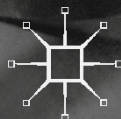


Gender and
Representation in British
'Golden Age' Crime Fiction

Women Writing Women

Megan Hoffman

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This book is dedicated to my parents, Neal and Colleen Hoffman

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Introduction

Classic British ‘golden age’ crime fiction provides an ideal space in which to explore issues that accompany changing models of femininity. In this particular subgenre, certain elements are already required; the potential for deviance through transgressing social codes—the ‘law’—is necessary to the plot of a golden age narrative. At the same time, classic investigative crime fiction requires resolution; the break in law and order must be mended by an all-powerful detective figure.¹ While predominantly conservative, this formula allows a ‘safe’ textual space for the exploration of anxieties surrounding constructions of femininity in the period during which British golden age crime fiction was being written. The first half of the twentieth century saw significant changes in the construction of gender roles in the popular consciousness, social policies regarding women and, consequently, perceptions of femininity; the inevitable anxieties that accompanied these changes are evident in portrayals of women and femininity in popular culture. The depiction of a woman in a crime novel, whether as victim, villain, suspect or detective, is loaded with social and cultural meanings as well as with expectations attached to the genre’s typical characters.² Though inevitably contained and forced into compliance with social and genre conventions through marriage, death or occasionally the necessity of playing the detective figure’s regulatory role, female characters are nevertheless used in ways that can be read as questioning and renegotiating social, gender and genre norms.³ With its resolution, the golden age crime novel contains any deviance that might have emerged within the

body of the text; however, it is often the case that this resolution is shaped in a particularly modern fashion.⁴ Alison Light identifies what she calls a ‘conservative modernity’ in women’s middlebrow literature of the period, pointing out that it was the cultural production of ‘a time when older forms of relationship and intimate behaviour were being recast and when even the most traditional of attitudes took new form’.⁵ How, then, does British women’s golden age crime fiction negotiate these shifting models through the portrayals of women and the feminine it offers?

I do not attempt to suggest either that depictions of women in golden age crime fiction written by women are unequivocally empowering, or that their conservatism is inevitably repressive. Rather, I argue that these depictions are ambivalent, advocating a modern, active model of femininity that gives agency to female characters, while also displaying with their resolutions an emphasis on domesticity and on maintaining a heteronormative order. This ambivalence provides a means to deal with anxieties about women’s place in society without advocating either a radical feminist dismissal of social conventions or a return to a Victorian ideal of submissive domesticity. The active models of femininity, including deviant femininity, provided in these novels speak to a changing society in which a woman’s place—in the home, in the workplace and in education—was continually being questioned, and the exploration that I provide of both conflict and resolution in these texts adds to the existing body of work on both the crime fiction genre and women’s middlebrow fiction in general. I shall begin with a chapter on historical context, which is vital to understanding the concerns explored in these novels. The following chapters examine issues such as sexually nonconforming women, the changing—and often conflicted—nature of gender roles in both the domestic and public spheres, and conclude with a discussion of the powerful image of the woman’s body, both dead and living, and the ways in which depictions of this body can be seen to explore and negotiate issues of gender, class and identity.

My work refers to and builds upon the varied criticism on crime fiction, particularly that produced in the last 30 years. Much critical attention has been devoted to crime fiction as a genre, and an important early critical work on the genre is Howard Haycraft’s account of the history of crime fiction, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (1941). *Murder for Pleasure* is significant because it was contemporary to many of the novels and stories I analyse in this study, so Haycraft’s identification of the genre’s popular writers, novels and themes is particularly

relevant to my focus on the social and cultural forces that come into play in the production of the works examined. Haycraft is the first to attempt to identify particular movements or subgenres within the wider context of crime fiction, naming the dates of ‘The Golden Age’ as 1918–30 and ‘The Moderns’ as 1930 to the crime fiction produced up to the time of *Murder for Pleasure*’s publication.⁶ Julian Symons’ *Bloody Murder* (1972) is another important early work that attempts to give an historical account of the genre. Symons rather simplistically argues that the reading habits of the public shaped the plots and concerns of the crime fiction genre in the 1920s; with the increasing number of lending libraries such as Boots and W.H. Smith in Britain, Symons reasons, the preferences of the large number of women who patronised these libraries must have had an effect on the literature that was subsequently produced and consumed: ‘Supply again followed [women’s] demand for books that would reinforce their own view of the world and society, long untroubling “library novels”, light romances, detective stories. Many of the detective stories were written by women, and essentially also for women.’⁷ Here and throughout *Bloody Murder*, Symons disregards the potential for exploration and renegotiation of gender and social roles that can be found in crime fiction of the period, as well as the unsettling potential for violence that often ensues when these issues are examined. With the emerging field of middlebrow studies in the 1990s and 2000s came more complicated and useful readings of women’s middlebrow fiction, including crime fiction. Alison Light’s landmark work *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991) argues that:

by exploring the writings of middle-class women at home in the period ... we can go straight to the centre of a contradictory and determining tension in English social life ... which I have called a conservative modernity: Janus-faced, it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards; it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before.⁸

Light’s work acknowledges the complex nature of the social influences that shaped middlebrow fiction in the period, understanding conservatism ‘not as a force which is simply “anti-change” so much as a species of restraint or “brake” ... holding progress back on the leash of caution but allowing it none the less to advance’.⁹ As Light suggests in her chapter

on Agatha Christie, and as I shall explore in the case of both Christie and other women crime writers of the period, such fiction reworks and renegotiates outdated cultural norms even while providing distinctly conservative resolutions—it ‘offers a modern sense of the unstable limits of respectability’.¹⁰

Stephen Knight’s work has also been influential in complicating the traditional view of the golden age crime novel as ‘light’ or simplistically conservative. Knight’s *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980) includes a chapter on Agatha Christie’s series detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple in which Knight argues that in Christie’s fiction the model of the heroic masculine detective is rejected in favour of ‘a system of inquiry which is self-consciously female, and also fully rational’.¹¹ Knight also suggests that Christie is ‘a genuine channel for the anxieties and the ultimate self-consolations of her class and sex’.¹² Knight’s analysis of Christie’s fiction recognises the gendered implications of the ways in which it manipulates the crime fiction formula, and his chapter on Christie’s contribution to golden age crime fiction is one of the first critical treatments to recognise the importance of conducting a complex inquiry not only of crime fiction as a bourgeois literature but also of its construction of a gendered methodology of detection.

Published in 1981, not long after Knight’s *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan’s *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* is a thorough study that not only contributed to the growing body of work on gender in crime fiction but was also the first to examine extensively female characters in the genre. *The Lady Investigates* considers not only female protagonists in the works of well-known writers but also the female detectives created by many writers who had been critically neglected before its publication, such as Patricia Wentworth and Gladys Mitchell. It also recognises the potential complexity of social and cultural influences on depictions of women.¹³ Nevertheless, *The Lady Investigates* is a history of women detective figures that includes a list of characters and how they function in their respective narratives rather than a close reading of the factors that influenced portrayals of gender in the novels and stories examined. My own observations align more closely with Merja Makinen’s recent work on femininity in Agatha Christie’s works, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (2006). Unlike much of the criticism on the genre that deals with gender, Makinen’s work recognises the potential for ambivalence in Christie’s representations of femininity. Using an historical approach similar to my own in its examination

of the various culturally defined modes of femininity in Christie's novels, Makinen argues that even though 'Christie was writing during a period of intense gender renegotiation in relation to the modern world ... a political conservatism did not necessarily rule out a questioning and even subversive attitude to cultural gender expectations'.¹⁴ Makinen also states that one of her aims is to use a wide variety of Christie's fiction in her work in order to give her readings depth and provide a comprehensive look at the issues with which her work engages, an approach I also advocate. However, I have chosen to expand my enquiry to include a wide variety of writers and texts in order to give a more nuanced and broader perspective on the ways in which themes such as domesticity, education and sexuality are explored in women's crime fiction of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

Along similar lines, my work owes a great deal to the valuable contributions on women's middlebrow fiction, including Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (2001) and, as has already been discussed, Alison Light's groundbreaking study *Forever England*. Humble and Light both include crime fiction in their studies of middlebrow literature, and their focus on how such fiction engages with concerns of the period has been crucial to crime fiction studies, including my own. Humble, for example, argues that:

the 'feminine middlebrow' in this period was a powerful force in establishing and consolidating, but also in resisting, new class and gender identities ... it is its paradoxical allegiance to both domesticity and a radical sophistication that makes this literary form so ideologically flexible.¹⁵

Humble's examination of themes in 'feminine middlebrow' fiction, particularly of representations of domesticity and the family, and her expansion of the definition of 'interwar' fiction to include that written both before the First World War and after the Second World War in recognition of the major cultural changes that occurred during the first half of the twentieth century, informs and corresponds with many of my own arguments.

However, my study also includes elements that distinguish it from other critical works on crime fiction in general, women's crime fiction specifically and also women's middlebrow fiction. I have selected a wide variety of texts produced both by writers who have been the focus of a relatively large amount of critical attention, such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham, and by those who have received comparatively little, such as Ngaio Marsh, Gladys Mitchell, Patricia Wentworth,

Christianna Brand and Josephine Tey.¹⁶ Examining such a diverse range of writers, novels and stories contributes to the recovery of lesser-known writers while also providing a more nuanced picture of a complicated cultural landscape. Although only some of the period's crime writers continue to be read and discussed, all of the writers I have chosen to examine were widely read at the time of their works' publication.¹⁷ Gladys Mitchell, for example, was named in *The Observer* in 1938 along with Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers as one of the 'Big Three' prominent women crime fiction writers of her time.¹⁸ In fact, Mitchell's work has remained popular, though not at the same level as Christie's or Sayers', with numerous reprints since the 1980s, most notably by Virago Press, Vintage Press, Rue Morgue Press and Minnow Press. There was even a Mrs Bradley television series produced by the BBC in the late 1990s, but, in spite of this public profile, her work has continued to receive comparatively few mentions in criticism on crime fiction.¹⁹ Patricia Wentworth, whose elderly woman detective Miss Silver appeared a year before Christie's more famous Miss Marple, is another writer who was popular during the period but whose work faded into obscurity until recent reprints by Hodder & Stoughton, and who has also received very little critical attention. By including these writers and others such as Christianna Brand, who is better known for her children's fiction than for her crime fiction, I look to provide a more expansive picture of the themes that emerge from the work of women golden age crime writers in addition to offering innovative readings of both well-known and lesser-known texts.

I shall also offer a more expansive definition of the somewhat arbitrary categorisation of golden age crime fiction as being confined to the interwar years. Though some define golden age crime fiction as dating strictly from the publication of Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920 to the late 1930s, I have chosen to extend the reach of my examination, with Josephine Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946) as the most recent novel discussed.²⁰ Though the period between the two World Wars provides a convenient parenthesis for any study of golden age crime fiction, I would argue, along with Stephen Knight, Nicola Humble and, more recently, Samantha Walton, that the cultural forces that influenced the production and content of these novels cannot be strictly confined to the interwar years but continued well beyond the end of the Second World War into the late 1940s.²¹ I also use the term 'golden age' advisedly. Although I would argue with Stephen Knight that 'the stories do regularly represent types of social and personal unease which would contradict a notion of an

idyllic “golden” period’, the term is widely recognised as descriptive of the particular subgenre of crime fiction I am investigating, and so it is used throughout this work.²²

Though my work is historical and textual in its approach, with most attention paid to the social and cultural contexts in which the examined texts were produced, I have also used various contemporary theoretical works where appropriate to enhance my close readings of the texts. Judith Butler’s work on gendered subjectivity and identity, for example, has proven to be particularly useful when applied to readings of genre fiction, which is repetitious by nature and which lends itself to gendered readings when conventional plots and characters are reworked in ways that can be seen to renegotiate both cultural and genre constructions of gendered roles and themes. Butler argues that the recognition of the performativity of gender can reveal transgressive possibilities:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time ... then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.²³

Butler’s work stresses both the instability of gender categories and the coercive force of gender norms, both concepts that are evident in the depictions of subversive or imperfectly performed femininity (and also masculinity) set loose in the body of the text, but compelled into submission in the resolutions of the fiction I examine. This last point also opens up the intriguing possibility that the conclusions reached in this fiction project only the illusion of safety and completion; they can, in fact, be read as always failing to approximate the ideal of order to which they aspire.

Through my readings, I aim to explore the ambivalent nature of modes of femininity depicted in golden age crime fiction, and to show that seemingly conservative resolutions are often attempts to provide a ‘modern-yet-safe’ solution to the conflicts raised in the texts. Consequently, Chap. 2, ‘Change and Anxiety’, offers an overview of the period’s key social tensions with regard to women’s changing roles. This chapter introduces a wide range of concerns, including perceptions of the large number of ‘superfluous’ single women in British society following the First World War; increasing access to education, particularly university education for women; increasing career opportunities outside the home occurring simultaneously with continued, intense pressure to marry and have

children; and changing ideologies surrounding marriage and sexual relationships—all issues that are central to the narratives examined in the following chapters.

The book's third chapter, 'Everybody Needs an Outlet', explores depictions of women who do not conform to the heteronormative order, including spinsters, lesbians and 'fallen' women. The chapter begins with discussions of single women detectives, including Dorothy L. Sayers' Miss Climpson, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver and Gladys Mitchell's Mrs Bradley. Though she may or may not function as the primary detective in the crime narrative, the single woman's liminality allows her to work both inside and outside the domestic circle—near enough to detect effectively and detached enough to identify the corruption within. This common setting also serves to enable the questioning of the traditional patriarchal family's dominance, unsettling constructions of normality and safety. The chapter continues specifically to examine Christie's *Murder is Easy* (1939), Ngaio Marsh's *Overture to Death* (1939) and Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1929) in relation to the theme of single women as victims and villains. As a victim, the single woman is often punished for exhibiting excessive or inappropriate desire. The 'repressed' single woman, whether lesbian or heterosexual, is also a common perpetrator, as her hidden desires are manifested in sexualised violence. Such villains are located outside definitions of 'normal' sexuality, and though they are always contained, their existence points to significant unease about their disturbing potential for agency and the accompanying questions this raises about concepts of 'transgressive' and 'normal' sexuality.

Chapter 4, 'A Joint Venture?', examines depictions of detective couples, including Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, Allingham's Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton, Marsh's Roderick Alleyn and Agatha Troy, and Christie's Tommy and Tuppence Beresford. Vane, Fitton, Troy and Beresford together provide a model of femininity that attempts to reconcile new opportunities for career women with a fulfilling romantic relationship and a domestic life. However, though these couples offer a valuable exploration of the potential of companionate marriage, they often falter when the question of parenthood—accompanied by the expectations surrounding domesticity and women's role in the home—arises. This chapter explores how—and if—the 'gap' that exists between actively equal partnership and domesticity is negotiated in these novels. This chapter also posits that often within these couples' relationships the feminised, 'masochistic' modern male must return to a paradigm of dominant,

aggressive masculinity and the modern female must return to a traditionally submissive role in order to establish a successful romantic relationship. The conservative resolutions that follow these reversed positions signify both anxiety about changing gender roles and a desire to explore a possible renegotiation of the roles typically played out in the heterosexual romance plot. In addition, I question the reading of masochistic desire as ‘giving in’ or a loss of power for women, while recognising the problems inherent in the assumption of a submissive and often masochistic role as a traditionally appropriate means for women to express sexual desire. Examining these narratives reveals an ambiguous view on the state of modern marriage, reflecting uncertainty but not an absolute retreat to less empowering ideals.

My fifth chapter, ‘Ladies of a Modern World’, reads Tey’s *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946), Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* (1935), Mitchell’s *St Peter’s Finger* (1938) and *Laurels Are Poison* (1942), Allingham’s *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) and Brand’s *Death in High Heels* (1941) in order to consider depictions of women in schools, universities and the workplace. These settings provide the opportunity to explore the tension between women’s expanding place in the public sphere and the pressure to stay in traditionally domestic roles. That some female characters are depicted as flourishing in an academic community, or achieving professional success, presents the possibility of moving towards an equal place with men in the public sphere of academia or the workplace. Nevertheless, novels depicting women and girls in education and the workplace are not necessarily always supportive of such an agenda—as can be seen in *The Fashion in Shrouds*, they are often fraught with problematic conflict between an active ideal and the domesticity that was still considered to be the ultimate feminine achievement. These narratives also paint a complex portrait of female friendship and community—on the one hand, communities such as Sayers’ Shrewsbury College or Mitchell’s St Peter’s Convent are positive depictions of flourishing communities of women who work individually and together for the success of both themselves and their students, and who must cope with outside prejudice. On the other hand, these novels show that even such communities face conflict with the wider patriarchal institutions to which they are connected, and novels such as *Laurels Are Poison* and *Miss Pym Disposes* present a far more ambivalent view of women living and working together, with excessively aggressive competition and ‘abnormal’ sexuality being two possible ‘dangers’ that may manifest.

The book's sixth chapter, 'Sensational Bodies', discusses the treatment of both the female murder victim's body as well as the female killer's body in golden age crime narratives. Women's bodies—both dead and alive—represent sites of transgression that must be resolved or contained at the novel's conclusion so that order can be restored. Texts analysed in this chapter include Christie's *Peril at End House* (1932), *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), *Dumb Witness* (1937), *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) and *The Body in the Library* (1942), as well as Mitchell's *Speedy Death* (1929) and Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1927). The female killers and victims portrayed in these texts are shown to have unstable identities, whether this is illustrated through the killer's aptitude for disguise, or, in the case of the murder victims, the physical replacement of one woman's body for another. This ambiguity characterises such bodies as occasions of confusion, disguise and deception, emphasising both the disruption of social order and the instability of class and gender stereotypes.

Throughout these chapters, a picture emerges of narratives that test boundaries and subvert stereotypes while offering 'safe' resolutions. The range of texts I examine provides an overview of the ways in which women writers deal with the pressing anxieties that accompanied the rapid social changes of the first half of the twentieth century, revealing ambivalence towards available modes of femininity. The ways in which these images are investigated and manipulated have implications both for the genre and in the much wider sphere of the dominant culture. An appropriate question to begin with, then, is: what, exactly, is at stake when women write women in golden age crime fiction?

NOTES

1. How these conventions might be complicated when that detective figure is a woman will be discussed to some extent in this book and has already been examined at length elsewhere in works such as Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan's *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (1981) and Karla T. Kungl's *Creating the Fictional Female Detective: The Sleuth Heroines of British Women Writers, 1890–1940* (2006).
2. This is certainly not to say that constructions of masculinity were not also under scrutiny in these narratives, but the primary focus here is on representations of women.
3. Other critics have also argued for the importance of reading crime novels in light of the possibilities they reveal within their formulaic conventions

- rather than the limitations of those conventions. For instance, Gill Plain writes of the crime genre that ‘these texts cannot be reduced to the sum of their resolutions; they must also be considered in the light of the conflicts and tensions that they mobilize en route, and, in exploring these tensions, the possibility must be considered that crime, like its counterpart respectability, is seldom quite what it seems’. Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 6.
4. The term ‘modern’ is used here and throughout this work to refer to the culture and social mores contemporary with the narratives that are being examined.
 5. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 10.
 6. Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (London: Peter Davies, 1942), pp. 112–58, 181–206.
 7. Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), pp. 93–4.
 8. Light, *Forever England*, p. 10.
 9. Light, *Forever England*, p. 17.
 10. Light, *Forever England*, p. 61.
 11. Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980), p. 119.
 12. Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 133.
 13. For instance, *The Lady Investigates* acknowledges the social factors that shaped depictions of femininity in golden age crime narratives and that overt feminism does not always play into representations of femininity. Craig and Cadogan write of the wives of well-known male detective figures that: ‘Active feminism [in the 1930s] was considered old hat and soon became a source of irritation to those preoccupied with more pressing issues like the war in Spain and threatening developments in Germany. It had acquired a ridiculous aspect, and so a fashionable author was forced to adopt a bantering tone on the subject, displaying at the same time an awareness of apparently fundamental traits and incapacities in each sex. But it was impossible to revert to the prewar system of restrictions in women’s lives.’ Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 207.
 14. Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 1.
 15. Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.

16. Of the writers included in this book, only Christie and Sayers are included in Howard Haycraft's identification of the 'big five' most significant writers of British detective fiction (1942). Allingham and Marsh are both subjects of short sections in *Murder for Pleasure*, but other women writers such as Wentworth are only briefly commented upon. Mitchell is mentioned as a writer of detective fiction characterised by a 'lighter tone'. *Murder for Pleasure*, p. 195. Haycraft also names Inspector Lamb as the detective figure connected to Wentworth's work. However, Lamb is in fact a police officer who often works with the primary detective figure, Miss Silver, of whom Haycraft makes no mention. *Murder for Pleasure*, p. 204.
17. Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers in particular have been included in virtually every work on the history of crime fiction and significant critical works have been produced on each writer. In addition to Makinen's *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (2006), Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick's *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (1982), Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker's *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (1991), R.A. York's *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion* (2007), as well as several biographies have been written on Christie and her work. Various articles and chapters within well-known critical works on crime fiction and/or women's fiction have also been written on Christie, including Stephen Knight's "'...done from within"—Agatha Christie's World', in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980), Alison Light's 'Agatha Christie and Conservative Modernity' in *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991), and Gill Plain's 'Sacrificial Bodies: The Corporeal Anxieties of Agatha Christie', in *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001). Sayers has also often been the subject of study, with Janice Brown's *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (1998), Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis' *Conundrums for the Long Week-end: England, Dorothy L. Sayers and Lord Peter Wimsey* (2000), and Crystal Downing's *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (2004), as well as Susan J. Leonardi's chapters 'Unnatural by Degrees: Dorothy L. Sayers' Overachieving Murderess' and 'Of Catteries, Colleges, and Whimsical Weddings', in *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (1989), SueEllen Campbell's 'The Detective Heroine and the Death of Her Hero: Dorothy Sayers to P.D. James', in *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction* (1995), and Gill Plain's 'Safety in Sanctity: Dorothy L. Sayers' Marriage of Convenience', in *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (1996). Susan Rowland includes Christie and Sayers, as well as Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, in her psychoanalytic study of the lives and work of six women crime writers, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women*

- Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (2001). In comparison with Christie and Sayers, Allingham has received relatively little critical attention, but still significantly more than writers such as Brand, Marsh, Mitchell, Tey and Wentworth.
18. Torquemada, 'These Names Make Clues', *The Observer* (London, UK: 2 October 1938), p. 7, *Proquest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer (1791–2003)*, Web, 30 October 2011.
 19. The critical works that include Mitchell tend to focus on Mrs Bradley as a detective figure, including in Craig and Cadogan's *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (1981) and Kungl's *Creating the Fictional Female Detective: The Sleuth Heroines of British Women Writers, 1890–1940* (2006). Elizabeth English provides an interesting and convincing queer reading of Mitchell's *Speedy Death* in *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction* (2014), and in *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (2015), Samantha Walton discusses Mitchell's work in the context of the psychiatric and psychological discourses that influenced the medical, legal and popular understandings of mental illness and criminal responsibility in the first half of the twentieth century.
 20. Julian Symons identifies the golden age as spanning the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that the end of the Second World War marked the change from 'detective story' to 'crime novel'. *Bloody Murder*, pp. 18–19.
 21. Knight is more liberal than critics such as Haycraft and Symons in his definition of 'golden age'; while acknowledging that the phrase is usually used to describe 'the period between the two world wars', he argues that the period might more accurately be dated from 1908 (with the publication of Gaston Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* in translation, Mary Roberts Rinehart's *The Circular Staircase* and Carolyn Wells' *The Clue*) until 'well after 1939', as 'many of the classic writers of the so-called "golden age" went on writing in their familiar modes'. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 85–6. Humble argues that 'although the feminine middlebrow as I understand it is clearly a product of the inter-war years, its form, themes and successes were not immediately disrupted by the Second World War. In defining my period as running from the end of the First World War to the mid-1950s, I challenge the prevailing convention that would see the Second World War as effecting a decisive ideological and cultural break, and offer a revision to the way we currently map the changing politics of femininity and the domestic in the twentieth century.' *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 3–4. Samantha Walton similarly writes in *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* that 'The perimeters of the golden age need to be

extended into order to avoid misguided characterization of the golden age as “homogenous” ... Although the years between the wars provide a neat demarcation, and the commencement of the Second World War a reason for literary tropes and generic expectations developed during the interwar years to become somewhat less than “golden”, many later works test these expectations.’ Samantha Walton, *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 8.

22. Stephen Knight, ‘The Golden Age’, in Martin Priestman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 77.
23. Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 402.

Change and Anxiety: Historical Context

In order to examine the issues at stake within depictions of femininity in golden age crime fiction, it is important to reflect upon the historical context within which these narratives were produced. The first half of the twentieth century was a period of rapid and substantial change for women in British society, and traditional gender categories were beginning to be debated and questioned in very public ways. With the First World War, the gendered lines drawn between the domestic and public spheres became increasingly blurred as many women found themselves working outside the home for the first time or returning to the workforce after marriage as the demand for workers grew in the absence of conscripted men. Not only did women begin to assume a more prominent role in the male-dominated public sphere; they also gained access to jobs that would previously have been closed to them on the basis of gender, for example in munitions factories, engineering and in offices and shops. These jobs would generally have been more highly paid than traditional ‘women’s work’ in the textiles industry, domestic service or helping to run family businesses. Despite this shift in the kind of work women were assumed to be capable of, historian Gail Braybon cautions against the assumption that women’s increased presence in the workplace during the First World War fundamentally changed views towards traditional gender roles, arguing: ‘Women themselves may have gained much from the experience of war work, but men’s attitudes to them were another matter.’¹ Expectations and prejudices accompanying gendered social roles did not change quickly, and this tension was played

out during the decades following the First World War through conflicting depictions of those roles in popular culture.

By the end of the First World War, proponents of women's rights were optimistic that women would not only be able to hold the ground they had gained in the fight for equality between the sexes, but also to push further. Indeed, in 1918 the vote and the right to stand for Parliament, privileges for which feminists had fought for decades, were given to women who were over 30 or who had graduated from a British university.² However, many historians argue that with this victory came a loss of focus for the feminist movement; suffrage was an issue that had united women of all backgrounds, and its achievement, though limited, meant that the movement lacked a clear direction during the interwar years. Jane Hannan, for instance, remarks of the post-war feminist movement that 'Once the vote was partially granted in 1918 ... it became less easy to maintain a commitment to a common goal.'³ The feminist movement's growing lack of cohesion along with the continuing cultural pressure to conform to traditional gender roles did not, however, prevent significant achievements for feminists in the period following the First World War; legislation was passed that opened new career opportunities in male-dominated professions such as the law, allowed women to sue for divorce on the same grounds as men and finally allowed all women the right to vote.⁴ In addition, women gained the right to be awarded degrees at some of the nation's most prestigious universities, and the number of women who worked outside the home was growing.

Though it was becoming more accepted for them to assume public roles, women still faced intense pressure to marry, have children and devote their lives to housekeeping, even though more women were remaining unmarried and those who did marry were having fewer children than ever before.⁵ This combined with a division within the feminist movement as to 'whether their aim should be to seek equality with men or to emphasize women's special needs',⁶ and a growing suspicion of militant feminists as 'unnatural' women,⁷ to create significant tension in the ways in which femininity was portrayed in the media and in popular forms of discourse. Such tensions form the cultural backdrop for a period during which crime novels and stories began to reach an unprecedented level of popularity, and women played a substantial role in both their audience and their creation.⁸ The production and consumption of popular literature were growing as innovations in publishing allowed for the cheap production of novels and the number of lending libraries increased.⁹ With fewer children and the

popularisation of labour-saving household technology such as the vacuum cleaner, many women had time for leisure activities like reading. Women who worked outside the home were also more likely to have extra money to spend on luxuries like books and clothing. These factors combined to make women an increasingly important demographic for publishers, and in his chapter on golden age crime fiction in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* Stephen Knight argues that:

[A] crucial element in the development of [the crime novel] was the gender of its audience. The magazines that carried short stories, *The Strand*, *Pearson's*, *Windsor* and so on, were designed for men, though they often had sections for the family. But lending libraries which ... were the basic medium for dissemination of the new clue-puzzle novels had a 75 per cent female audience.¹⁰

Certainly, women quickly became a significant force in the publication of crime novels during the post-war period, and there is no question of the popularity of the genre with readers of both sexes; in fact, crime fiction made up 'one-quarter of all fiction published' by 1939.¹¹ The 'clue-puzzle novel' that Knight refers to was the main form taken by golden age crime fiction in Britain, and some of its most popular writers were women.

As I shall discuss, crime fiction allows considerable scope for portraying transgressions of gender and social boundaries. This does not necessarily mean that women writers of crime fiction identified themselves unequivocally with feminism—many women were hesitant to associate themselves with the militant feminism of the sort practised by the suffragettes. When it was suggested that she give a lecture on the feminist movement in 1938, Dorothy L. Sayers remarked that though she believed that every woman should have the right to choose a profession regardless of that profession's gender associations, she 'was not sure [she] wanted to 'identify [her]self ... with feminism', referring to 'aggressive feminism' as 'old-fashioned' and likely to 'do more harm than good'.¹² Such an attitude is very much in line with the uncertain relationship many women of the period had with the 'feminism' of their experience, and it reflects the ambivalence displayed in the crime fiction of the period when it encounters the questions of women's changing roles and cultural perceptions of those roles. From education for women to the 'surplus' of single women, from women in the workplace to lesbianism, golden age crime fiction by women writers engages with contemporary anxieties about women's place in society

and changing modes of femininity. As Michael Hayes argues in his essay 'Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste', 'popular fiction is a cultural nexus for a historically determined and evolving relationship whose understanding requires us to reflect on the period, the people and the state of book production as well as the books themselves'.¹³ This chapter provides such a reflection, exploring what is at stake in the portrayals of women, and subsequently gender, in golden age crime fiction.

WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Significant advances were made in women's education in the first half of the twentieth century, continuing educational reforms that had begun in the nineteenth century. From 1918, the school leaving age for both boys and girls was raised from 12 to 14, while women had been allowed to attend university, and in fact had been able to graduate with degrees from universities in Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Scotland and Wales, since the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ However, it was not until 1920 that they were granted the right to obtain degrees from Oxford, and Cambridge did not fully grant women university membership until 1948,¹⁵ though it did grant 'titular' degrees to women beginning in 1921.¹⁶ Of course, the few women attending university were from the middle or upper classes; higher education was, with few exceptions, beyond the means of working-class women, and 'the great majority of all children, and an even greater majority of girls, received the whole of their education in an elementary school'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, a growing number of middle- to upper-class girls were able to obtain a secondary education: from 185,000 in 1920 to 500,000 in 1936, though Deirdre Beddoe points out that 'girls attending recognized secondary schools were far outnumbered by boys'.¹⁸ Outnumbered as they may have been on all levels, more women were being educated outside the home than ever before, and this was proving to be a significant cause of anxiety for a segment of society that had previously been almost entirely dominated by men. When women were finally given the right to obtain degrees from prestigious universities like Oxford and Cambridge, the reality that they were capable of the same level of education as men could no longer be ignored. Educated women were a threat not only to the long-established 'sacred' male traditions of such universities but also to a society in which they were under pressure to conform to a domestic ideal. Susan J. Leonardi comments that a common argument used against higher education for women was that:

women's role is to be a wife and mother and she should therefore be educated to that end. To follow the same course of studies as men, to receive the same degrees as men, makes women more like men, and therefore less feminine, less able to play their proper role.¹⁹

In spite of such attitudes, women continued to go to university, though they faced considerable prejudice. Oxford's women's colleges were encouraged to keep as low a profile as possible; women attending such colleges likely thought—and were told—that the less they disturbed the university's status quo, the more seriously they would be taken.²⁰ This rationale is apparent in Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935) when the Dean of Shrewsbury College, a fictional women's college at Oxford, is reluctant to contact the police to investigate a series of malicious incidents taking place in the college: 'the less publicity the better'.²¹ Even when women were noticed simply by virtue of working hard at their studies, they were still criticised:

Women, because they were eager students and grateful for the opportunity to receive an education comparable to that of their brothers, threatened, by their very eagerness and by the greater visibility this eagerness entailed, to seem the majority rather than the minority, that place assigned to them by even the most liberal male advocates of higher education for women.²²

Though Leonardi specifically examines women's experiences at Oxford, her analysis of attitudes towards educated women can also be applied to wider societal concerns about the implications of educating women. Not only was there anxiety that women would step out of prescribed gender roles, surpass men and take men's jobs, but there was also growing prejudice against homosexuality, and the close friendships formed through studying together and living together at schools and universities were perceived as a threat to the cultural ideal of marriage, motherhood and domesticity. Suspicions about lesbianism reveal a broader anxiety surrounding female sexuality, and part of this worry concerns premarital heterosexual activity as well as lesbian relationships, both of which had the potential to destabilise the pro-marriage agenda. Nevertheless, for all the prejudice against them, an increasing number of British women were aspiring beyond a primary education, and with this prospect came opportunities in academia and in the workplace that would, before the twentieth century, have been nearly inconceivable.

CAREERS AND THE WORKPLACE

The First World War opened up many opportunities for British women in the workplace, as women were needed (and were encouraged) to replace enlisted men in factories and in government jobs. Feminists were optimistic that this trend would continue after the war and that the job market would continue to become more accessible to women. However, this turned out not to be the case. As men returned to Britain at the end of the war, the increased presence of women in the workplace began to be perceived as threatening to the nation's return to 'normalcy', and the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act of 1919 forced many women out of their wartime factory jobs. Braybon identifies a concerted, government-sponsored effort to encourage women to return to more domestic roles, observing a change in the media's treatment of women workers in 1919: 'Papers which originally concentrated on lambasting *unemployed* women and asking why they did not take the jobs offered to them started demanding that women still in employment be dismissed to enable ex-soldiers to find work.'²³ Women who wanted to keep their wartime jobs were accused of being selfish and unwomanly, and 'by 1920 it was considered wilful and perverse of a woman to wish to earn her own living'.²⁴ Another argument used against women in the workplace was that their growing financial independence could be morally detrimental, leading to vanity as they had more disposable income to spend on clothing and cosmetics; in *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain, World War I to the Present*, Cate Haste comments on the 'legends' that 'proliferated about new classes of affluent spendthrift women squandering their wages on trivialities in the absence of male financial guidance' even though 'women were invariably taken on at lower wages than the men they replaced, and the cost of living soon caught up with any advance they may have made'.²⁵ The 'moral' implications of single women and childless women occupying jobs that could go to a male breadwinner with a family were stressed in the media, but the reality was that women needed these jobs: 'the Census of 1921 showed that nearly one woman in three had to be self-supporting'.²⁶

Though women were publicly encouraged to step out of the workplace after the First World War, it had, in fact, generally become more acceptable than before the war for them to hold jobs outside the home. Beddoe points out that 'over the whole period between the wars the number of insured women workers increased more rapidly than that of men'.²⁷ Feminist magazines such as *Time and Tide*, *Woman's Leader* and *The Vote*

projected positive images of career women for their readers to emulate.²⁸ Though the minority in an era when most of the media was exhorting women to embrace a domestic ideal, the fact that publications like these existed and were read indicates the presence of resistance to such a model. In the middle classes, young women were more frequently deciding to enter into careers, but it was assumed that most of these women would eventually marry and become housewives and mothers. Though it was increasingly common for women at some point in their lives to hold jobs ‘appropriate’ to their sex, such as office work, teaching and domestic service, professions like the law were still for the most part closed to them until the passing of the Sex Disqualification Removal Act in 1919. This Act opened up such professions to women with provisions against discrimination on the basis of sex, although Albie Sachs and Joan Hoff Wilson argue that the masculine connotations that accompanied the idea of professionalism itself made change difficult to implement:

The exclusion of females [from traditionally male professions such as the law] was justified on the basis of maintaining professional standards. Maleness was converted into one of the attributes of professionalism ... [The professions’] maleness became part of their character, so that the admission of women was seen as not merely adding to their number or introducing some novelty, but as threatening the very identity of the institutions themselves.²⁹

In addition to facing deeply ingrained institutionalised discrimination, women would have to obtain a high level of education to become employed in professions like the law, which limited participation to the upper-middle- and upper-class women who could afford it and were determined enough to break into male-dominated fields. Nevertheless, the Sex Disqualification Removal Act represented a step forward for equality in the public sphere.

Finding satisfying work that would allow economic independence was even more difficult for working-class women. A shortage of domestic servants for middle-to upper-class households meant that unemployed working-class women were strongly urged to go into service, a job that required excruciatingly long hours for low pay. Domestic service, unlike the higher-paying factory jobs that many working-class women had taken during the war, was one of the more ‘gender-appropriate’ occupations that unemployed women were pushed towards when they lost their war-time jobs.³⁰ Braybon names a number of government training schemes

aimed at working-class women that were put in place in the 1920s in order to encourage women workers to pursue domestic service jobs:

the Scholarship Scheme, which gave grants for training in non-industrial occupations like teaching, midwifery, nursery nursing and cookery; the Home Crafts Scheme, which organised training for women to go into domestic service; the Home Makers Scheme, which gave women general domestic training; grants were also given to help buy uniforms for domestic service.³¹

Domestic servants did compose a significant part of the female workforce; ‘in 1921 service still accounted for 33 per cent of all working women and by 1931 that figure had risen to 35 per cent’, but in spite of the large proportion of the female work force engaged in service roles, the demand for servants still exceeded the supply.³² Such an imbalance can be seen in Agatha Christie’s *Murder is Easy* (1939), where Miss Waynflete complains about the difficulty of hiring domestic servants who will conform to traditional expectations: ‘But nowadays, really, one is thankful to get *anybody*. She was very slipshod in her work and always wanting to go out—well, of course she was young and girls *are* like that nowadays. They don’t seem to realize that their time is their employer’s.’³³ This account of an errant employee reflects not only the frustrations of the middle- to upper-class employers who could not find enough ‘suitable’ servants, but also the ways in which young, working women’s expectations of the workplace experience were changing. It was no longer absolutely necessary for a working-class woman to become a domestic servant; once women realised there were jobs available with higher pay, better hours and the possibility of advancement, they were not necessarily eager to enter into domestic service. This was acknowledged even at the time; in *The English Middle Classes*, first published in 1949, Roy Lewis and Angus Maude view the National Institute of Houseworkers, a training programme for domestic servants, with some scepticism:

The setting up of the Institute *may* do something to raise the status of domestic service in the eyes of working-class girls ... But it cannot be expected that the Institute will have any perceptible direct effect on the main problem. Not many girls who are prepared to undertake six months’ training for a skilled craft will consider domestic service as an occupation.³⁴

The economic gap between the working and middle classes was narrowing, creating tension in middle-class households that could only afford

one or two servants but still insisted on operating by the same strict rules and low wages that had been customary in larger households in the nineteenth century. This illustrates an issue of both class and gender anxiety: the fact that many women were looking for alternatives to domestic service suggested a larger social change from the old order of larger households with lifelong servants, but it also meant women felt that if they entered the workforce, they were no longer restricted to performing domestic tasks that supposedly came ‘naturally’ to them like cleaning, cooking and childcare.

Though it was accepted that many women had (and wanted) to work for economic reasons, there still existed a high level of disquiet in society about women who chose to work outside the home, and particularly when it came to working mothers.³⁵ In *Women Workers in the First World War*, Gail Braybon refers to a 1916 entrant in the magazine *Labour Woman*’s essay competition who expressed a negative view on working mothers: ‘No crèches etc. can ever make up to children for the mother’s love. Whatever a childless woman may do for the community is nothing to the service rendered by her who gives it healthy and good children.’³⁶ Many professions, including teaching and the Civil Service, adopted marriage bar policies that required women to resign if they married. In spite of the progress that had been made towards the acceptance of women in the workplace, the success of these marriage bars made it more challenging for professional married women to hold jobs and enforced the gendered boundaries between the domestic and public spheres. In 1931, another legislative blow was struck against married working women when the Anomalies Act was passed, which excluded married women from receiving unemployment benefits and, in effect, made it extremely difficult for a married woman to prove that she was genuinely looking for work, even if she had previously been employed.³⁷ Such restrictions obviously made it much more difficult for a woman to obtain a job after her marriage, and if she had to give up a job for a reason such as pregnancy, she would be hard-pressed to find another one. Marriage was still held to be a woman’s ‘true purpose’, and measures such as marriage bars and the Anomalies Act illustrate that the patriarchal ideology of separate, gendered spheres still held sway. Such limitations kept power firmly within the realm of men; young, unmarried women were tolerated in the workplace but the assumption was that they would eventually marry. When women did marry, their job prospects became more precarious, and this injustice was rationalised by the assumption that married women would not need to work since their

husbands would provide for them and, in any case, their primary focus would shift to motherhood and housekeeping.

Surprisingly, the issue of the marriage bar was a divisive one within the feminist movement. Jane Lewis argues that: 'Feminists campaigned against the marriage bar on the grounds that marriage *per se* was not incompatible with work ... However, mainstream feminists continued to believe that paid employment *was* incompatible with motherhood.'³⁸ The stance Lewis describes reflects the wider cultural view of women and motherhood that had emerged after the First World War in reaction to the more visible public role women had assumed during the war. As Harold L. Smith explains, the First World War

unleashed a powerful current of cultural conservatism which helped shape the direction of postwar feminism ... The increased preoccupation with marriage and motherhood helped ensure that those who wished to make this central to feminism would find a receptive audience, while increasing the resistance to feminists wishing to improve women's employment opportunities.³⁹

This division within the feminist movement marked a change from a focus on campaigning for the collective rights of women within the public sphere to an interest in the rights of women based on sexual difference between the needs of women and men. Since women bear children and are traditionally the primary caregivers in the family, the feminist movement was concerned with making mothers as valued and as comfortable as possible—which, to most people, meant staying at home to raise their children.

The growing cultural conservatism after the First World War through the 1930s stressed the 'need' for women to remain in the home, but the coming of the Second World War once again emphasised the reality that women were desirable—and competent—contributors to the workplace. In 1941, labour shortages forced the government to implement 'measures under which all women aged 16–49, with the exception of women with children under 14 and those already doing essential war work, were compelled to register'.⁴⁰ Cate Haste points out that 'By 1943 women made up 57 per-cent of the total workforce. Nine single women out of 10, and 80 per-cent of married women aged 18–40 were in the Services, or working in industry or civil defence.'⁴¹ As in the First World War, many women were occupying jobs in areas that were traditionally dominated by men. In fact, women 'eventually replaced men in all essential industries—engineering, vehicle building, shipbuilding and

aircraft production, in chemicals and explosives, on the railways, buses and in the civil service'.⁴² In the late 1930s, Amanda Fitton, the character who marries Margery Allingham's series detective, Albert Campion, represents an example of a woman who succeeds in a male-dominated profession—aircraft engineering—before she becomes a mother and leaves her career to become the primary caregiver for her son. Even as the Second World War ended and cultural pressure was once again exerted on women to give up their jobs and be housewives, the demands of war had again made clear that women were in the workplace to stay.⁴³

MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

Despite the increasing number of women pursuing careers, marriage continued to be (and was indeed assumed to be) the ultimate goal and principal occupation of most women throughout the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁴ Deborah Thom observes of the gendered division of labour that remained the norm in most households that 'the assumption that girls were primarily future mothers and home-makers and its corollary, that boys were breadwinners and secondarily fathers, continued to dominate discussion until the 1960s'.⁴⁵ Though the division of sex roles between the 'masculine' public sphere and the 'feminine' domestic sphere had not altered a great deal since before the First World War, ideas of what constituted an ideal marriage began to shift. The 'companionate' marriage, a venture based on affection, sexual compatibility and partnership, was the new model to which couples aspired. Gladys M. Cox's 1935 health manual *Youth, Sex, and Life* stresses an ideal still based on separate spheres but also on mutual respect and shared interests:

As far as possible, both should arrange the work so that they have leisure and energy for companionship and for mutual enjoyment of the pleasures of the home and for interests outside the home. In so far as they can share interests and hobbies, their married life will be the richer.⁴⁶

This model suggests that an active partnership, both within the home and outside it, was now considered essential to the happiness of a marriage. However, as Shani D'Cruze observes, this increased emphasis on shared interests 'did not mean any blurring of differential sex roles, nor of the sexual division of household labour—rather a complementarity between husband and wife that could provide the basis for companionship and

affection'.⁴⁷ The tension between the public gains made in the fight for gender equality and the more slowly evolving gender roles within marriage relationships was recognised at the time; in Havelock Ellis' *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students*, first published in 1933, such conflict is acknowledged as potentially problematic:

But the discontent with marriage which we so often find among wives, even though more or less below the surface, has a real foundation. It is associated with the new and larger claims on life which the women of recent generations have more and more taken, not content like their mothers to accept as natural and inevitable the predominance of men and their own place of subjection. The religious and social aspects of the world have changed for women without in any corresponding degree changing for men ... So that when a woman enters marriage she is apt to become aware of a discrepancy which tends to become a mental conflict within herself.⁴⁸

Ellis' observation suggests that inequality inherent in the gender roles assigned to wives and husbands caused tension in the modern marriage relationship, even in those marriages based on ideals of sexual and intellectual compatibility. Women who were used to the idea of having economic independence and a role in the workplace were obviously not necessarily resigned to taking a submissive role in marriage.

