie's authorial identity may influence broader discussions of her work, just as her careful negotiation of the marketplace has informed her reception so far. In Chapter One, I described a scholarly tendency to position Christie's six decades of publications in what I called a 'vacuum' vaguely defined by war, but academic treatments are increasingly being rooted in historical context. For example, Samantha Walton's *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (2015) relates the work of Christie and other popular crime writers of the 1940s to contemporary debates surrounding guilt in legal and psychiatric case studies.⁸⁹⁸ Approaching Christie's books as 'literary texts which challenge, subvert, toy with and test the prevailing values and prejudices of interwar Britain', Walton represents a growing tendency to understand the importance of historicizing and close-reading Golden Age detective fiction.⁸⁹⁹ In this thesis, I have considered texts written in the aftermath of the First World War, and in the build-up to and aftermath of the Second World War. The historical aspect has been central to my discussion of queerness and normativity, because British national identity in those crucial years was in a unique state of flux. The nineteenth-century 'medicalization' of sexual desire exerted a strong influence throughout the twentieth century in psychiatry, law-making, eugenics, and even politics, but

⁸⁹⁶ Speaking at the launch of the International Agatha Christie Festival (Torquay, 15 Sep. 2014).

⁸⁹⁷ Anita Singh, 'Agatha Christie and the Book Cover Most Foul', *Daily Telegraph* (14 Apr. 2015), 3.

⁸⁹⁸ Samantha Walton, *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Back cover.

it was considered privileged information for many years, while the meanings and definitions of identity categories were constantly changing. Always mindful of war, the Britain Christie wrote for and about was one that drew on the nostalgic remembrance of a unified, clearly hierarchized Empire, nonetheless alive to this construction's unreality.

This thesis is not supposed to provide the last word on queerness in Christie. I would encourage further research into subversive femininities, which have already been excellently treated by Shaw and Vanacker, Gill, Plain, and Makinen. However, as the first full queer reading of a 'Golden Age' detective novelist, this project has provided an argument for diversifying the queer literary canon. Queer literary criticism is becoming increasingly diverse, and it is logical for a variety of primary sources to be considered from a queer perspective. Middlebrow literary productions like Christie's are often regarded as envoys of conservative traditionalism, and a focus on the unfixed nature of identity categories in these texts has been particularly productive. As straight people assume ownership over queer spaces by rote, undermining straightness in a thoroughly 'Institution' writer means exposing the thorough queerness of normativity itself. Early in my introduction, I quoted Julian Symons, who claimed that 'few feminists or radicals are likely to read [Christie].'⁹⁰⁰ This thesis has provided context for a more nuanced understanding of authorship, reception, and the fraught question of human identity. Queerness is fundamental to Christie's literary landscape, where the only truth about human identity is its dependence on the Other.

⁹⁰⁰ Symons, 'Puzzle Maker', 29.

Appendix: Titles by Agatha Christie in which children kill or are killed

A child here is defined here as a character known to be aged under eighteen. A title in bold indicates that the child is the main victim or criminal in the text.

Children as victims

Murder on the Orient Express (1933) – child killed in the past. The man responsible is ‘executed’ by people affected.

And Then There Were None (1939) – three children were killed in the past. The man and woman responsible (accident and murder, consecutively) are the first and last victims of an ex-judge, disillusioned with the law’s limited sweep.

The Body in the Library (1942) – schoolgirl is killed and her body is dressed up and exchanged with that of a seventeen year-old dancer, to obscure the time of death.

‘Three Blind Mice’ (1948/1950) and ‘The Mousetrap’ (1952) – child died after abuse in the past. His brother kills the adults responsible for revenge.

Dead Man’s Folly (1956) – Teenage girl blackmails a couple who have murdered in the past, though really she knows nothing. She is murdered.

‘The Unexpected Guest’ (1958) – victim ran over a child in the past, showed no remorse, evaded legal punishment, and is eventually killed by the child’s father.

Endless Night (1967) – Schoolboy was killed in the past by a working-class boy who wanted his wristwatch, and who grows up to marry and murder an heiress.

Hallowe’en Party (1969) Schoolgirl intimidates a couple who have murdered in the past, though really she knows nothing. She is murdered. Her adolescent brother blackmails them and is also killed.

There is a rough trajectory here: while initially the dead child is stuck in the past, and those who grew up around it extract revenge, by the end the child is presented as a dangerously unknown entity trading knowledge for money and threatening adults. A sense of authority surrounds the first dead child’s avengers: a mock jury, a judge, and so on. There are no avengers in later texts, the transition being marked by ‘Three Blind Mice’ in which the dead child’s mentally ill brother poses as a policeman. From representing innocence and

potential growth (a potential curtailed by death), the child comes to represent fear of the (literally) unknown.

It is worth mentioning Jan Warwick in 'The Unexpected Guest', the victim's teenage half-brother. Jan is 'about nineteen' but 'mentally retarded' and believes that he has killed his brother, ultimately killing himself in an attempt to evade police. It is Jan's death that prompts the real murderer to confess, for his family's peace of mind. In a different way to, and perhaps more strongly than, the killer in 'Three Blind Mice,' Jan stands here for the child's muddled transition from victim to threat, from innocent to powerfully unknowable.

Children as killers

Towards Zero (1944) – In the past, a boy killed somebody. As an adult, a solicitor recognizes him while he is planning a second murder, so he kills the solicitor and then proceeds with his plan. Secretly, he is still emotionally a child (these are the main murders).

Crooked House (1949) – a home-schooled girl, aged 'about eleven', kills her grandfather because he will not give her ballet lessons.

Hickory Dickory Dock (1955) – In the past, a boy killed his mother. Now a student under an assumed identity, he kills two housemates who discover his original identity (these are the main murders).

Endless Night (1967) – In the past, the narrator killed a friend at school, for his wristwatch. He has grown into an emotionally stunted serial killer after meeting a woman 'who looked and smelled and tasted of sex.'

An essentialist strain runs through these depictions: once a murderer, always a murderer. The idea that people do not change only begins appearing in the Christian worldview in the 1940s. 'Nature' is not fixed or immutable in the 1930s texts, which hardly feature children. Interest in murderous children is only entertained from 1944, the penultimate year of the Second World War. We may deduce an emphasis on essence, heredity, and the fear of 'kinks' emerging – the danger of the unknown manifests in the construction of childish innocence.

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