Though traditional gender roles remained intact within ideas about the typical marriage, at least some measure of equality was being fought for through legislation; in 1925 the Matrimonial Causes Act passed, which 'enabled wives to sue for divorce on the same basis that husbands could: adultery'.⁴⁹ This Act signified a general recognition of the importance of sexual compatibility in marriage; a husband's fidelity was now as significant to the success of a marriage as a wife's. The rising number of divorces after the First World War attested to increasing social acceptance of the legal dissolution of an unhappy relationship; divorces increased 'from 3,280...between 1911–1915 to 20,100 between 1931–1935'.⁵⁰ The idea of a companionate marriage gave women at least some control over their destinies; being able to choose an emotionally and sexually well-suited partner was an improvement upon marrying solely for economic reasons (this does not mean that economic security was no longer a pressing concern for many women considering marriage, only that general expectations of the marriage experience had changed). The acknowledgement that women could and should feel sexual desire is extremely significant; Marie Stopes, author of the bestselling 1918 sex manual, *Married Love*,

writes of marriages in which the woman's sexual needs have not been accounted for:

One result, apparently little suspected, of using the woman as a passive instrument for man's need has been, in effect, to make her that and nothing more. Those men ... who complain of the lack of ardour in good wives, are often themselves entirely the cause of it. When a woman is claimed at times when she takes no *natural* pleasure in union, it reduces her vitality, and tends to kill her power of enjoying it when the love season returns.⁵¹

In *Married Love*, Stopes strongly voices her support for the model of companionate marriage, arguing that both partners must be sexually and emotionally fulfilled in order to live happy lives. The manual is noteworthy because it discusses sex from a woman's perspective, describing how a woman can be sexually satisfied and how a woman's typical monthly cycle relates to her libido. In Stopes' view, a woman is not a 'passive instrument', obliged to be obedient to the man's desires, but a partner whose sexual needs are also worthy of consideration. Stopes also advocates the cultivation of interests outside marriage for both partners, pointing out that women in particular, as housewives, suffer from a lack of intellectual stimulation: 'Marriage can never reach its full stature until women possess as much intellectual freedom and freedom of opportunity within it as do their partners.'⁵² *Married Love* does, however, indicate that the object of a healthy sex life is not only the satisfaction of the couple, but also procreation, 'the supreme purpose of nature in all her enticing weft of complex factors luring the two lovers into each other's arms'.⁵³ This view is consistent with the idealised notion of motherhood that was being promoted at the time: sex was to be enjoyed not only for its own sake, but also for the possibility of the children that might result from the union.

Birth Control

Although a romanticised vision of motherhood prevailed during the inter-war period, women were in fact having fewer children. Lewis points to a

steady decline in the fertility rate until after World War II ... while in the 1870s there were over 295 legitimate live births per 1000 married women aged 15–44, this figure had dropped to 222 by the first decade of the twentieth century and to only 111 by the 1930s.⁵⁴

In terms of individual families, ‘only 20 per cent of marriages made around 1860 resulted in fewer than three children, but this was the case for 67 per cent of marriages in 1925’.⁵⁵ These statistics certainly indicate a significant change in sexual practices—the rising use of birth control.⁵⁶ Deirdre Beddoe notes a considerable expansion in birth control use among the middle and working classes over a 20-year period: ‘The increase of middle-class people using birth control rose from 9 to 40 per cent between 1910 and 1930, whilst figures for the working-class are from 1 to 28 per cent.’⁵⁷ Such high numbers were part of the reason for the government’s agenda to encourage women to marry and boost the birth rate. Nevertheless, the possibility of being able to control their reproductive lives held undeniable appeal for modern couples. The prospect of having a baby a year was unattractive to most women, not only for the financial burden but also for the physical toll that giving birth many times in succession could take. Even Marie Stopes, who writes of having children as ‘hand[ing] on the torch which lights our consciousness in the sphere of matter’, advocates ‘allow[ing] at least six months or a year to elapse before beginning the supreme task of [the couple’s] lives, the burden of which falls mainly upon the woman’.⁵⁸ Stopes also recommends couples wait ‘*at least a year*’ after the birth of the first child before trying to conceive again.⁵⁹ Such regulation of reproduction cannot be achieved without some form of birth control, which Stopes supports in both *Married Love* and the 1918 birth control manual *Wise Parenthood*, as well as through the co-founding of the Holloway Clinic in 1921, the first birth control clinic in Britain.

A more disturbing side of the birth control debate is evident in the rising interest in eugenics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the fertility rate was dropping more quickly for the upper and middle classes than for the working class, those who were concerned about the repopulation of Britain after the First World War were dismayed at the perceived consequences if the working class was allowed to populate the nation. Even before the war there had been concern about the lowering birth rate and the role of the working class; Jane Humphries writes that the activities and publications of the Eugenics Education Society, founded in 1907, ‘reflected the general unease over the international decline of Britain, the causes of which were believed to be domestic; hence the stress on teaching working-class women household management and infant care: to enhance national efficiency’.⁶⁰ After the enormous loss of life during the war, eugenicists were even more anxious about the prospects of the nation’s future population, fearing that Britain would lose power as

a nation through a depleted and genetically weak population. The emergence of the ‘cult of domesticity’ was a way to address this anxiety through encouraging women to have children.

The Cult of Domesticity

The years following the First World War brought an intensified focus onto marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals for women.⁶¹ This cult of domesticity stemmed from an agenda adopted by the government and the media to force women who were occupying ‘men’s jobs’ in wartime out of the workplace and, theoretically, to repopulate the nation after the loss of life in the war and in the face of lowering birth rates. Beddoe argues that ‘In the inter-war years only one desirable image was held up to women by all the mainstream media—that of the housewife and mother ... Realising this central fact is the key to understanding every other aspect of women’s lives in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s.’⁶² For politically active feminists, the prevalence of an idealised image of domesticity made it difficult to make progress unless it was by means of advocating measures that would help mothers. The influence of society’s preoccupation with marriage and motherhood for women is undeniable, and Martin Pugh suggests that it even helped women gain the right to vote:

The steady advance of women into politics under cover of motherhood and domesticity culminated in the politicians’ willingness in 1918 to confer the vote, not upon the young war workers, but upon the women over thirty years of age—who were presumed to be largely wives and mothers.⁶³

He goes on to say, though, that ‘it was not easy, or even natural, to escape from domestic ideology subsequently, even when women had the electoral power to do so’.⁶⁴ Many of the issues feminists focused on during the interwar years involved mothers and children, as this was one arena where feminists were able to exert influence due to the high profile of such concerns in the public eye.

For many women, this idealisation of domesticity brought added pressures. In middle-class households, women were increasingly expected to be directly involved in housekeeping and childrearing. The advent of devices such as the vacuum cleaner made it easier for women to do housework quickly and made it less likely that additional labour from servants would be needed, but this also meant that housewives became

more socially isolated. In Agatha Christie's *Partners in Crime* (1929), Tuppence Beresford refers to her boredom with being restricted to the 'women's sphere' of domesticity and the ease with which she accomplishes her household tasks: 'Twenty minutes' work after breakfast every morning keeps the flag going to perfection.'⁶⁵ The growingly popular discipline of psychology also encouraged women to take a direct role in the raising of their children to ensure that when the children reached adulthood they would be less likely to have mental health difficulties stemming from mistakes or neglect on the caretaker's part.⁶⁶ Psychologist John B. Watson's influential childcare manual *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928) warns mothers that 'psychological care [is] just as necessary as physiological care'.⁶⁷ The manual also refers to 'child-rearing' as 'the most important of all social obligations', criticising mothers who believe 'that all that children need is food as often as they call for it, warm clothes and a roof over their heads' and praising 'the modern mother who is beginning to find that the rearing of children is the most difficult of all professions, more difficult than engineering, than law, or even than medicine itself'.⁶⁸ Watson's advice draws the distinction between a 'modern', knowledgeable mother who understands the importance of her role in raising an emotionally healthy child and the old-fashioned sort of mother who only attends to her child's physical needs. This new ideal of motherhood stressed the importance of the mother's constant presence during the child's first few years as absolutely vital; when Watson refers to motherhood as a profession, he means that the woman who decides to be a mother should abandon all thought of a job outside the home—those who do not will inevitably imperil their children's mental well-being.

An interest in child development and the insistence on more regimented childcare were not the only influences that psychological theories had upon marriage. Sexology, an offshoot of psychology first introduced in the late nineteenth century, also shaped the new ideal of sexual compatibility within marriage. Sexology introduced the concept of 'frigidity', which pathologised women who had difficulty or could not become aroused during 'normal' heterosexual sex. In *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life* (1926), psychologist Wilhelm Stekel estimates that 50 per cent of his women patients are frigid.⁶⁹ In another treatise on frigidity in women first published in 1936, Edward Hirschmann and Edmund Bergler posit that frigidity is connected to the development of mental illness in women: 'The frigid woman only too easily becomes lonely, neglected, betrayed, neurotic, dejected—and ill.'⁷⁰ The association of frigidity with

mental illness further stigmatised nonconforming sexuality, marginalising sexually ‘deviant’ women who did not fit the heteronormative ideal. Progressive as the notion that both partners should be sexually satisfied in a relationship may be, in its idealisation of heterosexual, married sex, early sexology presented a very narrow definition of ‘normality’ and a limited set of options for women’s construction of their own sexual identities.

Spinsters

Considering the influence of the cult of domesticity on popular expectations of a woman’s role, the increasing numbers of single women, or so-called ‘spinsters’, caused significant cultural anxiety both before and particularly after the First World War. Single women had been especially visible in the earlier, more active feminist campaigns focused on political issues including suffrage; in *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930*, Sheila Jeffreys argues that ‘much of the impetus of the early women’s movement had come from or been directed towards helping spinsters’.⁷¹ Even before the massive loss of young men in the First World War, there was a discrepancy in the proportion of women to men in the population; D’Cruze points out that ‘after 1871, the census showed that there were slightly more women than men in the population. This imbalance increased between 1871 and 1911 and was made still larger by the loss of male lives in the First World War.’⁷² By 1939, Jane Lewis notes that ‘one woman in six died unmarried, compared with one man in ten’.⁷³ One result of this demographic change was an increase of women in the workplace; in many cases, it was not financially feasible for a woman to depend on male relatives for her entire life, so it was up to her to earn a living on her own. For those women who did not marry, a career was a newly viable—and often attractive—option, but the reality of being a working single woman was often challenging. Such women did not conform to the popular, heteronormative, domestic ideal of femininity, and consequently they were often viewed with suspicion and derision. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the National Association of Schoolmasters, an all-male organisation of teachers, ‘attacked women teachers specifically as spinsters, revealing their fear that women who were outside marriage were particularly dangerous, undermining men’s traditional superiority in the family as well as in employment’.⁷⁴ Sexology also portrayed spinsters as a serious problem; unmarried women ‘were viewed in much popular sexological literature as being destructive, warped, and damaging to the

social fabric'.⁷⁵ Because they could not be confined to the 'feminine' domestic sphere by means of marriage and motherhood, single women who had careers and/or were overt feminists were often seen as 'unnatural' and dangerous.⁷⁶

HOMOSEXUALITY

As the number of single women grew, homosexuality became a major focus for paranoia. Homophobia was pervasive during the first half of the twentieth century, and close friendships between women that had been easily accepted in the nineteenth century were no longer considered appropriate. For example, intense friendships formed between young people of the same sex began to be viewed as something less than harmless and natural; Gladys Cox warns in the 1935 health manual *Youth, Sex, and Life* that 'both sexes need to be on their guard against allowing friendships with members of their own sex to become too intense, or too passionate'.⁷⁷ Changing attitudes towards relationships between women can at least partly be attributed to the discipline of sexology; according to the views of some sexologists, even physical interaction such as hugs, kisses and caresses, which were more commonly expressed between female than male friends, was identified as 'risky' behaviour that could lead to lesbian activity. In *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, psychologist John B. Watson sternly cautions that:

The majority of parents somehow feel safe if their boys run with boys and their girls run with girls. Nothing is further from the truth ... Our whole social fabric is woven so as to make all women slightly homosexual. Girls hold hands, kiss, embrace, sleep together, etc.⁷⁸

Watson and other psychologists viewed sexuality as being formed by a person's contact and relationships with others rather than being innate, and thus they understood homosexuality as being preventable and curable. In 1921, an effort by the government to regulate women's sexuality was made when the criminalisation of lesbianism was debated in Parliament.⁷⁹ The legislation was ultimately dismissed in an attempt to keep such shocking subject matter out of the public eye. Another high-profile condemnation of lesbianism came when Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), which sympathetically depicts a lesbian protagonist, was judged in court to be obscene in the year of its publication. All these reactions

are attempts to censure, dismiss and hide the open expression of lesbian sexuality in the public sphere in order to prevent 'innocent' women from being exposed to the possibility of lesbianism.

Behind the homophobia that became ingrained in British culture in the first half of the twentieth century was the anxiety that women would reject marriage, motherhood and domesticity as desirable modes of femininity. The cultural upheaval that accompanied the First World War led to the unsettling realisation that women were capable of performing work traditionally done by men and that society could indeed function with women occupying prominent public roles. This independence, and the freedoms that came with the vote and increased opportunities in the workplace, proved that women could thrive in the 'masculine' public sphere, threatening the stability of traditional gender roles in a heteronormative social model. Reaction to this threat, combined with the pressure created by the ideology of the 'cult of domesticity', meant that women who resisted traditional femininity were resented, dismissed and/or suppressed. Yet women who function outside the heteronormative model can be in a unique position to expose the model's problematic nature, a subject to which I turn next.

NOTES

1. Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 157.
2. Jane Hannan, 'Women and Politics', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850–1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 234.
3. Hannan, 'Women and Politics', p. 234.
4. These pieces of legislation were, respectively, the Sex Disqualification Removal Act of 1919, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 and the Representation of the People Act of 1928.
5. Jane Lewis notes that the number of women married under the age of 45 who had between zero and two children increased from 44.8 per cent in 1901 to 69.8 per cent in 1941, and that the number of families with five or more children decreased from 27.5 per cent in 1901 to 9.2 per cent in 1941. Jane Lewis, *Women in England, 1870–1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984), p. 5.
6. Hannan, 'Women and Politics', p. 234.
7. Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 128.
8. Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 50.

9. Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 93.
10. Stephen Knight, 'The Golden Age', in Martin Priestman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 81.
11. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 65.
12. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?: Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 21.
13. Michael Hayes, 'Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste', in Clive Bloom (ed.), *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 77.
14. Felicity Hunt, 'Introduction', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850–1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), pp. xvii, xix.
15. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 46.
16. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 46.
17. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 34.
18. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 40.
19. Susan J. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 28.
20. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees*, p. 23.
21. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 86.
22. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees*, p. 25.
23. Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, p. 189.
24. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 3.
25. Cate Haste, *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain, World War I to the Present* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 42.
26. Felicity Hunt, 'Divided Aims: The Educational Implications of Opposing Ideologies in Girls' Secondary Schooling, 1850–1940', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850–1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), p. 18.
27. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 48.
28. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 16.
29. Albie Sachs and Joan Hoff Wilson, *Sexism and the Law: A Study of Male Beliefs and Legal Bias in Britain and the United States* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1978), p. 170.
30. As Frank Gloversmith remarks, 'Domestic service was believed to be the most suitable employment for working-class women. It was the most "nat-

- ural” kind of work and it was claimed that the happiest, best-kept working-class homes were ones in which the wife had at one time been a servant.’ Frank Gloversmith, *Class, Culture, and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 213.
31. Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, pp. 221–2.
 32. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 61.
 33. Agatha Christie, *Murder is Easy* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 53.
 34. Roy Lewis and Angus Maude, *The English Middle Classes* (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 312.
 35. Beddoe states that ‘The single most arresting feature of the inter-war years was the strength of the notion that women’s place is in the home.’ *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 3.
 36. Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, p. 124.
 37. Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 190.
 38. Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 103.
 39. Harold L. Smith, ‘British Feminism in the 1920s’, in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990), p. 47.
 40. Haste, *Rules of Desire*, p. 100.
 41. Haste, *Rules of Desire*, pp. 100–1.
 42. Haste, *Rules of Desire*, p. 101.
 43. Gillian Avery observes that ‘the war forced all school-leavers, however privileged, into jobs; after it was over even those who up till 1939 would have stayed at home until they were married thought if not of a career then of a job, and the qualifications needed before one could begin on a professional training, minimal in the 1930s, were to become more and more exacting’. Gillian Avery, *The Best Type of Girl: A History of Girls’ Independent Schools* (London: Deutsch, 1991), pp. 228–9.
 44. Lewis notes that ‘Marriage ... was part of the typical experience of women throughout the period. Between 1871 and 1951 the proportion of adult females who were (or had been) married never fell below 60 per cent.’ Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 3–4.
 45. Deborah Thom, ‘Better a Teacher Than a Hairdresser?: A Mad Passion for Equality or, Keeping Molly and Betty Down’, in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850–1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), p. 130.
 46. Gladys M. Cox, *Youth, Sex, and Life* (London: Pearson, 1935), p. 207.
 47. Shani D’Cruze, ‘Women and the Family’, in June Purvis (ed.), *Women’s History: Britain, 1850–1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 75.
 48. Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students* (New York: Emerson Books, 1954), p. 277.
 49. Smith, ‘British Feminism in the 1920s’, p. 54.
 50. Haste, *Rules of Desire*, p. 95.

51. Marie Stopes, *Married Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 38.
52. Stopes, *Married Love*, p. 96.
53. Stopes, *Married Love*, p. 78.
54. Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 5.
55. D'Cruze, 'Women and the Family', p. 55.
56. Kate Fisher notes that: 'The early twentieth century saw considerable developments in reproductive technology: the invention of caps and diaphragms and their dispersal in a growing number of birth control clinics from the 1920s; the manufacture of spermicidal pessaries; the commercialization of sheaths; and, in the early 1930s, the production of the latex condom. Despite this, the use of non-technological methods [such as withdrawal, abstinence and abortion] persisted.' Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 137.
57. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 106.
58. Stopes, *Married Love*, pp. 79–80.
59. Stopes, *Married Love*, p. 83.
60. Jane Humphries, 'Women and Paid Work', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Women's History: Britain 1850–1930* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 123.
61. Gladys M. Cox writes in the 1935 health manual *Youth, Sex, and Life* of the importance of choosing a suitable marriage partner: 'If you secure the right mate for you, marriage and parenthood are the supreme achievements of life and lead to an exquisite and satisfying happiness ... for normal people a happy marriage, with children growing up, offers the best that life can give.' *Youth, Sex, and Life*, p. 197.
62. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 8.
63. Martin Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930–1950', in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990), p. 155.
64. Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism', p. 155.
65. Agatha Christie, *Partners in Crime* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1989), p. 8.
66. Lewis observes that: 'The encouragement given to middle-class wives during the inter-war years to devote more time to both housewifery and child care marked a departure from the ambivalent nineteenth-century attitudes regarding the degree of personal involvement in domestic tasks compatible with cultured, ladylike behaviour. The changes brought new stresses, however, particularly in respect to the higher standard of child care that was demanded. Child psychologists, active in the new child study movement, and infant feeding experts both emphasised the importance of elaborate routines and schedules to build the child's character.' *Women in England*, p. 116.

67. John B. Watson and Rosalie A.R. Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1928), p. 3.
68. Watson and Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, pp. 7, 11–12.
69. Wilhelm Stekel, *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life*, trans. James S. Van Teslaar (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 97.
70. Edward Hitschmann and Edmund Bergler, *Frigidity in Women: Its Characteristics and Treatment*, trans. Polly L. Weil (Washington; New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1948), p. 3.
71. Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (London: Pandora, 1985), p. 89.
72. D’Cruze, ‘Women and the Family’, p. 56.
73. Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 154.
74. Alison Oram, ‘Inequalities in the Teaching Profession: The Effect on Teachers and Pupils, 1910–39’, in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850–1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), pp. 117–18.
75. Sheila Jeffreys, ‘Women and Sexuality’, in June Purvis (ed.), *Women’s History: Britain, 1850–1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 205.
76. Jeffreys, ‘Women and Sexuality’, p. 204.
77. Cox, *Youth, Sex, and Life*, p. 212.
78. Watson and Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, pp. 178–9.
79. Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 128.

‘Everybody Needs an Outlet’: Nonconforming Women

A figure of particular interest in the works of women writers of golden age crime fiction is that of the sexually ‘nonconforming’ woman—the spinster, the lesbian, the ‘fallen’ woman. Of course, there are significant differences between these characters that prevent them from being conflated, but the connection between them lies in the fact that they function outside the accepted paradigm of marriage, and so present an alternative to that paradigm. All these types are women who do not fit into the ‘cult of domesticity’ and so represent a threat to the cultural ideal of marriage and motherhood as primary life goals for women. As Susan Rowland argues, ‘Women alone—as marriageable ingénues, the confirmed single and the elderly—have frequently engendered fear in conventional societies concerned to keep female “otherness” bound up in patriarchal structures.’¹ Certainly, the portrayals in the novels examined in this chapter are influenced by anxieties about single women in British society. Though often ultimately contained, typically by means of marriage or death, these characters’ presence serves to threaten the notion of a heteronormative ideal, and their actions and fates can be read as attempts to negotiate the implications of non-compliance to a socially sanctioned model of femininity.

Women who exhibit excessive or deviant sexuality are often portrayed as victims and villains in golden age crime fiction, and looking closely at these depictions offers a means of examining attitudes towards nonconforming women in the first half of the twentieth century. The ‘repressed’ spinster, whether lesbian or heterosexual, is a common perpetrator, as her frustrated

desires manifest in violence. As I have discussed, the imbalance of women and men following the First World War meant that many women simply did not have the option of marriage, despite the overwhelming pressure to conform to a feminine ideal of wife and motherhood. Though many young single women are introduced as characters in golden age crime fiction, their primary function is frequently to play the female lead in a romantic subplot or the love interest for a male detective figure; consequently, the resolutions in which these young women take part seemingly contribute to the affirmation of heteronormative order. A young couple's marriage at the conclusion of a crime narrative is common enough to have become a convention of the genre, contributing to a 'safe' resolution and symbolising the healing of the community that has been disrupted by crime. When the young women in question engage in sexual activity outside marriage, they are either punished or, if they have sufficient potential for eventual marriage, are rehabilitated. In the case of Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1929), Harriet Vane is almost executed for the murder of her lover, but is rescued by becoming the love interest and future wife of detective figure Lord Peter Wimsey. Harriet is portrayed sympathetically and the public condemnation of her character is depicted as outdated and unfair, but Harriet's ultimate fate as Peter's wife upholds a rigid standard of socially approved femininity.

When the single women depicted are middle-aged or older, their options become narrowed even further—either they are desexualised completely or any sexual desire is pathologised as mental illness. The sexual potential of such women is viewed with suspicion and disgust; the extremely negative depiction of villains and victims such as Eleanor Prentice and Idris Campanula in Ngaio Marsh's *Overture to Death* (1939) reflects the prejudice shown towards single women when they exhibit sexual desire. Even when single female killers are not directly sexually motivated, the inspiration for their crimes often stems from some form of frustrated desire for revenge against the model of patriarchal family from which they are excluded. Though such women are inevitably punished and silenced, their existence points to significant unease about the potential threat to prevalent ideals of femininity. The significance of nonconforming female characters does not lie in their inevitable containment at the narratives' conclusions, but in their disturbing potential for agency and the accompanying questions raised about the transgressive and the normal.

The social concern of the 'superfluous' woman is also overtly addressed in golden age crime fiction through the figure of the spinster detective.

Many critics have discussed the implications of elderly single women as detectives; Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker point out that "The abilities old ladies possess ... amount to the essential qualities of the detective: a strong moral sense, a knowledge of human nature, and a capacity for deduction based on carefully observed evidence."² The elderly spinster detective, with her affinity for gossip and sharp observational skills, as well as her unthreatening persona, is perfectly suited to work 'undercover' in the enclosed, and often domestic, settings of golden age crime novels.³ In addition, the single woman's liminality—as aunt, governess, friend of the family—allows her to function both inside and outside the suddenly threatening domestic circle, near enough to detect effectively and detached enough to extract the corruption within.⁴ However, the spinster detective is also a character who often serves ambivalent purposes. On the one hand, she destabilises the paradigm of masculine rationality represented by the conventional male detective figure by solving crimes using 'feminine' skills. In the spinster detective, characteristics that are traditionally derided in older single women of limited worldly experience give her access to superior knowledge and thus power in the domain of patriarchal law. On the other hand, these skills also serve the purpose of social regulation—the spinster detective is unable to escape the role of the enforcer of a conservative (and heteronormative) model of order. Nevertheless, these conclusions can still often be seen to destabilise existing paradigms by contributing to the re-formation of the modern family in a way that offers agency for women through choice.

NONCONFORMING WOMEN AS DETECTIVES: MISS CLIMPSON

When Dorothy L. Sayers' Miss Climpson first appeared in the novel *Unnatural Death* in 1927, the single female detective was already a recognisable figure in the genre. W.S. Hayward's widow detective Mrs Paschal in *The Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1861) and Anna Katherine Green's spinster Miss Amelia Butterworth in *That Affair Next Door* (1897) are just two early examples of single female characters who solve crimes. Miss Climpson, however, is the first of several recurring single female detective figures to appear in the work of women writers of golden age crime fiction. Though she does not get top billing in Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey novels, Miss Climpson nevertheless does a good deal of the active detecting when she is called in to assist Wimsey's investigations. Miss Climpson's

first appearance in *Unnatural Death* is preceded by an ironic misunderstanding between Wimsey and his ally from Scotland Yard, Detective Inspector Parker; Wimsey takes Parker to meet Miss Climpson, ‘a friend’ who is ‘quite comfortably fixed in a little flat in Pimlico’.⁵ Parker listens sympathetically and unwittingly as Wimsey explains:

‘Outlet—everybody needs an outlet ... and, after all, one can’t really blame people if it’s just that they need an outlet. I mean, why be bitter? They can’t help it. I think it’s much kinder to give them an outlet than to make fun of them in books.’⁶

Parker assumes that this ‘friend’ is Wimsey’s mistress and that Wimsey is speaking of unsympathetic attitudes towards ‘fallen’ women. When Wimsey realises Parker’s mistake, he chastises him, ‘It is not what you think ... There, I knew you had a nasty mind.’⁷ This misunderstanding is a reversal of the stereotypical assumption that spinsters ‘police’ others’ sexual behaviour through their prudishness because they themselves are repressed and secretly obsessed with sex.⁸ It also destabilises assumptions about the sexual activities of single women living alone and supporting themselves—Parker assumes that Miss Climpson must be being ‘kept’ by Wimsey rather than earning her own money through a career. For these women, the boundary between ‘career’ woman and ‘fallen’ woman is potentially very thin in the eyes of many.

The ‘outlet’ Wimsey provides for Miss Climpson and the other single women working for him is the business he refers to by the unflattering name ‘The Cattery’—a private inquiry agency disguised as a typing pool. In this establishment,

All the employees were women—mostly elderly, but a few still young and attractive—and ... all these women were of the class unkindly known as ‘superfluous’. There were spinsters with small fixed incomes, or no incomes at all; widows without family; women deserted by peripatetic husbands and living on a restricted alimony, who, previous to their engagement with Miss Climpson, had had no resources but bridge and boarding-house gossip. There were retired and disappointed school-teachers; out-of-work actresses; courageous people who had failed with hat shops and tea parlours; and even a few Bright Young Things, for whom the cocktail party and the nightclub had grown boring.⁹

It is worthwhile to note that this definition of ‘superfluous’ women includes single women of all ages and of varied experiences, not just spinsters of

middle age or older who had failed to find a husband. 'Superfluous' here denotes women who are not defined in relation to the traditional family, as wives and mothers, and so are marginalised. The variety of women employed by the Cattery, whether working out of financial necessity or boredom, reveals the need for a widened definition of acceptable roles for women outside the domestic sphere.

Instead of tedious typing work, the women of the Cattery engage in serious private investigation roles that often involve seeking out justice for other women:

These women seemed to spend most of their time answering advertisements. Unmarried gentlemen who desired to meet ladies possessed of competences with a view to matrimony; sprightly sexagenarians, who wanted housekeepers for remote country districts; ingenious gentlemen with financial schemes, on the look-out for capital ... gentlemen such as these were very liable to receive applications from members of Miss Climpson's staff. It may have been coincidence that these gentlemen very often had the misfortune to appear shortly afterwards before the magistrate on charges of fraud, blackmail, or attempted procuration, but it is a fact that Miss Climpson's office boasted a private telephone line to Scotland Yard, and that few of her ladies were quite so unprotected as they appeared.¹⁰

Far from being dangerous in their 'superfluity', the women of Miss Climpson's agency work to protect society from the threat of unscrupulous men who would prey on those who are desperate—in particular, on single women eager for employment, as they once were. For Miss Climpson and her fellow employees, suspicious sexual morality is characteristic of the men who target vulnerable women, not the women themselves.

Since they are in Wimsey's employ, it is through him and his connections in Scotland Yard that the women of the Cattery derive their authority as detectives. However, in their role as detectives, these women go where the primary detective, Wimsey, cannot. They are able to use the skills and resources available to them as single women—'bridge and boarding-house gossip', for example—to gather the evidence that is vital to Wimsey's cases.¹¹ Though Wimsey is essential to the Cattery's success as a business because of his financial assets and social clout, he recognises that his own investigations would often not be successful without the women he employs:

'People want questions asked. Whom do they send? A man with large flat feet and a notebook ... I send a lady with a long, woolly jumper on knitting-needles

and jingly things round her neck. Of course she asks questions—everyone expects it. Nobody is surprised. Nobody is alarmed. And so-called superfluity is agreeably and usefully disposed of.¹²

Wimsey's argument underlines the unique power his employees can gain by manipulating expectations of their behaviour. Where a male police officer or Wimsey himself could not investigate without encountering apprehension or reticence, a woman can easily navigate 'undercover' because of the assumption that her inquisitiveness is innate and not a professional tool employed to gather information. The workers at the Cattery undermine negative stereotypes about women's capacity for professionalism by using these expectations to achieve their professional ends and prove their usefulness.

Miss Climpson herself seems to be the stereotypical elderly spinster: extremely tidy, given to fluttering exclamations; deeply religious; and old-fashioned in her appearance. However, some of Miss Climpson's opinions are surprisingly advanced; she often draws attention to changing modern gender roles by stressing the limited opportunities that were available to women during her own youth. In *Strong Poison*, for example, Miss Climpson writes a letter to Wimsey containing a passage in which she describes arriving in the town where she will be conducting an investigation:

'I had *no* difficulty in getting a comfortable room at the Station Hotel, *late* as it was. In the old days, an *unmarried* woman arriving *alone* at *midnight* with a *suitcase* would hardly have been considered *respectable*—what a wonderful difference one finds today! I am *grateful* to have lived to see such changes, because whatever old-fashioned people may say about the greater *decorum* and *modesty* of women in Queen Victoria's time, those who can remember the old conditions know how *difficult* and *humiliating* they were!¹³

Miss Climpson's description of the restrictions placed on single women in the past leaves no doubt as to her thoughts on the benefits of more relaxed, modern attitudes. The contrast she draws between modern and 'old-fashioned' standards of women's behaviour highlights the extent to which ideas about respectability have changed since more restrictive Victorian times. Miss Climpson frequently makes such comparisons by relating her misogynistic father's opinions on 'proper' activities for a woman:

'A dear old friend of mine used to say that I should make a very good lawyer ... but of course, when I was young, girls didn't have the education or the opportunities they get nowadays ... I should have liked a good education, but my dear father didn't believe in it for women. Very old-fashioned, you young people would think him.'¹⁴

Miss Climpson's comment also serves as a reminder that modern young, single women have much greater prospects to develop themselves professionally and escape the label of 'superfluous' than older single women had. Nevertheless, Miss Climpson demonstrates through her investigative successes that, even without becoming a lawyer, she is still able to appropriate the patriarchal power of the law by using the feminine skills learned throughout her life as a spinster in her professional capacity as detective.

In *Strong Poison*, Miss Climpson displays those skills to great effect. While in the village of Windle looking for an opportunity to enter Mrs Wrayburn's house, where she must find the old woman's will in order to supply an alternative motive for the murder of which Harriet Vane is accused, Miss Climpson uses sketching as an excuse for visiting the Lake District to her curious fellow-boarders: 'As girls we were *all* brought up to dabble a little in water-colours, so that I was able to display quite sufficient *technical knowledge* to satisfy them!'¹⁵ Her 'feminine' accomplishment allows Miss Climpson to stay in the small town without raising any suspicions about her real motives, and the specialised knowledge accumulated in boarding houses—where single women often lived—makes it possible for Miss Climpson to gain access to Mrs Wrayburn's house. Miss Climpson even forges a friendship with Mrs Wrayburn's nurse, Miss Booth, based on Miss Booth's interest in spiritualism, with which Miss Climpson is also familiar through her time in boarding houses:

If there was one subject in the world about which Miss Climpson might claim to know something, it was spiritualism. It is a flower which flourishes bravely in a boarding-house atmosphere. Time and again, Miss Climpson had listened while the apparatus of planes and controls, correspondences and veridical communications, astral bodies, auras, and ectoplasmic materialisations was displayed before her protesting intelligence ... And then there had been that quaint little man from the Psychical Research Society ... He had rather liked Miss Climpson, and she had passed several interesting evenings hearing about the tricks of mediums.¹⁶

The ‘tricks’ Miss Climpson learned in the boarding house allow her to rig the nurse’s séances and provide an excuse—through ‘summoning’ the disembodied spirit of the dying Mrs Wrayburn—to search for the will. Once the will is found, Miss Climpson secretly steams the envelope open:

It was not a long document, and, in spite of the legal phraseology, its purport was easily gathered ... She put it in her petticoat-pocket—for her garments were of a useful and old-fashioned kind—and went to hunt in the pantry. When Miss Booth returned, she was making tea peacefully.¹⁷

Miss Climpson effectively uses the most domestic of spaces—the kitchen—to unlock the legal document that will point to the murderer. Her ‘old-fashioned garments’ prove to be ‘useful’ in their capacity to conceal her detective activities, much like her typical spinster occupations, painting and spiritualism, have done. Miss Climpson may not be a lawyer, but she has no trouble discerning the will’s legal language, and her feminine skills allow her to take the law into her own hands—or into her petticoats—in ways a male detective could not have.

Though Miss Climpson uses her image as a conventional old woman to subvert stereotypes and consistently draws unfavourable comparisons between modern and old-fashioned mores, she also reflects the limits of modern attitudes in her own reactions to other single women. Miss Climpson is not portrayed as a stereotypically prudish spinster when it comes to heterosexual sexuality; when on the jury for Harriet Vane’s murder trial in *Strong Poison*, she does not assume Harriet is guilty simply because Harriet has lived with a lover, unlike the judge, a man ‘so old, he seemed to have outlived time and change and death’, who opines that Harriet is ‘a person of unstable moral character’ who has ‘become ... corrupted by the unwholesome influences among which she lived’.¹⁸ The judge represents the patriarchal ‘law’ that condemns Harriet before the trial is over—not necessarily for murder—but certainly for choosing to live outside the accepted paradigm of marriage. Miss Climpson, however, presents an alternative to this sort of law; through her unconventional methods she discovers the will that leads to the real murderer’s motives and subsequently his capture. The justice Miss Climpson helps procure for Harriet Vane is both legal and, implicitly, moral, as Harriet ‘is discharged without a stain upon her character’.¹⁹ Nevertheless, though Miss Climpson is willing to overlook Harriet’s sexual indiscretions as well as, presumably, those of the variety of single women who work in the Cattery, she is somewhat

less tolerant when it comes to the possibility of women having romantic relationships with each other. It is made clear that Miss Climpson is 'a spinster made and not born—a perfectly womanly woman'.²⁰ This description, appearing in *Unnatural Death*, separates Miss Climpson from the novel's villain, Mary Whittaker, who is associated with 'dangerous' lesbian sexuality. Miss Climpson plays the detective figure's regulatory role of upholding order by supporting traditional gender roles within sexual relationships, advising Vera Findlater, who is Mary Whittaker's lover and her third murder victim, that close friendships between women can be harmful:

'Love is always good, when it's the *right kind* ... I cannot help feeling that it is more natural—more proper, in a sense—for a man and woman to be all in all to one another than for two persons of the same sex.'²¹

Miss Climpson's advice seems to be later proved correct when Vera is killed by the woman she loves, highlighting the perceived destructive power of homosexuality. Though Miss Climpson is a nonconforming woman herself, she still polices social conduct, and in the popular ideology of the time 'natural' relationships between men and women were exclusively 'good', 'right' and 'proper'.

However, the novel's other portrayals of nonconforming women present a more nuanced perspective on lesbian sexuality. Mary Whittaker's great aunt, Agatha Dawson, is an elderly woman who lived for years with a former schoolmate, Clara Whittaker. The two women are implied to have had a happy romantic relationship for most of their lives until Clara's death. Interestingly, Miss Climpson, who was so disapproving of Vera's relationship with Mary, is far more tolerant of the two older women. Clara, a successful horse breeder, has left her money to Agatha upon her death, and Miss Climpson comments to Wimsey upon Clara's 'Passing over her *own family*, with whom she was *not on very good terms*—owing to the narrow-minded attitude they had taken up about her horse-dealing!!'²² Miss Climpson adds that Clara's nephew, who is Mary's father,

'resented very much not getting the money ... as he had kept up the feud in a very *un-Christian* manner, he had really *no right* to complain, especially as Clara had built up her fortune *entirely* by her own exertions. But, of course, he inherited the *bad, old-fashioned* idea that women *ought not* to be their own mistresses, or make money for themselves, or do what they liked with their own!'²³

Miss Climpson judges Clara's will to be absolutely justified in view of her family's unenlightened attitude towards her lifestyle and career. When it comes to the matter of professional accomplishments, Miss Climpson is particularly liberal in her support of a woman's right to be self-supporting, condemning 'old-fashioned' mindsets about women's agency as 'bad'. Miss Climpson's ambivalence towards women's relationships with each other is revealed to be complicated by her insistence upon the need for each partner to have her own interests; while she describes Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson's relationship as working well because Clara Whittaker was devoted to her profession and Agatha Dawson was the more 'domestic partner', adept at running the household, Miss Climpson is doubtful about the younger women because of their plan to live together on an isolated farm in the country. She asks Vera, 'Won't you find it gets rather dull and lonely—just you two girls together?', and implies that 'outside interests' are needed in order to keep the relationship healthy.²⁴ Though Miss Climpson does explicitly express the wish that Vera will find a nice young man to settle down with, her main objections to the relationship between Vera and Mary are the emotional dependence shown by Vera and the inevitable strain that spending all their time together will have on the two women. Miss Climpson reads the relationship between Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson as successful because they had separate interests: despite their homosexuality, the two women occupied traditionally gendered roles in the relationship, Clara taking the 'masculine' position in her career as a horse breeder and Agatha—the more 'feminine' partner—as a housewife. In keeping with her modern sensibilities, Miss Climpson advocates a relationship that adheres to the ideal of a companionate marriage, irrespective of sexual orientation, but she still plays a regulatory role in upholding heteronormative ideals.

NONCONFORMING WOMEN AS DETECTIVES: MISS SILVER

In 1929, Patricia Wentworth's spinster detective Miss Silver debuted in the novel *Grey Mask*. Like Sayers' Miss Climpson, Miss Silver is a professional detective, but the two women differ in that Miss Silver is self-employed. In maintaining her own private investigation business, Miss Silver has an advantage over Miss Climpson, who must rely on Lord Peter Wimsey; Miss Silver's agency as a detective is self-derived. Shaw and Vanacker argue, however, that Miss Silver lacks the credibility of other single female detectives because of the opacity of her investigative methods and the implausible nature of the novels' plots:

In quite impossible ways Miss Silver appears at the scene of the potential crime, guesses who is the murderer without explanation or rationale, and generally seems to belong more to the crude thriller than to the detective story of logic and deduction ... Her spinsterish appearance is inconsistent with her sensational behaviour and also with the far-fetched plots of the novels she features in.²⁵

Instead of the clarity of Miss Climpson's first-person letters to Wimsey, in the Miss Silver novels the detective's processes and motivations are not necessarily evident. Though the plots of some Miss Silver novels may seem unlikely—for example, elements in *Grey Mask* include the discovery of a secret international criminal organisation, an heiress in hiding and two instances of faked deaths—they do share with other crime novels of the period the element of the threat from within. In the first three Miss Silver novels, a member of the client's family is found to be the criminal, allowing Miss Silver, like other single female detectives, to use her powers of observation to uncover the secrets of the suddenly dangerous domestic space.

Miss Silver is similar to other detectives like Miss Climpson and Agatha Christie's Miss Marple in that the stereotypical skills accumulated in the role of elderly spinster have particularly suited her to investigative work. Not only does she possess all the qualities of an elderly single woman that aid her in detection by allowing her to infiltrate close-knit communities and domestic spaces without suspicion, but she is also a former governess, a role that often inspires reflexive obedience in those who might be assumed to have greater authority than she.²⁶ Miss Silver's experiences as a governess aid her directly in her investigative efforts ('Prim and efficient as a governess in her own school-room, Miss Silver took command'), but on first encountering the detective, her clients tend to be disappointed with her unprepossessing appearance.²⁷ Nevertheless, she quickly relieves them of the suspicion that she might be anything less than competent; when Captain Henry Cunningham first visits Miss Silver's office, he 'wished with all his heart that he hadn't come'.²⁸ Before long, however, 'Henry found himself curiously impressed, he couldn't think why. There was nothing impressive about mouse-coloured hair, indeterminate features, and a toneless voice. Yet Miss Silver impressed him.'²⁹ The schoolroom atmosphere Miss Silver's presence evokes can also be soothing and reassuring. When Rachel Treherne of *Lonesome Road* (1939) hesitates to tell Miss Silver about the attempts that have been made on her life,

[Miss Silver] laid down her knitting ... took a bright red exercise-book out of the top right-hand drawer, laid it open before her, dipped a pen, and wrote a careful heading. These actions had a curiously composing effect upon Miss Treherne. The calming influence of routine made itself felt ... The book touched the schoolroom note again ... By the time Miss Silver looked up she was ready with what she had to say.³⁰

As a governess figure, Miss Silver is both comforting and authoritative. She derives her power from the hold that schoolroom-law still has over her clients and those around her; like children, they are bound to obey and are given a sense of security by an atmosphere of 'routine'. Also like children, they can only relate the information they know; only the governess has the power to put that information into a recognisable framework, as Miss Silver does when she solves the case. The governess is part of a household and therefore has access to the domestic circle; however, she is not directly a member of the family and this is what makes her an ideal detective figure for the golden age crime novel, which routinely exposes the threatening potential of the domestic.

The first three Miss Silver novels, *Grey Mask*, *The Case is Closed* and *Lonesome Road*, all employ members of the narrative's central family—people who should supposedly be able to be trusted by their relatives—as villains. Alison Light's discussion of Christie's domestication of the detective story is also relevant to Wentworth's Miss Silver novels:

The criminal is first of all 'one of us', someone who for nine-tenths of the novel must carry on seeming successfully to be just that ... And it is not physical disguise so much as psychological disguise which is potentially pathological. The most innocent (the least likely) person may turn out to be the criminal, the obvious deviant and degenerate are frequently red herrings: the criminal classes are not the ones to fear.³¹

This analysis is particularly apt when applied to *Grey Mask*; the novel begins with crime's obvious infiltration into the domestic space when Charles Moray returns to his empty family home after a long absence to find it has become a meeting place for a mysterious criminal organisation. The head of the organisation is not seen by his subordinates and goes by the name Grey Mask. Charles and his former fiancée, Margaret, try to help a young heiress who is a target of Grey Mask (and who turns out to be Margaret's long-lost cousin) and at the climax of the novel discover that Grey Mask, the criminal mastermind, is none other than Margaret's cheerful, bumbling

stepfather Freddy. When Freddy reveals his identity, Margaret is stunned: 'The pillars of her house had fallen.'³² Freddy tells her,

'It will save trouble if you will realise that you are not dealing with an amiable stepfather who has suddenly gone mad, but with a man of intelligence who has built up a most successful business and is prepared to remove anyone who endangers it.'³³

Freddy's psychological disguise as a kindly, dim father figure allows him to establish 'a most successful' criminal enterprise from inside the domestic circle.³⁴ Freddy again uses the domestic space to mask his crimes when he encloses Charles and his stepdaughter in the cellar of Margaret's childhood home to die of suffocation. It is Miss Silver who saves Charles and Margaret, and this successful rescue of the couple from the destructive power of the family home reflects her authority as a detective to restore order to the damaged family unit. Charles and Margaret enact this symbolic restoration through their marriage, a device often used in conclusions of golden age crime novels, thus providing a reconfiguration of the family that follows a more modern paradigm after the existing, corrupted family's 'suffocation' of its members.

The couples that find love at the end of many of Wentworth's Miss Silver novels could be seen to represent the restoration of heteronormative order after the disturbing events of murder or other crimes have upset the moral balance. However, this would be too simplistic a reading of such conclusions; though golden age novels frequently end in marriage, they do not necessarily glorify the concept of the traditional, patriarchal family. Stephen Knight's observations about Agatha Christie's resolutions can be applied to many works of golden age crime fiction, including the Miss Silver narratives: 'Many ... stories end not with the solution to the problem but a final linking of two lonely lovers ... a new family order can rise from the family disturbed by murder; it has a healing, renovating effect.'³⁵ In these narratives, the marriage plot does not necessarily reaffirm the strength of traditional family bonds but signals the formation of a new, modern family unit. The newly created family is shown to stem from choice, thereby making room for women's agency; the original family is either irredeemably broken or an unbearable burden to its members. In *Lonesome Road*, Rachel Treherne is the administrator of her wealthy father's estate, and as such she is constantly besieged by her avaricious relatives. Rachel is more mature than the heroines of the previous Miss Silver novels; she is a single woman in her late

thirties, but it is made clear that she is unmarried not because she does not have the inclination but because she is ‘much, much too busy’ working for the charity she has established in her father’s name.³⁶ Her extended family, who constantly plead for Rachel’s money and time, is an enormous drain on her energy, and inheriting her father’s position as ‘head of the family’ is shown to be detrimental to Rachel’s personal fulfilment. When it becomes clear that one of the family desires Rachel’s death, this disruption to her ‘normal’ family life becomes a catalyst for change. Rachel calls in Miss Silver to investigate and establishes her as a houseguest who is a retired governess. Miss Silver, the governess figure, is once again the outsider who is able to penetrate the corrupt domestic circle. Rachel also meets and falls in love with Gale Brandon, an American who befriends her and then saves her after an assailant tries to push her off a cliff. The destructive power of the family is made explicit in the contrast between Gale and Cosmo Frith, the cousin who is in love with Rachel but who is revealed to be her attempted murderer. Rachel’s marriage to Gale is depicted as a choice that allows her to construct her own alternative to the hereditary family, which is shown to be destructive, threatening and untrustworthy. But it also lifts the burden of patriarchal inheritance from Rachel’s shoulders, relieving her of the pressure of carrying out her familial duty, as Gale persuades her to pass the work of managing her father’s fortune on to someone else. Miss Silver restores order by providing a solution to the case and encouraging the match between Rachel and Gale, and though this resolution is conservative in that Rachel rejects work in favour of marriage, it still suggests a modern alternative in that it has brought about the abandonment of the corrupted patriarchal family for a model based on choice.

NONCONFORMING WOMEN AS DETECTIVES: MISS MARPLE

The best known of the golden age spinster detectives, Agatha Christie’s Miss Jane Marple, first appeared in *The Murder at the Vicarage* in 1930—after both Sayers’ Miss Climpson (1927) and Wentworth’s Miss Silver (1929). Like Miss Climpson and Miss Silver, Miss Marple is an older unmarried woman and possesses all the skills that particularly suit these women for detection. Miss Marple has lived all her life in St Mary Mead and her lack of experiences outside village life has honed, rather than impaired, her ability to judge human nature. Miss Marple takes conscious pleasure in observing human behaviour for the purpose of solving puzzles; in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, she explains:

'Living alone, as I do, in a rather out-of-the-way part of the world, one has to have a hobby. There is, of course, woolwork, and Guides, and Welfare, and sketching, but my hobby is—and always has been—Human Nature ... And, of course, in a small village, with nothing to distract one, one has such ample opportunity for becoming what I might call proficient in one's study.'³⁷

Miss Marple equates her aptitude for observation and deduction with the typical hobbies of spinsters, validating those interests that are ordinarily dismissed with her ability to apply her skills to detection. The vicar of St Mary Mead observes, 'Not only does [Miss Marple] see and hear practically everything that goes on, but she draws amazingly neat and apposite deductions from the facts that come under her notice.'³⁸ Miss Marple's proficiency in detection earns the respect of figures who traditionally represent patriarchal authority, such as the vicar and Sir Henry Clithering, Ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard and 'one of the best brains in England'.³⁹ Her unerring powers of observation are contrasted with her appearance as a 'white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner' and her hesitating, self-deprecating speech when she is drawing razor-sharp conclusions.⁴⁰ Critics such as Kathy Mezei have noted the irony revealed in the disparity between Miss Marple's reluctant style of speaking and what she is actually saying: 'The clichés of deferential speech—"quite", "so", "just", and the question "is it not?"—camouflage the shrewdness of her comments.'⁴¹ Because Miss Marple is usually addressing men in positions of authority or younger people who are prepared to ridicule her, the detective's hesitation, fluttering and dithering provide a humorous yet unsettling contrast between the inevitably correct observations cloaked in the deferential speech patterns of a stereotypical elderly woman and the failure of the authoritative powers that suddenly cannot be trusted. This hyperbolic performance ironically subverts ageist dismissals of the older woman's agency.

In contrast to other spinster detectives like Miss Climpson and Miss Silver, Miss Marple's detection is strictly amateur—she usually only produces solutions and uses others to do the actual investigative footwork. She is not, however, bound by the need to make a living; this becomes an advantage in the Miss Marple narratives because it illustrates the potential for activity, purpose and rational thought in elderly spinsters, questioning the stereotype of aged single women as worthless or superfluous. As Miss Marple explains,

‘Talking scandal, as you say—well, it *is* done a good deal. And people are very down on it—especially young people ... But what I say is that none of these young people ever stop to *think*. They really don’t examine the facts. Surely the whole crux of the matter is this: *How often is tittle-tattle*, as you call it, *true!* ... It’s really a matter of practice and experience. An Egyptologist ... if you show him one of those curious little beetles, can tell you by the look and the feel of the thing what date BC it is, or if it’s a Birmingham imitation. And he can’t always give a definite rule for doing so. He just *knows* ... What my nephew calls “superfluous women” have a lot of time on their hands, and their chief interest is usually *people*. And so, you see, they get to be what one might call *experts*.’⁴²

In this passage, Miss Marple defends a knowledge of human nature gained through a lifetime of gossiping as being akin to the specialist professional knowledge accumulated through a career’s worth of practice. In doing so, she validates the activities of ‘superfluous women’ as being worthwhile, contrary to the ridicule of young people like her nephew who view gossip as a stereotypically feminine pastime that is harmful and silly. She also points out that when elderly women gossip they are ‘thinking’ and ‘examining facts’, activities that carry value in the professional world.

Even though her own behaviour subverts age and gender stereotypes, Miss Marple is, like other detectives, limited to the detective figure’s role as restorer of the status quo after the disruption of murder. Nevertheless, though it is true that Miss Marple restores order to the society that would constantly underestimate her and devalue the abilities that allow her to play the detective role, it is not a given that society will fall back into the established order after the crimes that create such a significant disturbance. As in Wentworth’s Miss Silver novels, the danger is often shown to originate within the family unit, and after the spinster in her unique position as both insider and outsider resolves the threat, the broken family circle is often re-formed in a significantly different way. In *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), the patriarch of a well-to-do family in the community is murdered and Miss Marple uncovers the killer. However, these circumstances do not by any means simply re-establish a hypothetical peaceful ideal that existed before the murder. The victim, Colonel Protheroe, is an unpleasant, verbally abusive man who is universally loathed, and his murder does not unduly sadden anyone in the community or even in his immediate family. During the investigation, many of the suspects are shown to be nonconforming women in the sense that they refuse to adapt to the roles assigned to them in the patriarchal family. These women include: Lettice Protheroe,

the deceased Colonel's daughter, who is described as 'completely vague' but is actually concealing considerable sharpness behind her mask of ennui; Anne Protheroe, Lettice's stepmother, 'a quiet, self-contained woman whom one would not suspect of any great depths of feeling', who is actually having a passionate affair with a young artist; and Mrs Lestrangle, a newcomer to St Mary Mead whose very name hints at her status as an outsider and who is described as '[having] all the ease of manner of a well-bred woman, and yet there was something about her that was incongruous and baffling'.⁴³ For all these women, traditional heterosexual relationships and the patriarchal family are shown to be destructive and emotionally devastating. Lettice Protheroe dislikes her father and hates her stepmother for marrying her father and for having an affair with Lawrence Redding, the artist Lettice herself has fallen in love with; Lettice also breaks the heart of young Dennis, the vicar's nephew. Anne Protheroe is unhappy with her obnoxious husband and is persuaded by her lover to kill him for the inheritance. Mrs Lestrangle is revealed to be Lettice's mother, the Colonel's first wife, who has a terminal illness and came to St Mary Mead to see Lettice before she dies, though the Colonel forbids it. These women find agency in their rebellion against the patriarchal family, but it leads to exile for Lettice and the dying Mrs Lestrangle and destruction for Anne Protheroe, as she is executed for her husband's murder.

The novel ends with a seemingly reassuring return to order when the village vicar's flighty wife, Griselda, tells him that she is going to have a baby and be a 'real "wife and mother" (as they say in books)'.⁴⁴ That this ending is an affirmation of the traditional family is a questionable point—even as Griselda announces her intention to take part in the 'cult of domesticity' by reading popular guides on 'Household Management' and 'Mother Love', she adds that 'They are all simply screamingly funny—not intentionally, you know'.⁴⁵ The ideal of perfectly conforming wife- and motherhood is subverted by the use of humour to deflate the notion of 'turning women out a pattern', and this suggests the possibility of a more forgiving model based on women's experiences.⁴⁶ This is not the only family that is reinvented at the end of the novel, as Lettice and her mother, Mrs Lestrangle, are reunited and plan to leave St Mary Mead together since the overbearing Colonel is dead. Lettice tells the vicar: 'It's queer. She and I belong to each other. Father and I didn't.'⁴⁷ The destruction of the patriarch enables the formation of a new family of choice that allows Lettice to drop the mask of inactivity she had cultivated to hide her true personality when she lived in a more conventional

family unit with her father and stepmother. Certainly, a kind of order is established at the conclusion of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, but the roles of mothers in particular, with Griselda's casual dismissal of popular childrearing edicts and Mrs Lestrangle and Lettice's happy reunion, represent a more expansive alternative to conventional notions of the ideal patriarchal family.

NONCONFORMING WOMEN AS DETECTIVES: MRS BRADLEY

Mrs Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, a thrice-widowed trained psychologist, first appeared in 1929 in *Speedy Death*. Though Mrs Bradley is still an elderly, single female detective, she subverts expectations associated with her age and sex in much more unsettling and even overtly playful ways than do Miss Climpson, Miss Silver and Miss Marple. In appearance, she is frequently described as avian or reptilian by those who know her:

Mrs Bradley was dry without being shrivelled, and bird-like without being pretty. She reminded Alistair Bing, who was afraid of her, of the reconstruction of a pterodactyl he had once seen ... She possessed nasty, dry, claw-like hands, and her arms, yellow and curiously repulsive, suggested the plucked wings of a fowl.⁴⁸

Mrs Bradley is a caricature of elderly women, who are conventionally seen as non-threatening, but the 'bird-like' nature of her appearance is far more threatening than the small, sweet and fluttery characteristics that are more stereotypically ascribed to elderly women. Her voice, though pleasant, further discomfits those around her in spite of its attractive quality:

Strange to say, her voice belied her appearance, for, instead of the birdlike twitter one might have expected to hear issuing from those beaked lips, her utterance was low, mellifluous, and slightly drawled; unctuous, rich, and reminiscent of dark, smooth treacle.⁴⁹

The disparity between Mrs Bradley's voice and her appearance is an indication of her 'strangeness'; though a 'dry' old woman, her sensual voice—like 'dark, smooth treacle'—suggests an unsettling sexual potential. The words Mrs Bradley speaks are also jarring to her audience, providing another unexpected contrast; the first time she speaks in *Speedy Death*, it is to remark—'graciously and with quiet relish'—'I

remember that a friend of my own fainted in the bath some four years ago ... She was drowned.'⁵⁰ To make such a comment with her pleasant voice, and displaying a disconcerting enjoyment in macabre subject matter, again marks Mrs Bradley as out-of-the-ordinary; her unnerving behaviour and way of conversing are incongruous with those of a stereotypical elderly widow.

Mrs Bradley shares with other elderly women detectives particular abilities that suit them to play the role (such as the benefit of being able to gossip freely in all social spheres without provoking suspicion), but she has one distinct advantage: as a psychologist, she has additional insight into human nature and often uses this to unmask the criminal. Though she is not a career detective like Miss Climpson or Miss Silver, her profession qualifies her to observe and make accurate deductions from and about human behaviour. In the pattern of Miss Climpson's patronage by Lord Peter Wimsey, Miss Silver's status as a former governess and Miss Marple's self-declared standing as an 'expert' in human nature, Mrs Bradley's professional position also allows her to operate as an alternative to official legal systems. She explains her attitude towards detection in *Speedy Death*: 'I accuse no one ... I know what I know, and I deduce what I deduce. But accusation—that is not my business. I am a psychologist, not a police-woman.'⁵¹ Though Mrs Bradley may not always 'accuse' in a public setting, she occasionally metes out her own form of justice if she thinks that the punishment society will assign to the crime does not fit the individual circumstances of the criminal.⁵² For example, in *Death at the Opera* (1934), Mrs Bradley discovers that the murderer is a very elderly former actress who has killed one of the actors in a school play because she wanted to see the part played by someone more talented. Instead of exposing her to the police, Mrs Bradley writes her an admiring letter condoning a murder committed for artistic principles alone. Another example occurs in *The Saltmarsh Murders* (1932), when Mrs Bradley deliberately provokes a heart attack in an insane woman rather than have her arrested and put to trial. However, the most subversive instance of Mrs Bradley's unique administration of justice takes place in the first novel of the series, *Speedy Death*, in which the detective becomes a murderer herself, upsetting traditional notions of the detective figure as a stabilising force. In this way, Mrs Bradley often transgresses the law herself even as she solves crimes, providing unsettling resolutions that question boundaries of morality and the detective's role, even as they restore order to a community disrupted by murder.

NONCONFORMING WOMEN AS VICTIMS AND VILLAINS:
OVERTURE TO DEATH AND MURDER IS EASY

Single women detective figures are ambivalent in that they use their surveillance skills to police social order; yet they also destabilise stereotypes by repeatedly showing the value of ‘superfluous’ women. When single women characters are employed as villains and victims, however, these depictions often become far less nuanced and more negative. Ngaio Marsh’s novel *Overture to Death* (1939) demonstrates several cultural stereotypes about single women, most notably the repressed spinster, but also the manipulative, sexually promiscuous divorcée and the ‘wild’ (yet still marriageable because of her youth and lack of sexual experience) young woman, revealing deep-seated cultural anxieties about women’s sexuality. *Overture to Death* takes place in a classic enclosed setting, in this case a village. The pool of suspects is further narrowed by the discovery that the murder of Miss Campanula, a middle-aged spinster with a forceful personality, was probably committed by one of a small cast of a play acted by local celebrities. The suspects include such stereotypical golden age characters as the local squire, the vicar, the doctor, the mysterious stranger who has recently moved to the village, the young couple and the (other) spinster. The single women in *Overture to Death* are not portrayed in flattering terms. Idris Campanula and Eleanor Prentice are two prominent spinsters in the village who engage in vicious gossip and compete with each other for domination in the parish’s various societies and charitable groups. Before Miss Campanula’s death, the only front on which she and Miss Prentice are united is in their objection to Mrs Ross, a new resident in the village who is having an affair with the local physician, Dr Templett. A single woman in her late thirties, Mrs Ross is described as extremely attractive, but she is disliked in the community and is revealed to be a professional blackmailer. As an adulteress, she does not conform to the dictates of socially acceptable feminine sexuality. Her questionable morality conveniently also extends to her criminal activities, and she is punished and removed from the village when she is arrested. One example of the general uneasiness that exists towards Mrs Ross appears when she congratulates Dinah, the rector’s daughter, on her appointment as the producer of the play:

But somehow Dinah didn’t quite want Mrs Ross so frankly on her side. She was aware in herself of a strong antagonism to Mrs Ross and this discovery surprised and confused her, because she believed herself to be a rebel. As a rebel, she should have applauded Selia Ross.⁵³

Dinah’s desire to be nonconforming is undone by her own potential as a young, marriageable woman: her position as half of the novel’s perfunctory young couple prevents her from being actually nonconforming and from accepting Mrs Ross as an ally.

Dinah’s antipathy towards Mrs Ross is not the only instance of antagonism among women in the novel. In fact, there are virtually no meaningful connections between women in *Overture to Death*, least of all between Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula, who are ostensibly friends:

[Miss Campanula] was supposed to be Eleanor Prentice’s great friend. Their alliance was based on mutual antipathies and interests. Each adored scandal and each cloaked her passion in a mantle of conscious rectitude. Neither trusted the other an inch, but there was no doubt that they enjoyed each other’s company.⁵⁴

Unlike the spinster detectives in other crime novels who employ their penchant for gossip as a productive tool, the spinsters in *Overture to Death* use scandal as a destructive force against each other and the people of the community. The depiction of female friendship here is not a positive one—just how damaging it is becomes clear when it is revealed that Miss Prentice is Miss Campanula’s murderer.

Dr Templett describes Miss Campanula as: ‘starved and repressed and hung about with a mass of shibboleths and Victorian conversation ... here she’s stayed for the last twenty years, living on rich food, good works and local scandal’.⁵⁵ Miss Prentice is depicted in similarly uncomplimentary terms; her nephew Henry complains to his father:

‘She is an ageing spinster cousin of the worst type ... She’s an avid woman. She was in love with you until she found it was a hopeless proposition. Now she and ... Campanula are rivals for the rector. Dinah says all old maids fall in love with her father. Everybody sees it. It’s a recognised phenomenon with women of Eleanor’s and Idris Campanula’s type.’⁵⁶

Laura Doan argues that the ‘spinster’s challenge to domestic hegemony impels the creation of a stereotype to deny the embodied threat’,⁵⁷ and both Henry and Dinah have reasons for finding Miss Campanula and Miss Prentice threatening: for Henry, Miss Prentice has already tried to take his mother’s place by attempting to marry his father, and when she does not succeed settles in as a substitute for the squire’s wife, ‘the first lady of the

district'.⁵⁸ For Dinah, both women are vying for her father's attention and the position of being her stepmother. Dinah and Henry recall the stereotype of the neurotic, sexually desperate spinster to control and neutralise the danger to their respective family circles, but instead of the stereotype's hyperbole being shown to be overblown and untrue, the couple's fears about spinsters are violently realised.

For both women, repressed desire is seen to exhibit as unhealthy sexual obsession. When Detective-Inspector Fox tells Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn about his conversation with Miss Campanula's maid, he relates, 'Well, Mr Alleyn, to Mary's way of thinking, Miss C. was a bit queer on the subject of Mr Copeland. Potty on him is the way Mary puts it.'⁵⁹ Miss Campanula's sexual desire is seen as odd because she is an older, unmarried woman in love with a man who does not view her as having sexual potential. Her desire is pathologised as verging on a mental disturbance. Miss Prentice is described as being even more unbalanced than Miss Campanula:

'I may as well tell you, Mr Alleyn, that in Henry's and my opinion Miss Prentice is practically ravers. It's a well-known phenomenon with old maids. She's tried to sublimate her natural appetites and ... it's been a failure. She's only repressed and repressed.'⁶⁰

Miss Prentice murders Miss Campanula out of sexual jealousy after she thinks she sees Miss Campanula and the rector in a compromising position. Alleyn comments that Miss Prentice 'fell a prey to whatever furies visit a woman whose ageing heart is set on one man and whose nerves, desires and thoughts have been concentrated on the achievement of her hope'.⁶¹ Alleyn also notes that she is not 'completely dotty': 'She's probably extremely neurotic. Unbalanced, hysterical, all that. In law, insanity is very closely defined. Her counsel will probably go for moral depravity, delusion, or hallucination.'⁶² Both the killer and her victim are categorised as unbalanced because of their unbecoming sexual desire, and these psychological issues are suggested as being natural reactions to sexual repression. Alleyn's explanation that Miss Prentice's mental problems will not be legally recognised as 'insanity' in court implies a disturbing acceptance of the stereotype of a hysterical spinster whose sexual repression has led to mental illness. With its normalisation of pathological behaviour stemming from repressed sexuality, its negative view of women's friendships, as well as its unflattering portrayal of the sexually promiscuous Mrs Ross,

Overture to Death represents the confirmation of the public's worst fears about unmarried women. With 'rebel' Dinah's marriage to Henry, the novel's remaining single woman is contained, and heteronormative order is firmly established.

As stereotypical as the portrayal of spinsters is in *Overture to Death*, other novels are more complex in their presentation of the spinster villain. Agatha Christie's *Murder is Easy* (1939) offers a variation on a spinster villain who differs from the idea of the sexually repressed, elderly single woman who is driven insane by her frustrated sexuality. Miss Honoria Waynflete is a killer who disguises herself as a detective, using the assumption that the elderly spinster is an ideal detective figure to deflect suspicion from herself and frame her former fiancé, Lord Whitfield, for several murders in revenge for having rejected her when they were young. The novel complicates the image of the single woman detective by manipulating the expectation that an intelligent, observant elderly spinster will inevitably use her skills for detection, inhibiting the restoration of order usually brought by these figures. Unlike Miss Climpson, whose aspiration of becoming a lawyer was thwarted but who instead uses her skills to uphold the law as a detective, Miss Waynflete represents the more disturbing consequences of frustrated ambition.

The spinster detective stereotype is evoked from the beginning of *Murder is Easy*, when former policeman Luke Fitzwilliam meets a talkative old lady, Miss Pinkerton, on a train to London. Miss Pinkerton, whose name clearly suggests her detective potential with its evocation of the nineteenth-century American detective agency, is on her way to Scotland Yard to report her suspicion that several people who have recently died in the village of Wychwood-under-Ashe have actually been murdered. Luke decides to humour Miss Pinkerton when she begins chatting to him, reflecting that 'there was something very cosy and English about old ladies like this old lady ... They could be classed with plum pudding on Christmas Day and village cricket and open fireplaces with wood fires.'⁶³ Miss Pinkerton's embodiment of the quintessential elderly English lady at first leads Luke to doubt her conclusions even as he listens indulgently: 'I wonder why they get these fancies? Deadly dull lives, I suppose—an unacknowledged craving for drama. Some old ladies, so I've heard, fancy every one is poisoning their food.'⁶⁴ Ironically, it is only after Miss Pinkerton, the obvious spinster detective figure, becomes a victim herself when she is run down by a car on her way to Scotland Yard that Luke changes his mind about her credibility, completely revising his assessment of elderly women

to reflect the typical description of the spinster detective. Luke compares Miss Pinkerton to his Aunt Mildred, another clever, elderly spinster:

‘What old ladies fancy they see is very often right. My Aunt Mildred was positively uncanny! ... Every man should have aunts. They illustrate the triumph of guesswork over logic. It is reserved for aunts to *know* that Mr A. is a rogue because he looks like a dishonest butler they once had. Other people say reasonably enough that a respectable man like Mr A. couldn’t be a crook. The old ladies are right every time.’⁶⁵

After Miss Pinkerton becomes a possible victim of murder, Luke seems to assume the mantle of detective figure, but his belated change of opinion regarding the accuracy of Miss Pinkerton’s observational skills has already called into question his own reliability as a detective. He goes to Wychwood-under-Ashe to investigate, arranging to stay with a cousin of a friend, Bridget Conway, who is the former secretary and now-fiancée of Lord Whitfield, a newspaper magnate. Like Miss Pinkerton, Bridget complicates a stereotype of ‘English’ womanhood, as she is revealed to be a far more complex character than the ideal English girl Luke had planned to seek out when he returned to England after his retirement from police work abroad:

He had had an acknowledged picture at the back of his mind during his voyage home to England—a picture of an English girl flushed and sunburnt ... It had been a warm gracious vision ... Now—he didn’t know if he liked Bridget Conway or not—but he knew that that secret picture wavered and broke up—became meaningless and foolish.⁶⁶

A dark-haired, clever career woman, Bridget Conway fits neither Luke’s fantasy of pastoral English womanhood nor his image of her before meeting her; Luke had imagined that Bridget was ‘a little blonde secretary person—astute enough to have captured a rich man’s fancy’, and he is surprised to find that she bears no resemblance to this stereotype.⁶⁷ However, Bridget is not just a gold-digger who uses her sexuality to ensnare a rich man—she is extremely good at her job, and she has ‘force, brains’, and ‘a cool clear intelligence’.⁶⁸ Bridget also has a very realistic idea about what her marriage to Lord Whitfield will look like:

‘I’m a young woman with a certain amount of intelligence, very moderate looks, and no money. I intend to earn an honest living. My job as Gordon’s

wife will be practically indistinguishable from my job as Gordon's secretary. After a year I doubt if he'll remember to kiss me good night. The only difference is in the salary.⁶⁹

Though she and Luke become the novel's token couple, Bridget's pragmatism sets her apart from the conventional romantic heroine. Although the strategy of marrying for money or social position is as old as the institution itself, Bridget's framing of her potential marriage as simply a savvy career decision places that decision into a modern framework that emphasises professional skills and economic empowerment.

Even though Bridget serves as the romantic interest of two men, she is still grouped with the village's other spinsters, as her sexuality is constantly alluded to as being threatening beyond what might be expected for a young, marriageable woman. Luke repeatedly calls Bridget a 'witch', at one point telling her, 'You've bewitched me. I've a feeling that if you pointed your finger at me and said: "Turn into a frog," I'd go hopping away with my eyes popping out of my head.'⁷⁰ Wychwood-under-Ashe—'one of the last places where they had a Witches' Sabbath'—is itself rife with stereotypes about the unsettling 'strangeness' of single women: Luke reflects that the village 'seemed singularly remote, strangely untouched'.⁷¹ The village's demographic matches its description; when Luke asks what sort of people live there, Bridget replies: 'Relicts, mostly ... Clergymen's daughters and sisters and wives. Doctors' dittoes. About six women to every man.'⁷² Miss Honoria Waynflete is one of the village's typical 'relicts'; she is 'completely the country spinster ... Her face was pleasant and her eyes, through their pince-nez, decidedly intelligent.'⁷³ Miss Waynflete's appearance and manner recognisably evoke the classic spinster detective character, and she at first seems to be a logical ally for Luke. This impression is reinforced when Luke learns that Bridget and Miss Waynflete both have been acting in a detective capacity before his arrival in the village. Bridget describes to Luke how she and Miss Waynflete share the suspicion that Amy Gibbs, a local domestic servant who has recently died from 'accidentally' drinking red hat paint, was actually murdered since it is unlikely that Amy herself would have possessed such paint: 'You wouldn't wear a scarlet hat with carrot hair. It's the sort of thing a man wouldn't realize.'⁷⁴ Bridget's observation places her in the position of detective figure along with elderly spinsters Miss Pinkerton and Miss Waynflete, as their ability to see valuable details that a man would dismiss displaces the 'official' investigator, Luke. In addition, Luke has overlooked a vital clue that

is the key to the real murderer's identity: as Miss Pinkerton relates her misgiving to Luke on the train that someone in the village is a killer, she remarks, 'And you see, the person in question is just the last person any one *would* suspect!'⁷⁵ Though Miss Pinkerton refers to the killer as a 'person', Luke assumes that the killer must be a man. Realising this, Miss Waynflete encourages this supposition when Luke confides in her. She warns Luke that if he reveals that he is looking into the murders, the killer might then focus on Luke: '*he'll* know. *He'll* realize that you're on his track.'⁷⁶ Miss Waynflete's suggestions eventually point Luke in the direction of Lord Whitfield, whom Miss Waynflete implicates by manipulating the image of the lonely, romantically thwarted spinster, claiming she did not voice her suspicions because she 'was fond of him once'.⁷⁷ She cautions Luke to be careful while he is investigating: 'Men have courage—one knows that ... but they are more easily *deceived* than women.'⁷⁸ Bridget, who is beginning to suspect Miss Waynflete, agrees with her. Luke has, in fact, been deceived by Miss Waynflete, though Bridget has not, designating Bridget, not Luke, as the true detective figure.

From playing supporting roles in Luke's investigation, Bridget and Miss Waynflete emerge as detective figure and villain in the final confrontation. Miss Waynflete tries to slip Bridget a sedative and leads her to a secluded wooded area, intending to kill her and blame it on a jealous Lord Whitfield. Bridget, who has ascertained her purpose, pretends to be drugged and tries to persuade Miss Waynflete to admit to the murders, putting the skills she has learned as a professional secretary to use, just as the elderly spinster detectives employ their specialised abilities: 'She'd done it as a secretary for years. Quietly encouraged her employers to talk about themselves. And this woman wanted badly to talk, to boast about her own cleverness.'⁷⁹ It emerges that Miss Waynflete's motive is not sexual frustration, but frustrated ambition:

'Yes, I always had brains, even as a girl! But they wouldn't let me do anything ... I had to stay at home—doing nothing. And then Gordon—just a common boot-maker's son, but he had ambition, I knew. I knew he would rise in the world. And he jilted me—jilted *me!*'⁸⁰

Instead of being the stereotypical spinster whose crimes are the result of repressed sexuality, Miss Waynflete represents a more realistic danger, standing as a warning against relegating women to a passive, domestic role. Miss Waynflete's transgression challenges arguments for keeping women

out of education and the workplace as it implies that the true danger of 'superfluous' women only emerges when they are not allowed an active role other than that of wife and mother. In spite of this suggestion's implications, the novel's resolution is typically conservative. Though Bridget, the modern career woman, emerges triumphant from her struggle with Miss Waynflete, it is not through her own power; Luke comes to Bridget's rescue as Miss Waynflete is trying to strangle her. Like Harriet Vane in *Strong Poison*, Bridget is saved—both literally and symbolically—in the end by her potential for marriage.

STRONG POISON: THE VILIFIED VICTIM

Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1929) presents another example of nonconforming women that complicates the meaning of transgression. While the novel includes as detective figures Miss Climpson and Miss Murchison, another of Wimsey's single woman employees from the Cattery, the most prominent single woman in *Strong Poison* is Harriet Vane, who is on trial for the murder of her former lover, Philip Boyes. Harriet's treatment during her trial and imprisonment dramatises the unfair social condemnation of women who engage in sex outside marriage, thereby problematising the distinction between victim and villain. Significantly, Harriet's innocence is first championed by other single women; the two members of the jury who cannot reach a consensus with the others about her guilt are Miss Climpson, who 'stuck out for it that Miss Vane wasn't that sort of person', and

a stout, prosperous party who keeps a sweet-shop ... [who] has no opinion of men in general (she has buried her third) ... At first she was ready to vote with the majority, but then she took a dislike to the foreman, who tried to bear her down by his male authority.⁸¹

These two women do not bow to the pressure of the 'male authority' represented by the judge and the other jurors to deliver a guilty verdict, and they achieve the retrial that saves Harriet's life. Unlike the relationships depicted between the nonconforming women in *Overture to Death*, those in *Strong Poison* are supportive and united against unfair judgements by a patriarchal culture.

Harriet already has two strikes against her when she is accused of murder: she has lived with a man outside marriage (refusing marriage when

he offers it); and she is a career woman who earns her own living after the deaths of her parents. Both of these elements place her outside the paradigm of the traditional patriarchal family and cause her to be seen as transgressive even before her arrest. Harriet's threatening potential has been discussed by critics such as Maureen T. Reddy, who points out that it is 'Harriet's unconventionality that makes her the perfect suspect in Boyes's murder, from the legal system's standpoint: such an "unwomanly" woman must be capable of the most heinous acts'.⁸² When the judge addresses the jury, it is obvious that he is considering Harriet's sexual past when contemplating her probable guilt, and that he is suggesting the jury do so as well:

'Now you may feel, and quite properly that [Harriet's living with Boyes] was a very wrong thing to do. You may, after making all allowances for this young woman's unprotected position, still feel that she was a person of unstable moral character ... But, on the other hand ... It is one thing for a man or woman to live an immoral life, and quite another thing to commit murder. You may perhaps think that one step into the path of wrongdoing makes the next one easier, but you must not give too much weight to that consideration.'⁸³

Even as the judge admonishes the jury not to take Harriet's sexual deviance into account, he makes explicit that she is living 'an immoral life', and he suggests the possibility that one moral lapse might lead to another. He also infers that Harriet is 'unnatural' for not marrying Boyes and legitimising her sexuality when she has the chance:

'It would be natural for you to think that this proposal of marriage takes away any suggestion that the prisoner had cause for grievance against Boyes. Anyone would say that, under such circumstances, she could have no motive for wishing to murder this young man, but rather the contrary. Still ... the prisoner herself states that this honourable, though belated, proposal was unwelcome to her.'⁸⁴

By using loaded phrases such as 'it would be natural for you to think' and 'anyone would say that', the judge insinuates that Harriet's behaviour deviates from a standard of normality to which the majority of people conform. Her aberrant behaviour in rejecting Boyes' offer of marriage would therefore indicate that she is capable of other moral transgressions, such as murder. Though Harriet is a victim of unfair

stereotypes, her rehabilitation is brought about by her becoming another stereotype—the heroine of a romance plot. Miss Climpson and Miss Murchison, the spinsters who do the majority of the investigative legwork that saves Harriet, also perform the function of manoeuvring the heteronormative romance plot into place, even as they break down assumptions about the morality of sexually active single women by proving that Harriet is not a killer.

During the course of the investigation, Lord Peter Wimsey falls in love with Harriet and vows to marry her once she is acquitted and released. In order for Harriet to become the detective's legitimate love interest, she must be cleared symbolically of her sexual transgression as well as of committing a crime. This is accomplished partly by establishing equality between Harriet and Peter through a comparison of their sexual experience; when Harriet cautions Peter that she has had a lover and so is not sexually 'innocent', Peter counters: 'So have I, if it comes to that. In fact, several.'⁸⁵ Harriet must also be exonerated legally; at the end of her retrial, the judge announces that 'the Crown, by unreservedly withdrawing this dreadful charge against you, has demonstrated your innocence in the clearest possible way. After this, nobody will be able to suppose that the slightest imputation rests upon you.'⁸⁶ Vilified by society and almost executed for a crime she did not commit because of the suspicion her sexual deviance casts upon her, Harriet is in the end declared innocent by the patriarchal system that accused her after being 'rescued' by the detective. Through the depiction of Harriet's trials and acquittal, *Strong Poison* engages with contemporary debates about women's sexuality, and it questions existing assumptions about sexual morality, providing an alternative to the many detective narratives that inevitably use marriage, imprisonment or death to contain the nonconforming woman. Nevertheless, though Harriet refuses Peter's proposal in *Strong Poison*, she does eventually marry him later in the series, which suggests that the declaration of her innocence of symbolic criminality is as much an affirmation of her potential for marriage as it is an exoneration of nonconforming sexuality. However, the path to Harriet and Peter's eventual marriage is not short or uncomplicated. Harriet even becomes an active detective figure herself in both *Have His Carcase* (1932) and *Gaudy Night* (1935), putting her on a more equal footing with her former saviour before they are married and suggesting at least the possibility of equality between partners as being necessary to a successful marriage.

NOTES

1. Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 160–1.
2. Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 63.
3. Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980), p. 77.
4. Kathy Mezei similarly argues that ‘the spinster is ... uniquely situated as an instrument of surveillance precisely because of her marginal and indeterminate position’. Kathy Mezei, ‘Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.2 (2007), p. 104.
5. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 24.
6. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 24.
7. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 31.
8. Walter Gallichan writes in his 1929 book *The Poison of Prudery* that ‘prudery arises as reinforcement of resistance against the forbidden thoughts, and the resistance may be so heightened that it becomes a pathological symptom’. Walter Gallichan, *The Poison of Prudery* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1929), p. 13, quoted in Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (London: Pandora, 1985), p. 191.
9. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 54.
10. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, pp. 54–5.
11. Indeed, Catherine Kenney suggests that Miss Climpson and the women of her typing agency are actually more convincing than Wimsey as detectives, despite the fact that they are his employees: ‘Lord Peter himself must wrestle with his amateur status as a crime-solver, but as his employee, Miss Climpson is unassailably professional, a privileged place indeed for a woman of her generation ... By working for Wimsey, she and the other “superfluous women” employed by the Cattery gain access to the hierarchical power structure of society, an access usually barred to their gender.’ Catherine Kenney, ‘Detecting a Novel Use for Spinsters in Sayers’s Fiction’, in Laura L. Doan (ed.), *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 127.
12. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 32.
13. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 190.

14. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 29.
15. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 192.
16. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 203.
17. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 237.
18. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, pp. 1–5.
19. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 280.
20. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 186.
21. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 191.
22. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 86.
23. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 86.
24. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, pp. 187, 190.
25. Shaw and Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, p. 36.
26. Shaw and Vanacker argue of the spinster detective: 'What better figure to choose to defend the innocent than the admonitory figure of childhood, of fairy-stories and the morality tale: the maiden aunt, the spinster school-teacher, the wise woman of the village? Relieved of sexuality and undistracted by close emotional bonds, such a figure cannot but see things clearly and act impartially as an agent of moral law.' *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, p. 4.
27. Patricia Wentworth, *Lonesome Road* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2007), p. 275.
28. Patricia Wentworth, *The Case is Closed* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005), p. 146.
29. Wentworth, *The Case is Closed*, pp. 148–9.
30. Wentworth, *Lonesome Road*, p. 10.
31. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 94.
32. Patricia Wentworth, *Grey Mask* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p. 243.
33. Wentworth, *Grey Mask*, p. 245.
34. The idea of danger emerging from within the supposed safety of an enclosed community is a common theme in crime fiction; Kathy Mezei points out that 'The secretive elements that motivate so many detective novels are not merely the usual threat to the status quo and moral order from the outside (urbanization, modernization, the foreigner or stranger), but the uncannier, more disturbing threat from the inside.' Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech', p. 110.
35. Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 116.
36. Wentworth, *Lonesome Road*, pp. 5, 32.
37. Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1986), p. 191.
38. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 190.

39. Agatha Christie, 'Death by Drowning', *The Thirteen Problems* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 205.
40. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 14.
41. Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech', pp. 109–10.
42. Agatha Christie, 'A Christmas Tragedy', *The Thirteen Problems* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1988), pp. 148–9.
43. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, pp. 11, 24, 20.
44. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 220.
45. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 220.
46. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 220.
47. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 219.
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69. Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 113.
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78. Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 198.
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80. Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 204.
81. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, pp. 41–2.
82. Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 22.
83. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 5.
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A Joint Venture?: Love, Partnership and Marriage

The presence of romance plots in golden age crime fiction was, at the time, much discussed amongst the genre's writers and critics. In 1928, American writer S.S. Van Dine (Willard Huntingdon Wright) outlined a tongue-in-cheek list of 'rules' for crime writers to follow called 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories'. Rule number three states: 'There should be no love interest. The business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not to bring a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar.'¹ Also in 1928, in her introduction to *The Omnibus of Crime*, Dorothy L. Sayers complains that:

Publishers and editors still labour under the delusion that all stories must have a nice young man and woman who have to be united in the last chapter. As a result, some of the finest detective-stories are marred by a conventional love-story, irrelevant to the action and perfunctorily worked in.²

Despite such criticisms, the fact remains that many writers—including Sayers—continued to incorporate representations of love and marriage in their novels. The 'conventional love-stories' to which Sayers refers continued to be a conspicuous feature in the plots of golden age crime novels throughout the period, and, in addition, complex romance plots that bridge several novels are prominent in the fictional lives of a number of detective figures including Sayers' own Lord Peter Wimsey, Margery Allingham's Albert Campion and Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn. That love interests were frequently employed does not mean that crime writers

did not view the creation of a romance plot for their detective characters with some trepidation. Allingham sardonically remarked of the risks of marrying off a male detective figure,

Of all the hazards that threaten the detective of fiction, I doubt if there is one more likely to be lethal than matrimony. Taking a wife is a serious step for any man, but for him it can be lethal.³

When Allingham and other writers introduce long-term romantic interests for their series detectives, the strategy of depicting the women as active partners in detection is often used in order to sustain successfully the series' momentum. With the exception of Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, who are a detective team from their very first appearance, all the couples examined in this chapter are examples of detective and romantic pairings in which the male partner is already an established, successful series detective when he meets his future wife. In the case of series detectives' romances, often the relationship is represented from courtship to marriage and beyond while the couple solves crimes together. This strategy gives occasion for the novels to explore not only the potential for female agency to be found in the emerging ideal of companionate marriage, but also the tension inherent in the meeting between a still culturally dominant domestic ideal and the reality of expanding opportunities for women in the public sphere. Consequently, depicting conventional heterosexual romantic relationships, particularly creating a female love interest for a male series detective, provides an opportunity to construct a dialogue with available models of femininity of the time, and a space in which to test modern ideas about sexuality, gender roles and companionate marriage.

As discussed in this book's second chapter, marriage and the subsequent lifestyle of domesticity assumed to accompany it remained the expectation for women throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, ideas about roles within marriage were changing. Marie Stopes' *Married Love* makes a case for a model of 'companionate' marriage in which both partners are sexually, emotionally and intellectually fulfilled.⁴ In his 1935 guide for young couples, *Modern Marriage*, Edward F. Griffith writes about the rapidly evolving expectations of a wife's role: 'our conception of the purpose and meaning of marriage has changed in a generation ... Women in particular have a broader outlook on life. They will no longer consider that their only vocation is sweeping, dusting, cooking, and

producing children.⁵ This changing understanding of both the marriage relationship and gender roles within that relationship was beginning to redefine what constituted a model partnership between spouses. It also created inevitable tension between the traditional domesticity still held as an ideal and the potential for more active roles for women.

Occurring simultaneously with this new interpretation of marriage was the anxiety that accompanied the rise of feminism and the more active public role women assumed during and after the First World War. Critics such as Nicola Humble have noted that World War I and its aftermath affected gender stereotypes and, consequently, depictions of gender in women's middlebrow fiction:

The [war's] effect on gender roles was decisive ... The new man of this moment rejected the old masculine values of gravitas and heroism in favour of frivolity and an effete and brittle manner. The new woman took on the practicality and emotional control once the province of the male: she was competent, assured, and unemotional. These figures are significant new social stereotypes, repeatedly lamented, celebrated, and anatomized in the pages of the press over the course of more than a decade, and peopling most forms of contemporary fiction.⁶

These changing modes of masculinity and femininity are evident in detective pairings such as Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, and Allingham's Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton, as the deceptively inane detectives are matched with sensible, industrious women. The new gender stereotypes apparent in these portrayals clash with conventional gender roles within the romance plot to create a certain anxiety that belies the seemingly progressive marriages that result when these modern men and women unite. These characters' relationships are often fraught with sexual tension and personal conflict until they are reconciled in marriage, and the resulting marriage frequently requires that the modern 'masculine' woman and 'feminine' man must return to their traditional gender roles in order for the marriage to take place. This reversal does not happen easily; in fact, the couple's struggle is often marked by physical and/or emotional violence. Humble points out that ambivalence about what constitutes an ideal romantic relationship was not uncommon in women's middlebrow fiction of the period, and that a text can often embrace the idea of companionate marriage while seeming to 'espous[e] ... retrogressive positions about gender roles within marriage' such as implicit approval of male

against female domestic violence.⁷ This seeming incongruity represents conflicting ideologies in popular thought about roles within the marriage relationship; on the one hand, the new ideal of companionate marriage implies a co-operative relationship of equals, but on the other, psychologists continually argued that unequal power relations between couples were natural. Havelock Ellis, for instance, writes in 'Love and Pain' (1913) that to 'exert power, as psychologists will recognise, is one of our most primary impulses, and it always tends to be manifested in the attitude of a man toward the woman he loves'.⁸ Significantly, Wilhelm Stekel asserts in his *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life* (1926) that this power structure is also sought out by women in their relationships:

The woman always seeks the man to whom she must resign herself. She wants to be coerced into love ... All conflicts between man and woman, the whole unfortunate 'struggle between the sexes', rises out of this longing for a strong-willed man; it flows out of the longing for conquest, for the thrill of self-subjection or defeat.⁹

Within this school of thought, the feminine/submissive and masculine/dominant binary prevails in sexual relationships between men and women because of natural, ingrained responses in both sexes. This understanding is at odds with the companionate marriage ideal that emphasised the need for equality, and these conflicting popular opinions on gender roles in typical heterosexual romantic relationships are reflected in the ways couples are depicted in golden age crime fiction.

In this chapter, I shall explore the idea that the modern male must return to the paradigm of dominant, aggressive masculinity and that the modern female must return to the traditionally submissive role in order to establish a successful romantic relationship. Such resolutions are undeniably conservative, but the fact that these positions are depicted as reversed in the first place signifies unease about modern gender roles. The anxiety associated with the post-war male's assumption of more 'feminine' characteristics is expressed, but is seemingly resolved by his return to dominant masculinity.¹⁰ In addition, though taking a traditional, masochistic feminine role could (and indeed should) be seen as a step backwards for women, to read masochistic desire as simply 'giving in' or as a loss of power is problematic. Though Marianne Noble is specifically referring to nineteenth-century novels in *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, her analysis of the need to recognise masochism as a legitimate

means of expressing sexuality for women can also be applied to novels of the twentieth century: ‘masochism [is] a limited and limiting—but effective—means of imagining physical pleasure without damaging culturally sanctioned ideals of female identity’.¹¹ While restrictive in their suggestions that the wish to be dominated is innate in women and is often necessary for them to be sexually fulfilled, the work of sexologists such as Stekel recognises that women’s ability to experience and express desire is a positive and valid component of a sexual relationship. Though the modern woman’s reversion to a more conventional role can be read as a conservative failure to establish a new type of marriage, the relationships still aspire to the ideal of companionate marriage. The narratives explored in this chapter are shown to be ambivalent about modern marriage, reflecting uncertainty and conflict, but they do not represent a complete retreat to less empowering ideals.

The changing face of femininity is particularly evident in depictions of the life and detection partners chosen by popular series detectives such as Allingham’s Albert Campion, Sayers’ Lord Peter Wimsey and Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn. In Amanda Fitton, Harriet Vane and Agatha Troy, a model of femininity is provided that attempts to reconcile new opportunities for career women with a fulfilling romantic relationship and a domestic life. However, though these couples, as well as Christie’s Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, provide a valuable exploration of the potential of companionate marriage, they often falter when the question of parenthood—accompanied by the expectations surrounding domesticity and women’s role in the home—arises. As Craig and Cadogan point out, the women partners ‘embodied conflicting images, suggesting female independence of thought at one level but, at another, being nudged beyond supportive roles to the point of subservience’.¹² Paradoxically, each ‘is treated seriously as an active partner, even if this attitude is contradicted by narrative implications elsewhere in the stories’.¹³ Consequently, this chapter will also explore how—and, indeed, if—the ‘gap’ that exists between actively equal partnership and domesticity is negotiated in these novels. The ways in which marriage was being reconceptualised undeniably gave women a chance for greater agency that more restrictive, Victorian and Edwardian ideals of proper wifely behaviour did not permit, but how far did this agency extend?

The marriage plot conveniently plays into crime fiction’s tendency to offer essentially conservative resolutions, but a series detective’s marriage means that the depiction of the couple in question will continue

at greater length than many literary portrayals of romantic relationships. The courtship period provides a space in which gender roles can be renegotiated, and when a series detective and his love interest marry, the series continues, depicting the evolving relationship and examining what it means to have a ‘modern’ marriage. Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments on what she calls ‘writing beyond the ending’—when tactics are used to subvert or criticise the closure embodied by the traditional romance plot:

the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative ... Writing beyond the ending ... produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised.¹⁴

In depictions of series detectives’ relationships—most notably with Christie’s Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, but also with Marsh’s Alleyn and Troy, Allingham’s Campion and Fitton and Sayers’ Wimsey and Vane—the two participants are shown throughout different stages of their marriages and their lives. As DuPlessis writes, narratives that continue beyond a conventional ending can be viewed as transgressive by the very fact that they offer a more complex portrayal of marriage than a romance plot that simply ends when the couple finally unites.

‘TREAT ’EM ROUGH?’: COURTSHIP IN *ARTISTS IN CRIME* AND *DEATH IN A WHITE TIE*

The depiction of the courtship leading to a marriage and also the ‘honeymoon’ period directly following the nuptials provides a significant opportunity for the negotiation of new rules for conducting a marital relationship. There is often a considerable amount of tension inherent in this phase, as the couple acts out and sometimes attempts to rewrite the gendered scripts that accompany a heterosexual courtship. These concerns are evident in the courtship between Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn and Agatha Troy, which is played out over the course of two novels, *Artists in Crime* (1938) and *Death in a White Tie* (1938). The opening scene of *Artists in Crime* in which the couple first meet is deliberately unromantic; Alleyn watches Troy at work on a painting, but his attention is initially drawn not

by his own attraction to her person but by Troy's frustrated exclamation, 'Damn, damn, damn! Oh *blast!*'¹⁵ A 'startled' Alleyn beholds:

a woman [who] seemed to be dabbing at something. She stood up and he saw that she wore a pair of exceedingly grubby flannel trousers, and a short grey overall. In her hand was a long brush. Her face was disfigured by a smudge of green paint, and her short hair stood up in a worried shock, as though she had run her hands through it.¹⁶

Though Troy becomes the unsuspecting object of Alleyn's gaze, her prosaic expression of annoyance is what first grabs his attention; she is not introduced as a passive object for the male spectator; rather, it is her voice that first commands his attention.¹⁷ In this case, Troy, though in the 'feminine', objective position of being observed, is an active observer herself; she is deeply involved in her own work, which depends upon taking in and interpreting details as much as Alleyn's does. Alleyn does not gain Troy's notice until he points out an element she needs to complete her painting, to which she remarks, 'Well, I must say you're very observant for a layman.' Troy's condescending comment firmly places her in the more powerful role of professional observer and—to her mind—Alleyn as an amateur. Their conversation continues:

'It's synthetic.'

'You mean you've trained your eye?'

'I've had to try to do so, certainly.'

'Why?'

'Part of my job. Let me take that box for you.'

'Oh—thank you. Mind the lid—it's a bit pointy. Pity to spoil those lovely trousers. Will you take the sketch?'

'Do you want a hand down?' offered Alleyn.

'I can manage, thank you,' she said gruffly, and clambered down to the deck.¹⁸

Troy's interest in, and then absent-minded dismissal of, Alleyn's reasons for 'training his eye' emphasises that of the two she is the first to appear as a professional, and as a more successful professional than Alleyn. After he makes his suggestion about the painting, he recognises Troy as a famous artist and is embarrassed for presuming to give her the benefit of his visual skills. Though Alleyn is playing the gallant male in carrying Troy's box, Troy is hardly the conventional damsel in distress. The contrast between

the couple's clothing is emphasised—Alleyn's 'lovely' trousers are compared to Troy's, which are 'exceedingly grubby'. The descriptions of their clothing indicate that Troy is the more active (and therefore more masculine, given the stereotypical connotation between masculinity and activity) of the two, having dirtied her clothing in the course of performing her work. This places Alleyn in the passive position of being warned not to 'spoil' his garments through his attempt at playing the chivalrous male romantic lead. Troy also refuses Alleyn's gentlemanly offer to help her down, further rejecting the role of the helpless *ingénue*. The early emphasis on Troy's professional success, as well as the contrast between her markedly unfeminine appearance and Alleyn's sartorial tidiness, plays with gendered expectations of the romantic hero and heroine. The 'long brush' Troy holds in her hand as she works is a phallic symbol that places her in a masculine role of power, as she wields a tool that denotes her professionalism even as she is in the conventionally feminine position of being watched by Alleyn.

This play with gendered expectations continues throughout the first scene and, indeed, throughout the novel. Troy's gender ambiguity is again emphasised later in the novel in a situation that subverts the trajectory of a stereotypical sentimental courtship. During an emotional moment, Troy begins to cry: 'She looked like a boy with her head turned shamefacedly away. She groped in her trousers pocket and pulled out a handkerchief disgracefully stained with paint. "Oh blast!" she said, and pitched it into the waste-paper basket.'¹⁹ Alleyn then offers her his own handkerchief. In this scene, instead of surrendering to Alleyn's comfort and to a romantic heroine role, Troy turns away from him, highlighting her masculine characteristics in the process. Again, Alleyn's tidiness is contrasted with Troy's work-stained garments, but in the earlier scene when Alleyn's gentlemanly offer of help is refused because it will ruin his clean trousers, Troy's clothing prepares her for the more active role. In the later scene, Alleyn is more equipped to deal with 'feminine' emotion than Troy, implying the limits of modern, active femininity. Far from being a tender scene in which the future couple is brought closer together, it is a moment that highlights the discomfort of modern femininity forced into the confines of a traditional romance plot.

In one respect, Troy and Alleyn end the case on an equal footing, as they guess the killer's identity at approximately the same time. However, Troy's professional powers of observation are downplayed in this instance—while Alleyn's knowledge is shown to come from his detective profession, Troy's

is gained by a vaguely defined ‘woman’s instinct’. When she tells Alleyn that she thinks she knows who the killer is, he reacts with surprise:

‘You *know*?’

‘I think I do ... I don’t know why—there seems to be no motive, but I believe I am right. I suppose woman’s instinct is the sort of phrase you particularly abominate.’

‘That depends a little on the woman,’ said Alleyn gravely.

‘I suppose it does,’ said Troy and flushed unexpectedly.

‘I’ll tell you who it is ... I can see that this time the woman’s instinct was not at fault.’²⁰

Troy is allowed to intrude upon Alleyn’s professional prerogative by correctly naming the killer, but she does not have the authority to do so by the use of her own intelligence or any sort of detective skills. Though they both have the correct answer, Alleyn is given the right to confirm Troy’s and to judge whether the means by which she has reached the same conclusion is worthy. Both agree that ‘woman’s instinct’ is not a valid investigative method—it ‘depends on the woman’ from which it comes, implying that only a woman who has masculine approval is capable of using ‘woman’s instinct’ as a creditable means of gathering information.²¹ This scene stands in contrast to the beginning of *Artists in Crime*, in which Troy’s eye is recognised as having more authority than Alleyn’s. However, Alleyn does eventually acknowledge that her skills as an artist place her as his equal. Indeed, in *Death in a White Tie*, the novel in which the couple continue their courtship, Alleyn consults Troy’s observations of a party after which a man is murdered. Troy begins to relate her impressions of the event but then pauses: ‘And then later on—but look here ... I’m simply maundering.’ Alleyn replies: ‘God bless your good painter’s eyes, you’re not. Go on.’²² Troy’s response to Alleyn is much more deferential than her casual attitude to his visual skills at their first meeting. Once again, Alleyn is given the authority to validate Troy’s participation in an investigation, but his praise of her analysis is based on her competence at her work, suggesting that profession can transcend gender.²³ Both Alleyn’s and Troy’s capacity for observation would suggest that their relationship has significant potential for equality, but as Alleyn is repeatedly cast in the more dominant role, the balance of power becomes weighted in his favour. However, Alleyn’s position of authority is one with which he is profoundly uneasy. His discomfort with occupying

the masculine authority figure role becomes evident throughout his and Troy's hesitant courtship.

The authority his profession gives Alleyn is the source of considerable self-loathing. When he is required to search Troy's bedroom as part of his investigation into the murder of an artist's model, Alleyn is reluctant to perform this intrusion on her privacy, even though his position as detective requires it. Searching Troy's bedroom brings together Alleyn's fastidiousness and his reluctance to make any sexual advances to Troy. As he searches, Alleyn berates himself for his choice of career: "An odious trade," he mutter[s] to himself. "A filthy degrading job."²⁴ When it comes to the symbolic violation of Troy's sexualised personal space, Alleyn's self-loathing echoes the modern, reluctant masculinity characteristic of depictions of the post-World War I male. Alleyn's squeamishness also denies the position of power that accompanies his profession, as well as the desire for dominance that popular psychology insists is 'natural' to a man in his relationships with women.

Alleyn's uncertainty regarding how to construct a relationship with Troy is evident in a daydream in which he indulges in *Death in a White Tie*. Alleyn and his partner, Fox, return to Scotland Yard to finish some paperwork, and in that companionable atmosphere Alleyn's reflection upon their partnership soon becomes a fantasy about what life with Troy might be like if they were married:

Presently Alleyn put down the reports and looked across at his friend. He thought: 'How often we have sat like this, Fox and I, working like a couple of obscure clerks ... I shall go home later on, a solitary fellow, to my own hole.' And into his thoughts came the image of a woman who sat in a tall blue chair by his fire, but that was too domestic a picture. Rather, she would sit on the hearth-rug. Her hands would be stained with charcoal and they would sweep beautiful lines across a white surface. When he came in she would look up from her drawing and Troy's eyes would smile or scowl.²⁵

Alleyn's fantasy of domesticity is ambivalent; it combines a stereotypically domestic hearthside setting with a woman who is performing an activity that distinguishes her in the public sphere. Alleyn's daydream occurs when he is working with Fox, his friend and partner, with whom he feels 'that pleasant feeling of unexpressed intimacy that comes to two people working in silence at the same job'.²⁶ That his imaginings take place when he and Fox are working together suggests that his ideal relationship with

Troy might be similar. Nevertheless, though Fox is referred to as Alleyn's 'friend', Alleyn is also his professional superior. For Alleyn to fantasise about a relationship with Troy that would be akin to his and Fox's suggests that Alleyn desires a romantic relationship that is companionate but still places one partner—himself—in the more dominant role. However, Alleyn's fantasy-Troy is not completely subservient, even if she seems to be in the extremely domesticated position of sitting near the hearth waiting for her man to return from his work. In this fantasy, Alleyn rejects the image of Troy sitting in a chair by the fire as 'too domestic', suggesting that sitting on the floor is not as submissive as it might seem—the position is more unconventional than domestic. Furthermore, Troy is occupied not with typical household tasks but with her own work. In addition, though Alleyn is thinking of a scene that involves him observing Troy while she sits below him, which would suggest that he is in a position of power, he is also fantasising about being the object of Troy's gaze. Though it is his own fantasy, Alleyn does not even know whether 'Troy's eyes [will] smile or scowl', implying that Alleyn is not only unsure how to proceed with the relationship, but that he also feels he is in a passive position, unable to control how he is being perceived. The mixture of traditional and modern gender roles expressed in Alleyn's fantasy represents his struggle to negotiate changing models of masculinity and femininity and how they might play into a modern heterosexual romantic relationship.

Alleyn's failure to perform adequately a romantic hero role is made explicit in the final chapter of *Artists in Crime*, when expectations of a conventionally romantic conclusion are overturned. The chapter's title, 'Epilogue in a Garden', evokes the ending to a traditional romance in which the hero and heroine confess their tender feelings for each other in a stereotypically romantic setting. As the scene begins, 'Troy sat on a rug in the central grass plot of Lady Alleyn's rose garden. Alleyn stood and looked down at her.'²⁷ Foreshadowing his fantasy of their marriage in *Death in a White Tie*, Alleyn is cast in the masculinised position of observer and Troy as the submissive female sitting below him, and the stage seems to be set for them to assume their traditional gender roles and come together for a predictable happy ending. However, instead of a romantic scene, Alleyn performs the golden age detective's explication followed by a self-loathing retreat from declaring his romantic feelings:

'I think that if we met again in a different way you might have loved me. But because of all that has happened your thoughts of me are spoiled. There's an

association of cold and rather horrible officiousness. Well, perhaps it's not quite as bad as all that, but my job has come between us.²⁸

Alleyn is reluctant to take advantage of Troy's emotional vulnerability, acknowledging her uncertainty regarding her feelings for him and his unwillingness to force the point.²⁹ That Alleyn is so overtly uncomfortable with a 'natural', aggressive form of masculinity is suggestive; by not declaring himself to Troy more forcefully, Alleyn has failed to act as the stereotypical romantic hero. Their inability to come to a romantic understanding at the end of *Artists in Crime* sets Alleyn and Troy apart from other, more transient couples in the typical golden age crime novel; the uncertainty of their story highlights their discomfort with conforming to the traditional romance plot that will inevitably shape the trajectory of their relationship.

Complicated depictions of marriage and romantic relationships, and the cultural rules that define them, continue in *Death in a White Tie*, the novel in which Alleyn and Troy reconcile their feelings for each other. Central to this portrayal is the very evident conflict between the traditional and the modern. The novel's setting is the fading upper-crust world of debutante balls, in which 'coming out' becomes a metaphor not only for young girls making their debuts into upper-class society, but also for secrets and scandals that are revealed after their containment by the complicit silence of Victorian social codes. Indeed, the phrase's meaning is interrogated on the first page of the novel when Lady Alleyn informs her son that she will be helping to 'bring out' his niece, her granddaughter, during the upcoming season:

'Roderick,' said Lady Alleyn, looking at her son over the top of her spectacles, 'I am coming out.'

'Out?' repeated Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn vaguely. 'Out where, mama? Out of what?'

'Out into the world. Out of retirement. Out into the season. Out. Dear me,' she added confusedly, 'how absurd a word becomes if one says it repeatedly.

Out.'³⁰

Alleyn's failure to grasp immediately that his mother is speaking of the London season lends a humorous note that further underscores the interrogation of 'coming out'—as a man from an aristocratic family, he should be aware of the tradition to which the phrase refers, so his indifference marks the questioning of the tradition's significance. Lady Alleyn's

repetition of the word ‘out’ and her remark on the ‘absurdity’ of a repeated word also work to dismantle the ritual’s meaning.

The clash between modern and traditional cultures is exemplified in the murder of Lord Robert Gospell, or Bunchy, as he is called. Bunchy is a familiar figure on the social scene and represents a lost era. He is described as

[having] an odd trick of using Victorian colloquialisms; legacies, he would explain, from his distinguished father ... He kept up little Victorian politenesses, always leaving cards after a ball and often sending flowers to the hostesses who dined him. His clothes were famous—a rather high, close-buttoned jacket and narrowish trousers by day, a soft wide hat and a cloak in the evening.³¹

Bunchy represents the safe, idealised and patriarchal world of the upper classes. He has learned his anachronistic speech patterns from ‘his distinguished father’, linking Bunchy with the past, and even his surname, Gospell, suggests an affinity to tradition, ritual and trustworthiness. That he represents paternalistic Victorian social codes is further demonstrated by his role as a ‘fairy godfather’ figure to the debutantes, as Bunchy is always the first to speak to or dance with struggling girls in order to help them progress more smoothly onto the social scene. When Bunchy becomes a murder victim after uncovering the identity of Lady Evelyn Carrados’ blackmailer, this represents irreparable cracks in the façade of the old-fashioned social mores he represents. As he is rushing out of the ballroom to contact Alleyne with the details of his discovery, Bunchy considers for the first time the reality of the London season:

It took him some time to get round the ballroom and as he edged past dancing couples and over the feet of sitting chaperons he suddenly felt as if an intruder had thrust open all the windows of this neat little world and let in a flood of uncompromising light. In this cruel light he saw the people he liked best and they were changed and belittled ... And he wondered if the Victorian and Edwardian eras had been no more than freakish incidents in the history of society and if their proprieties had been as artificial as the paint on a modern woman’s lips.³²

Bunchy’s bitter reflections on what he sees as the sordid nature of the modern world and his questioning of the ‘proprieties’ of the past signify the passing away of traditional social structures—a transition that does not happen easily and is marked by the violence of Bunchy’s murder. Bunchy’s

death is almost universally mourned among the members of his social circle; this grief can be read as not only for the man but also for the era he embodied, invoking a popular nostalgia for order and innocence, artificial as these may be, after the trauma of the First World War.

The plot of *Death in a White Tie* concerns a blackmailer who is worrying several members of the aristocracy, including Lady Alleyn's friend, Evelyn Carrados, whose daughter, Bridget, is a debutante. Inspector Alleyn discovers that Lady Carrados is being blackmailed because she was not actually married to Bridget's father, Paddy O'Brien, who died before their daughter was born. After O'Brien's death, Lady Carrados marries a much older man, who proves to be verbally and physically abusive to her and her child. Lady Carrados' situation is an example of the novel's critical examination of marriage; with O'Brien, she has an emotionally and physically satisfying relationship outside marriage, but when she marries Sir Herbert Carrados for security and social position, the relationship is abusive and destructive. Lady Carrados is so anxious for the secret of her daughter's illegitimacy not to become public that she is driven to paying off the blackmailer. She agonises over what might happen if her daughter finds out that her parents were not married and the anticipated shame the revelation would bring upon her and her family. However, when Alleyn persuades Lady Carrados to tell the truth, his response to her statement is to admire her courage in defying convention and staying with the man she loved. At first glance, Alleyn's non-judgemental reaction seems to suggest a progressive response to attitudes towards female sexuality outside marriage, but a closer examination of the situation, as well as of the other instances of female sexuality depicted in the novel, reveals a more ambivalent—and problematic—stance.

Evelyn Carrados is depicted as a kind-hearted woman who pays a high price for marrying for security. Her nickname, given to her by Paddy O'Brien, is 'Donna', because she reminds him of a painting of the Virgin Mary by the Renaissance painter Raphael.³³ In the scene in which Alleyn learns the truth about her relationship with O'Brien, Lady Carrados

was not in bed. She was in her boudoir erect in a tall blue chair and wearing the look that had prompted Paddy O'Brien to compare her with a Madonna ... [Alleyn] thought: 'She is an English lady and these are an English lady's hands, thin, unsensual, on the end of delicate thin arms.'³⁴

When Lady Carrados finally admits her sexual indiscretion, she is in her bedroom but not in her bed, placing her in a sexualised space but keeping

her separate from the potential site of actual sex. Her nickname suggests sexual purity but was given to her by the man with whom she had an affair and a child. Almey's consideration of her 'thin, unsensual' hands and arms is conspicuously non-sexual, and the connection of her hands to those of 'an English lady' desexualises her body by linking it with the cultural stereotype of a well-behaved, emotionally and physically controlled upper-class English woman. Added to Lady Carrados' aura of purity is the implication that she and O'Brien desperately wanted to marry but could not because he was already married; in fact, it is when O'Brien is rushing to give her the message that his wife has died and they are free to marry that he is killed in an automobile accident. On the one hand, Lady Carrados is judged kindly for her relationship with O'Brien, suggesting the possibility for a compassionate response to women who express sexuality outside marriage; on the other, she is implicitly disconnected from, and absolved of, her sexual indiscretion through the images with which she is associated and the implication that marriage was intended until tragedy struck. Significantly, the lenient attitude shown to Lady Carrados is conspicuously absent when it comes to other women in the novel engaging in sex outside marriage.

In contrast to the sympathy with which Lady Carrados' affair is depicted, Mrs Halcut-Hackett, an unscrupulous, abusive professional chaperone to debutantes, is not shown the same leniency. As a social-climbing American and former actress aspiring to belong to English upper-class society, Mrs Halcut-Hackett's indiscretions are not absolved by her class status like Lady Carrados, and she does not possess the 'natural' air of an English lady that lends Lady Carrados inherent respectability. When Bunchy is speaking to Mrs Halcut-Hackett early on in the novel, he reflects that her social manner is 'An imitation, but what a good imitation ... Her American voice, which he remembered thinking charming in her theatrical days, was now much disciplined and none the better for it.'³⁵ Mrs Halcut-Hackett's original class, nationality and profession mark her as an outsider to the social class in which she is now trying to gain status, and even though she is established enough that she is in a position to help young women 'come out', she is still negatively judged because she accepts money for doing so. Though she has advanced to a respectable social position, Mrs Halcut-Hackett is set apart because of her insistence upon operating as a professional. She is also the married party in her affair with Captain Withers, a suspect in Bunchy's murder, marking another transgression and another difference from Lady Carrados, who has engaged in a relationship in which the man was the adulterer. As a woman who is seeking sexual

fulfilment outside her marriage, Mrs Halcut-Hackett strays outside the bounds of social acceptability; she also offends by being a desiring middle-aged woman. In comparison with Lady Carrados, another middle-aged woman who has outstepped social restrictions upon female sexuality, Mrs Halcut-Hackett is subject to much stronger implicit criticism. In addition to the issue of stereotypes associated with nationality and social class, one of the key differences between the two is that Lady Carrados' transgression occurs in the past, when she is young, and is therefore pardonable. Lady Carrados is a desexualised older woman, while Mrs Halcut-Hackett actively exhibits sexual desire. While he is interviewing Mrs Halcut-Hackett in connection with the crimes, Alleyn observes, 'She wetted her lips. Again he saw that look of subservience and thought of all traits in an ageing woman this was the unloveliest and most pitiable.'³⁶ Alleyn is repulsed by his perception of possible sexual excitement in Mrs Halcut-Hackett's response to his show of authority:

Alleyn had interviewed a great number of Mrs Halcut-Hacketts in his day. He knew very well that with such women he carried a weapon that he was loath to use, but which nevertheless fought for him. This was the weapon of his sex. He saw with violent distaste that some taint of pleasure threaded her fear of him. And the inexorable logic of thought presented him to himself, side by side with her lover.³⁷

Besides being repelled by her as a desiring older woman, Alleyn is also uncomfortable with the means through which Mrs Halcut-Hackett experiences her desire. Like his aversion to pursuing Troy too aggressively, Alleyn's disgusted reaction to Mrs Halcut-Hackett is symptomatic of his rejection of a dominant masculine role in his interactions with women. He is reluctant to exercise 'the weapon of his sex' to elicit fear and the accompanying sexual desire it evokes in women who derive sexual excitement from being dominated.

Alleyn's anxiety about performing the dominant masculinity that is assumed to be innate suggests that such a model is problematic. His eventual assumption of a 'natural', dominant masculinity begins with a conversation with his mother. When they are discussing the case, she slips in some of her own opinions on gender roles and her son's relationship with Troy:

'If you're too delicately considerate of a woman's feelings she may begin by being grateful, but the chances are she'll end by despising you.'

Alleyn made a wry face. ‘Treat ’em rough?’
 ‘Not actually, but let them think you *might*. It’s humiliating but true that ninety-nine women out of a hundred like to feel their lover is capable of bullying them. Eighty of them would deny it. How often does one not hear a married woman say with a sort of satisfaction that her husband won’t let her do this or that? Why do abominably written books with strong silent heroes still find a large female reading public? What do you suppose attracts thousands of women to a cinema actor with the brains of a mosquito?’

Their conversation continues:

‘Do you suggest that I go to Miss Agatha Troy, haul her about her studio by her hair, tuck her under my arrogant masculine arm, and lug her off to the nearest registry office?’
 ‘Church, if you please. The Church knows what I’m talking about. Look at the marriage service. A direct and embarrassing expression of the savagery inherent in our ideas of mating.’³⁸

Lady Alleyn’s advice implies that a traditional model of masculine dominance and feminine submission is natural and therefore necessary to most successful sexual relationships, even if many modern women would deny that they derive pleasure from the feeling of being sexually dominated. At the same time, she admits that Alleyn does not have to actually commit violence, he only needs to perform according to the accepted model and make it look like he ‘*might*’. Lady Alleyn does not advocate male against female violence, but she does suggest that female sexuality in the form of masochism must be considered a valid means of expressing desire, as it is one of the very few means recognised as being acceptable within culturally sanctioned forms of femininity.³⁹ Lady Alleyn uses popular romance novels and the cinema as well as the ritual of the traditional marriage ceremony to point out the culturally ingrained language of masculine dominance and feminine submission. She also qualifies these examples by criticising such novels as ‘abominably written’, the attractive actor as having ‘the brains of a mosquito’ and the marriage service as an ‘embarrassing expression of ... savagery’, indicating that although masochistic fantasies should not be discounted as a legitimate means of expressing desire, they should not necessarily be seen as positive and do not comfortably mesh with feminist ideals.

Alleyn’s ‘wry’, facetious responses to his mother’s views on gender roles within romantic relationships indicate that he is uncomfortable with the inference that he should be more forceful with Troy. However, he wastes

little time in attempting to renegotiate their relationship. Not long after the conversation between mother and son, Alleyn invites Troy to his flat for tea. When they begin to talk about the case, he sees that she is uneasy and asks, ‘Why does [my job] revolt you so much?’⁴⁰ Troy responds:

‘It’s nothing reasonable—nothing I can attempt to justify. It’s simply that I’ve got an absolute horror of capital punishment ... I used to adore the Ingoldsby Legends when I was a child. One day I came across the one about my Lord Tomnoddy and the hanging. It made the most dreadful impression on me. I dreamt about it ... I used to turn the pages of the book, knowing that I would come to it, dreading it, and yet—I had to read it. I even made a drawing of it.’⁴¹

Troy’s frightened yet fascinated reaction to the hanging in the story mirrors her interaction with Alleyn—she finds him repellent because of his profession, and yet she is sexually attracted to him. Troy’s confession marks a turning point in their relationship, as Alleyn subsequently finally feels free to take on the dominant role, embracing Troy for the first time and ignoring her half-hearted protests:

‘Not now,’ Troy whispered. ‘No more, now. Please.’
 ‘Yes.’
 ‘Please.’

He stooped, took her face between his hands, and kissed her hard on the mouth. He felt her come to life beneath his lips. Then he let her go.
 ‘And don’t think I shall ask you to forgive me,’ he said. ‘You’ve no right to let this go by. You’re too damn particular by half, my girl. I’m your man and you know it.’⁴²

Troy’s ambiguous repetition of ‘please’ could mean both a refusal of, and a plea for, Alleyn’s sexual attentions. His forceful embrace of Troy and aggressive assertion of his place in her life could not contrast more strongly with his previous awkward advances. However, when Troy admits that she is undeniably sexually attracted to him but is shaken by what has taken place, Alleyn is overcome with remorse and returns to his usual deference, stammering ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry.’⁴³ Troy tells him, ‘I’ve been very weak ... You looked so worn and troubled and it was so easy just to do this.’⁴⁴ As she tells it, Troy’s submission is an act of agency; it is Alleyn’s down-trodden appearance, not his forceful masculinity, that makes Troy respond to his sexual advance. When Troy leaves, Alleyn ironically acknowledges

his failure to perform according to the established framework of gender roles in heterosexual relationships as defined by his mother by calling himself '[y]our most devoted Turkey-cock'.⁴⁵ With this image, Alleyn explicitly recognises his ineptitude in presenting the exaggerated masculinity required by the role of the 'leading man'. As Judith Butler writes,

Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of 'man' and 'woman.' These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate.⁴⁶

Alleyn's self-deprecating recognition of his attempt to heed Lady Alleyn's advice on the form of masculinity he must assume in order to establish a relationship with Troy emphasises that his sexually aggressive advance is not 'natural', but is a performance. That Alleyn and Troy's eventual marriage hinges on both of them being able to conform to the types of masculinity and femininity demanded by the heterosexual romance plot indicates a modern acknowledgement of the possibility that these gender roles are problematic.

Death in a White Tie ends with Troy admiring Alleyn's professional skills: 'How extraordinarily trained your eye must be! To notice the grains of plate-powder in the tooling of a cigarette-case; could anything be more admirable? What else did you notice?'⁴⁷ Although as a painter her eye is as 'trained' as his for noticing detail, in praising his talent for his once-despised profession, Troy finally invites Alleyn to view her as the object of desire she has refused to be from the beginning of their relationship. Alleyn enthusiastically complies:

'I notice that although your eyes are grey there are little flecks of green in them and that the iris is ringed with black. I notice that when you smile your face goes crooked. I notice that the third finger of your left hand has a little spot of vermillion on the inside where a ring should hide it; and from that, Miss Troy, I deduce that you are a painter in oils and are not so proud as you should be of your lovely fingers.'⁴⁸

In scrutinising Troy, Alleyn dismisses the marks of her profession and places her body's sexual potential over her professional abilities. Just as a ring would hide the spot of paint on Troy's finger, marriage will relegate her profession to a secondary priority. Linking his observation of Troy

with the professional observation that led to the discovery of the murderer's identity means that Alleyn has reconciled his professional authority with his new-found masculine authority, but the fact remains that he is only able to do this once Troy has given him permission to objectify her. Their courtship seems to conclude with a traditional 'happy ending', but their struggles to reach that culmination mark a real uncertainty and ambivalence about the shape of a successful modern romantic relationship.

PARTNER, INTERRUPTED: REPRESENTING COMPANIONATE
RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WORK OF MARGERY ALLINGHAM
AND DOROTHY L. SAYERS

The problematic nature of gender roles in heterosexual romantic relationships is also explored through Margery Allingham's Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton, as well as Dorothy L. Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. These depictions represent relationships based on a model of companionate marriage in which the couple collaborates both in love and in detection, but in each case the male detective figure assumes the role of the dominant partner and the women are relegated to the position of glorified sidekick. In a positive interpretation of this kind of relationship, Susan Rowland points out that female detective partners such as Agatha Troy, Harriet Vane and Amanda Fitton have 'a subordinate but contributing intellectual role far surpassing that of Dr Watson'.⁴⁹ The couple who might be an exception to this trend are Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence Beresford; as Craig and Cadogan write, '[o]f all the husband-and-wife detection teams, Tommy and Tuppence come nearest to representing an equal partnership'.⁵⁰ However, even this couple are faced with a hiatus from detection when confronted with the matter of parenthood. In all of these cases, motherhood, not wifehood, becomes the deciding factor in relegating women to a passive role in the background and creating a 'domestic gap' in the narratives of partnership.

Allingham's Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton first meet in *Sweet Danger* (1933) when Campion is called in to work on an improbable case during which he discovers that Amanda's brother Hal is the long-lost ruler of a small European country. In *Sweet Danger*, the gender roles assigned to Campion and Amanda are extremely flexible, and the artificiality of traditional gender categories is constantly being pointed out. For example, when Campion and his associates first come to rent a room in the Fittons'

house, Amanda shows them around in the feminine ‘costume’ of ‘a white print dress with little green flowers on it ... There was something artificially formal in her whole appearance. Her hair had been dressed rather high on her head and certainly in no modern fashion.’⁵¹ When they tell her they will rent rooms, Amanda admits, ‘I thought we’d better smarten up a bit. That’s why I’ve got this frock on.’⁵² Amanda’s idea of ‘smartening up’ is associated with old-fashioned clothing and hairstyle, linking her ‘smartened-up’ appearance with a recognisably obsolete model of hyper-femininity. The word ‘costume’ is used repeatedly to describe Amanda’s clothing, here and in a later scene during which she wears a ‘costume ... consist[ing] of a bathing dress and a pair of ragged flannel trousers lifted from Hal’s cupboard’.⁵³ With her bathing dress and her brother’s well-worn trousers, Amanda has irreverently paired particularly feminine and masculine pieces of clothing. The mischievous mixing of strange combinations of clothing and the frequent association of Amanda’s outfits with ‘costume’ reveal an artificiality in visual gender categories that allows her to test the boundaries of modern femininity. Amanda’s choice of work also bends traditional gender categories; she is a competent mechanic who later becomes a professional engineer. This play with gendered activities and appearance is not restricted to Amanda; one scene in *Sweet Danger* features Campion making a particularly memorable entrance dressed in clothing that belongs to Amanda’s elderly aunt, having just engaged in a shooting skirmish with an intruder.⁵⁴ The gender flexibility afforded to both Campion and Amanda suggests the possibility of them forming a modern relationship in which prescribed gender roles do not restrict either party’s agency.⁵⁵

From the beginning, Amanda and Campion’s partnership is surprisingly equal, but Campion does make an effort to keep the balance of power in his own favour, even as Amanda repeatedly points out her own value in the partnership. In *Sweet Danger*, Campion refers to Amanda as his ‘lieut’ (lieutenant) for the first time, coining a nickname that will last throughout their relationship.⁵⁶ Despite Campion’s efforts to allow her to assist him while keeping her in her (feminine) place, Amanda spiritedly refuses to be left out of the action when Campion tries to exclude her from facing dangerous situations. In one instance, Amanda protests, ‘You’ll never do it all alone without me ... I think you’ve bitten off more than you can chew.’⁵⁷ Her refusal to accept his authority as a detective and a man prompts Campion to comment ironically:

'I was going to take you into partnership as soon as you were over school age ... but I'm hanged if I shall now ... You ought to look on me with reverence. You ought to see me as the hand of fate, a deity moving in a mysterious way.'⁵⁸

A similar scene occurs in *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938), in which Campion remarks, 'I don't like this show, Amanda. I'd feel much happier if you were out of it. You don't mind, do you?'⁵⁹ Amanda responds by laughing: 'I'm the only disinterested intelligence in the whole outfit. My motive is nice clean curiosity. I'm valuable.'⁶⁰ Amanda never doubts her own ability to be an active partner in the relationship and puts her own potential for detached reasoning with or above that of Campion, the main detective. Her irreverent response to Campion's attempts to push her into a more passive role and thoughtlessly accept his authority questions the dominantly masculine, self-sufficient stereotype of the traditional detective figure. Instead of insisting upon asserting any kind of authority over Amanda in these situations, Campion accepts her right to be present and active after his initial half-hearted protests. In *Sweet Danger*, he even gives her his gun—a classic phallic symbol of detective authority—and does not question her ability to use it, implicitly acknowledging her agency:

Mr Campion took his revolver from his coat pocket and handed it to her ... She rose cautiously to her feet, slipped the gun in her jacket pocket, and turned towards the house. Then, looking back suddenly, she stopped and kissed him unromantically on the nose.⁶¹

Nicola Humble argues that beneath the 'comradely' relationship between the two is a 'strong emotional subtext' that is 'unspoken', and that this 'reticence' is a modern way of conveying 'emotional and ... romantic authenticity'.⁶² Their interactions with each other are characterised by non-flirtatious banter and easy companionship, which suggests something like a homosocial bond, separating them from overwrought romantic clichés and therefore from the stereotypical gendered responses of a traditional romance. At the end of *Sweet Danger*, Amanda proposes to Campion a combination of partnership and romantic relationship in conspicuously unromantic language that also rejects a conventional feminine role for herself: 'Don't be frightened ... I'm not proposing marriage to you. But I thought you might consider me as a partner in the business later on ... I don't want to go to finishing school, you know.'⁶³ Amanda's dismissal of 'cake love', or

overly emotive romantic love, at the end of *The Fashion in Shrouds* is also typical of her pragmatic approach to their relationship: 'Cake makes some people sick ... I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll pop this to-morrow and buy some apples.' Relieved, Campion replies, 'Do you know, Amanda, I'm not sure that "Comfort" isn't your middle name.'⁶⁴ Campion and Amanda's seemingly unfussy, non-sexually charged dealings with each other represent one way of negotiating a modern relationship that is not dependent upon the gender-coded script of a conventional romance. However, the companionate nature of their relationship is contingent upon the absence of sexual desire evident in their dealings with each other. Like Alleyn and Troy, Campion and Amanda must revert to enacting conventional gender roles before they are allowed to marry, and this occurs when they abandon their 'comfortably' desexualised connection.

The balance of power in their relationship shifts when the time comes for Campion and Amanda finally to marry. In *Traitor's Purse* (1941), Campion is stricken with amnesia, and all his memories, including those of his relationship with Amanda, are wiped out. Amanda has become infatuated with another man and has broken off their engagement, and Campion responds with uncharacteristic passion:

Every time he set eyes on [Amanda] she became dearer and dearer to him ... She looked very young and very intelligent, but not, he thought with sudden satisfaction, clever. A dear girl. *The* girl, in fact. His sense of possession was tremendous. It was the possessiveness of the child, of the savage, of the dog, unreasonable and unanswerable.⁶⁵

Losing his memory has allowed Campion to assume an aggressive, sexually dominant masculinity in his attitude towards Amanda; his feeling of 'possessiveness' is described in terms implying that this type of masculinity is innate and has nothing to do with 'reason'. It is suggested that Campion has simply recognised his true feelings for Amanda, but his memory loss and subsequent conclusion that though Amanda is competent and loveable she is not as 'clever' as he has proven to be an easy way out of negotiating a modern relationship that relies on equal partnership. Gill Plain has noted that in Dorothy L. Sayers' work, the Second World War had the effect of influencing a return to the safety of traditional gender roles, 'so that otherness and other debates [could] be put aside in order to concentrate on the priority of conflict'.⁶⁶ Certainly, the wartime setting and anxious tone of *Traitor's Purse* significantly differ from earlier novels in

the Campion series such as the fantasy-adventure *Sweet Danger*, with its whimsical plot that allows play with gender categories for both Campion and Amanda. The flexible gender roles they have assumed throughout their courtship fail to carry over into the reality of their wartime marriage, and Campion and Amanda must fall back on the paradigm of dominant masculinity and submissive femininity in order to reach the culmination of the romance plot. The subdued sexual tension that characterised their relationship before *Traitor's Purse* is now supplanted by Campion's clichéd sexual jealousy, which makes him act on his feelings for Amanda, who is herself acting completely against her clearly stated distaste for 'cake love' by becoming besotted with Lee Aubrey, the man who turns out to be the villain of the story. This trite love triangle suggests the need to resort to the model of a conventional romance and its accompanying gender stereotypes to bring about Campion and Amanda's reconciliation at the end of the novel.

After their marriage, Campion leaves to fight in the Second World War, and the next time he and Amanda see each other is three years later, at the end of *Coroner's Pidgin* (1945). That they meet at the end of the novel is significant; Campion is on leave and spends the entire novel trying to solve a case quickly so that he can return to Amanda, who plays no role in the investigation. When Campion finally reaches home, the first person he sees is not Amanda but his three-year-old son, whom he has never met. Amanda's first line in the novel is also its last, when she says to Campion: 'Hullo ... Meet my war-work.'⁶⁷ As an engineer, Amanda could have been making a direct contribution to the war, but motherhood has relegated her to a passive, domestic role, both in the conflict and in her previous detecting partnership with Campion. By referring to her son as 'work', Amanda does make a gesture towards positing motherhood as an active and valid profession, but since she is not present in the narrative while she is mothering this encouraging thought is somewhat negated.⁶⁸ Campion and Amanda's relationship, which began with the promise of equal partnership symbolised by their ambivalent gender roles, has settled into the comfortable resolution of a traditional marriage, with husband and wife occupied in separate, gendered spheres, as Campion continues in his detective role and Amanda, as the mother of a small child, is consigned to the absolute periphery of his investigation's narrative.

Dorothy L. Sayers' Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey have a relationship with a similar trajectory. Like Amanda Fitton and Albert Campion, their courtship involves a detective collaboration that leads to a romantic

partnership. Of all the detective couples, Harriet and Peter are perhaps the most explicitly concerned with issues of equality and individualism within a romantic pairing. The way these concerns are dealt with in the context of this particular couple has been criticised for being overly idealised, particularly with relation to the well-known proposal scene at the end of *Gaudy Night* (1935), in which Peter asks Harriet to marry him and she responds affirmatively with the Latin words used to confer Oxford degrees.⁶⁹ Nicola Humble calls this scene ‘unintentionally farcical’ but admits ‘it is a fantasy ... of a union of equals, of a great woman finding one of the few available great men to match her’.⁷⁰ The scene’s rewriting of a conventionally hackneyed romantic ending is undoubtedly optimistic in its implication that equal education can produce a marriage of equals. Nevertheless, Harriet and Peter’s relationship is one with an obviously dominant partner—Peter. From his dramatic role in gaining Harriet’s acquittal for murder in *Strong Poison* (1929) to his explication at the end of *Gaudy Night* when he pieces together the information Harriet has gathered, Peter is always shown to be the more powerful detective figure. This does not mean, however, that the gender positions they occupy remain stable throughout their relationship. One way in which conventional gender positions in Harriet and Peter’s relationship are subverted is through the power of the gaze, which is reversed in *Gaudy Night* to put Peter in the role of desired object. Several critics have pointed out that in *Gaudy Night* the moment of Harriet’s realisation that she is sexually attracted to Peter comes when she is avidly studying his facial features while he is reading and unaware of her visual examination.⁷¹ Peter also becomes the object of Harriet’s gaze in *Have His Carcase* (1932) when the two are swimming. At this moment, Harriet reflects that ‘[Peter] strips better than I should have expected ... Better shoulders than I realized, and, thank Heaven, calves to his legs.’⁷² Harriet’s candid appraisal of Peter’s physical assets puts her in the conventionally masculine subject position and places Peter in the conventional feminine position, as his body is regarded for its sexual potential.

Throughout their relationship, which begins with Harriet’s rescue by Peter in *Strong Poison* and continues as Harriet achieves agency as a detective herself in *Have His Carcase* and *Gaudy Night*, the two occupy unstable gender roles while still progressing inexorably towards the dénouement of a traditional romance plot. Gill Plain argues that Harriet moves ‘from her “feminine” position of absolute helplessness in *Strong Poison* to a relatively masculine position of centrality in *Gaudy Night*. The result is the existence within the text of a counter-current running against the surface

conformity of the romance plot.⁷³ Plain also cautions against viewing the marriage between the two as strictly conventional:

Even the conformity of the Wimsey/Vane marriage is not straightforward. *Gaudy Night* posits a conflict between ‘traditional’ woman’s devotion to her man and a non-gender-specific devotion to the intellect, and Harriet Vane’s love story occupies an uneasy space between the two.⁷⁴

Harriet and Peter’s marriage is, in some ways, a bow to the conventions of traditional romance plots, but it also reads as a sincere exploration of a modern companionate marriage and an attempt to negotiate a model for a relationship that allows both parties an equally active role. Their interrogation of the gender roles inherent in the conventional romance plot is evident in a sexualised episode of mock violence in *Gaudy Night*. Concerned about Harriet’s physical safety, Peter resolves to teach her how to defend herself against a possible attack, and this curious episode becomes what Marya McFadden calls ‘a stylized, mock-sadomasochistic ritual’.⁷⁵ Though Peter initiates the action, pretending to strangle Harriet while she attempts to defend herself, he then invites Harriet to try strangling him when she is unable at first to set him off balance. Harriet soon catches on, and when it is again her turn to be attacked nearly knocks Peter over. They complete the ‘rather breathless’ interlude by sharing a symbolic ‘post-coital’ cigarette, and Harriet subsequently reflects upon how she can turn the experience into a scene for her book in which a hypermasculinised male character tries to seduce a stock female character—a ‘glamorous but bored wife’—through physical domination.⁷⁶ When contemplating this scene, Harriet thinks, ‘It would suit them very well ... the cheap skates!’⁷⁷ While Marsh’s Troy and Alleyn must actually assume the submissive feminine and dominant masculine roles of the traditional romance plot, and Troy must admit to her masochistic desire, before they are able to have a successful romantic relationship, Harriet and Peter’s physical struggle is an obvious play on these conventions, with Harriet’s reflection upon rewriting the interaction into a passage for her novel, reinforcing the scene’s symbolically performative nature. Harriet’s rejection of the gender roles inherent in the conventional submissive/feminine and dominant/masculine binaries that emerge when, in her imagination, the man physically overcomes the woman and they romantically embrace, also represents her rejection of this model for herself. Peter’s invitation to Harriet to overcome him physically, even while they both acknowledge that he is still

the physically dominant partner, indicates the future trajectory of their relationship—both Peter and Harriet insist upon equality; still, in order for this to happen Peter must be the one who allows it.

The Wimsey/Vane relationship further complicates the conventional romance plot in the last novel of the Wimsey series, which is also the first post-nuptial outing for Harriet and Peter. *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) begins with a gossipy series of letters written by various characters, including Lord Peter Wimsey's mother, the Dowager Duchess of Denver. In her diary, the Dowager Duchess describes Harriet's first visit to the London house where she and Peter will live after their honeymoon:

H. alarmed by size of house, but relieved she is not called upon to 'make a home' for Peter. I explained it was his business to make the home and take his bride to it ... H. pointed out that Royal brides always seemed to be expected to run about choosing cretonnes, but I said this was duty they owed to penny papers which like domestic women—Peter's wife fortunately without duties. Must see about housekeeper for them—someone capable—Peter insistent wife's work must not be interrupted by uproars in servants' hall.⁷⁸

The Dowager Duchess acknowledges the power of a popular domestic ideal, but is firm about Harriet not needing to fulfil that ideal: Peter is cast in the stereotypically feminine role of being in charge of the domestic space. However, Harriet and Peter's situation is exceptional—Peter's class status enables the couple to hire servants to fulfil the domestic tasks that Harriet might otherwise be expected to perform, and as they (unlike royalty) will not be scrutinised by the popular press, Harriet's lack of involvement in domestic matters will not be censured by the wider culture. Nevertheless, Peter's insistence upon Harriet not being obliged to bear the burden of household tasks creates the possibility (albeit an idealised one) for a companionate relationship in which each member of the couple is allowed to pursue his/her own interests outside traditionally gendered spaces.

Busman's Honeymoon is significant in that it goes beyond the traditional dénouement of a romance plot, the wedding, in the way described by DuPlessis, and attempts to depict realistically the tensions involved in negotiating gender roles within a modern marriage. Harriet and Peter are both sexually and emotionally satisfied with each other, but they are still tentatively trying to work out the power relations in their relationship. When their 'busman's honeymoon' commences with the discovery of the murdered body of their new house's previous owner, Mr Noakes,

Harriet and Peter are initially shown to be equally matched in detective skill. As they attempt to reconstruct what the murder weapon may have been, both make valuable contributions to the discussion, to the surprise of the officer in charge of the case, Superintendent Kirk, who comments admiringly, 'You're quick, you two. Not much you miss, is there? And the lady's as smart as the gentleman.'⁷⁹ Despite their intellectual equality, *Busman's Honeymoon* quickly establishes a gender division when it comes to the active business of detection. When the body is found, the authorities are called and they and Peter go to the cellar to investigate: 'The cellar door was opened; somebody produced an electric torch and they all went down. Harriet, relegated to the woman's role of silence and waiting, went into the kitchen to help with the sandwiches.'⁸⁰ Harriet's dismissal to the kitchen is a definite regression from the active detecting partnership she enjoys with Peter before their marriage, and her exclusion from the examination of Noakes' body contrasts strongly with her sole discovery and assessment of the murdered body that opens *Have His Carcase* (1932). Her insecurity about her new role in the relationship prompts her to ask Peter, 'whatever you do, you'll let me take a hand, won't you?'⁸¹ Peter laughingly assents, but Harriet has already started to be nudged to the side in favour of other detective partners such as Bunter, who is ecstatic when, as Peter is reconstructing the crime, he looks to his valet for help in a moment of excitement: 'Not the new wife this time, but the old familiar companion of a hundred cases—the appeal had been to him.'⁸² By the end of *Busman's Honeymoon*, it is clear that Harriet has traded the role of partner for another role—that of symbolic mother, as she holds Peter, 'crouched at her knees, against her breast, huddling his head in her arms that he might not hear eight o'clock strike'.⁸³ Peter bears the burden of responsibility for the execution of Noakes' murderer in his capacity as sole detective figure, and Harriet, deprived of the detective partnership she had shared with him, must act not as wife and partner, but as mother to Peter.

Harriet's relegation to the domestic periphery is apparent when she appears very briefly after giving birth to her first child in the short story 'The Haunted Policeman' (1939), in which she is rendered passive by her physical state and Peter solves a case alone. In the case of Harriet and Peter, the 'domestic gap' evident in many detective and romantic partnerships where the woman is sidelined by motherhood is not as evident, as *Busman's Honeymoon* is the final novel in the Wimsey series. However, one notable glimpse of life after parenthood for the couple appears in the short story 'Talboys' (1942). The story involves

Harriet and Peter's small son, Bredon, who is unjustly accused of stealing peaches from a neighbour's tree. The case itself is benignly domestic in nature—there is no danger and the 'crime' is hardly legally punishable. This renders Harriet's presence in the story safe within the context of her role; she can potentially be both domestic and active in detection. However, this is not how the story plays out. Peter again assumes the role of sole detective figure, but this time he has a new partner: his son, Bredon. Peter is working to absolve Bredon of stealing the peaches, a scenario that mirrors the plot of *Strong Poison*, in which Peter's investigation saves Harriet from the conviction for murder. While Peter is off detecting, Harriet is preoccupied with other concerns:

Harriet Wimsey, writing for dear life in the sitting-room, kept one eye on her paper and the other on Master Paul Wimsey, who was disembowelling his old stuffed rabbit in the window-seat. Her ears were open for a yell from young Roger ... Her consciousness was occupied with her plot, her subconsciousness with the fact that she was three months behind on her contract.⁸⁴

Continuing the trend that begins in *Busman's Honeymoon*, Harriet no longer functions in the role of partner, but that of mother. One optimistic aspect of this scenario is that Harriet has been able to negotiate a role within which she can still actively pursue her profession, 'three months behind on her contract' or not. 'Talboys' attempts realistically to present a solution to the problem of reconciling an emotionally satisfying career and family life, but this combination fails when it comes to depicting marriage as an equal partnership. The end of the story involves Peter and Bredon teaming up in mischief to place a snake in the bed of an irritating houseguest, and they exclude Harriet from their plan. The father and son partnership replaces that of husband and wife, putting a patriarchal and hierarchical model of detective partnership above the establishment of a professional and personal collaboration between male and female equals.

'HAPPILY EVER AFTERWARDS': AGATHA CHRISTIE'S TOMMY AND TUPPENCE

The couple that perhaps comes closest to achieving an equal partnership in both their detective and personal lives is Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence Beresford. Some critics have dismissed the Tommy and Tuppence stories as 'obvious'⁸⁵ and 'undoubtedly weaker than the Hercule

Poirot or Miss Marple stories'.⁸⁶ Jessica Mann even derides Tuppence as 'embarrassingly fatuous'.⁸⁷ The narratives featuring Tommy and Tuppence are undoubtedly whimsical—the infantilised names and role-playing that characterise Tommy and Tuppence and the far-fetched plots of many of the stories recall popular adventure stories more than crime novels. However, these elements also enable the relationship between Tommy and Tuppence to match a companionate ideal in a way that many other detective marriages do not. Fortunately, other critics have seen the stories' potential for depicting a companionate relationship in which the woman initiates the action as much as or even more than the man. For instance, Merja Makinen points out that 'Tuppence is ... independent and self-reliant and the relationship between her and Tommy is overtly constructed as one of equality,'⁸⁸ and Craig and Cadogan write that 'Tuppence's fluffiness ... turns out to be deceptive. She frequently ferrets out the clue in whatever case she and Tommy are investigating.'⁸⁹ Indeed, within their companionate marriage, Tuppence is the partner who spiritedly maintains the momentum in both their professional and personal lives, constantly pushing Tommy into modernity. When they bump into each other as old acquaintances at the beginning of *The Secret Adversary* (1922), Tuppence insists that since they are both hard up for money they should each pay for their own tea: 'My dear child ... there is nothing I do not know about the cost of living ... we will each of us pay for our own. That's that!'⁹⁰ Tuppence's no-nonsense refusal to accept the social convention of a man paying for her tea, and her reference to Tommy as 'my dear child', place Tuppence in an active role—even a leadership role—from the beginning. While they are having tea, Tuppence is the one who comes up with the framework for the money-making scheme she terms their 'joint venture'.⁹¹ When they begin their business partnership and their new employer warns them to take care with the case they are hired to investigate, Tommy responds, 'I'll look after her, sir,' while Tuppence, 'resenting the manly assertion', retorts: 'And *I* look after you.'⁹² Fortunately, Tommy as well as Tuppence are shown to defend the terms of gender equality within the relationship. In *N or M?* (1941), after they have been married for years, Tommy firmly asserts their partnership; when told 'I suppose even you couldn't persuade your wife to keep out of danger,' Tommy responds:

'I don't know that I really would want to do that ... Tuppence and I, you see, aren't on those terms. We go into things—together!' In his mind was that phrase, uttered years ago, at the close of an earlier war. A *joint*

venture ... That was what his life with Tuppence had been and would always be—a Joint Venture.⁹³

When faced with gendered assumptions about Tuppence's competence from an outside authority, Tommy goes beyond taking a masculine stance alongside their boss, affirming their model of equality both externally and internally. The Tommy and Tuppence stories provide a portrait of a working marriage that subverts the ending of a traditional romance plot by showing a truly companionate marriage existing beyond 'happily ever after'. The couple's relationship even exceeds the companionate ideal, as they are actual business partners, not 'separate but equal' within gendered spheres.

In *Partners in Crime* (1929), Tommy and Tuppence are given the opportunity to take over a detecting business called the International Detecting Agency. Though they admit that they have experience of only one case to draw upon, Tommy and Tuppence have both 'read every detective novel that has been published in the last ten years' and resolve to draw upon this knowledge in dealing with the cases that come to them through the agency.⁹⁴ Their emulation takes the form of assuming the roles of various recognisable detective figures and sometimes their sidekicks, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Baroness Orczy's Old Man in the Corner, H.C. Bailey's Reginald Fortune and Christie's own Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings. Significantly, though these role-playing stories are parodic in tone, they provide a space in which it proves not to matter whether Tommy or Tuppence plays the detective or the sidekick when it comes to solving the crime. In this way, the narratives not only call into question gendered assumptions about detective skills but also, as Merja Makinen writes, 'destabili[ze] the dominance and subservience of ... traditional constructions'.⁹⁵ Also, in the way the roles in their detective agency are set up, Tommy is the 'chief' and Tuppence is the secretary in the outer office, but in practice they are equally active partners in the business. This masquerade 'highlights the gender expectations of society in general and serves to call attention to the inherent sexism', as it plays on assumptions about gendered roles in the workplace in order to deceive suspects and clients.⁹⁶

Throughout the novels and stories involving Tommy and Tuppence, Tuppence constantly functions to question traditional gender roles. At the beginning of *Partners in Crime*, she draws attention to the unrealistic

nature of the conventional romance plot's 'fairy tale ending': 'So Tommy and Tuppence were married ... and lived happily ever afterwards. It is extraordinary ... how different everything always is from what you think it is going to be.'⁹⁷ Tuppence's frustration stems from the fact that she is bored with housework and 'wants something to do so badly': 'Twenty minutes' work after breakfast every morning keeps the flag going to perfection.'⁹⁸ Tuppence's longing for activity and her honest assessment of the amount of time and effort it takes to fulfil her domestic role in a modern household of two people highlight the need for a reassessment of roles assigned in traditional gendered spheres.⁹⁹ In *N or M?*, an exasperated Tuppence again rails against enforced inaction, this time not only because of sexism but also because of ageism. She calls herself 'a poor, pushing, tiresome, middle-aged woman who won't sit at home quietly and knit as she ought to do', and asks Tommy, 'Are we past doing things? *Are* we? Or is it only that every one keeps insinuating that we are.'¹⁰⁰ Tuppence's questioning of social norms highlights the injustice of arbitrary limitations based on negative gender and age stereotypes. Her responses to what could be seen as the restrictive roles of marriage and motherhood also represent an attempt to redefine these institutions so as to include the potential for agency. When she and Tommy agree to marry, Tuppence enthusiastically says, 'What fun it will be ... Marriage is called all sorts of things, a haven, a refuge, and a crowning glory, and a state of bondage, and lots more. But do you know what I think it is? ... A sport!'¹⁰¹ Tuppence dismisses the idealising, solemn or derogatory language commonly associated with marriage in favour of a playful, modern term that suggests action and even sex, thereby redefining marriage as an activity in which one voluntarily engages for pleasure and excitement. When Tuppence tells Tommy that they must give up the detective business, it is not because she is overcome with caution after a narrow escape from death, as he assumes. Instead, she lets him know that they face a new challenge: parenthood. Tuppence says, 'I've got something better to do ... Something ever so much more exciting ... I'm talking ... of Our Baby. Wives don't whisper nowadays. They shout. OUR BABY! Tommy, isn't everything marvellous?'¹⁰² Tuppence's retirement from detection is not a rejection of an active mode of femininity; she constructs her impending motherhood as moving on to yet another (more) stimulating new endeavour.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the fact remains that the couple is not depicted in print again until *N or M?*, in which their children are grown. Tommy and Tuppence's narrative is disrupted, as is their business partnership, when they separate into gendered public and

private spheres for the duration of the time their children are living at home, but they significantly leave detection together just as they enter back into it together. Neither is ever the sole detective figure; their partnership in both life and detection stands as the most ideally equal among golden age detective couples. The domestic gap common to all these narratives is problematic in terms of depicting marriage as an equal partnership, but Tommy and Tuppence come closest to reaching a modern, more equal relationship between the sexes. These narratives' ambivalent portrayals of gender roles should not necessarily be taken as a failure but rather as a by-product of attempts to negotiate changing ideals of love, marriage and domesticity and the gender constructions that accompany them. The more active models of femininity available to the modern woman allow for a certain amount of gender flexibility, but the conservative resolutions of the romance plot and the crime genre, as well as culturally dominant views on the duties of motherhood, demand that women partners must spend at least the duration of their active motherhood restricted by domestic obligations. Chapter 5 will discuss the ways in which these limitations inform constructions of femininity in the public sphere of the workplace.

NOTES

1. S.S. Van Dine, 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories', in Howard Haycraft (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), pp. 189–90.
2. Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Introduction to the Omnibus of Crime', in Howard Haycraft (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), p. 103.
3. Quoted in Jessica Mann, *Deadlier Than the Male: Why Are Respectable English Women So Good at Murder?* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), p. 109.
4. Stopes writes of the necessity of developing a more equal ideal of marriage, 'While modern marriage is tending to give ever more and more freedom to each of the partners, there is at the same time a unity of work and interest growing up which brings them together on a higher plane than the purely domestic one which was so confining to the women and so dull to the men. Each year one sees a widening of the independence and the range of the pursuits of women: but still, far too often, marriage puts an end to woman's intellectual life. Marriage can never reach its full stature until women possess as much intellectual freedom and freedom of opportunity within it as do their partners.' Marie Stopes, *Married Love* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 95–6.

5. Edward F. Griffith, *Modern Marriage* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1955), pp. 1–2.
6. Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 197.
7. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 219–20.
8. Havelock Ellis, ‘Love and Pain’, in Sheila Jeffreys (ed.), *The Sexuality Debates* (New York; London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd., 1987), p. 511.
9. Wilhelm Stekel, *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life*, trans. James S. Van Teslaar (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 247.
10. Elaine Showalter argues that male hysteria brought on by the trauma of the First World War destabilised constructions of masculinity: ‘For most [men] ... the anguish of shell shock included ... intense anxieties about masculinity, fears of acting effeminate, even a refusal to continue the bluff of male behavior. If it was the essence of manliness not to complain, then shell shock was the bodily language of masculine complaint, a disguised male protest, not only against the war, but against the concept of manliness itself. Epidemic female hysteria in late Victorian England had been a form of protest against a patriarchal society that enforced confinement to a narrowly defined femininity; epidemic male hysteria in World War I was a protest against the politicians, generals, and psychiatrists.’ Elaine Showalter, ‘Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Identities’, in Margaret Randolph Highonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel and Margaret Collins Weisz (eds.), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 64.
11. Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 25.
12. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 91.
13. Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 207.
14. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 5.
15. Ngaio Marsh, *Artists in Crime* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1984), p. 11.
16. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 11.
17. In her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), Laura Mulvey discusses the concept of a ‘Male Gaze’ that places women as objective observed as opposed to subjective observers. In the case of Alleyn and Troy, this convention is complicated when the role of observer is linked to their respective professions.

18. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 32.
19. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 181.
20. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 243.
21. In Agatha Christie's work, 'woman's instinct' is repeatedly shown to be a valued method of detection in spite of its derision by those who do not find it credible. Hercule Poirot (who himself often uses such a means of detecting) recognises the value of women's powers of observation and explains 'woman's instinct' in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926): 'Women observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing that they are doing so. Their subconscious mind adds these little things together – and they call the result intuition.' Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 195.
22. Ngaio Marsh, *Death in a White Tie* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1986), p. 75.
23. As will be discussed in Chap. 5, Dorothy L. Sayers similarly espoused the idea that gender should be irrelevant when it comes to an individual's capacity to do a job.
24. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 161.
25. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 179.
26. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 179.
27. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 250.
28. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 256.
29. Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1930) ends in a way that similarly rejects the trajectory of a conventional romance plot; Harriet Vane turns down Lord Peter Wimsey's proposal of marriage after he has saved her from being convicted for murder, refusing the 'damsel-in-distress' role in which the woman is saved by the man and subsequently becomes his wife. Like Alleyn, Peter does not press his suit after Harriet's rejection of his proposal, giving Harriet the power to summon him when she wants to see him.
30. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 9.
31. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 20.
32. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 51.
33. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 13.
34. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 139.
35. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 33.
36. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 171.
37. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 170.
38. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 185.
39. Marianne Noble recognises masochism in nineteenth-century American women's literature as a means for women to express desire through the 'dominant language' of masculine/dominance and feminine/submis-

sion, arguing: 'The dominant language that eroticises women's suffering and their submission to male dominance has itself frequently been an important means of exploring and expressing desire. The desires and fantasies that the dominant language enables a woman to articulate are indeed ideologically overdetermined, but they are also real.' Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, p. 8.

40. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 232.
41. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 232.
42. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, pp. 232–3.
43. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 233.
44. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 233.
45. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 233.
46. Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993), p. 26.
47. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 253.
48. Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 253.
49. Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 21–2.
50. Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 81.
51. Margery Allingham, *Sweet Danger* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 62–3.
52. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 65.
53. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 178.
54. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, pp. 185–6.
55. The whimsical tone of the novel allows this flexibility; Geraldine Perriam posits that *Sweet Danger* is essentially set up like a fairy tale, but a fairy tale in which 'the author allows the hero to "get his girl" as convention demands' while also providing 'greater possibilities for both hero and heroine by allowing them to act outside narrow gender stereotypes, both by their actions and by their contrast with other characters'. Geraldine Perriam, 'Sex, *Sweet Danger* and the Fairy Tale', *Clues* 23.1 (2004), p. 46. The nature of the gender-bending roles assumed by Amanda and Champion also evokes a pantomime in which the character of the principal boy is played by a female actor in drag and the character of the dame is played by a male actor in drag.
56. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 81.
57. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 197.
58. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 197.
59. Margery Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 214.
60. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 214.
61. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 207.
62. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 210.

63. Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 250.
64. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 288.
65. Margery Allingham, *Traitor's Purse* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1989), p. 47.
66. Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 57.
67. Margery Allingham, *Coroner's Pidgin* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1945), p. 227.
68. Amanda's reference to her son as 'war-work' is supported by the social climate with regard to mothers in post-war Britain. Denise Riley writes of British pronatalism in the 1930s and 1940s that 'The temporary coincidence of verbal object—the mother—in the diction of population policies, of social-democratic "progressiveness", and of women's labour organisations brought about an emphasis on the mother as real worker in the home, equal or indeed greater in "value" than the waged woman worker. In all this, the mother who did go out to work, and who consequently had especial needs, became an impossibility, regarded by no-one.' Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 152. This ideology of motherhood can clearly be seen in the portrayal of Amanda's resignation from her engineering job and absence from her position as detective partner to her husband in favour of motherhood, and also in Christie's Tuppence Beresford, who ceases her detective work when she becomes pregnant and resumes after her children are grown and have left home. The difference between the two is that in Amanda's case the detective narratives featuring her husband continue in her absence and in Tuppence's case the narratives cease for the duration of her domestic obligations and resume when she is 'free' to take up detection as a profession again. With Sayers' Harriet Vane, who is depicted as having divided her attention between work and family, the issue is for the most part avoided since Harriet's work as a novelist does not require her physically to leave the home, and the series of novels ends after her honeymoon with only brief glimpses of Harriet and Peter as parents in subsequent short stories. No attempt is made to resituate Harriet as both detective partner and mother of young children.
69. Peter asks, '*Placetne, magistra?*' and Harriet answers, '*Placet*'. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 557.
70. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 221–2.
71. Crystal Downing writes about this scene with relation to Mulvey's idea of the gaze in *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (2004), and both she and Carolyn Heilbrun (1991) point out that in *Gaudy Night* Peter is not only the eroticised object of Harriet's female gaze but also that of the women of Shrewsbury College. Harriet's observation of

- other women's appraisal of Peter allows Harriet to recognise Peter's sexual potential.
72. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Have His Carcase* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 104.
 73. Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, p. 58.
 74. Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, p. 58.
 75. Marya McFadden, 'Queerness at Shrewsbury: Homoerotic Desire in *Gaudy Night*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (2000), p. 365.
 76. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 458–9.
 77. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 459.
 78. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 16.
 79. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, p. 152.
 80. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, p. 136.
 81. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, p. 142.
 82. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, p. 393.
 83. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, p. 451.
 84. Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Talboys', *Lord Peter: The Complete Lord Peter Wimsey Stories* (New York: Perennial, 2001), pp. 462–3.
 85. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 93.
 86. T.J. Binyon, *Murder Will Out: The Detective in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 68.
 87. Mann, *Deadlier Than the Male*, p. 105.
 88. Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 29–30.
 89. Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 80.
 90. Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 14.
 91. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, p. 23.
 92. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, p. 62.
 93. Agatha Christie, *N or M?* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1981), pp. 43–4.
 94. Agatha Christie, *Partners in Crime* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1989), p. 15.
 95. Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 34.
 96. Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 31.
 97. Christie, *Partners in Crime*, p. 7.
 98. Christie, *Partners in Crime*, p. 8.
 99. As discussed in Chap. 2, modern labour-saving household technology, as well as the decreasing size of the typical household, made it easier for middle-class women to do household chores without outside help or servants, but it also meant that housewives were increasingly socially isolated.

100. Christie, *N or M?*, pp. 6–7.
101. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, p. 400.
102. Christie, *Partners in Crime*, p. 224.
103. Susan Rowland writes that ‘Tuppence’s vigorous personality allows the novel to represent pregnancy as a continuum of self-fulfilling adventures within traditional feminine domesticity.’ *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, p. 158.

Ladies of a Modern World: Education and Work

In the first half of the twentieth century, expanding opportunities for education and work opened up possibilities for women to achieve equality with men in unprecedented ways, but the conflict between these prospects and the push to keep women confined to traditional, domestic roles resulted in anxiety which is reflected in the complex portrayals of working women and women's educational institutions in the period's crime novels. Examining fictional depictions of women negotiating such previously male-dominated spheres can offer insight into these often complicated and rapidly changing female roles. Within education, communities of women are shown to provide a supportive environment for both students and teachers, but the spectre of lesbianism, figured as a threat, often intrudes on these positive depictions, reflecting fears stemming from popular interpretations of psychological theories about the sexuality of women who actively take part in traditionally patriarchal institutions.¹ Essentialist assumptions about women's abilities are at play in many of the novels' depictions of working women; as will be discussed later in this chapter, many plots introduce a successful woman only to have her 'natural' inclinations towards marriage and motherhood move her to abandon her career at the novel's conclusion. Though these resolutions are conservative, the narratives provide a space for explorations of women's evolving roles in the public sphere, roles that are shown to be nearly inextricable from the pull of traditional expectations surrounding femininity, domesticity and sexuality.

Despite such conflict, crime novels also explore the positive implications to be found for women in the workplace. Adopting the profession of detection allows women such as Sayers' Miss Climpson and Wentworth's Miss Silver a way to use their talents to earn a living and complicate the label of 'superfluous' women that has been assigned to them. Being a professional detective also makes it possible for a married woman like Tuppence Beresford to work on an equal footing with her male counterpart, Tommy, as well as avoid (albeit temporarily) falling into the narrow purview of stereotypical domesticity. Though detection is an obvious profession for women characters in crime fiction, it is by no means the only option offered. Women feature as advertising executives, archaeologists, cleaners, engineers, fashion designers, fashion models, nurses, professors, saleswomen, secretaries, teachers and writers, to name but a few. These varied occupations reflect both typical and atypical jobs for women, but what many depictions of working women have in common is the expression not only of the need but also of the desire to work. The individualistic ideal of making a living at, and achieving success in, a job suited to one's own talents is one that manifests in many depictions of working women in golden age crime novels. Dorothy L. Sayers, in particular, often explicitly engages in her novels and essays with the 'problem' of women in the workplace. In her essay 'Are Women Human?' (1938), Sayers states that entering into debates about whether or not women should be allowed to join professions conventionally occupied by men is 'meaningless'.² Rather, Sayers argues, every person should have the opportunity to engage in whatever work suits their individual talents and tastes, regardless of traditional gender divisions:

If [men] are going to adopt the very sound principle that the job should be done by the person who does it best, then that rule must be applied universally ... Once lay down the rule that the job comes first and you throw that job open to every individual, man or woman, fat or thin, tall or short, ugly or beautiful, who is able to do that job better than the rest of the world.³

The ideal of a non-gender-specific basis for professional achievement is evident not only in Sayers' work but also in that of Margery Allingham, whose Amanda Fitton is the only woman in her workplace and is 'a pretty good engineer'.⁴ Characters such as Miss Climpson, Miss Silver, Sayers' crime writer Harriet Vane and Allingham's Amanda all represent the possibility of successful women working in male-dominated professions. Nevertheless, the fates of some of these women and the attitudes shown

towards working women are often contradictory. The expectation that women will fall into the ‘natural’ occupation of marriage and childbearing eventually eclipses their desire to have careers, and so the resulting resolutions provide a ‘safe’ solution that recognises and responds to the difficulty for women of continuing in careers after marriage and motherhood.⁵

As discussed in the previous chapter, Amanda Fitton gives up her skilled work with aeroplanes during the Second World War to focus on what she defines as another type of ‘war-work’—raising her son. Though not forced as entirely out of the workplace as Amanda, in the short story ‘Talboys’ Harriet Vane’s attention to her work is shown to be compromised by her duties as a mother. In a particularly disturbing scene that will be examined later in this chapter, Val, Albert Campion’s couturier sister who features as a suspect in Allingham’s *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938), cheerfully surrenders all of her considerable professional accomplishments and potential in order to become a submissive wife to a man who earlier in the novel has been pursuing another woman. In the case of Wentworth’s Miss Silver novels, the plot inevitably includes an unhappy young working-woman character for whom work is represented as not only a necessity but a source of exhaustion or a state of purgatory before the ‘real’ satisfaction of marriage.⁶ That some women characters are allowed to achieve professional success is optimistic in presenting the possibility of moving towards an equal place with men in the public sphere of the workplace. However, these examples demonstrate that novels depicting working women are sometimes not straightforwardly supportive of such an agenda—they are often fraught with problematic conflict between an active ideal of women pursuing careers that suit their talents and interests and the domesticity that was still considered to be the ultimate feminine achievement.

Of course, increased access to education also plays a significant role in shaping women’s public presence, and schools and universities are often used as settings in golden age crime novels. Not only are such places ideal to function as the ‘closed’ space with a limited list of suspects essential to many plots, but they also provide the opportunity to explore and develop ideas about women’s education through depictions of women students, women teachers and the schools themselves. As many of these representations reflect, obtaining an education, particularly a university education, was by no means uncomplicated for women in the first half of the twentieth century. Women were not allowed to obtain degrees from Oxford University until 1920, and at Cambridge University they were not eligible to be full members of the university (and thus obtain degrees that gave

them the same status as male graduates) until 1948.⁷ Though other universities besides these two prestigious examples began to award degrees to women in the late nineteenth century, June Purvis cautions that ‘this does not mean ... that women were fully accepted on equal terms with men nor fully integrated into the university structure’.⁸ Susan Leonardi outlines a debate during the early years of considering degrees for women in which learning was thought by some to be ‘dangerous’ for women because it might ‘make them dissatisfied with their limited role [of wife- and motherhood] or unfit ... for that role altogether’.⁹ Leonardi argues that ‘the discourse of the debate makes clear that some such fear, some such sense of the danger of women rising up and taking over, is never far from the surface’.¹⁰ The communal nature of many women’s educational facilities is a convenient point at which much anxiety about educating women is directed. Nina Auerbach, for example, writes of the ‘recurrent literary image’ of women’s communities as:

a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through masculine approval alone ... communities of women ... are emblems of female self-sufficiency which create their own corporate reality, evoking both wishes and fears.¹¹

Novels set in women’s schools, colleges and universities speak to the hopes and doubts of many about women’s education; representations of close-knit, supportive female communities such as *Gaudy Night’s* (1935) Shrewsbury College or the convent school of *St Peter’s Finger* (1938) illustrate the possibility of a positive ideal of women’s education in which both students and teachers contribute to the well-being of the community while developing their own talents. However, both *Gaudy Night* and *St Peter’s Finger* present educational facilities for women as facing prejudice originating from stereotypes about communities of women. The fear of ‘unnatural’ women is commonly depicted; frequent allusions to the dangers of lesbianism—and, in the case of *St Peter’s Finger*, religious extremism—are a common front for discomfort with the idea of women living and learning together. Though in both novels such stereotypes are confronted and shown to be false, Josephine Tey’s *Miss Pym Disposes* (1948) is more ambivalent, depicting a physical education teachers’ training college at which negative assumptions about tightly knit communities of women are paradoxically both reinforced and complicated.

‘IN HER OWN PLACE’: SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES
OF WOMEN IN *GAUDY NIGHT* AND *ST PETER’S FINGER*

Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* is a novel that deals explicitly with fears about communities of women; however, instead of confirming stereotypes about the psychological ‘damage’ inherent in living in such a community, *Gaudy Night* uses the assumption of a repressed, ‘unnatural’ educated woman as the inevitable unhinged villain to manipulate expectations and, in doing so, expose and dismantle the stereotype.¹² As the novel begins, crime novelist and Oxford graduate Harriet Vane is travelling with some trepidation to her old Oxford college, Shrewsbury, where she will attend a ‘gaudy’ and be reunited after many years with her former lecturers and fellow students. Harriet feels compelled to revisit Shrewsbury College after receiving a letter from an ill friend who wants to see her, though she feels defensive about others’ perceptions of her since she was scandalously—though unjustly—accused of murdering her lover. Before Harriet arrives, she worries about the potential reactions to her colourful past but derives comfort and self-assurance from reflecting on her status as an Oxford graduate:

She laughed suddenly, and for the first time felt confident. ‘They can’t take this away, at any rate. Whatever I may have done since, this remains. Scholar; Master of Arts; Domina; Senior Member of this University’ ... a place achieved, inalienable, worthy of reverence.¹³

For Harriet, the repetition of these formal titles to herself confirms her sense of self-esteem and defines her identity beyond her connections to men through sexual and romantic relationships.

Even after the gaudy, when Harriet is invited to stay at Shrewsbury to investigate the vandalism and poison-pen letters that have been plaguing the college, the university is represented as a restorative haven where she is able to gain confidence and perspective away from the attentions of Lord Peter Wimsey, who has been romantically pursuing her. In one scene, as Harriet sits gazing at the Oxford skyline and haltingly attempts to write a sonnet, she feels that she has rediscovered her sense of self:

with many false starts and blank feet, returning and filling and erasing painfully as she went, she began to write again, knowing with a deep inner certainty that somehow, after long and bitter wandering, she was once more in her own place.¹⁴

Composing the sonnet represents a different kind of creativity from the crime novels and occasional detection through which Harriet makes her living. The question of finding a balance between satisfying work and a fulfilling personal life is central to the novel, and Harriet's sonnet, which pays tribute to her love of the university, is her first step towards reconciling these aspects. Peter later finds and finishes the sonnet, mirroring the way he will later perform the traditional detective's explication at the end of the novel after Harriet's investigative legwork. These collaborations between Harriet and Peter inextricably weave together intellect, detection and romantic love, and provide an idealistic attempt to present their relationship as a marriage of equals. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship is only equal to a certain degree; Peter is and continues to be the dominant partner, retaining the detective's authority to draw the correct conclusions from the pieces of information Harriet has uncovered in her investigation. To Harriet, though, the possibilities for partnership with Peter that emerge when they are both at Oxford convince her of their potential for an acceptably companionate relationship. When Peter mistakenly walks off with Harriet's academic gown, she thinks to herself, "Oh well, it doesn't matter. We're much of a height and mine's pretty wide on the shoulders, so it's exactly the same thing." And then it struck her as strange that it should be the same thing.¹⁵ Harriet's reflection on her and Peter's accidental exchange of gowns signifies her new-found perspective; the university represents a common ground between them, into which traditional gender roles within heterosexual romantic relationships do not come into play, and this is the factor that enables their agreement to marry—an agreement forged in the words of the conferral of Oxford degrees. Though the university system and marriage represent patriarchal institutions, Harriet's realisation that if she and Peter can be equal in one they can also be equal in the other suggests the possibility of redefining an active and fulfilling role for women within the structures of both.

As an Oxford graduate who has achieved considerable professional success, Harriet is used to illustrate that although education is important, what one does with that education is also significant; as the Dean points out, 'After all, it's the work you are doing that really counts, isn't it?'¹⁶ Early on in the novel, Harriet explains why she is able to continue to write crime novels after nearly being hanged for a murder she did not commit:

I know what you're thinking—that anybody with proper sensitive feelings would rather scrub floors for a living. But I should scrub floors very badly,

and I write detective stories rather well. I don't see why proper feeling should prevent me from doing my proper job.¹⁷

Harriet champions the idea that people should engage in professions that suit them, regardless of how those professions have traditionally been gendered; as she tells the young daughter of disapproving scout and (as yet undiscovered) poison-pen letter writer Annie, 'lots of girls do boys' jobs nowadays'.¹⁸ This is a position that is held not only by Harriet but by the other women of Shrewsbury as well; Miss Lydgate, Harriet's former English tutor, tells her, 'I think it's so nice that our students go out and do such varied and interesting things, provided they do them well. And I must say, most of our students do do exceedingly good work along their own lines.'¹⁹ The notion that a job needs to be suited to the person performing it is central to the novel and presents an optimistic view of a future in which such an ideal is the norm. However, *Gaudy Night* also shows that for women, professional fulfilment is often complicated by marriage. Harriet's struggle with this particular combination is not the only situation in the novel through which these issues are explored; she meets two former classmates at the gaudy who represent very different outcomes for working married women, and who embody Harriet's own thoughts and fears about choosing marriage for herself. The first of these two women is former History student Phoebe Tucker, who has married an archaeologist. Phoebe and her husband work side by side and travel to sites together while their three children stay with 'delighted grandparents'.²⁰ Phoebe's situation is particularly fortunate; she is relieved of the domestic duties that might otherwise prevent her from experiencing a fulfilling work life, yet she inhabits the unrealistic position of combining her 'natural' function as wife and mother with an enjoyable career outside the home. Though Phoebe has not lost herself in the duties of marriage and motherhood, the truth is that this has been possible because one of the factors in her happy marriage is a mutual enjoyment of her husband's work.

The relationship between Phoebe and her husband illustrates the ideal of companionate marriage; however, here, as in other examples of companionate marriage, including Harriet and Peter's, the balance of power between the two is skewed towards the husband. Phoebe has the inclination and the knowledge to be able to derive a satisfying job for herself from assisting her husband, but not all of Harriet's fellow students have been so fortunate. Another old acquaintance Harriet meets at the gaudy is Catherine Bendick, who is 'two years older than [Harriet], but...look[s] twenty'.²¹ During her

time at Shrewsbury, Catherine had been ‘very brilliant, very smart, very lively and the outstanding scholar of her year’, but is now a ‘drab’, broken-down farmer’s wife.²² Harriet is shocked by the change in Catherine and, after hearing about the difficulties of Catherine’s life on the farm, asks her why she did not ‘take on some kind of writing or intellectual job and get someone else to do the manual work’.²³ Catherine responds, ‘That’s all very well ... But one’s rather apt to marry into somebody else’s job.’²⁴ When Harriet leaves Catherine, she has ‘a depressed feeling that she had seen a Derby winner making shift with a coal-cart’.²⁵ Harriet’s idealistic insistence that a job should fit the person doing it is complicated by the real pressures on women to conform to traditional gender roles within marriage. Catherine’s situation is presented in stark contrast to Phoebe’s as a cautionary tale not only of what can happen when one takes on an unsuitable job, but also of the consequences of marrying an intellectually incompatible partner. A happy marriage is presented as one that fits the companionate ideal, but this does not mean that both partners occupy equal positions in the relationship. Rather, it is contingent upon whether a woman’s professional interests mesh with those of her husband.²⁶ Though Harriet points out that Catherine could have chosen a more appropriate field, Catherine’s response indicates that cultural expectations mean that this is not always a feasible option. Harriet’s relationship with Peter, and Phoebe’s with her husband, work as examples of companionate marriage because the women happen to do work that complements their husbands’, but these successful marriages depend upon the women being fulfilled by a subordinate role in both their relationships and their husbands’ occupations.

Central to *Gaudy Night* is the question of a woman’s place—in education, in the workplace and in family life—and how such roles are being renegotiated. *Gaudy Night* is an unusual crime novel in that the plot does not include a murder; the ‘crime’ involves vandalism and poison-pen letters to various members of the college. The perpetrator is widely suspected to be one of Shrewsbury’s female academics; the Dean’s secretary, Mrs Goodwin, remarks, ‘The poor creature who does these things must be quite demented. Of course these disorders do tend to occur in celibate, or chiefly celibate communities. It is a kind of compensation, I suppose, for the lack of other excitements.’²⁷ The novel uses the assumption that women living in all-female communities are likely to have psychological issues stemming from sexual repression to obscure the identity of the true perpetrator and to make a point about the inaccuracy of these widely accepted stereotypes.²⁸ In fact, the letter writer and vandal is Annie Wilson, a widow with two daughters who works as a scout at Shrewsbury and has a

vendetta against Miss de Vine, a visiting scholar, because Miss de Vine had in the past exposed an act of academic misconduct perpetrated by Annie's historian husband, who committed suicide after being discovered. Annie herself actively attempts to throw suspicion on Miss de Vine in an early conversation with Harriet, when she alludes to the 'queerness' of 'clever ladies' before hinting that all the incidents had occurred 'since a certain person came into the college'.²⁹ Annie frequently and vehemently expresses the opinion that a woman's place is in the home, and her widowhood is frequently spoken of with sympathy. Because of her conservative views and status as a widow and mother Annie is seen as a 'natural', 'feminine' woman and so is overlooked and unsuspected. Yet when Peter's nephew Saint-George stumbles upon her lurking around the college, Annie, who is dressed in black with her face hidden to conceal her identity, tells him, 'Go away. We murder beautiful boys like you and eat their hearts out.'³⁰ Later, Harriet describes the unseen perpetrator as having a 'grip like steel' and 'a most unfeminine vocabulary'.³¹ Critics such as Marya McFadden have noted the irony that Annie represents the opposite of the culprit for whom Harriet is searching; instead of an academic woman acting out her 'unnatural' urges, it is Annie, the policer of heteronormativity, who acts outside stereotypical gendered behaviour: 'While Annie ideologically professes to be motivated by the desire to return women to their "proper place" in the home, ironically she herself is appropriating the masculine prerogative of aggression in her tactics.'³² As the perpetrator, Annie evokes the image of an 'unnatural' woman that she thinks will immediately draw suspicion to members of the college in order to implicate Miss de Vine. Thus, when her identity is revealed, both the stereotypes of the feminine, domestic mother figure and of the unstable, sexually repressed single career woman are destabilised by being proven false.

Annie is contrasted with the target of her wrath, Miss de Vine, who is the epitome of professionalism. Detached and rational, Miss de Vine puts intellectual values before emotion; when Annie asks if Miss de Vine considers 'breaking and killing' her husband to be 'a woman's job', Miss de Vine tells her, 'Most unhappily ... it was my job.'³³ Miss de Vine will not shirk her professional responsibility to report a colleague's misconduct simply because he is a man who supports a family, but that does not mean that she did not find it unpleasant. Annie angrily responds,

A woman's job is to look after a husband and children. I wish I had killed you. I wish I could kill you all. I wish I could burn down this place and all

the places like it—where you teach women to take men’s jobs and rob them first and kill them afterwards.³⁴

The words Annie uses to describe her feelings are violent and active, images that clash with the ideal of loving domesticity enshrined in her perception of ‘a woman’s job’. Making her marriage, and later the memory of her marriage, her job is what has made Annie unstable, which contrasts with the image of the repressed career woman who develops psychological issues as a result of choosing a career over domesticity.³⁵

While Annie, with her conservative views on women’s roles, is psychologically unbalanced and destructive, the women of Shrewsbury, whom Annie sees as ‘queer’ and ‘unnatural’, are in fact depicted as sane, caring and professional. When Lord Peter Wimsey is performing the traditional detective’s explication at the end of the novel, he begins by telling his audience,

‘The one thing which frustrated the whole attack from the first to last was the remarkable solidarity and public spirit displayed by your college as a body. I should think that was the last obstacle that [the perpetrator] expected to encounter in a community of women.’³⁶

Peter’s admiration of the community’s loyalty explicitly calls attention to the way it has challenged the expectation that professional women will be ruthless and unstable. The women of Shrewsbury draw together and support each other in an atmosphere of paranoia and fear, dealing with the attacks with self-reliance and discretion. *Gaudy Night*’s resolution advocates the importance of professional ethics above all, and, in addition, Harriet and Peter’s engagement at the novel’s end also presents the hopeful possibility of an intellectually and professionally equal marriage that presents an alternative to the heteronormativity that only allows women (and men) to have one kind of ‘proper’ role.

Like *Gaudy Night*, Gladys Mitchell’s *St Peter’s Finger* (1938) takes place in a community of women within a larger, male-dominated institution. While *Gaudy Night* is set in a women’s college at a prestigious university, *St Peter’s Finger* takes place in a Roman Catholic convent and school for girls. As the novel begins, the detective figure, psychologist Mrs Bradley, is called upon to visit the convent and investigate the suspicious death of one of the school’s young pupils. The girl, Ursula Doyle, is thought to have drowned herself, but Mrs Bradley suspects that she may have actually been murdered,

and the nuns of St Peter's are eager to prove that Ursula did not commit the mortal sin of suicide. The press coverage of the incident has been 'highly-coloured' and scathing, exploiting commonly held negative opinions of convents and nuns.³⁷ Such media attention is also identified as something to be feared by the communities of women in *Gaudy Night* and *Miss Pym Disposes*. That this factor is specifically mentioned in all three novels is significant, though their treatment of the prospect of publicity is different. *Gaudy Night* and *Miss Pym Disposes* both regard publicity as something to be avoided at all costs, as it would inevitably involve reinforcing negative stereotypes of women's communities.³⁸ When no attempt at a cover-up is made, as in *St Peter's Finger*, the exploitative media coverage would seem to confirm society's fears. The local people who live in the village near St Peter's take a dim view of the convent and its inhabitants, some even going so far as to vandalise the convent buildings after Ursula's mysterious death. Just before she makes her way to the convent, Mrs Bradley meets an elderly villager who stops to gossip and calls convents 'death-traps', saying that nuns 'lure little children to their doom'.³⁹ His reading of the girl's death is that the supposedly cruel and avaricious nuns killed the child so that her cousin Ulrica, who is planning to become a nun, will inherit their wealthy grandfather's fortune and give it to the Catholic Church upon taking her vows. The only positive impression of nuns comes from Mrs Bradley's French maid, Celestine, who tells her, 'Was I not taught by the good nuns everything that I know? More, too, which, alas! I have forgotten. Madame should recuperate, after the long American tour, at a convent. It is incredible, the care that is given.'⁴⁰ Celestine, who has actually spent time in a convent, has a more realistic idea of the positive potential of such communities, in contrast to widely held prejudices against Roman Catholic nuns in particular and self-sufficient communities of single women in general.⁴¹ Mrs Bradley herself is aware of the misogyny and religious prejudice that fuels reactions to convents: 'People nearly always exaggerate when they write or talk about convents. I don't think we have the right to assume what has not been proved.'⁴² Mrs Bradley's level response to the publicity surrounding Ursula's suspicious death dismisses the common fears and assumptions about convents, and her position as detective figure adds weight to her statements. In fact, the nuns at St Peter's are shown to be gentle and nurturing with their pupils; Mrs Bradley is told at the beginning of her investigation that 'as a special treat' the girls are sometimes taken to 'see the Mother Superior, who [gives] them sweets, and whom they [are] accustomed to address as Grandma'.⁴³ This and other frequent examples of the convent's warmly familial atmosphere

are at odds with the common assumption that nuns are frustrated single women whose rigid adherence to the harsher aspects of religious dogma leads them to mistreat the children in their care.

Though the nuns are separated from the outside world, they are by no means portrayed as lacking in secular understanding. Indeed, far from being a sequestered space for girls and women who commit themselves without having had life experiences, St Peter's is home to a surprisingly diverse combination of talented and knowledgeable women from all walks of life. The Mother Superior is the 'daughter of a royal house', who is 'an intelligent and widely experienced woman' and 'had lived a brilliant, worldly life before her acceptance of the veil'.⁴⁴ One of the nuns, Sister St Bartholomew, is the former Rosa Cardoso, a famous actress who joined the convent after a fire burned down the theatre in which she had a financial stake. No matter what has brought the various women to the convent, they are given the freedom to exercise their unique skills within its context. Sister St Bartholomew has become legendary among the schoolgirls for her gruesome and highly entertaining accounts of various saints' martyrdoms, which

were given by the old ex-actress with a lack of reticence which amounted to the Rabelaisian, and had stiffened the hair of many generations of girls, who, with the sadistic tendency of extreme youth, on the whole enjoyed them very much, but were not always edified by them in exactly the way that their mentors and preceptors might have wished.⁴⁵

Sister St Bartholomew's embellished tales satisfy her dramatic impulses, while teaching gives her a job that is suited to her particular abilities. The tales' entertainment value and appeal to the children's 'sadistic' tendencies also challenge expectations of a dogmatic Roman Catholic education, showing that there can be room even in such structured confines for creativity, individual expression and even subversion of the Church's approved narratives. In addition to Sister St Bartholomew, the convent is also home to Mother Cyprian, an expert bookbinder; Mother Saint Benedict, a talented painter; and Mother Saint Simon-Zelotes, a well-known artist who specialised in metalworking before becoming a nun and who is making brilliant reproductions of the convent's seven-hundred-year-old chalice and paten. These, as well as the rest of the nuns, are both personally and professionally fulfilled by having the opportunity to exercise their talents to benefit the group, creating a

diverse community in which the members support each other and individuality is respected.

In contrast to the nuns, Ulrica Doyle, Ursula Doyle's cousin and her murderer, is a neurotic young girl who is obsessed with the idea of becoming a nun someday. Ulrica is piously religious and wishes to join the convent at the conclusion of her schooling, but the nuns (correctly) regard Ulrica's religious fanaticism as potentially unhealthy. Ulrica orchestrates her cousin's death so that their grandfather's fortune, which his favourite grandchild Ursula was set to inherit, will instead go to Ulrica and subsequently be passed on to the Church as a dowry. It is significant that Ulrica is the murderer; Mrs Bradley's chauffeur, George, suggests Ulrica is 'ethereal', while the nuns, in contrast, are 'practical': '[Ulrica] seemed to me not of this world, madam. She reminds me of what I used to think nuns were like before we knew those here.'⁴⁶ Ulrica's invention of herself into the stereotypical image of a nun and her obsessive adherence to the wider institution of the Church alienates her from the community she so wishes to join—she commits the mortal sin of murder for the Church's financial gain instead of finding value in cultivating her own talents and using them to create a place for herself within the community. Rather than reporting Ulrica to the authorities for Ursula's murder, Mrs Bradley ensures that the girl is sent to her grandfather in New York so that she can do no harm to her other cousin, Mary Maslin, who is also a student at the convent. Ulrica's punishment is not to be handed over to the law but to be exiled from the community—as in *Gaudy Night* and *Miss Pym Disposes*, the female perpetrator's punishment is dealt with from within the community of women, indicating a rejection of the wider patriarchal authority of the law and the institutions of which the communities are a part. The nuns of St Peter's are devoted to the Church, but their practical application of their faith is based not on the Church's inflexible rules but on their own experiences in the world outside the convent, which have produced in them both a shrewd knowledge of human nature and a compassionate interpretation of their religion, traits that the fanatical Ulrica is lacking. Like the community of women in *Gaudy Night*, St Peter's convent is composed of a group of talented and intelligent women who confound popular negative stereotypes. The nuns represent a working community in which individualism is celebrated, and their convent presents an alternative to a heteronormative model of family and community that subverts both religious and secular patriarchal authority.

QUITE NORMAL?: STEREOTYPES AND SEXUALITY IN *MISS
PYM DISPOSES* AND *LAURELS ARE POISON*

Josephine Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946) is set in an idyllic manor house in the English countryside that has been converted into Leys Physical Training College, a highly regarded educational facility for women who want to work as physical education teachers or in the medical field. Miss Lucy Pym, who becomes the detective figure, is summoned by the headmistress, an old schoolmate, to give a lecture on psychology. Though she is not formally trained in the subject, Miss Pym, a former schoolteacher, has recently written a popular psychological text after 'spen[ding] all her spare time reading books on psychology' and disagreeing with them all.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, though Miss Pym's book is a bestseller, for practical purposes she is not shown to be particularly skilful in her new subject. For example, in her own mind, Miss Pym labels teacher Miss Lux as lonely and unattractive, but Miss Pym's opinion changes radically when she finds that for years Miss Lux has been romantically pursued by a famous, handsome stage actor: 'She had been all wrong about Miss Lux. As a psychologist she began to suspect she was a very good teacher of French.'⁴⁸ Miss Pym is repeatedly chagrined to realise that when she applies her psychological knowledge she misreads people and situations, and this has implications for her reliability as a detective figure. In fact, Miss Pym is characterised much more as a schoolteacher than as a psychologist, and, as a detective figure, she is unusual in that instead of bringing an outside perspective to an insular community, her previous life experiences mean that she becomes assimilated into that community to the extent that her perspective is limited.⁴⁹

Miss Pym's experiences both in an English girls' school and as a schoolteacher obscure and complicate any psychological insight that might warn her of potential trouble at Leys. As the novel begins, Miss Pym visits Leys out of a sense of obligation to Henrietta Hodge, the former Head Girl at Miss Pym's old school whom she admired as a child. The relationship has not altered much since their schooldays, with Henrietta in the dominant role and Miss Pym submissive and grateful for Henrietta's attention. The dynamics in their relationship align it with the stereotypical 'crushes' that were often assumed to characterise schoolgirl friendships and that will prove to be the motivation behind the novel's crime. Miss Pym's youthful, 'very childlike' and 'oddly small-girlish' demeanour, as well as her penchant for sweets and puddings, are other infantilising details that invite comparisons to a schoolgirl rather than an outside

authority figure.⁵⁰ Unlike other spinster detectives such as Miss Marple or Miss Silver, whose unassuming appearances are contrasted with their sharp detective abilities and who are able to maintain the distance that allows them to retain their authority, Miss Pym becomes so integrated into the community that it becomes impossible for her to discern the correct perpetrator at the correct time. Just before she is set to leave the school after her lecture, Miss Pym is asked to stay on to fill in for another teacher who is attending a conference in London, and this shifts her even more from the position of outsider to that of insider. Miss Pym happily considers her prolonged stay at Leys:

Nice, clean, healthy children. It was really very pleasant here. That smudge on the horizon was the smoke of Larborough. There would be another smudge like that over London. It was much better to sit here where the air was bright with sun and heavy with roses, and be given friendly smiles by friendly young creatures.⁵¹

Miss Pym's consideration of the 'smoke' and associated dirtiness and darkness of the city in contrast to the 'nice, clean healthy children' in the idyllic countryside is another faulty judgement that is soon pointed out to her by the true outsider at the school, Brazilian dance student Theresa Desterro.

Desterro's maturity, exoticism and urbanity set her apart from the other students; indeed, her 'otherness' gives her insight into the workings of the students and the college that Miss Pym lacks. When Desterro asks Miss Pym why she does not find the students at Leys interesting from a psychological perspective, Miss Pym tells Desterro that she considers them to be 'too normal and too nice. Too much of a type.'⁵² Desterro responds with 'amusement':

I am trying to think of someone—some Senior—who is normal. It is not easy ... You know how they live here. How they work. It would be difficult to go through their years of training here and be quite normal in their last term.⁵³

Miss Pym's judgement of the 'healthiness' of the young women at Leys is suggested to be superficial and reflects a relatively new attitude about women and physical activity that evolved with the introduction of physical education into the curriculums of girls' schools. Martha Vicinus writes that 'By the end of the nineteenth century the most important single method

for binding girls into a band of loyal students was sports ... [Sports] channelled the emotionalism and “herd instinct” of girls into a “healthier” esprit de corps.⁵⁴ Desterro’s assessment of the students, however, echoes a popular wariness of physically active women that outweighs the ‘healthiness’ of their activity. Ross McKibbin writes of attitudes towards women who enjoyed playing sports that:

It has been argued that the ‘femininity’ of successful sporting women could be questioned ... Middle- and upper-class girls, though encouraged to play sport, in playing it were subject to tighter constrictions than men. It was then in the nature of things that sociability and harmony were thought more desirable for women even than for men; and competition less.⁵⁵

Leys’ atmosphere could be seen to foster deviance because its students’ femininity has become compromised by their competitiveness. As will be shown, the murder that takes place is due to one student killing another so that the woman she loves can become the recipient of a prestigious job opportunity. Lesbianism and its violent manifestation can here be read as resulting from the loss of femininity that occurs when women are encouraged to be overly competitive.

Desterro is not only an outsider at Leys because of her nationality and sophistication; she is also set apart by her confident heterosexuality. She enrolls in the school for a change of scene after an unsuccessful romantic relationship, not, like the other young women, out of necessity to train for a career. When Miss Pym assumes that she will teach dance after leaving Leys, Desterro quickly corrects her, saying, ‘Oh no; I shall get married.’⁵⁶ In fact, Desterro even has a candidate waiting in the wings in the form of an attractive English cousin. Desterro’s established heterosexuality and acceptance of marriage as a career separates her from the other students, whom she describes as ‘naïve’:

They are like little boys of nine ... Or little girls of eleven. They have ‘raves’ ... They swoon if Madame Lefevre [the dance instructor] says a kind word to them. I swoon, too, but it is from surprise. They save up their money to buy flowers for Fröken [a teacher at Leys], who thinks of nothing but a Naval Officer in Sweden.⁵⁷

Desterro dismisses the other students’ possible homosexual feelings towards teachers or each other as a childish—and genderless—emotion that

is clearly separate from ‘adult’ passions such as her own or that of Fröken for her Naval Officer. The ‘raves’ Desterro mentions were, as Martha Vicinus points out, a familiar feature of the experiences of young women at school: ‘The adolescent crush was so common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it was known by many different slang words besides “crush”: “rave,” “spoon,” “pash” (for passion), “smash,” “gonage” (for gone on), or “flame”.’⁵⁸ Instead of judging the ‘raves’ of the other girls as a legitimate expression of sexuality, Desterro’s infantilisation of their lesbianism dismissively treats it as something common to all schoolgirls, that they will ‘grow out of’, and thus non-threatening. This reflects popular psychological thought; in Sigmund Freud’s well-known case study ‘Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria’ (1905), he posits that ‘A romantic and sentimental friendship with one of her school-friends, accompanied by vows, kisses, promises of eternal correspondence, and all the sensibility of jealousy, is the common precursor of a girl’s first serious passion for a man.’⁵⁹ A few decades later, in 1938, Havelock Ellis writes:

It remains true that a certain liability to more or less romantic homosexual affection is found among boys, while girls, much more frequently, cherish enthusiastic devotions for other girls somewhat older than themselves, and very often for their teachers. Even, however, when these emotions are reciprocated, and even when they lead to definite sexual manifestations and gratification, they must not too hastily be taken to indicate either a vice calling for severe punishment or a disease demanding treatment. In the great majority of these cases we are simply concerned with an inevitable youthful phase.⁶⁰

Within this line of thought, Desterro’s heterosexuality indicates a ‘mature’ sexual identity, while the same-sex crushes of the other young women mean that their sexual identities are not fully developed. This has significant implications when it comes to Desterro’s attitude towards her education; though she is a talented student, her indifference to her education marks her as ‘feminine’, and implies that the other women’s competitiveness over their careers could be seen as immature as well as unfeminine. According to this model, when the other students do reach maturity and, by implication, heterosexuality, their careers will lose importance.

Miss Pym Disposes is unusual in that no crime occurs until nearly the end of the novel, when a calculated attack that appears to be an accident fatally injures unpopular student Barbara Rouse. Rouse has been assigned

a teaching position at a prestigious school that many feel should have been given to another student, Mary Innes, and Rouse's death clears the way for Innes to take the job instead. In fact, Innes' close friend Beau Nash is the person who tampered with the gym equipment that causes Rouse's death. Though Miss Pym refuses to believe that the friendship between Innes and Nash is anything but 'normal', their obviously strong emotional attachment and its results represent the 'dangerous' sexuality stereotypically perceived to be inherent in such relationships. When Miss Pym finds evidence near the scene of the crime that she believes implicates Innes, she accuses the girl. Innes realises that Nash must have been the culprit, and so she does not deny the accusation, understanding that Nash has committed the crime out of affection for her. Miss Pym is uncertain about turning the brilliant student in to the authorities, and Innes tries to convince her not to: 'I *would* atone, you know. It wouldn't be any half-hearted affair. It would be my life for—hers. I would do it gladly.'⁶¹ Innes' hesitation over the word 'hers' indicates that it is not Rouse's life she would be exchanging hers for, but Nash's. The self-inflicted punishment that Innes proposes is to spend her life assisting her father, a country doctor, in his small practice instead of becoming a physical education teacher as she had dreamed:

'I decided that I would work alongside my father ... My one ambition since I was a little girl has been to get away from living in a little market town; coming to Leys was my passport to freedom ... believe me, Miss Pym, it would be a penance.'⁶²

Innes' decision to take the blame reveals her love for Nash, but it also has extremely negative implications. Her education in Leys' community of women offers Innes the means to escape the 'little market town' and its social conventions that would restrict her to a role in the traditional family and prevent her from forming the bonds with other women—whether as lover, friend, student or teacher—that would have fulfilled her. Working alongside her father places Innes firmly within the patriarchal family, where her deviant sexuality, which has unintentionally led to the 'unnatural' act of murder, is contained. Innes' atonement is not only an act of love but also an act of guilt for her relationship with Nash and the crime to which it has led. Her wish to cover up Nash's impulsive attack also indicates the influence of class upon the possibility of desire—Innes comes from a respectable, hard-working middle-class family and Nash is a spoiled young woman from a privileged family who 'could not visualise the possibility of

frustration'.⁶³ Both women exhibit competitiveness and ambition, along with deviant sexuality, but Innes' middle-class upbringing means that she recognises boundaries that Nash does not. Innes entirely assumes the responsibility of keeping the secret herself, discerning that Nash has little concern for the possible consequences of her actions. Innes' return to the small village and family medical practice she had wished to escape provides a means of preserving respectability by keeping deviant sexuality secret.

Miss Pym's struggle over whether or not to expose Innes is a result of both her own indoctrination in the culture of all-female educational institutions and her sensitivity to the condemnation it would bring to both Innes and the school if the law were called upon to punish the killer.⁶⁴ In her obsessive fretting about what to do with the information she holds, Miss Pym reasons:

It wouldn't be God who would dispose this, in spite of all the comforting tags. It would be the Law. Something written with ink in a statute book. And once that was invoked God Himself could not save a score of innocent persons being crushed under the juggernaut wheels of its progress. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, said the old Mosaic law. And it sounded simple. It sounded just. One saw it against a desert background, as if it involved two people only. It was quite different when one put it in modern words and called it 'being hanged by the neck until you are dead'.⁶⁵

In Miss Pym's thought process, the law is an uncontrollable, outside force that does not take individual circumstances into account. The biblical imagery in her reflection makes the law seem an archaic, patriarchal means of achieving justice. Instead of exposing Innes to the inevitable fate that would befall her if tried for murder, Miss Pym decides to dispense a different form of justice herself, keeping the crime and its punishment within the boundaries of Leys. This does not mean that the decision comes easily. Miss Pym particularly wavers when discussing the problem in carefully vague terms with Desterro's fiancé Rick, who advises her to do the 'obvious right thing ... and let God dispose'.⁶⁶ As a man and as Desterro's fiancé, Rick represents the world outside Leys and its values. Miss Pym struggles between Rick's suggestion, with the patriarchal weight of the law behind it, and the loyalty, self-sufficiency and individualism that are influenced by her experiences as a student and a teacher in a community of women. Like her friend Henrietta, who believes in carefully considering each student's strengths and weaknesses before recommending her for a

specific job, Miss Pym reflects on factors such as Innes' emotional sensitivity, her academic talent, the feelings of her proud and hard-working parents, and the potential impact of negative publicity on Leys before agreeing to a punishment for the alleged crime. For Miss Pym, the uniform sentence that would be dealt by the law seems disturbingly inappropriate to the particular circumstances, so her educational training comes into play and she responds to the situation as though she were a teacher who has discovered a student misbehaving. Instead of reporting what she has found even to her friend the headmistress, who will be obliged to pass on responsibility to outside forces, Miss Pym acts with the authority of a teacher and permits the student to choose her own penance. By applying the workings of a school to a crime that would ordinarily lead to punishment by death, a humane, sensitive and 'modern' alternative to the undiscriminating, archaic 'juggernaut wheels' of the law is presented.

In spite of Miss Pym's demonstration of agency in re-evaluating the fairness of the official justice system, the novel's resolution is undeniably conservative. Aside from Innes' return to the patriarchal family, it is made very clear that Nash and Innes will go their separate ways after graduating. Learning that the two women's plans to go to Norway together have been abandoned, Miss Pym reflects, 'It was evident that this relationship was not what it had been ... But there was one relationship that showed satisfactory progress.'⁶⁷ Innes' confession and voluntary exile means that the lesbian relationship and its 'unnatural' results will fade away and never be made public. Had the true story of Rouse's murder come to light, though the repercussions would have been fatal, the intense relationship between Innes and Nash would have had to be publicly acknowledged. The 'satisfactory' relationship Miss Pym is considering is that of the firmly heterosexual Theresa Desterro and her cousin/lover. Desterro happily tells Miss Pym, 'I am going to stay in England and marry Rick.'⁶⁸ Even this resolution, though predictable, is cautiously conservative; Desterro's exoticism is contained by marriage to her cousin, who, despite looking like a 'gigolo', is in fact a 'pleasant and responsible' English businessman—the opposite, one assumes, of the 'unsuitable' object of her former affections.⁶⁹ Even while being the most obvious representative of heterosexuality at Leys, Desterro is still dangerous because of the exaggerated sexuality associated with her foreignness, which must be rendered safe by her absorption by marriage into British social and sexual mores.

Ultimately, *Miss Pym Disposes* presents a more troubling, ambiguous portrayal of an educational community run by and for women than the

stereotype-flouting *Gaudy Night* or *St Peter's Finger*. Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple write that it 'would be possible to argue that both the closed communities of women and lesbianism [in *Miss Pym Disposes*] are presented as "unhealthy" breeding grounds for criminal acts'. However, they go on to suggest that taking this line 'neglects both the sympathetic portrayal of women's relationships and the interesting handling of lesbianism'.⁷⁰ Certainly, with its portrayal of confident, beautiful 'goddess' Beau Nash as lesbian and murderess, *Miss Pym Disposes* seems to confirm the worst suspicions about the effects of the insularity of a group of women living and working together, not to mention that the competitiveness fostered in the school could be seen as rendering the women 'unfeminine' and thus more capable of deviance.⁷¹ However, the depictions of Innes' self-sacrificing assumption of blame for Nash's crime and Miss Pym's titular decision to take justice into her own hands point to a more ambivalent reading of the novel's presentation of a female community, suggesting both the depth of love possible in a relationship between women and that the school is actually more 'civilised' than the harsh and archaic dominant culture.

Gladys Mitchell's *Laurels Are Poison* (1942) is another novel that takes place in a teachers' training college for women and ambivalently deals with questions of individualism, professionalism and sexuality. *Laurels Are Poison* begins when Mrs Bradley is called in to investigate the disappearance of one of Cartaret Training College's teachers, Miss Murchan, who is discovered to be missing after the previous term's College Dance. While in a post at another school, Miss Murchan was involved in an accident in which a child was killed, and Mrs Bradley suspects that this incident is related to the teacher's disappearance. Meanwhile, as the students begin their traditional 'rags', or pranks, at the beginning of term, it becomes obvious that another, more malicious series of rags is also taking place at the college. The perpetrator of these incidents is in fact Miss Murchan, who is hoping to frighten Mrs Bradley away and has been secretly living in the school storeroom, hiding from her half-sister, Miss Paynter-Tree. In an even more convoluted twist, Miss Paynter-Tree is posing as a student at the school hoping to get revenge on Miss Murchan for the death of the child who was Miss Paynter-Tree's illegitimate daughter. As Mrs Bradley finds out, both women were in love with the child's father and Miss Murchan killed the girl out of jealousy towards Miss Paynter-Tree. The nature of Miss Murchan's disappearance, and, later, the malicious and sometimes dangerous rags she perpetrates, set the stage for the novel's often ironic and

self-conscious representations of gender and sexual deviance.⁷² Cartaret Training College serves as a space in which play with gender and sexual norms is riotous and uncontained; ‘Bacchanal’ imagery is used to describe Miss Murchan’s hair just before she disappears after dancing with one of her female students, and this suggestion of uninhibited revelry and hint of sexual deviance carry on throughout the novel.⁷³ It is up to Mrs Bradley, as both detective and authority figure at the school, to restore the order of heterosexuality and normative gender roles.

Both sets of rags that are going on at the school become sites for gender deviance, with Mrs Bradley as the only person able to see accurately through the various performances taking place. Miss Murchan’s rags are generally of a particularly malicious character, including putting holes in disinfectant tins so that the liquid runs out over the boxroom floor, slashing the clothing of two poor students who cannot afford to buy more, and cutting off the hair of an ill student while she is sleeping. When Mrs Bradley and Deborah, a young teacher whom she has taken into her confidence about the investigation, go to the boxroom to assess the damage done by the disinfectant, Mrs Bradley comments that it was ‘quite deliberately done ... No fumbling ... just a neatly drilled hole expressive of a determined and bold personality’. In reply, Deborah suggests the act is, ‘Expressive of a man, not a woman’, but Mrs Bradley is non-committal: ‘I don’t know. Some of the games-playing young are surely capable of a smack like that on a tin.’⁷⁴ When Deborah is speaking with another teacher, Miss Topas, about the incidents, they agree that from a psychological point of view the pranks sound like ‘a boy’s or man’s trick’—‘that stabbing business ... Connects up with Jack the Ripper, of course. You could connect the hair-cutting in the same way ... and that coat-slashing, too.’⁷⁵ Though Deborah and Miss Topas are using popular psychological theories of criminality to attempt to identify the perpetrator, Mrs Bradley, the psychologist by profession, is shown not to be limited by such assumptions about ‘typical’ gendered crime.⁷⁶

Significantly, the students’ rags, as well as Miss Murchan’s, employ gender play. The very first rag that occurs at the beginning of term sets the tone for those that will follow: a group of young men construct a bonfire out of a pile of chamber pots outside the college and proceed to dance riotously around it, again evoking Bacchanal imagery that indicates an occasion of deviance. Upon observing this, Mrs Bradley, scan[s] the dancing figures for a full minute. Then she dart[s] towards the bonfire, seize[s] one of the dervishes by the seat of his trousers, and haul[s] him forcibly

out of the circle.⁷⁷ The voice that emerges from the prankster begging Mrs Bradley not to report her is that of a woman. Like her ability to see through Miss Murchan's deliberately misleading, masculine-gendered pranks, Mrs Bradley can also discern physical attempts to obfuscate gender.

Along with such rags, the relationships between the students at Cartaret contribute to the play with gender and sexual norms that characterises the novel. Kitty, Alice and Laura are three Cartaret students who become deputy detectives to Mrs Bradley as Deborah is increasingly sidelined by a conventional marriage plot. The trio, upon meeting each other for the first time, quickly establish themselves as the 'Three Musketeers'. They do so in a parody of the language used in a traditional wedding ceremony: 'Wilt thou, Alice, take this Thingummy as thy wedded what-do-you-call-it?'⁷⁸ Following on from this declaration, the young women often refer to each other by male names and pronouns, playing at flexible gender roles and using the paradigm of male friendship to suggest that relationships between women can include the same sort of camaraderie. When Alice, the most timid and conventional of the Three Musketeers, develops a crush on Deborah, it is casually accepted by her two comrades. At the school dance just before the novel's climax, Laura encourages Deborah to 'take young Alice' as her partner for the last waltz, 'and make her happy for life'.⁷⁹ In spite of her obvious crush on Deborah, Alice is the most conservative of her friends; when the other two are speculating on Deborah's engagement and whether she will continue to work after her marriage, Alice remarks, 'I shall get married myself, later on ... I came from the lower classes where marriage is the rule, not the exception, and I'm not ashamed of it.'⁸⁰ Like Theresa Desterro in *Miss Pym Disposes*, Alice apparently separates the immature, 'schoolgirl' lesbian desire for an attractive teacher from an inevitable future of marriage. Alice's commentary also acknowledges the issue from the perspective of class; Alice desires to be accepted in her social sphere, and she understands that to do so she must conform to conventional models of femininity. However much she and her friends might play at deviant gender roles, and however real her own feelings for Deborah might be, Alice implies that desire and duty are not connected—eventually social conventions will become undeniable and she will have to 'grow out of it'.

Alice's schoolgirl crush on Deborah is portrayed benevolently, but a negative perception of suspected lesbianism in adult women is made apparent when Mrs Bradley asks the Principal to send Deborah's friend Miss Topas to take over her place as Warden. The Principal objects on the

grounds that the two women ‘get on much too well’, insisting that she does not ‘approve of these violent friendships on the Staff’.⁸¹ Deborah thus becomes a focus for the stereotypes and taboos surrounding lesbian desire in a women’s educational institution, and her potentially dangerous ‘condition’ is policed by Mrs Bradley, who ‘rescues’ Deborah from this threat. While Deborah begins as a young woman on the cusp of a successful career and as an active detective sidekick to Mrs Bradley, she is gradually deprived of agency in both areas. Shortly after the malicious rags begin—and after the Principal declares her disapproval of violent friendships—Mrs Bradley sends both Deborah and Miss Topas away to her nephew’s house in the country for the weekend. This weekend is meant to keep the two women out of danger, both literally and figuratively, as Mrs Bradley has also invited Miss Topas’ ‘young man’ and another of her own nephews, Jonathan, as a potential romantic interest for Deborah.⁸² With the introduction of male love interests for both women, their friendship is rendered unthreatening—it is no longer the ‘violent’ friendship of two women who are inappropriately attached to each other. Jonathan’s introduction becomes the factor that not only renders Deborah’s sexuality safe, but also takes away her agency in both an investigative and a professional sense.

The relationship between Deborah and Jonathan is fraught with the disturbing threat of actual physical and emotional violence from its beginning, providing an ironic contrast with the labelling of lesbian desire as ‘violent’. When the couple first meet, they are immediately attracted to each other, though the cook comments that the relationship could move a bit more quickly: ‘Made for each other, they be. But [Deborah], her hangs back. Shy, I reckon, poor maid. Mester Jonathan ded ought to make a bold bed there, and breng her to et violent ... Her’d gev en, easy enough, ef he act forceful.’⁸³ The cook’s opinion that Deborah will become more enthusiastic about—or at least accepting of—the relationship were Jonathan to force himself upon her sexually is one unfortunately shared by Mrs Bradley and even, as it transpires, Miss Topas.⁸⁴ The attempts to enforce Deborah’s heterosexuality foreshadow Adrienne Rich’s assertion that ‘for women heterosexuality might not be a “preference” at all but something that has to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force’.⁸⁵ Miss Topas, who is linked to Deborah’s transgressive desires, takes part in attempting to trap her friend into a marriage about which Deborah is obviously uneasy. One evening, Miss Topas invites Deborah to her rooms for a drink, neglecting to inform her friend

that Jonathan is also invited. Jonathan wastes no time in putting sexual pressure on Deborah:

Before Deborah could avoid it, he had taken her into his arms, and ... kissed her with an enthusiasm which caused Miss Topas ... to observe that her sitting-room was not a film studio. She then ... seized Deborah (who seemed uncertain whether to launch an attack upon the intrepid wooer or whether to cry) and embraced her more gently and a good deal less disturbingly than she had been embraced by the ardent young man. This action decided Deborah. She made a dash for the door, tore out, and they could hear her running up the stairs.⁸⁶

Instead of welcoming Jonathan's embrace, it is clear that Deborah would have tried to 'avoid it' if she could; neither 'launching an attack' nor crying is an eager or positive response to an unexpected kiss from a man to whom she is supposedly sexually attracted. Miss Topas' remark that 'her sitting-room [is] not a film studio' indicates that the performance of heterosexual desire that occurs has a quality that verges on flamboyant artificiality. The conventional marriage plot that is forcing Deborah into a passive role is made conspicuous by its hyperbolic trappings, revealing its contrived nature and creating an image of violence that is particularly jarring, as it exposes unequal power relations between the sexes. It is the embrace of Miss Topas, Deborah's friend and professional equal, that removes Deborah from her paralysed indecision and provides the impetus for her to escape the uncomfortable situation. Miss Topas subsequently encourages Jonathan to 'be a little more gentle', while he protests that he is 'obeying [Mrs Bradley's] orders'.⁸⁷ Miss Topas then persuades Deborah to come back downstairs and locks her in the room with Jonathan, 'taking no chances of her match-making going astray'. Like Mrs Bradley hiring Deborah and then relegating her to the role of Jonathan's wife, Miss Topas' behaviour forces Deborah into a passive, feminine role within a conventional marriage plot.

This is not the only occasion when Miss Topas (and other women) deprive Deborah of agency. During the College Dance at the climax of the novel when Mrs Bradley sets a trap in the hope of catching Miss Murchan, Jonathan is about to slip away to assist his aunt when Deborah finds him and insists upon accompanying him. Jonathan assents but sends her back to retrieve their scarves, and escapes in the meantime. When Deborah realises what Jonathan has done, she attempts to follow him into danger but is restrained by her women friends, including Miss Topas, who tells

Deborah, 'You may queer the pitch. There's a peculiar do on tonight.'⁸⁸ Miss Topas' comment ironically reiterates Deborah's potential for deviance; it is feared that her presence at Miss Murchan's apprehension will jeopardise Mrs Bradley's attempt to restore order. Miss Topas and the other women act as complicit enforcers of heterosexual norms. At this point, instead of playing the role of detective's assistant or even sharing that role with Jonathan in a detecting partnership, Deborah has been rendered completely passive. This is reinforced when Mrs Bradley is preparing to perform the traditional detective's explication at the end of the novel; she maternally tells Deborah to 'relax, child, or, better still, go to bed. I want to talk to Jonathan.'⁸⁹ Jonathan has supplanted Deborah in the role for which she was hired, that of confidante and assistant detective to Mrs Bradley. Deborah is reduced to being told to go to bed like a child and pleading to be let in on the detective's privileged knowledge with the promise that she will only be a passive listener. Deborah's infantilisation is complete when she nods off at the end of Mrs Bradley's explication and Jonathan lifts her up and carries her off to bed with the words, 'The baby appears to be asleep.'⁹⁰ Not only has Deborah's relationship with Jonathan deprived her of any role she may have had as an assistant detective, but it has also put an abrupt end to a promising career. When they are discussing their future wedding, Deborah tells Jonathan, 'I must stay on here until the end of the summer term. I've got to get these girls through their examinations.' Jonathan replies, 'Oh, no, you haven't. We're being married some time within the next six weeks. It's simply up to you to say when.'⁹¹ Jonathan ignores the responsibility Deborah feels towards her career and towards the students with whom she has built close relationships. Though Deborah is given the illusion of a choice about when to have the wedding, it is clear that any agency she might have had has disappeared along with her life as a single woman.

Conservative as the resolution of *Laurels Are Poison* may seem—at least with regards to attitudes towards marriage, women's careers and lesbian sexuality—the novel's treatment of these issues in fact reflects a considerably more ambiguous conclusion. The mischievous treatment of gender and sexual deviance as played out in Cartaret's Bacchanal atmosphere highlights the artificiality of gender boundaries. As Deborah's sexuality becomes a focus for the restoration of order, the lengths to which both Mrs Bradley and Deborah's women friends go to ensure that she is forced into proximity with Jonathan exposes the romance plot's artificiality and potentially problematic nature. Deborah's fear of Jonathan and

the abusive and violent element of their relationship also problematise and call into question the conventional marriage plot's desirability and its accompanying heterosexual power relations. Deborah's fate casts doubt on the assumption that lesbian desire is part of an immature 'phase'; her resistance to heterosexuality characterises her active position as working woman and assistant detective figure, but her yielding to Jonathan and marriage mark her loss of agency and infantilisation.

'A MOST "NATURAL" REACTION': PERSONAL
AND PROFESSIONAL CONFLICT IN *THE FASHION*
IN *SHROUDS* AND *DEATH IN HIGH HEELS*

Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* is a novel that presents an even more overtly conflicted view of the question of work and marriage for women. The novel begins with a portrait of an English fashion house that is saved from ruin through the efforts of two ambitious women:

When the last Roland Papendeik died, after receiving a knighthood for a royal wedding dress—having thus scaled the heights of his ambition as a great *couturier*—the ancient firm declined and might well have faded into one of the amusing legends Fashion leaves behind her had it not been for a certain phoenix quality possessed by Lady Papendeik. At the moment when descent became apparent and dissolution likely Lady Papendeik discovered Val, and from the day that the Valentine cape in Lincoln-green face-cloth flickered across the salon and won the hearts of twenty-five professional buyers and subsequently five hundred private purchasers Val climbed steadily, and behind her rose up the firm of Papendeik again like a great silk tent.⁹²

The firm is revived by Lady Papendeik's (or Tante Marthe, as she is called) forward-thinking vision; had she adhered to the old-fashioned formula for success that her husband followed, it is implied that the company would have folded. Tante Marthe's employment of the young, talented Val points the business in a decidedly modern direction. Val's career begins its rise when she designs a garment that can be marketed and purchased on a large scale, unlike the one-off royal wedding dress that made Roland Papendeik famous. Val's professional success makes her a representation of other female couturiers who came to dominate fashion in the early twentieth century, including Jeanne Lanvin, Elsa Schiaparelli, Nina Ricci and Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, whose 'little black dress', much like Val's

‘Valentine cape’, made her name.⁹³ These women were at the centre of the changing fashion industry, which since the nineteenth century had been steadily moving towards a more modern model that involved the production of luxury goods on a wide scale as opposed to couturiers solely taking on individual commissions for the wealthy. As the head designer of a successful firm, Val is, in her own honest estimation, ‘one of the most important business women in Europe’.⁹⁴ The house of Papendeik is a firm run from top to bottom by women who are taken seriously as workers; Val explains to her brother Albert Campion that Tante Marthe requires that the contingent of women who do the work of assembling and sewing all the garments be called ‘seamstresses’ and not ‘work-women’, indicating respect towards and acceptance of the women as professionals.⁹⁵ The women employed to model the clothing in Papendeik’s showroom are also held to a high level of professional conduct. When a model leaks an important new design to a rival firm that produces the dress before Val has a chance to show it, the model is reprimanded and dismissed. The success of the house of Papendeik, contingent upon the women’s skills and associated with modernity, represents women’s increasing economic potential in the public sphere.

Val’s client Georgia Wells, who is a famous stage actress, also represents a modern woman at the top of her profession, but the relationship between the two women is competitive and fraught with passive-aggressive barbs on both sides. Professionally, they are ‘a mutual benefit society’,⁹⁶ as Val designs clothing for Georgia’s roles, but open friendship between the two is suggested to be impossible because they are romantic rivals for the attentions of businessman Alan Dell.⁹⁷ Though Georgia is married when Alan first catches her eye, she pursues him anyway and he succumbs, dazzled by one of her acclaimed stage performances. For both Val and Georgia, their careers are what make them ‘modern’ women, but it is indicated that the ‘essential’ femininity that characterises their relationships with men makes it impossibly difficult for such women to be successful both romantically and in the workplace. Val and Georgia are described as:

two fine ladies of a fine modern world, in which their status had been raised until they stood as equals with their former protectors. Their several responsibilities were far heavier than most men’s and their abilities greater. Their freedom was limitless. There they were at two o’clock in the morning, driving back in their fine carriage to lonely little houses, bought, made lovely and maintained by the proceeds of their own labours. They were both

mistress and master, little Liliths, fragile but powerful in their way, since the livelihood of a great number of their fellow beings depended directly upon them, and yet, since they had not relinquished their femininity, within them, touching the very core and fountain of their strength, was the dreadful primitive weakness of the female of any species.⁹⁸

Though Val's and Georgia's formidable accomplishments are recognised and even acknowledged as superior to 'most men's', it is implied that the lack of traditional domesticity in their lives renders them incomplete—their houses, though 'lovely' and owned independently, are 'lonely'. Gill Plain writes that in *The Fashion in Shrouds*, 'archetypal ideological forces such as romance and motherhood are mobilised as strategies of containment—suggesting that the public woman is ultimately misguided, and is channelling her energies in an “unnatural” direction’.⁹⁹ Val's attraction to Alan is noted by Tante Marthe, who observes to Campion, 'Val is in love with that man ... He is very masculine. I hope it is not merely a most natural reaction. We are too many women here.'¹⁰⁰ The success of their well-run business aside, Tante Marthe implies that their workplace, which represents the most significant part of Val's life, is 'unnatural' because it is dominated by women.¹⁰¹ Femininity is constantly referred to in the novel as an essential 'weakness' that prevents women from functioning fully and easily in the public sphere, since it taints their relations with other people, particularly with men, though—in a typical double bind—if a woman does not indulge this 'weakness', it is implied that she is unnatural. Even Val has been taken in by this idea, as she explains to Campion:

You're a sensible, reasonable, masculine soul. If you fell in love and something went wrong you'd think it all out like a little gent and think it all quietly away, taking the conventional view and the intelligent path and saving yourself no end of bother because your head plus your training is much stronger than all your emotions put together. You're a civilized masculine product. But when it happens to me, when it happens to Georgia, our entire world slides round. We can't be conventional or take the intelligent path except by a superhuman mental effort. Our feeling is twice as strong as our heads and we haven't been trained for thousands of years. We're feminine, you fool!¹⁰²

According to Val, the disadvantage to being a modern woman is that, besides dealing with the problem of their 'naturally' more violent emotions overpowering their intellects, they also lack the 'thousands of years of

training' that men have had in how to repress their emotions in a socially acceptable manner. As in *Miss Pym Disposes*, women are suggested to be inherently 'uncivilised' without the tempering influence of men.

The novel's characterisation of femininity as weakness is not, however, as straightforward as it may seem. Val's femininity is often pointed out through the gaze of her brother Albert Campion, which is, as it becomes clear, skewed by his own feelings of discomfort and inferiority. At the beginning of the novel, when Val and he are staring into a mirror and noting their similarities and differences, Campion tells her, 'I think you're better than I am in one or two ways, but I'm always glad to note that you have sufficient feminine weaknesses to make you thoroughly inferior on the whole.' When Val asks what these might be, Campion 'beam[s] at her. In spite of her astonishing success she could always be relied upon to make him feel comfortingly superior.'¹⁰³ This 'comforting superiority' is not a feeling that lasts for Campion. Gill Plain notes that throughout *The Fashion in Shrouds*, 'Campion ... consigns women to a number of familiar stereotypes of femininity.'¹⁰⁴ Plain points out as an example of this attitude that 'he assumes that Val, traumatised by her failed love affair, would counteract her jealousy by committing murder, an assumption based on the patriarchal premise that women prize love higher than law'.¹⁰⁵ This major misapprehension on Campion's part is preceded by many minor incidents during which his assumed superiority to Val is questioned. When he rather cruelly teases her about her feelings for Alan Dell, Val defends her entitlement to be sexually interested in a man. Campion uneasily reflects,

There was dignity in the protest. It brought him down to earth and reminded him effectively that she was, after all, a distinguished and important woman with every right to her own private life. He changed the conversation, feeling, as he sometimes did, that she was older than he was, for all her femininity.¹⁰⁶

On another occasion, Val's canny reading of Alan's infatuation with Georgia surprises Campion with its honest shrewdness: '[Val's] insight was always astonishing him. It was misleading, he reminded himself hastily; a sort of inspired guesswork or, rather, an intermittent contact with the truth.'¹⁰⁷ Campion's moments of amazement and hasty self-justification when Val reads or reacts to a situation intelligently belie his confidence in his masculine superiority. After all, if Val can handle emotional circumstances with poise and reason, then the constructions of both violently emotional femininity and rational, cerebral masculinity are destabilised.

However, although the novel's characterisations of femininity and masculinity are shown to be uneasy at best, the depiction of the relationship between Val and Alan is uncompromising and promotes a version of femininity in which modern accomplishments cannot coexist with traditional values. When Alan finally recovers from his infatuation with Georgia and realises that Val is the woman he really wants, his declaration is unabashedly couched in language that refers to an old-fashioned model of active masculinity and passive femininity:

Will you marry me and give up to me your independence, the enthusiasm which you give your career, your time and your thought? That's my proposition ... In return ... I should assume full responsibility for you. I would pay your bills to any amount which my income might afford. I would make all decisions which were not directly in your province, although on the other hand I would like to feel that I might discuss anything with you if I wanted to; but only because I wanted to, mind you; not as your right. And until I died you would be the only woman. You would be my care, my mate as in plumber, my possession if you like ... It means the other half of my life to me, but the whole of yours to you. Will you do it?¹⁰⁸

Val responds in the affirmative to this dreary proposal, 'so quickly that she startle[s] herself'. Alan's proposal is a blatant request for Val to trade career for marriage with no prospect of her retaining an equal part in the relationship financially, intellectually or emotionally. Val surrenders her modern career 'in fashion' to take up a position that is by Alan's traditional definition of the marriage relationship 'out of fashion'.¹⁰⁹

Despite the conservative ending to the marriage plot between Val and Alan, *The Fashion in Shrouds* does not seem unrestrainedly to advocate such a fate for all women. Tante Marthe and her business presumably continue even after Papendeik's head designer is lost to traditional domesticity. Georgia is a serial monogamist, constantly seducing or even marrying men and then leaving them when she becomes bored, which does not seem to have harmed her career as a famous actress, in spite of the stereotypical 'femininity' that characterises her relationships with men. Yet another modern professional woman, aeroplane engineer Amanda Fitton, ends the novel by rescuing Campion from the murderer in a reversal of conventional masculine heroic stereotypes and then getting engaged to him in an exchange that, in contrast with Alan's proposal to Val, rejects emotionally overwrought 'cake love' in favour of a more down-to-earth, companionate modern relationship. Traditional domesticity in the form

of motherhood will later end her career, but at this point Amanda comfortably embraces the idea of a marriage of equals, in which both partners are allowed to have professional as well as personal lives. Similarly, Val's retreat into the position of wife as defined by Alan does not diminish the fact that she has been a brilliant businesswoman. In addition, as has been demonstrated in the discussion of Campion's uneasy perceptions of Val and of himself in relation to Val, the definitions of masculinity and femininity that are produced in the novel are shown to be not entirely stable or trustworthy.

Another perspective on the conflict between traditional and modern gender roles in a female-dominated workplace is offered in Christianna Brand's *Death in High Heels* (1941). Like Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds*, *Death in High Heels* is set in the fashion industry, an 'acceptable' profession for women. *Death in High Heels* differs, though, in that workplace rivalries between women are the primary suspected motives for murder. Though men occupy the highest managerial positions at London couturier Christophe et Cie, the many women who are employed there in various roles make up a diverse and particularly modern group. Of the three women in the shop's sales staff, Victoria is happily married and is the primary breadwinner of her household, Irene is a widow who enters the workforce upon her husband's death and works her way up to the position of head saleswoman, and Rachel is a single mother in the middle of a divorce. In addition to these three, two women occupy slightly higher managerial roles. Miss Doon (whose first name is never revealed) is the novel's murder victim; beautiful, sexually promiscuous and willing to use these qualities to her own professional advantage, she is viewed ambivalently by her co-workers. On the one hand, they enjoy her sexual frankness and laugh at her sometimes-cruel jokes, but on the other, Irene in particular resents Doon's easy move up the professional ladder. The other office manager, Gregory, is disliked by her co-workers because of her abrasive, 'masculine' personality and social awkwardness. She is also envied due to her professional success, and because she is named as the recipient of a coveted management job at the company's branch in Deauville. Another of the company's employees is the charwoman Mrs Harris (often referred to as Mrs 'Arris by the younger women in mockery of her Cockney accent). Mrs Harris is a comic figure to the younger employees at Christophe et Cie due to her age and social class, but she is not entirely a one-dimensional caricature of a working-class woman—in one pivotal scene, she takes advantage of the impression that she is hard of hearing

in order to gain access to private conversations and acquire information. Mrs Harris' explanation of why she does this is unusually humanising for a depiction of a member of the working class:

“Mrs 'Arris,” the young ladies says, very soft-like, to see if I'm listening, and if I don't answer, they thinks I don't 'ear and goes on with what they 'as to say. I don't mean no 'arm ... it's a bit lonely in the shop sometimes, 'aving the people all talking between theirselves, and keeping you out as you might say.”¹¹⁰

Though Mrs Harris is the object of much mockery in the workplace, her manipulation of the assumption that she will not hear or understand the sales staff's conversations gives her the power of privileged knowledge. Mrs Harris' assessment of her position in the office is also telling; she realises that her class and age place her as an outsider, and admits that she notices this and feels hurt by it. The charwoman's statement makes her relatable and provides a voice to a segment of the workforce that is seldom given a multifaceted representation.¹¹¹ The variety of women workers depicted in *Death in High Heels* illustrates a realistic view of the modern workplace's diversity, but the novel's constructions of working women are complicated by conventional definitions of femininity.

Doon's death by poisoning shocks her co-workers, but it is acknowledged that her 'goings on' have offended some.¹¹² In spite of Doon's many sexual exploits, which have on occasion pitted her as a romantic rival against her co-workers, motives of professional rivalry are given the stronger weight in the investigation of her murder. Victoria and Rachel discuss their suspicion that Irene might have killed Doon in order to be promoted to the Deauville job, since Gregory cannot be spared from the London shop in the absence of a manager as experienced as Doon: 'But, my dear, nobody would kill anyone for such a round-about reason as that; it's fantastic!'¹¹³ Implausible as such a motive might be, it is generally agreed to be the most likely scenario until Detective Charlesworth's realisation that Doon's murder might instead be the result of a personal rivalry with Gregory over the affections of Mr Bevan, the manager of the entire shop.¹¹⁴ Adding to the confusion is the revelation that in fact two poisonings were attempted on the day of the murder. Irene confesses to Rachel and Victoria that she believes herself to be Doon's murderer since she sprinkled oxalic acid on the lunch she expected Gregory to eat: 'I meant to make [Gregory] ill ... I wanted to go to Deauville so much, and

I thought if she were ill, only a little bit ill, just for a few days, Bevan would have to send me.¹¹⁵ Irene is in an agony of guilt because she believes that she has mistakenly killed Doon while trying to poison Gregory, but her attempt at murder turns out to have been half-hearted—so little of the poison is put in Gregory's food that nothing happens. In the meantime, Gregory has put a far larger, lethal dose of poison in Doon's food. Professional rivalry is depicted as being a far less potent catalyst for agency than personal rivalry—Irene's desire for advancement in the workplace falls short of Gregory's desire for Bevan and marriage.

Gregory's longing for domesticity is made conspicuous by her incompetence in performing conventional, heterosexual femininity. Doon is contemptuous of Gregory's sexual inexperience, telling the other women,

if ever there was a craggy virgin it was Gregory. The moment I set eyes on her I knew what her trouble was, and I actually had her round to a few parties and tried to get her off ... but nothing doing.¹¹⁶

Gregory is disliked by her female co-workers because in addition to her awkwardness with men she does not engage in social niceties in the workplace, and her inability to conform to socially accepted feminine codes makes it difficult for her to communicate with other women even though it is implied as marking the reason for her professional success. Gregory admits that she has 'a brain like a man's ... I was just born like that; but I really do reason things out more than most women'.¹¹⁷ It is also pointed out several times that Gregory's unfeminine physical appearance sets her apart; her hands are 'regrettably like a man's' and her face is 'clumsily made up'.¹¹⁸ In spite of the fact that she is the highest-ranking woman at Christophe et Cie, both Gregory and others view her achievement in the workplace as secondary to her lack of conventional femininity. When Charlesworth visits Gregory's house to question her, Gregory is 'sitting darning a pair of stockings ... with a vase of roses, arranged without skill or imagination, by her side'.¹¹⁹ This description of Gregory's activity and surroundings indicates an inept attempt at domesticity, and her thwarted desires are made sadly explicit when Charlesworth asks her for her opinion, as she is 'a very intelligent girl'.¹²⁰ Gregory is 'flattered and delighted. To be considered intelligent and level-headed was second only to being considered attractive and marriageable.'¹²¹ It is during this visit that Charlesworth intuits that Gregory might be the most likely suspect in Doon's murder; both Gregory and Doon were sexually interested in

Bevan, but only Gregory would have been devastated by being sent away to take the job in Deauville, which Gregory should have viewed as a positive career move:

Firstly, she would get her rival out of the way, and secondly, she would make it impossible for Bevan to send her abroad; it was essential for him, wasn't it, to have one or other of them at Christophe's? That masculine brain of hers worked very coolly and quickly.¹²²

Gregory wishes to stay close to Bevan and dispose of Doon, whose extreme sexual attractiveness she cannot match. Gregory's 'masculine' brain enables her to commit murder, but she would not have killed had it not been for her desire for heteronormative, feminine domesticity, a fatal conflict that indicates the danger of an obsession with conforming to such a model. At the same time, Gregory's inability to conform also harms her relationships with her female co-workers, with whom she cannot form friendships. In contrast, Irene, who is able to develop such connections, commands the loyalty of her co-workers even when they suspect that she is the murderer. In order to be a desirable work colleague, it seems that a woman needs to be able to perform according to a culturally coded model of femininity in addition to being able skilfully to do her job.

Ultimately, *Death in High Heels*, like many of the novels examined in this chapter, presents very mixed conclusions about perceptions of women in the workplace. Gregory's 'masculine' brain allows her to rise through the ranks at the shop, but her obsession with conforming to a conventional feminine model proves to be her downfall. When Victoria, the only married working woman on Christophe et Cie's staff, falls under suspicion for Doon's murder, her unemployed artist husband immediately finds a teaching position so that she will no longer need to suffer the stress of appearing in public at her job, even though Victoria has always proven to be the more reliable breadwinner of the two.¹²³ On the other hand, Irene, who so desires the position in Deauville that she attempts to poison Gregory, achieves her ambition in the end. Irene's reward shows that women can be allowed to achieve professional success, but that they must still be sufficiently 'feminine' in order to do so. Irene's desire for the Deauville job is not so great that she actually commits murder, and the intensity of her guilt when she thinks she is a murderer, in addition to her colleagues' later loyal urgings to take the promotion when she thinks she is undeserving, prove that she is 'feminine' enough to be worthy of

the promotion when she receives it. In addition, Irene's status as a widow with no romantic ties allows her to be a successful professional woman who has still shown herself to be capable of heterosexual, domestic femininity, while rescuing her from the chaos of excessive sexual desire, which has destroyed the careers of both the promiscuous Doon and the lovelorn Gregory. Once again, as in *The Fashion in Shrouds* and *Laurels Are Poison*, heterosexual romantic relationships are in the end shown to be incompatible with professional success.

The ambivalence towards women's roles in *Death in High Heels* echoes that of every other novel discussed in this chapter; however, just because shop manager Gregory commits murder out of a pathological obsession with a feminine, domestic ideal, or Victoria, Val and Deborah give up their careers and reinforce traditional gender roles within heterosexual relationships, it does not mean that these novels are unequivocally conservative. Indeed, they depict active women in the public sphere who are eventually restricted by conventional notions of femininity, heterosexuality and the patriarchal family. This trajectory simultaneously enables the exploration of changing gender roles and the containment of cultural anxieties emerging from such renegotiations. It is shown that women can be successful in traditionally masculine spaces, but when some end up in 'safe', conventional roles, fears about the consequences of women's potentially expanding influence in the public sphere are addressed and eased. While the narratives often offer conservative resolutions, the many depictions of successful women can be read as undermining essentialist assumptions about women's abilities. Similarly ambiguous resolutions come into play in the varied depictions of women's bodies—both dead and alive—in golden age crime fiction, to which the fifth and final chapter will turn.

NOTES

1. In the second volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1917), Havelock Ellis writes that '[Homosexuality] has been found, under certain conditions, to abound among women in colleges and convents and prisons.' Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 2, *Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1928), p. 195.
2. Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?', *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), pp. 21–2.
3. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?', pp. 33–4.
4. Margery Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 70.

5. Ross McKibbin writes that ‘one factor’ in ‘the isolation of the middle-class housewife within a highly routine-bound domesticity ... was the near-universal withdrawal of middle-class women from the labour market—willingly or unwillingly—on marriage or at first pregnancy’. Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 82.
6. Hat saleswoman Margaret Langton in Wentworth’s *Grey Mask* (1929) is depicted as underpaid, malnourished and still pining after a long-ago broken engagement with the man with whom she reunites at the end of the novel, while exhausted and grieving fashion model Marion Grey of *The Case is Closed* (1937) enters into her career only out of financial necessity when her husband is falsely accused of murder and imprisoned. *Lonesome Road*’s (1939) Rachel Treherne inherits the job of managing her dead father’s fortune and charitable interests but is regretfully too busy for romantic interests until she meets a man who encourages her to divide the money among relatives, reduce her workload and have a family.
7. June Purvis points out that ‘the struggle of women to win access to degree examinations, and to be awarded a degree, on equal terms with men, was a painstakingly slow process’. June Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 116.
8. Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England*, p. 116.
9. Susan J. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 2.
10. Leonardi, *Dangerous by Degrees*, p. 2.
11. Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 5.
12. Nina Auerbach writes, ‘The stereotype of the “crazy spinster” is both the serpent in the garden and the pivot of the mystery, and Sayers depends on her readers’ complicity in it to befool the clues that are even more transparently laid out than the clues in the other Wimsey books are; in this case, unravelling the very easy mystery requires not so much chess-game ingenuity as it does a freedom from sexual myths that few novelists can expect to find in their readers.’ Nina Auerbach, ‘Dorothy Sayers and the Amazons’, *Feminist Studies* 3.1/2 (1975), p. 57.
13. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), pp. 9–10.
14. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 269.
15. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 343.
16. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 11.
17. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 35.

18. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 272.
19. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 46–7.
20. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 16.
21. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 54.
22. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 52.
23. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 53.
24. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 55.
25. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 56.
26. Such power dynamics in a companionate marriage were praised in marriage guides at the time; in Theodoor H. van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, first published in 1928, the writer quotes the thoughts of 'Gina Lombroso, daughter and secretary of the famous anthropologist, Cesare Lombroso, wife of the historian, Guglielmo Ferrero, mother of two children, and herself a doctor (both of philology and medicine)' on her own experience of marriage: 'A man should make it his business to let his wife participate in his work, should take an interest in her difficulties, should guide her activities, reassure her timidities and doubts ... there is no "man's job" in which a woman cannot help him, to some extent, materially or mentally; there is no terrifying anxiety and perplexity (of hers) which he could not dispel in a word. Let him give her a share in his work, let him take the trouble to understand and guide her, and she will believe that she is loved and appreciated, and she will be happy, whatever sacrifices may be demanded of her in return.' Theodoor H. van de Velde and Margaret Smyth, *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Heinemann Medical Books, 1965), p. 5.
27. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 238.
28. Popular suspicion about the potential for sexual deviance resulting from living in same-sex communities is rooted in psychological theories such as Sigmund Freud's 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), in which he names three types of 'inversion', including 'contingent inversion': 'In that case, under certain external conditions—of which inaccessibility of any normal sexual object and imitation are the chief—they are capable of taking as their sexual object someone of their own sex.' Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 137. Though in *Gaudy Night* such stereotypes are dismissed, Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* directly engages with the 'dangers' of deviant sexuality assumed to originate from a same-sex community's isolation.
29. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 42–3.
30. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 247.

31. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 514.
32. Marya McFadden, 'Queerness at Shrewsbury: Homoerotic Desire in *Gaudy Night*, *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (2000), p. 369.
33. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 539.
34. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 539.
35. Susan J. Leonardi writes, 'Repressed passion may twist and warp a personality, but it is love, making another person one's job, that is truly dangerous, as Miss de Vine opines early in the novel. An educated woman, then, is less likely to be guilty of villainy of this devouring sort, "unnatural" though she may be.' *Dangerous by Degrees*, p. 92.
36. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 522.
37. Gladys Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger* (London: Sphere Books, Ltd., 1989), p. 15.
38. In Mavis Doriel Hay's *Death on the Cherwell* (1935), which takes place in a fictional women's college at Oxford, publicity is also explicitly presented as something to be wary of because, whether the publicity is negative or positive, it will inevitably call upon gendered stereotypes. When the college bursar is found murdered, the college's principal, Miss Cordell, uneasily reflects upon the death's possible public implications: 'Publicity was Miss Cordell's bugbear. Respectable publicity was bad enough because newspaper reporters, however carefully instructed, were liable to break out into some idiocy about "undergraduates" or "academic caps coquettishly set on golden curls."' But shameful publicity! A death mystery! This was terrible!' Mavis Doriel Hay, *Death on the Cherwell* (London: The British Library, 2014), p. 24.
39. Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 20.
40. Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 18.
41. Tom Buchanan writes that 'estimated numbers of Catholics in England and Wales ... rose from 1,890,018 in 1918 to 2,392,983 in 1945' and that most of this increase in population was due to Irish immigration. Tom Buchanan, 'Great Britain', in Tom Buchanan and Martin Conway (eds.), *Political Catholicism in Europe: 1918-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 249-50. The association of Catholicism with Irish immigrants, who were also primarily working class, would have been troubling within the context of the period's predominantly conservative and, as the 1930s passed, increasingly nationalistic hegemony. In addition to this, the stereotypes that existed about communities of women, including the idea that isolation from men led to lesbianism and mental disorders stemming from repressed sexuality, would also have been connected with convents.
42. Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 35.
43. Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 122.

44. Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 29.
45. Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 27.
46. Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 268.
47. Josephine Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), p. 13.
48. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 167.
49. In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet Vane's emotional investment in Shrewsbury College is also presented as the reason why she is unable to deduce the villain's identity without Lord Peter Wimsey's outside help.
50. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, pp. 12, 25.
51. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 32.
52. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 36.
53. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 36.
54. Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p. 183.
55. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 383.
56. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 33.
57. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 34.
58. Martha Vicinus, 'Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships', *Signs* 9.4 (1984), p. 604.
59. Sigmund Freud, 'A Case of Hysteria', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 60.
60. Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students*, 2nd edn (New York: Emerson Books, 1954), p. 235.
61. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 221.
62. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 221.
63. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 234.
64. This is similar to the reasoning behind the refusal to turn the perpetrators over to the police in both *Gaudy Night* and *St Peter's Finger*—the price of leaving the punishment to be dealt with by patriarchal culture is judged to be too high.
65. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 211.
66. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 198.
67. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 230.
68. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 231.
69. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 152.
70. Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction', in Helen Carr (ed.), *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (London: Pandora, 1989), pp. 52–3.
71. Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 20.

72. Nancy Spain's *Poison for Teacher* (1949) is another example of a crime novel that uses a girls' school (suggestively called Radcliff Hall) as a setting for its self-conscious play with gender norms. With its irreverent representation of the workings and politics of a girls' school, its elaborately staged murders (one of which actually occurs in a rehearsal for a play), and its unlikely detective duo of a former actress and a former dancer, *Poison for Teacher* is deliberately camp, a strategy that enables its casual depiction of gender transgression as well as both heterosexual and homosexual desire.
73. Gladys Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 25.
74. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 67.
75. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 88.
76. Mrs Bradley's response that the holes could have been drilled by a member of 'the games-playing young' suggests the existence of an ambiguously gendered model of femininity that is specific to the modern, active young woman.
77. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 39.
78. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 24.
79. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 226.
80. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 179.
81. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 57.
82. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 76.
83. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 77.
84. A controlled amount of violence in heterosexual romantic relationships was acknowledged as normal and even desirable by psychologists at the time; in *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life* (1926), Wilhelm Stekel comments, 'With many women the rape fantasy plays a great rôle. They permit themselves easily to be overpowered, because this is the only way in which they can attain orgasm at all. Sometimes they must fight with the aggressor before intercourse.' Wilhelm Stekel, *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life*, Trans. James S. Van Teslaar (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 157.
85. Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (eds.), *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism* (New York; London: Norton, 1993), p. 216.
86. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 138.
87. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, pp. 138-9.
88. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 225.
89. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 232.
90. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 236.

91. Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, pp. 231–2.
92. Margery Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 5.
93. Axel Madsen writes in his biography of Coco Chanel (1990) that ‘Between 1920 and 1940, the most influential couture houses had been in the hands of women.’ Axel Madsen, *Coco Chanel: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 276. The fictional Val would have belonged to this powerful group of businesswomen.
94. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 65.
95. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 9.
96. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 10.
97. Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) of romantic rivalry as being an all-too-common way of representing women’s relationships to each other in literature: ‘All these relationships between women ... are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends ... almost without exception they are shown in their relationships to men.’ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (San Diego; New York: Harcourt, 1989), p. 82.
98. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 210.
99. Gill Plain, “‘A Good Cry or a Nice Rape?’”: Margery Allingham’s Gender Agenda?, *Critical Survey* 15.2 (2003), p. 63.
100. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 18.
101. Val’s place of business, like the convent, the schools and the college discussed earlier in this chapter, is looked upon as incomplete and possibly harmful because of its femaleness. These spaces, in spite of their efficiency and successful operation, are always set apart by their feminine ‘otherness’.
102. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 132.
103. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 7.
104. Plain, ‘A Good Cry or a Nice Rape?’, p. 64.
105. Plain, ‘A Good Cry or a Nice Rape?’, p. 64.
106. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 8.
107. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 62.
108. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 262.
109. Interestingly, Agatha Christie’s *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) includes a subplot that shares many characteristics with the Val/Alan marriage plot of *The Fashion in Shrouds*. *Evil Under the Sun* introduces an accomplished woman fashion designer named Rosamund Darnley who, while obviously enjoying her professional success, sinks into an immediate depression when an old flame and his wife come to stay at the resort where she is spending a holiday. Rosamund’s love interest, Captain Kenneth Marshall,

is trapped in an incompatible, loveless marriage until his wife is conveniently murdered, clearing the way for a renewed romance with Rosamund. When Rosamund and Ken unite at the end of the novel, he tells her, 'You're going to give up that damned dress-making business of yours and we're going to live in the country.' Rosamund's first response to Ken's belittling dismissal of her successful career is considerably more spirited than Val's passive acceptance of Dell's forceful proposal: 'Don't you know that I make a very handsome income out of my business? Don't you realize that it's *my* business—that I created it and worked it up, and that I'm proud of it! And you've got the damned nerve to come along and say, "Give it all up, dear".' Unfortunately, Rosamund quickly succumbs to convention, telling Ken sentimentally, 'Oh, my dear, I've wanted to live in the country with you all my life. Now—it's going to come true ...' Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 319–20. Rosamund's passionate defence of her professional achievements is eclipsed by the supposedly more powerful pull of retiring domesticity, which, since she has 'wanted it all her life', is presented as the more inherently natural—and stereotypically 'feminine'—choice.

110. Christianna Brand, *Death in High Heels* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1996), p. 191.
111. Nicola Beauman comments on the lack of depictions of working-class women in middlebrow fiction of the period: 'the lives of the upper middle-class women who were described in fiction were not the same as those of ... "unrecorded women"'. Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914–39* (London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 102.
112. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 22.
113. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 84.
114. As in *The Fashion in Shrouds*, a romantic rivalry between women who had formerly been friends and co-workers is suspected to be the motive to murder, once again demonstrating the difficulty of portraying women working harmoniously together without violent consequences. The difference between the two novels is that the suspicion that Val tried to poison Georgia turns out to be incorrect, while Gregory really did poison her rival. Nevertheless, both Val and Gregory are forced out of the workplace, Val through succumbing to her 'essential femininity' and marrying, and Gregory through being caught in her desperate attempt to conform to a conventionally feminine role.
115. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 201.
116. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 11.
117. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 196.
118. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, pp. 196, 215.

119. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 193.
120. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 195.
121. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 196.
122. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 217.
123. Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 173.

Sensational Bodies: Villains and Victims

As has been shown in this book's previous chapters, representations of gender in women's golden age crime fiction are rarely stable and are often fraught with contradictions. The modes of femininity explored in the novels and stories reflect those available during the period, and independence and nonconformity are often contained by the safety of conventionally heteronormative conclusions. However, despite the conservative resolutions many of these narratives provide, they still contain disruptive potential. One such site of instability and unresolvability is the body.¹ Mary Douglas 'maintain[s] that the human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension'.² The body, specifically the body involved in a crime, is inescapably loaded with meanings attached to social codes and the transgression of such codes. Bodies, particularly women's bodies, both dead and alive, represent sites of social and sexual deviance that must be resolved—buried—at the narrative's end so that order can be restored, however superficially.

The murder victim's body is perhaps the most obvious example of disturbance of order in crime fiction, but a closer examination reveals that the bodies of women who commit crimes are also of interest when exploring transgressive possibilities. To this end, I shall consider the treatment of women victims and killers in novels including Agatha Christie's *Peril at End House* (1932), *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), *Dumb Witness* (1937), *The Body in the Library* (1942) and *Evil Under the Sun* (1941), Gladys

Mitchell's *Speedy Death* (1929) and Dorothy L. Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1927). In each of these works, questions of identity, gender and class arise not only from the female victims of murder, but also, provocatively, from their killers.

The female murder victim's identity and the structure of the crime and its subsequent investigation provide a lens through which representations of women, the feminine and deviance can be questioned and explored. The particular significance of a victim being female has been recognised by critics including Linden Peach, who writes in *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions* that:

the victim of serious crime has always had an important, symbolic role in the definition of sexual and cultural norms. More often than not, the victim is a woman, and frequently a woman who has met her fate because she has transgressed ideological and socio-geographical boundaries.³

Peach goes on to point out, 'Very often, the female victims are "criminalised" and punished for their independence and assertiveness.'⁴ This holds true in a number of crime novels in which women are the victims of murder. In novels such as *The Body in the Library* and *Speedy Death*, the body becomes a site of transgression when the identity of the victim is not what it seems to be and consequently the original assumptions that accompany the victim's class and/or gender status are rendered uncertain. In these cases and in others, the ambiguous body ceases to represent an individual and becomes a site for the examination of social and cultural meanings.⁵ The uncertainty inherent in this frequent switching of identities and even, in some cases, of the bodies themselves makes for an uncanny and disturbing portrayal of death and the body that suggests a particularly modern anxiety surrounding the unstable nature of identity and individuality. Christie's Hercule Poirot repeatedly notices the 'sameness' of bodies; in *Evil Under the Sun*, Poirot points to sunbathers on a beach, saying, 'Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just—bodies!'⁶ Poirot's statement foreshadows the later exchange of a living woman's body with a dead woman's body, which he reveals at the novel's conclusion. This recognition of the sameness of bodies often works, as in the switching of the two young women's bodies in *The Body in the Library*, to call into question certain stereotypes about female sexual morality and also social class.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva names the corpse as ‘the utmost of abjection’.⁷ The corpse is a crucial example of the abject, a liminal, in-between state that Kristeva describes as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.’⁸ The constant switching of murdered bodies and of bodies’ identities and the gender and class issues the discovery of these substitutions bring to light goes even further than the representation of a murder to highlight the disruption of social order that those bodies exemplify. The murder victim’s abject body represents not only the boundary between life and death made uncomfortably visible but it is also the tangible evidence of transgression of the law. Kristeva claims that ‘Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility.’⁹ The women murder victims’ bodies, as well as the women killers’ bodies, represent sites of transgression of both law in the legal sense and the law of social order.

‘NOT AN ORDINARY MURDERESS’: THE KILLER’S BODY
IN *LORD EDGWARE DIES*, *UNNATURAL DEATH*, *DUMB
WITNESS* AND *PERIL AT END HOUSE*

The depictions of women killers in the work of Christie and Sayers are significant in their contravention of social and cultural boundaries. In killers such as Mary Whittaker of *Unnatural Death*, Bella Tanios of *Dumb Witness* and Jane Wilkinson of *Lord Edgware Dies*, issues of class and gender take centre stage in representations of criminals whose bodies themselves are essential to their crimes. Each of these women uses forms of masquerade to aid them in committing murder, whether this be using an alternate identity, as Mary Whittaker does in *Unnatural Death*, or the cultural expectations of accepted forms of femininity, as used by Bella Tanios in *Dumb Witness* with her performance as a traditional wife and mother, or even, as in the case of Nick Buckley in *Murder at End House*, the masquerade of passive female victimhood. As with his observation in *Evil Under the Sun* about the similarity of sunbathing bodies, Poirot also on several occasions specifically suggests that modern women are particularly disturbing in their fluid interchangeability. When he is explaining the timetable of the murder he has just solved at the end of *The Mystery of*

the Blue Train (1928), Poirot reveals that the woman thought to be the victim who was seen at a certain time was in fact her killer: ‘Les femmes, they look so much alike nowadays that one identifies them more by their clothing than by their faces.’¹⁰ The killer’s body, like the victim’s, becomes an ambiguous site of confused identities and transgressive potential as they manipulate available modes of modern femininity.

In Agatha Christie’s novel *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), the killer, Lady Edgware, ingeniously uses her second victim as her own disguise. Lady Edgware is an ambitious American actress originally named Jane Wilkinson who plots to kill her husband in order to clear the way for her to marry a Roman Catholic duke who will not accept a divorcee as a potential wife. Jane creates an alibi for herself by hiring another young actress, Carlotta Adams, to impersonate her at a dinner party during the time when Jane will actually be murdering Lord Edgware. Carlotta Adams, who will become Jane’s second victim soon after they perpetrate the dinner-party switch, is described by Poirot’s ‘Watson’-like sidekick Hastings as having

distinct charm, but charm of a somewhat negative order. It consisted in an absence of any jarring or strident note ... Her very appearance was negative ... A face that you liked but that you would find it hard to know again if you were to meet her, say, in different clothes.¹¹

Carlotta’s appearance foreshadows the corpse she will later be, and this mutability echoes the uncanny universality of the female dead body. She is already binarised, compared to a negative of a photograph. Carlotta’s ability to slip across boundaries, to disappear into different identities, is what attracts Jane Wilkinson to her when she sees Carlotta impersonating her on stage in a one-woman show and is therefore what ultimately seals Carlotta’s fate.

Hastings describes Carlotta as ‘a thoroughly nice girl’ and states at the beginning of the investigation that he cannot believe that she could be a suspect in Lord Edgware’s murder, even though he belatedly remembers that Carlotta’s stereotypical Jewish love of money might tempt her to be ‘led astray’ were she to be paid to commit a crime. Carlotta’s ethnic background as well as her speculated-upon sexual relationships make her an object of suspicion after she is dead—her morality is questioned when the gold box planted by Jane Wilkinson, from which Carlotta’s fatal dose of veronal was taken, is thought to have been a gift from a male admirer

imagined to have ties to both her death and Lord Edgware's murder. Yet Carlotta's fate arouses sympathy when it is found that she has been supporting an ill younger sister, and this evidence of 'good girl' behaviour helps Poirot to catch her killer when a potentially incriminating letter written by Carlotta to her sister is found to have been tampered with by Jane. Carlotta's reputation is at last redeemed when she is absolved of Lord Edgware's murder, her own assumed suicide and her supposed engagement in sexual activity outside marriage.¹² Significantly, Jane, Carlotta's double and her killer, also turns out to be her 'lover'. Not only does Jane plant the gold box that Poirot assumes must have come from a male lover, but she also tears a strategic corner from Carlotta's letter to her sister, turning the pronoun 'she' into 'he' and thereby implicating an unknown man in Lord Edgware's murder. Jane's planting of evidence becomes a form of gender-bending masquerade, another disguise that ties her to her victim, Carlotta, whose body Jane has already used as a disguise.

As a killer, Jane is described by a friend, fellow actor Bryan Martin, as 'not an ordinary murderess. She—she has no sense of right or wrong. Honestly she's not responsible.'¹³ Hastings also remarks upon Jane's 'completely natural' attitude after murdering her husband, calling her a 'very lovely and very conscienceless lady'.¹⁴ However, Jane's naïveté and childlike irresponsibility are shown to be somewhat calculated—remorseless she may be, but she certainly recognises her own culpability for the crimes she has committed and even displays pride in her own agency. Jane's beauty and her insouciance towards her own role in the murders lead men around her such as Hastings and Martin to view her as a stereotypically childish, attractive young woman whose 'natural' addiction to getting her own way renders her irresponsible for her actions.¹⁵ In fact, Jane is a supremely competent professional actress who is clever enough to use negative assumptions about her intelligence and competence to her own advantage. Also, there is evidence suggesting that the murder that marks the beginning of Jane's crime spree might have been the result of a more complex motive than simply her selfish desire to marry a duke and raise her social status. Lord Edgware is presented as a thoroughly unpleasant character; it is implied that he has sadistic tastes and unspecified, disagreeable sexual habits, and his death is not viewed particularly sympathetically by those who know him, even by his own daughter. It is never explicitly acknowledged that Jane's crime, and her subsequent efforts to cover it up, may have been as much an act of revenge by an abused wife as it was a conscienceless means of clearing the way for a second marriage.

The novel's final chapter, 'A Human Document', is mostly composed of a letter in which Jane explains the crimes in her own words. It is to be given to Poirot in the hope that he will have it published after her execution. Jane writes, 'I've always noticed that if you speak the truth in a rather silly way nobody believes you. I've often done it over contracts. And it's also a good thing to seem stupider than you are.'¹⁶ Jane's recognition of female stereotypes leads her to exaggerate her 'natural' irresponsibility, drawing suspicion away from herself by taking advantage of such assumptions. The casual professionalism evident in her account of negotiating contracts similarly indicates that she is far from unintelligent. In fact, Jane revels in the roles she plays and in her own potential for deviance. In her letter, Jane writes, 'It's funny, but I haven't lost my looks a bit ... They don't hang you in public any more, do they? I think that's a pity.'¹⁷ The letter's postscript, and the novel's final sentence, asks: 'Do you think they will put me in Madame Tussauds?'¹⁸ Jane actively seeks notoriety: she wants her own dead body, and its uncanny replica, to be seen and acknowledged and her story to be told.¹⁹ Jane's desire to be hanged in public, though thwarted, represents her fantasy of her body as a site of disturbance—of 'death infecting life'.²⁰ That her letter makes up the chapter entitled 'A Human Document' is telling—Jane's letter represents her own body, and her desire for it to be published signifies a disturbing investment in abjection. Though the novel does include a tidy explication along with the stereotypical engagement of a young couple, both symbolic of restored order, the final chapter asks a question more than it provides an answer—it is a transgressive voice from beyond the grave, asking for her body and her story to be acknowledged by those who are living.

Dorothy L. Sayers' *Unnatural Death* is also a novel in which the killer's body is as provocative—or more so—as the bodies of her female victims. Mary Whittaker is, like Jane Wilkinson, a professional woman, a nurse who has given up her hospital job in order to care for her dying aunt. The doctor who treated her aunt describes Mary to Lord Peter Wimsey as 'a very nice, well-educated, capable girl ... Self-reliant, cool, all that sort of thing. Quite the modern type.'²¹ When the aunt finally dies, the attending doctor is uneasy about the cause of death, and with good reason: Mary has hastened her aunt's death by injecting her with a syringe full of air designed to stop her heart in order to secure her aunt's money before a change in the law makes it impossible for Mary to inherit. Wimsey takes the case and is soon drawn in by Mary's undeniable worthiness as an adversary. As a criminal, she is elusive, intelligent and skilled at disguise. On one occasion

when Wimsey's valet, Bunter, is given the task of tailing Miss Whittaker, she realises she is being followed and goes into a Ladies Retiring Room, where she changes clothes and walks away under Bunter's unsuspecting nose. Wimsey comments, 'What a woman!'²² His somewhat condescending admiration continues even when it is clear that Mary Whittaker's intelligence and subtlety make her extremely competent as a killer: 'Hang it all—here are all we people with our brilliant brains and our professional reputations—and this half-trained girl out of a hospital can beat the lot of us. How was it done?'²³ Inspector Parker responds that the method used for the murders is 'probably something so simple and obvious that it's never occurred to us ... The sort of principle you learn when you're in the fourth form and never apply to anything.' Their disparagement of Mary's education, compared with their own 'brilliant brains and professional reputations', negates her intelligence and her agency as a killer, despite the fact that she has utilised a practically undetectable method that was undoubtedly picked up during her time as a very competent working nurse.²⁴ Mary is, as her aunt's doctor acknowledges, 'well-educated, cool, self-reliant, capable and modern'. The very modern phenomenon of the professional woman has flummoxed the accomplished detectives, and their disparagement of her intelligence marks a disproportionate response to a woman who is in fact a very clever criminal.

Mary Whittaker's affinity for disguise begins with a simple change of name when she assumes the moniker 'Miss Grant' as she goes to consult a lawyer about the implications of her aunt dying without having made a will. The lawyer, Mr Trigg, is initially drawn to the appearance of the 'tall and handsome ... attractive girl', but soon after the meeting a strange event alarms him. When Mary—who the novel strongly implies is a lesbian—thinks that the lawyer's attraction has made him seek her out to an uncomfortable (and unprofessional) degree, she disguises herself as a fatally injured battered wife with her face wrapped in bandages and she lures the lawyer to an empty house, where she drugs him and almost certainly plans to kill him before his taxi driver comes to the rescue. Trigg realises something is amiss when he sees that the mysterious woman, like 'Miss Grant', has an unusual scar running across the back of her hand. The telltale scar is the betraying marker that designates Mary's body as transgressive. Mary's choice of disguise as a battered wife is significant; Trigg unwittingly represents the patriarchal force of the law that is compelling Mary to commit violence to avoid being cut out by the changing inheritance policies. Mary, as the abused wife, lures Trigg to the

abandoned house under the pretext that she needs a will made in order to disinherit her abusive husband. Mary's disguise as a woman who has been injured through her participation in the heteronormative order makes her attack on Trigg an ironic reversal of a stereotypical female victim's circumstances. The attempted murder of a man who has been pressing his unwanted attentions on Mary represents the revenge of a woman who is violently trying to escape not only the power of the law, but also enforced heteronormativity.

Mary's other alternate identity is 'Mrs Forrest', a vaguely disreputable divorcee who is described as 'overdressed ... Heavily peroxidized ... powder too white for the fashion and mouth heavily obscured with sealing-wax red; eyebrows painted black to startle, not deceive'.²⁵ Mrs Forrest's theatrically sexualised appearance is the polar opposite of the respectable and tidy Mary Whittaker, and it seems increasingly likely that Mrs Forrest is the identity into which Mary plans to disappear—after her aunt's death, she destroys all existing photographs of herself as Mary Whittaker. Though Mrs Forrest is placed under suspicion early in the investigation, Wimsey remains in the dark as to her actual identity until nearly the end of the novel, even after his various encounters with a woman whose heavily made-up appearance could easily indicate a disguise. Referring to Mary Whittaker and Mrs Forrest, he says to Parker, 'Nobody's life is safe for a second while either of them is at large.'²⁶ Mrs Forrest's flamboyantly sexualised appearance is another over-the-top disguise, like the battered wife costume, that appropriates the mode of femininity it represents and uses it to make a point about such stereotypes. When Wimsey begins to progress alarmingly in his investigation, Mary Whittaker decides that she must eliminate him. Disguised as 'Mrs Forrest', Mary invites Wimsey to her flat and goes through the motions of seduction. Sensing that something is amiss, Wimsey reflects on her lack of attraction for him:

For all her make-up and her somewhat outspoken costume, she struck him as spinsterish—even epicene. That was the thing which had puzzled him during their previous interview ... Wimsey had felt her as something essentially sexless, even then. And he felt it even more strongly now.²⁷

Though he cannot distinguish Mary from Mrs Forrest, Wimsey is able to read her desire as a performance; Mary's sexual nonconformity is made legible through her excessive display of highly sexualised heterosexual femininity. This scene suggests that sexuality is natural or inherent—Mary

cannot disguise her lesbianism, even though she acts out a carefully staged show of heterosexual desire. Mary's disgust at seducing Wimsey is evident, but her lack of enthusiasm for Wimsey's embraces also reflects the situation of any woman faced with using her body to manipulate a figure in a position of power, regardless of sexuality. Mary's body, instead of being sexualised by her seductive appearance and performance, becomes 'sex-less', creating a rift that highlights the disturbing nature not of her own capacity for violence, but of the sexual masquerade of the version of femininity she feels forced to inhabit.

Mary Whittaker's third murder is that of her friend (and implied lover) Vera Findlater, who vacillated about supplying Mary with an essential alibi. Mary plants at the scene of the murder an American crime magazine called *The Black Mask*, on which the words 'The Black' have been underlined. By this red herring, Mary attempts to throw the investigators off the scent, pointing them towards a murderer of another sex and ethnicity—after all, a sensational crime magazine is 'hardly a lady's choice' and the underlined words must have been a desperate attempt by the 'captured women' to indicate that their kidnappers are not of Caucasian descent.²⁸ Mary herself is nowhere to be found, and the 'abominable' thought that 'an English girl' should have been kidnapped by a black man is distracting enough to throw the media into a frenzy and draw attention from the fact that the elusive Mary Whittaker has already been implicated in two previous murders. By using the multiple masquerades of sex, ethnicity and the fantasy of rape, Mary anticipates the media reaction and manipulates negative stereotypes to great effect, as she escapes and almost avoids capture.

Mary is finally apprehended not as herself but as 'Mrs Forrest', and her arrest is not accomplished without confusion. Mary's frequent switching of identities takes a comic turn when Wimsey's assistant Miss Climpson, entering 'Mrs Forrest's' apartment building, is mistaken by the police surveilling the building for Mary Whittaker in disguise.²⁹ This moment is significant, echoing the interchangeability of women's bodies and identities that is repeated throughout the crime fiction of the period. In this case, the woman detective becomes a potential victim when she goes to confront—and is mistaken for—the killer, who is herself in disguise. In addition, the confusion between the women seems to indicate that, irrespective of age, spinsters specifically are distinguished by an identifiable look that categorises them as a type and makes them transposable—Mary Whittaker is significantly younger than Miss Climpson, yet Miss Climpson is still

misidentified as Mary. This interchangeability also suggests the unease and even the sense of danger that accompanied the perceived threat to domestic heteronormativity represented by the unprecedented number of spinsters during the interwar years, from which even Miss Climpson is not exempt. It takes the male detectives, Wimsey and Parker, the enforcers of patriarchal law and order, to stop the murder of Miss Climpson by breaking into the private space of 'Mrs Forrest's' bedroom, where Miss Climpson is initially observed not as herself but as 'The body of a woman [lying] limply on the bed'.³⁰ The scene of the potential crime feels intimate, with the nameless victim passively positioned on the bed and the killer readying her syringe in the dressing room beyond; when Wimsey and Parker stop the transgressive act of murder, they restore heteronormative order by recognising and assigning distinct identities to the killer and her potential victim.

The novel concludes with Mary Whittaker's suicide. She strangles herself with a sheet in a parody of the execution that would have awaited her, again subverting the patriarchal law that has thwarted her from the beginning and caused her to become a killer in the first place. Unlike Jane Wilkinson, Mary's final act of agency is to choose not to tell her own story in the very public theatres of the courtroom and the media, therefore slipping free of her identity and becoming only a symbol of 'an evil woman', as Parker calls her when staring down at her dead body. Her corpse is grotesque, the 'face swollen' with a 'deep, red ring about the throat', and it makes Wimsey feel 'cold and sick'.³¹ The unsettling potential of an 'evil woman' is embodied in Mary's corpse, which 'disturbs identity, system, order'.³² The body represents a criminal woman who has subverted stereotypes of oppressed femininity by using them to mask her transgression and who has subverted the law by performing her own execution while in prison, appropriating the law even at the cost of her own destruction.

Besides those killers who use physical forms of masquerade to transgress social boundaries, there are also those who employ less obvious but no less effective means of accomplishing the same end, as with Mary Whittaker's appropriation of commonly held prejudices about sex and ethnicity as a form of disguise. Bella Tanios in Christie's *Dumb Witness* and Nick Buckley in Christie's *Peril at End House* are two killers who use cultural expectations of accepted feminine roles as a form of masquerade in order to confuse and mislead investigators who seek to restore order. Bella hides behind the image of a mousy, doting mother who is dominated

by her gregarious Greek husband. She plots to kill her wealthy spinster aunt, Miss Arundell, so that she and her children can inherit part of Miss Arundell's fortune and escape their impoverished lifestyle. In many ways, Bella is presented as a figure of pity and ridicule—she is looked upon kindly by all but thought to be hopelessly dull and ineffectual. For example, Bella loves clothing and eagerly looks to her stylish cousin Theresa's wardrobe for inspiration, but always seems to strike the wrong note with her cheap copies of Theresa's chic garments. Theresa is ostensibly the 'bad girl' and Bella the 'good girl': Theresa spends money indiscriminately, is 'Ultra modern ... and terribly made-up', while Bella is 'quite a nice woman—but absolutely stupid and completely under her husband's thumb'.³³ Bella and Theresa are, in fact, quite literally presented as mirror images of each other. Miss Lawson, Miss Arundell's companion, witnesses through her looking glass a woman she is sure is Theresa setting up an early attempt on Miss Arundell's life; Miss Lawson is positive about the identification because even though the night was dark, she could see that the woman was wearing a brooch with the initials 'T.A.', for Theresa Arundell.³⁴ In fact, since the initials were seen through the mirror, they are actually the letters A.T., for Arabella Tanios. Even Theresa's marriage at the end of the novel is the mirror image of Bella's—when Theresa marries her beloved Dr Donaldson, she is absolved of her wild, modern youth and slips comfortably into the role of traditional wife, 'amazingly happy and absolutely wrapped up in her husband's career'.³⁵ This should not, however, certainly be seen as a setback for the independent modern woman, but perhaps as an attempt to renegotiate the marriage relationship for the modern couple, as discussed in Chap. 5. While still in the subordinate role in the relationship, Theresa is happy in having married a man she loves, while meek, motherly Bella, seemingly the opposite of modern, stylish and rebellious Theresa, is the one who secretly despises her doctor husband and is miserable enough in her marriage to try to cast suspicion on her husband for a murder that she herself commits.

Bella's power as a killer lies in her ability to manipulate assumptions about herself—as a mother and a seemingly traditional wife who takes a subordinate role to her husband, she is dismissed by others as lacking the necessary agency and motive to commit murder. Theresa remarks to her brother Charles, 'I don't see that money would be any good to Bella. She goes about looking like a rag-bag and her tastes are purely domestic.'³⁶ Miss Lawson more charitably assumes that Bella deserves Miss Arundell's money, but comments to Poirot, '[Miss Arundell] didn't want to leave any

money *outright* to Bella because she was afraid that man would get hold of it ... the poor girl is *quite* under his thumb ... I dare say she'd *murder* someone if he told her to!³⁷ Those who know Bella read her as completely incapable of acting independently of her husband, and, in addition, view him suspiciously as an excessively emotional foreigner. In one sense, this stereotype holds true; the fact is that Dr Tanios is not entirely innocent in spite of not having committed an actual crime. It transpires that he took control of all Bella's assets upon their marriage and speculated them away. As a result of the passive role she is forced to take in the marriage, Bella grows increasingly resentful of her husband and finally commits murder so that she can attain the financial means to survive independently. The depth of her antipathy is evident even when she tries to use the suspicion directed against him as a foreigner to implicate him in her aunt's death. Bella shrewdly goes on the attack when Poirot tells her that Miss Arundell wrote him a letter shortly before her death expressing the suspicion that someone was trying to kill her:

'if anything was said in that letter against my husband, it was entirely untrue! ... Aunt Emily was prejudiced against my husband because he was not an Englishman, and she may therefore have believed things that Theresa said about him. But they are *not true*.'³⁸

In one swoop, Bella's overly vehement defence of her husband has cast suspicion not only on him but also on Theresa, whom Bella implies is trying to deflect suspicion from herself by spreading xenophobic slander about Dr Tanios.

Bella's manipulative behaviour and bid for freedom from her marriage are ultimately read correctly by Poirot, who calls Bella's trap of a string across the top of Miss Arundell's staircase 'a homely simple method—the kind that mother makes'.³⁹ Poirot is finally able to reconcile Bella's seemingly passive, traditional domesticity with her role as killer. He explains,

'I realized at once, not that [Bella] feared her husband, but that she disliked him ... Here was ... a thwarted [woman]. A plain girl, leading a dull existence ... finally accepting a man she did not care for rather than be left an old maid ... There was only one thing that illuminated her drab life, the expectation of her Aunt Emily's death. Then she would have money, independence, the means to educate her children as she wished—and remember education meant a lot to her—she was a Professor's daughter!⁴⁰

Bella's transgression lies in her representation of the absolute failure of a traditionally subordinate, domestic role for women. While determined to do everything 'correctly'—marrying to avoid becoming an 'old maid', giving control of her assets to her husband, striving to give her children the best in life according to the values she has inherited—Bella has been frustrated at every turn and made into a killer by these seemingly ordinary, yet destructive, circumstances. Bella's suicide by an overdose of sleeping draught is encouraged by Poirot, who tells her, 'It is the children you must think of, madame, not yourself. You love your children.'⁴¹ Instead of being subject to a public trial and execution, Bella is forced by her role as a mother into disposing of her offending body in a private, domestic manner. At one point, before anyone knows who murdered Miss Arundell, Charles asks Poirot, 'Doesn't [Bella] strike you as the type of woman who is marked out by fate to be a victim?'⁴² Bella, the killer, is in fact a victim herself—a victim of the cultural expectations of a woman's role that she is clever enough to manipulate as a form of masquerade, but is ultimately unable to escape.

Christie's *Peril at End House* is another novel in which a woman killer assumes an ingenious disguise—that of potential murder victim. Magdala (Nick) Buckley is a young, modern woman whose flippancy in the seeming face of death often enrages Poirot. Nick artfully arranges a meeting with the detective when she realises he is staying nearby and misleads him into thinking that someone is making attempts on her life in order to draw attention away from the fact that she herself is actually plotting a murder. Nick pointedly laughs at both Poirot and his assistant Hastings when they come to warn her of the purported danger, asking, 'Who is the dog ...? Dr Watson, I presume.' When Hastings 'coldly' gives his name, Nick responds 'Battle of—1066 ... Who said I wasn't educated?'⁴³ Nick's modern, mocking dismissal of Hastings marks Hastings as a relic of traditional 'Englishness'—the loyal Watson figure with the name of a legendary English battle. Nick's brash, modern femininity challenges the entrenched, English masculinity Hastings represents. To Poirot, she says,

'Do you think someone really wants to do away with me? ... But, of course, that sort of thing doesn't really happen ... I expect Monsieur Poirot is like a surgeon who's invented an operation or a doctor who's found an obscure disease and wants everyone to have it.'⁴⁴

Nick places Poirot in terms of his relationship to bodies, comparing him to a doctor or surgeon, and her dismissal of him is an attempt to remove

her own body from the equation and imply that she is not so easy to categorise.

Nick, whose masculine nickname indicates her potential for gender ambiguity, takes full advantage of the assumption that the killer would be a man and the victim a woman, disguising herself as the inevitable woman victim when she is in fact the murderer. Poirot refers to the potential killer as a 'clever man', and Nick's constructed identity as a flighty young flapper who is barely serious enough to acknowledge herself as a would-be murder victim is an extremely effective smokescreen.⁴⁵ Nick manipulates the stereotype with great success, time and again sidestepping Poirot by emphasising the fact that she is not a 'clever man' and so cannot be the killer. Poirot at first dismisses Nick's modern femininity: 'The young girls—they are not properly trained nowadays. The order, the method, it is left out of their bringing up. She is charming, Mademoiselle Nick, but she is a feather-head. Decidedly she is a feather-head.'⁴⁶ Nick's lack of 'proper training' in fact suggests that she transgresses outdated, gendered boundaries that would otherwise restrain her and subdue her activity. Poirot's mistake is in assuming that Nick's lack of 'order' and 'method' means that she is incapable of reasoned behaviour. Nick's manipulation of this stereotype to mask a capacity for carefully premeditated murder indicates a cultural anxiety that accompanies modern women who reject traditional roles.

Nick's stylish, boyish, modern femininity is contrasted with her unassuming cousin (and victim) Maggie's traditional femininity, and the second mode of femininity is represented far more positively than the first. Maggie is certainly viewed more favourably by the staid Hastings, who describes her as having an 'appearance of calm good sense ... A quiet girl, pretty in the old-fashioned sense—certainly not smart.'⁴⁷ Nick sees Maggie rather differently, remarking disparagingly, 'Maggie's got no kind of brains. Good works is about all she's fit for. That and never seeing the point of jokes.'⁴⁸ However, it is Maggie, not the flashy Nick, who has attracted the attention of, and become secretly engaged to, the famous pilot Captain Seton, whose death in an attempt to fly around the world sets Nick's plans for murder into motion. Hastings, who reads about Captain Seton's flight in the newspaper, comments admiringly, 'Must be a fine fellow. That sort of thing makes one feel it's a good thing to be an Englishman after all.'⁴⁹ Maggie's old-fashioned femininity and Captain Seton's stereotypical English masculinity make a pairing that seems ideal, except for the minor detail that they both die just before they are to be married. Nick, who knows about Maggie's secret engagement, quickly takes action

when Captain Seton is killed, stealing his love letters to Maggie and killing Maggie herself so that she can inherit Captain Seton's large fortune instead. Magdala Buckley is both Nick and Maggie's full name, and Nick reasons that she can pass herself off as the 'Magdala Buckley' designated in Seton's will. When Maggie's body is found, it is at first assumed that it is Nick's, as Maggie had been wearing Nick's distinctive shawl. Since Nick has taken care to represent herself as the potential victim, Maggie's body is dismissed and her murder plays a secondary role to the assumption that she was killed by mistake and that someone is still out to murder Nick. Nick has made her victim and herself interchangeable, not only by taking advantage of the convenience of their shared name, but also by setting Maggie up to be killed in her shawl so that it will look like the women were confused with each other. Nick, the killer, immerses herself in the role of victim so thoroughly that the true victim slips out of mind.

In spite of Nick's careful attempt to draw attention away from Maggie's death—'burying' her cousin in the disguise of a simple mistake—both the morally good, old-fashioned Maggie and the wicked, modern Nick, who overdoses on cocaine to avoid being arrested, are eliminated at the novel's conclusion. 'Magdala Buckley' is no more, but a compromise is presented in the form of the novel's conventional marriage plot between Nick's friend Frederica Rice and Jim Lazarus. Frederica, or 'Freddie', is a recovering drug addict who is separated from her similarly addicted, mentally unstable husband, and Jim Lazarus is an art dealer and 'a Jew ... but a frightfully decent one'.⁵⁰ The convenient suicide of Freddie's husband at the end of the novel clears the way for a marriage between Freddie and Jim. Freddie's masculine-sounding nickname, like Nick's, designates her as a modern woman, and her failed marriage and struggle with addiction make her something more complicated than the traditional *ingénue*. The marriage plot in *Peril at End House*, with an experienced, modern woman's second marriage to a man of a different ethnicity, sets up a very different representation of 'happily ever after' than if Maggie Buckley and Captain Seton had survived to become the novel's model couple; though the conventional marriage plot neatly restores order, it is perhaps not the order that might have been expected. The modern couple provides a way to stretch the possibilities of a conventional ending, while allowing the genre's conservative framework to remain in place.

Meanwhile, though the symbolic restoration of order is denied to the traditional couple in favour of a more modern manifestation, the transgressive, modern woman also becomes completely erased. Nick

symbolises modern, active femininity that has superseded passive, traditional femininity, but the novel's conclusion is ambiguous, as neither of these models is allowed to supplant the other. Nick's assumed cocaine overdose does not even take place on stage—Poirot only projects that it will happen. Her body is only hypothetical and does not intrude upon the narrative's resolution. Nick's insistent attempts to position herself as victim instead of killer have succeeded in the end, for as with the body of her victim, whose identity is so confused and downplayed that her body is mistaken for Nick's, Nick's own body becomes immaterial.

‘ERASED FROM THE PAGE’: THE VICTIM’S BODY IN *SPEEDY DEATH*, *THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY* AND *EVIL UNDER THE SUN*

Gladys Mitchell's *Speedy Death* is a novel peppered with women's bodies, dead and alive, identifiable and ambiguous. The novel opens with the discovery of a profoundly disturbing female body. Everard Mountjoy is a professional explorer and scientist who is presumed to be male but is, to the surprise of everyone at the house party during which the murder occurs, discovered to be a woman when her dead, naked body is found in a bathtub. It is at first assumed that Mountjoy has disappeared under sinister circumstances and left the unknown woman's body to be found, until it gradually becomes clear that 'Mountjoy was the lady, and the lady was Mountjoy'.⁵¹ When party guest Mr Carstairs is relating the circumstances of Mountjoy's death to the detective Mrs Bradley, he muses,

First, there is the queer fact that, although a man, known to the scientists of two continents as Everard Mountjoy, went into that bathroom, we found drowned in that same bathroom an unknown woman, and no trace of our friend except his dressing-gown.⁵²

That Mountjoy is 'known to the scientists of two continents' makes the deception particularly bewildering. Mountjoy has been passing himself off as a man not only to his friends but also to his fellow—probably mostly male—scientists, who would presumably have the most rational and penetrating ways of seeing. The guests' perplexity is a comic moment that explicitly draws attention to the dead body's lack of identity; it is increasingly clear that the body must be Mountjoy's, but Mountjoy is repeatedly referred to as having 'disappeared' instead of having died. In one of the

few critical discussions of *Speedy Death*, Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan call it a novel ‘which turns on an issue of transvestism never quite presented with sufficient aplomb’, presumably a reference to the fact that Mountjoy’s female identity is never revealed or even speculated upon at length.⁵³ Significantly, the story behind Mountjoy’s gender masquerade remains unknown and is only given the most superficial consideration. As becomes clear, Mountjoy’s murder has neutralised the threat of ‘his’ female body before it becomes manifest.

Even before his body is found, Mountjoy’s occupation attracts assumptions that are shown to be false, calling attention to his potential ambiguity. On their way to the house party, which is disrupted by the discovery of Mountjoy’s body, Dorothy Clark tells her fiancé, Bertie Philipson, that she thinks Mountjoy must be ‘A large, hairy, loud-voiced, primitive sort of creature, with a red tie and a black beard’.⁵⁴ Dorothy’s assumptions invoke a popular image of what an explorer should look like, but Mountjoy does not conform to this gendered stereotype; he is in fact.

a little, slim, clean-shaven, shy sort of fellow, with hardly a word to say ...
He doesn’t golf or motor or walk or ride or swim or tennis or anything.
And the only person who seems to be able to get two words out of him is
... Eleanor.⁵⁵

In spite of these hints at his imperfectly performed masculinity, Mountjoy’s relationship with Eleanor Bing is his ultimate undoing. Eleanor is a repressed, old-fashioned young woman whose interactions with men are usually erratic and ‘highly improbable’; when faced with an eligible man, she either reacts with cold, stereotypically Victorian disapproval or with socially inappropriate sexual advances.⁵⁶ Her attraction to Mountjoy falls in the latter category, and Eleanor’s pursuit of him results in a secret engagement between the two. When Eleanor discovers that her fiancé is a woman, she reacts by murdering Mountjoy. Mountjoy is punished for his failed gender performance by a woman whose excessive desire to conform to a heterosexual feminine role is also shown to have negative consequences. In ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, Judith Butler writes of gender non-compliance that:

gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the

reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated.⁵⁷

The murder ensures that the transgressive Mountjoy, whose female body underneath the inadequately performed male veneer is so distressingly threatening that Eleanor needs to annihilate it, is contained. However, Eleanor's act, though perpetrated out of her horror at knowing she had been having a romantic relationship with a woman, while punishing Mountjoy for not conforming to a female gender, also leaves Mountjoy's body as an ultimate reminder of his transgression. Mountjoy's female body is the abject, eternally unidentified figure that forces the recognition not only of gender non-compliance and its consequences but also of the instability of gender as a category.

When Mountjoy's body is found, it is agreed that Eleanor should not be told the truth about Mountjoy's sex in order to spare her embarrassment: 'Rather bad luck to find out that the chap you are engaged to is a woman, what?'⁵⁸ Mountjoy and Eleanor's relationship becomes something else that is meant to remain 'unknown'; indeed, their engagement 'was supposed to be a secret' in the first place.⁵⁹ When Mrs Bradley discusses Mountjoy's murder with the Chief Constable, she asks him if he has heard of sexual perversion. He replies, 'Not a pleasant subject.' Mrs Bradley 'assures' him, 'I do not propose to discuss it ... but I do suggest to you that Mountjoy may have formed a very real ... attachment to Eleanor Bing.'⁶⁰ The hint that Mountjoy might have been sexually attracted to Eleanor is all that is needed to suggest a possible motive for his murder. However, in murdering Mountjoy, Eleanor herself deviates from a model of gender compliance. Before Eleanor's guilt is discovered, Carstairs insists that the murder must have been a man's crime, since it required 'nerve' and because the killer entered the bathroom via a perilous climb from balcony to window.⁶¹ The particularly active nature of the crime means that the killer is automatically assumed to be a man. The inspector in charge of investigating Mountjoy's death says about Eleanor,

there's some young women that are past all bearing, and ... would be better out of the way; and Miss Eleanor Bing is one of them. Now I wonder who

the man is that she's shielding. If we could find him we might be laying our hands on the Mountjoy murderer.⁶²

Ironically, Eleanor's identity is masked by gender non-compliance, just as her victim's identity is by his own gender transgression. The police suspect Eleanor of having some knowledge of the crime, but assume that she must be protecting a man who has killed Mountjoy, motivated either by sexual jealousy or by paternalistic protectiveness towards Eleanor, when in fact Eleanor herself is 'the man' in question. Eleanor's cold and prudish manner provokes the surprisingly vitriolic comment that she is 'past all bearing, and ... would be better out of the way'. In fact, Eleanor's crime, and her subsequent attempts to murder romantic rivals when another young man catches her eye, do condemn her to be got 'out of the way'. Eleanor's excessive sexuality marks her as deviant, and, in order for the narrative to reach a resolution, she must be removed. Though Eleanor is Mountjoy's killer, she herself becomes the novel's second murder victim.

Eleanor's violence is diagnosed as 'repression' and 'neurasthenia', but it can also be read as a pathological manifestation of excessive desire to conform to a heterosexual model.⁶³ She kills Mountjoy out of fury on discovering that her fiancé is a woman, and she attempts to kill other women when she perceives that they are desired by a man to whom she is attracted. Mountjoy's provocative gender transgression fades into the background and even ceases to be discussed as Eleanor continues on her sexually motivated crime spree. When Eleanor is finally caught in the act of trying to murder a young woman guest, she 'fought and struggled, while from the lips which were accustomed to employ the most trite and correct of expressions there poured forth a stream of the most foul and abominable filth which ever disgraced the name of language'.⁶⁴ Eleanor's veneer of propriety is stripped off in the heat of committing a crime, and she is finally acting out her true motivations. However, Eleanor is effectively silenced in her moment of agency—as she rants, Bertie 'trie[s] to place a hand over her foaming mouth'.⁶⁵ The morning after this episode, Eleanor is permanently silenced when her dead body is found submerged in the bathtub in the same manner as Mountjoy's.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Eleanor is found to have been killed with an overdose of hyoscin, a drug Mrs Bradley reveals is used for calming nymphomaniacs.⁶⁷ The novel's first murder victim is punished for his failure to conform to heteronormative standards, but its second victim is condemned for her pathologically excessive heterosexual desire. In an ironic twist, Eleanor's killer turns out to be

the novel's detective figure, Mrs Bradley. Though Mrs Bradley is guilty of murdering Eleanor, she is found innocent due to a lack of evidence when the case goes to trial. After her acquittal, Mrs Bradley remarks to her son and lawyer, Ferdinand Lestrangle, 'I did not, in the everyday, newspaper, pot-house sense of the word murder Eleanor Bing. I merely erased her, as it were, from an otherwise fair page of the Bing family chronicle.'⁶⁸ The nonchalance displayed towards Eleanor's death is similar to the virtual dismissal of the unpleasant victim Rouse in *Miss Pym Disposes*, and Mrs Bradley's justification of the murder echoes Miss Pym's consideration for the feelings of Innes' family as a major factor in not turning the suspected student over to the authorities. Craig and Cadogan suggest that Mrs Bradley's murder of Eleanor is used 'to ridicule the thriller-writers' tendency to avoid moral complications by making their villains always perfectly villainous'.⁶⁹ Certainly, Mrs Bradley's shockingly callous description of her crime is ironic, but the novel's macabre sense of humour, evident in the blurred lines between detective, killer and victim, also works to call any restoration of order or respectability at the novel's conclusion into question. Like Bella Tanios, who is encouraged to commit suicide, Eleanor is 'erased' in a way that enables the family to continue to function without being tainted by scandal. However, this preservation of respectability is somewhat illusory, as the extent to which gender and genre conventions have been destabilised has already been revealed. Only with the suppression of the dead women's identities and the detective's acquittal for murder can the novel's ironic play with gender and genre be contained in some form of resolution.

Eleanor's 'real' voice is revealed—and again silenced—in the form of the discovery of her diary after her death. The diary is presented in the narrative as Carstairs reads it. Eleanor writes that she feels 'curiously attracted' to Mountjoy and that she has 'strange desires' for him. She has repeatedly written his name, at times with the prefix 'Mrs' attached.⁷⁰ Eleanor's sexual desire is signified by her preoccupation with Mountjoy's name, which is itself an innuendo promising sexual fulfilment. She wants Mountjoy to be 'manly and sunburnt', but he uncomfortably resists her.⁷¹ Eleanor's desire for Mountjoy to be 'manly' and to expose his body to the heat of both the sun and her sexual cravings is thwarted by Mountjoy's own need to keep the secret of his female body. The diaries' entries grow increasingly explicit, until 'At the last entry [Carstairs] blinked, and closed the book with a snap. There was a fire burning in the room. He walked over to it, and consigned Eleanor's diary to the flames.'⁷² As when she is caught in

the act of attempted murder, Eleanor's voice is silenced when it expresses excessive and unseemly emotion. The final entry in Eleanor's diary, presumably her most sexually explicit, is never revealed. Like Mountjoy's real identity, Eleanor's repressed self as exposed in her diary is expunged, just as Mrs Bradley has 'erased her from the family chronicle'.

As is explicitly seen with Mountjoy's body in *Speedy Death*, the physical body of a woman murder victim can be particularly transgressive in its intrusion into an enclosed community's fragile social fabric. The woman in question loses her individual identity, becoming a symbolic body. The erasure of women murder victims' identities is perhaps most overt in novels such as Christie's *The Body in the Library* and *Evil Under the Sun*, in which one body is shown to be interchangeable with another. When describing the kind of crime novel she wished to write in the foreword to *The Body in the Library*, Christie says that she 'laid down for [her]self certain conditions. The library in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body.'⁷³ The opening scene of *The Body in the Library* contains an overt example of the abject body's effect. The library, like its owners Colonel and Mrs Bantry, is decidedly orderly, correct and, with its status as both a repository of knowledge and a place of repose, symbolic of a privileged class of society: 'The whole room was dim and mellow and casual. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition.'⁷⁴ The murdered body found 'sprawled across the old bearskin hearthrug' is in every sense disturbing—her identity is unknown to the house's owners, she is gaudily dressed and made up, and her body carries with it all the moral assumptions associated with that of a modern, physically attractive young woman.⁷⁵ The body is discovered on an ordinary morning as the servants are going about the business of opening up the house for the day and Mrs Bantry is peacefully dreaming of a flower show. The jarring quality of the body when it is discovered—'a cheap, tawdry, flamboyant figure—most incongruous in the solid old-fashioned comfort of Colonel Bantry's library'—with all its symbolic disturbance, is distinctly abject. Its intrusion into the everyday lives of unknown people, into the order of the library and into an apparently different social stratum is disruptive in the extreme—'new and crude and melodramatic'.⁷⁶ The nature of the body in the library is calculated to be an unignorable fissure in the social fabric and to promote gossip, which is an ideal way to construct impressions surrounding class and gendered sexual morality that will inevitably be torn down.

After the discovery of the body in her library, Mrs Bantry telephones her friend Miss Marple to come and have a look. Mrs Bantry describes the young woman as ‘a beautiful blonde—like [in] books’.⁷⁷ She is somewhat enjoying the excitement, even though ‘it’s very sad and all that, but then I don’t know the girl—and ... she doesn’t look *real* at all’.⁷⁸ The body is disturbing and intrusive, but there is no sense of grief because the young woman does not look ‘real’—she has no personality to which potential mourners can relate. The body’s failure to look real is a direct result of its hyperbolically gendered characteristics, drawing attention to the performance of gender in the same way Judith Butler posits that the drag act does when she writes that ‘In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.’⁷⁹ When Miss Marple arrives, she accompanies Mrs Bantry into the library, where they see:

The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening-dress of white spangled satin. The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on the distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash.⁸⁰

The young woman’s body is not only gaudily made up and dressed, but also horrifying in its flamboyance. Far from sexualising the young woman, the make-up and revealing evening dress emphasise the shocking physicality of her dead body. The powder accentuates the discoloration of her oxygen-deprived skin; her lipstick creates a ‘gash’ in the blue face; and the revealing evening dress covers a ‘thin’ body. Rather than drawing sympathy, the glaring fact of her death only distances the body from its viewers; Mrs Bantry remarks to Miss Marple, ‘You see what I mean? It just isn’t *true!*’⁸¹ After the body is examined, the woman is at first thought to be the lover of Basil Blake, a man viewed mistrustfully in the village because he is ‘in film’ and throws raucous parties. Blake and his friends keep up a facade of modern insouciance; he is described as having ‘that silly slighting way of talking that these boys have nowadays—sneering at people sticking up for their school or the Empire or that sort of thing’.⁸² Blake and his live-in lover seem to eschew respectability and are assumed to be unconventional enough to be involved in a murder. As they have intruded on the quiet and traditional St Mary Mead, so they might have transferred the

consequences of their coarse modern life into the Bantrys' stolid country-house library. Blake's mistress, like the body in the library, is platinum blonde and stylish; Miss Marple points out, 'I've never seen her close to ... I never really saw her *face*. And all these girls with their make-up and their hair and their nails look so alike.'⁸³ Miss Marple names modernity as a threat to individuality—since 'all these girls ... look so alike'—and it becomes clear that the problem of the body's identity is not one that will be easily solved. The body in the library turns out not to be Basil Blake's lover, and Miss Marple clears Blake's name when she reveals that, avant-garde as he may seem, he is really a respectable English hero in disguise. It transpires that Blake was injured rescuing people from a burning building while working as an ARP warden during the Second World War and that he and his so-called mistress are actually married.⁸⁴ These two pieces of information go far in swaying public opinion about the now-upstanding young man, and, as it turns out, Blake himself is a victim of the body's disturbing force. The body was originally placed in his home, and Blake, panicking and drunk, in turn moved it to the Bantrys' library. Though he and his wife enjoy shocking their neighbours with their modern ways, they are essentially taking part in one of the novel's many masquerades, and they are ultimately participants in the traditional English social system that is disrupted by a young woman's body.

After its initial misidentification as that of Blake's 'mistress', the body in the library is named as that of Ruby Keene, a young professional dancer at a nearby hotel. Ruby Keene is only the young woman's stage name—her real name is Rosy Legge. Both names evoke certain assumptions about her character—'Ruby Keene' is 'a decided little gold-digger', a young woman who so charms the wealthy, disabled Conway Jefferson that he decides to adopt her and name her in his will as the sole inheritor of his fortune over his only surviving family, a son- and daughter-in-law.⁸⁵ Ruby's other name, Rosy Legge, reflects the suspicions that surround her sexual morality—it is assumed that since she is unscrupulous enough to manipulate a lonely old man for her own material gain, she must also be experienced in seduction. The police suspect an unidentified, jealous lover of Ruby's murder, but Jefferson insists that if Ruby had had a boyfriend, she would have told him. The policeman in charge of the case, Superintendent Harper, cynically thinks, 'Yes, I dare say that's what *she* told you!'⁸⁶ Ruby's appearance, class and ambition are all against her, and the official stance on the case acquires the prejudicial tone of a view often taken against female victims—that she 'asked for it'. As the investigation continues along in this

vein, Miss Marple begins to sense that something is not right about the body in the library; the dress that the young woman is wearing, seemingly chosen for a romantic tryst, has obviously been worn too often before. Miss Marple reasons that a 'well bred girl' would change into 'sensible' clothing, not an evening gown, for an outdoor assignation, while Ruby 'belonged to the class that wear their best clothes however unsuitable to the occasion'.⁸⁷ Miss Marple believes that the working-class Ruby would have worn her best gown if she were meeting a hypothetical, murderous lover, so there must be another explanation behind the body's appearance. This dubious assumption, with its overt class stereotyping, turns out to be correct, and, with the appearance of yet another young woman's body, an explanation begins to emerge that complicates the theory that Ruby is just another woman victim destroyed by her loose morals and unseemly ambition.

The novel's second body, presumed to be that of schoolgirl Pamela Reeves, is found charred beyond recognition in a burnt-out car. Pamela's family is middle-class and respectable, 'Not the kind of people you associated with tragedy.'⁸⁸ While he thinks of Ruby as conniving and ambitious, Superintendent Harper sees Pamela as 'a nice kid' and 'admits privately' that 'Ruby Keene ... might have asked for what was coming to her, but Pamela Reeves was quite another story.'⁸⁹ Along with Pamela's middle-class upbringing and stable family life comes the assumption that she must have been naïve, innocent and unworldly; Pamela's mother describes her as 'just a child' and 'very young for her age', giving an impression of desexualised innocence, far removed from the descriptions of the manipulative, seductive Ruby Keene.⁹⁰ However, it turns out that Pamela is in fact an 'awfully good' actress and on the day of both murders convincingly lied about her whereabouts because she thought she was meeting up with a talent scout to take a screen test. The 'talent scout' is actually Jefferson's unscrupulous son-in-law, who, along with his secret wife, Ruby's cousin Josie, plots to get Ruby out of the way so that she will not be able to inherit Jefferson's fortune. The two murder Pamela and Ruby at different times on the same night in a complicated plan to give both killers an alibi. As part of Pamela's 'screen test', they dress her in Ruby's clothing, dye her hair and make her up so that her body will be able to stand in for Ruby's. Pamela Reeve, the 'nice kid', turns out to have been just as fatally ambitious as her counterpart Ruby. The middle-class girl and the working-class girl both have desires and aspirations, and the revelation that one has 'played the role' of the other is particularly telling. The loss of identity that

accompanies the dead woman's body works in multiple ways in this novel; the body in the library is that of a young woman who has been punished for overreaching the expectations set in place for her, and she is both Ruby Keene and Pamela Reeve. The anxiety expressed by Miss Marple—"they all look so alike"—indicates that the body in the library can be identified with the modern young woman, ambitious, intrusive and dangerous, who is flouting tradition and the established order. She is an abject figure, 'flamboyant', 'crude' and—in her cross-class manifestation—impossible to categorise.

Another novel that plays with questions of identity through the switching of women's bodies is Christie's *Evil Under the Sun* (1941). The narrative begins with Poirot on holiday at a quaint seaside resort on an island off the coast of Devon, not 'the sort of place you'd get a body'.⁹¹ As he chats to his fellow guests, Poirot remarks with disgust upon the homogeneous look of the people sunbathing on the beach: "'Today everything is *standardized!*'" He waved a hand towards the recumbent figures. "That reminds me very much of the Morgue in Paris ... Bodies—arranged on slabs—like butcher's meat!"⁹² Like Miss Marple's comment that the modern fashions in cosmetics and hairstyling result in young women looking disconcertingly alike, Poirot's criticisms pinpoint a problem he also identifies as specifically 'modern'—the absence of distinction between physical bodies. The lack of substantial clothing required by the modern fashion for sunbathing publicly exposed more of the body, particularly the female body, than had ever been socially acceptable before.⁹³ Yet this exposure does not make women recognisable; rather, they are objectified, exposed to the gazes of those around them, and individual personalities become secondary to the visual effect of the sameness of the bodies in rows. This effect is employed in order to conceal the method of the novel's crime, Christine and Patrick Redfern's murder of beautiful, wealthy adulteress Arlena Stuart. When 'Arlena's' body is found, it is face down on the beach, in the attitude of a sunbather, recalling Poirot's ominous comment that the bodies on the beach look like they are lying on slabs in a morgue. Conveniently, Patrick Redfern is the only one to look closely at it and declare that Arlena has been murdered and that he will stay with the body while help is summoned. As it turns out, 'Arlena's' body is not Arlena at all—it is Christine Redfern in an auburn wig and faux-tanning lotion. When Arlena, who has concealed herself so that her presumed sexual assignation with Patrick is not discovered, emerges from her hiding place, Patrick strangles her and her body replaces Christine's as the corpse that

the police examine when they arrive. The Redferns are a pair of criminals who have murdered women before—Patrick starts a relationship with a wealthy woman, and, with his wife’s help, cons the woman out of her money and kills her. It dawns on Poirot that this is how Arlena’s murder must have been committed—after all, ‘One 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 lying out in the sun.’⁹⁴ The two women’s physical interchangeability is combined with confusion about who is occupying the role of the victim. Though Arlena is the one who has been murdered, Christine is the woman who draws the most sympathy from those around her, since she seems to be the sweet-natured, long-suffering wife who is faithfully waiting for her husband to recover from his romantic fling with the scheming Arlena. After she is murdered, Arlena is described as ‘the kind of woman to whom such a thing might happen’.⁹⁵ She is also called ‘a bad lot through and through’ and ‘undeserving of sympathy’.⁹⁶ Arlena seems to fulfil the expectation that a woman murder victim must have violated standards of ‘proper’ feminine behaviour in order to have come to such an end. Christine is seen as the real victim because of her decorous, quiet conjugal faithfulness in the face of her husband’s indiscretion. However, the shocking switch at the end of the novel, when Christine’s role as accomplice and her masquerade as victimised wife are revealed, calls into question standards of feminine behaviour and reveals their possible instability.

Ironically, Christine Redfern and Arlena Stuart are both described in great detail when they first appear. Christine is ‘an ash blonde and her skin was of that dead fairness that goes with that colouring. Her legs and arms were very white.’⁹⁷ A further element of Christine Redfern’s deception is that she plays the role of a delicate, fragile woman who is not physically active, when in fact she is a former school games mistress.⁹⁸ Arlena, on the other hand, has ‘rich flaming auburn’ hair, and ‘every inch of her exposed body was tanned a beautiful even shade of bronze’.⁹⁹ The differences between the two women are carefully delineated, and Christine’s mousiness is repeatedly contrasted with Arlena’s vibrance as it becomes clear that Arlena is having a poorly concealed affair with Christine’s husband. Arlena is described as having ‘IT’—a quality that makes everyone look at her.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, because she is sexually promiscuous, vain and enjoys attention from men, Arlena is negated; Poirot himself dismisses her while trying to comfort Christine Redfern: ‘The Arlena Stuarts ... of this world—do not count ... To count—really and truly to count—a woman

must have goodness or brains.’¹⁰¹ Not only does she not ‘count’ because of her lack of both goodness and brains, Arlena is also dehumanised—Poirot thinks to himself when he sees Arlena during one of her adulterous encounters with Patrick that her face is ‘like a sleek happy cat—it was animal, not human’.¹⁰² Arlena’s life is deprived of value and even humanity because of her sexual appetite, her competitiveness with other women and her lack of intelligence. In spite of this, the novel’s conclusion provides a more complicated reading of Arlena’s victimhood. During his explication of the events, Poirot tells his audience that he has always viewed Arlena as:

first, last and all the time ... an eternal and predestined *victim*. Because she was beautiful, because she had glamour, because men turned their heads to look at her, it was assumed that she was the type of woman who wrecked lives and destroyed souls. But I saw her very differently. It was not she who fatally attracted men—it was men who fatally attracted her.¹⁰³

Poirot points out that Arlena’s sexuality seems to have the potential to give her agency because of her body’s ability to draw the male gaze, but in reality her victimhood lies in her inability to control that power, in her total submission to that gaze. This lack of agency, the inability to make herself ‘count’ in the world through having the intelligence to manipulate the men she seduces, ultimately allows Arlena to occupy the role of the ‘true’ victim at the novel’s conclusion. Violence has not come to her as a result of her own actions—she is its passive recipient. The confusion and questioning of the role of the victim that is played out in *Evil Under the Sun* also reveals and criticises the prejudices towards female victims of crime—who, after all, is ‘deserving of sympathy’?

During the searches through both Arlena Stuart’s and Ruby Keene’s rooms after their murders, the dead women’s dressing tables are dwelled upon with particular attention to detail, and the dizzying variety of the cosmetics they both possess is emphasised. This can be read not only as a reference to the ease with which a modern woman can change her appearance, but also more specifically and negatively as a sign of both women’s vanity, artfulness and ability to deceive. Both are ‘bad girls’, women who use their appearances to seduce men. They are women whose appearances and/or attempts to change social classes are resented by those around them, and who ‘get what is coming to them’ when they are killed. However, their bodies are used to manipulate stereotypes surrounding the woman victim. Their bodies, and those of the other women victims and

women killers examined in this chapter, are sites of disturbance, on which the more specific issue of identity, as well as wider issues of the law and of attitudes towards women, can be examined. As Elizabeth Grosz writes in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*:

the body provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other, and all the other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition.¹⁰⁴

Particularly when the body is transgressive—whether it is that of a murder victim or a killer—it becomes a site of abjection, of death infecting life, of a disturbance of legal and social systems. Though order is superficially restored at the end of these novels, when the killer is found out (often becoming a victim herself), or when the victim is safely buried, the novels' potential for exploring the female body as a space of and for transgression, conflict and the questioning of norms cannot be overlooked.

NOTES

1. The significance of the body in crime fiction as a site of potentially fruitful examination has been recognised by critics such as Gill Plain, who writes that 'the wider assumptions that shape our knowledge and understanding of the genre are based not on textual observation, but on a series of distorted generalisations. The familiar landscape of genre fiction needs to be remapped, and one of the many possible routes to this remapping is through an analysis of the body.' Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 30.
2. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 74.
3. Linden Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 64.
4. Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction*, p. 70.
5. Several critics have referred to the body in crime narratives in terms of a page on which such meanings are written; in *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, Gill Plain argues that 'Murder literally is "written on the body" and bodies are never neutral. They inevitably bear the inscriptions of their cultural production—socially determined markers of gender, race, sexuality and class that profoundly

- influence the ways in which they are read by witnesses, police, detectives and readers.' Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, pp. 12–13.
6. Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 13.
 7. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.
 8. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
 9. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
 10. Agatha Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 225.
 11. Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1986), p. 19.
 12. However, Carlotta is still the victim of an ethnic stereotype: her death is suggested to be the direct result of a congenital Jewish weakness for money. Indeed, anti-Semitism is evident in many golden age crime narratives; see, for example, Malcolm J. Turnbull, *Victims or Villains?: Jewish Images in Classic English Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1998). Focusing on Christie specifically, Merja Makinen notes that her representations of Jewish characters are often extremely ambivalent, reflecting both sympathy and the most basic of stereotypes. Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 175–8. Makinen also points out that Christie often uses ethnic stereotypes as red herrings, as I examine with relation to Bella Tanios' Greek husband Jacob in *Dumb Witness*. Makinen, *Investigating Femininity*, p. 179. Nevertheless, as in the case of Carlotta, some of these xenophobic assumptions are confirmed even as they are ostensibly called into question. Jacob Tanios turns out to be innocent of murder, but he is guilty of financial imprudence and a domineering attitude towards his wife, both of which are implied to be connected to his foreignness.
 13. Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 45.
 14. Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 189.
 15. Interestingly, it is a woman, Lord Edgware's housekeeper, who insists upon Jane's guilt throughout the entire novel and recognises the transgressive potential of Jane's body before the male investigators are able to see beyond Jane's flighty act. Miss Carroll, who is a witness to Jane's entrance into the house on the night of Lord Edgware's murder, is adamant that there was no mistaking the woman as Jane, even though Poirot proves that Miss Carroll could only have seen the woman from the back: 'Back of her head, her voice, her walk! It's all the same thing. Absolutely unmistakable! I tell you I *know* it was Jane Wilkinson—a thoroughly bad woman if ever there was one.' Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 58.

16. Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 190.
17. Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 192.
18. Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 192.
19. Ernst Jentsch, whose 1906 essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' was a source for Sigmund Freud's influential 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', identifies the wax figure as an example of an uncanny object that can evoke discomfort in the observer: 'The unpleasant impression is well known that readily arises in many people when they visit collections of wax figures, panopticons and panoramas. In semi-darkness it is often especially difficult to distinguish a life-size wax or similar figure from a human person. For many sensitive souls, such a figure also has the ability to retain its unpleasantness after the individual has taken a decision as to whether it is animate or not ... The fact that such wax figures often present anatomical details may contribute to the increased effect of one's feeling, but this is definitely not the most important thing: a real anatomically prepared body does not need in the least to look so objectionable as the corresponding model in wax.' Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2.1 (1996), p. 12.
20. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
21. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 7.
22. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 124.
23. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 286.
24. Mary Whitaker's second and third victims, Bertha Gotobed and Vera Findlater, are killed through the same means as her aunt, by injection with a syringe full of air. In the case of Bertha Gotobed, the police-surgeon 'is quite convinced that the death was perfectly natural ... there is [not] the slightest reason to suspect foul play'. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 61.
25. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 73.
26. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 255.
27. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 182.
28. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 248.
29. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 292.
30. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 294.
31. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 299.
32. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
33. Agatha Christie, *Dumb Witness* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1988), p. 97.
34. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 194.
35. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 250.
36. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 19.

37. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 129.
38. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 139.
39. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 214.
40. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 245.
41. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 226.
42. Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 158.
43. Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House* (Glasgow: Fontana Press, 1980), p. 27.
44. Christie, *Peril at End House*, pp. 27–8.
45. Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 40.
46. Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 113.
47. Christie, *Peril at End House*, pp. 62–3.
48. Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 56.
49. Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 9.
50. Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 33.
51. Gladys Mitchell, *Speedy Death* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 20.
52. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 19.
53. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 180.
54. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 9.
55. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 9.
56. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 9.
57. Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 412.
58. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 15.
59. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 18.
60. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 105.
61. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 66.
62. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 95.
63. In *The Psychology of the Female Body*, Jane M. Ussher defines neurasthenia as 'a collection of varying symptoms, many of them similar to those of hysteria, including headaches, masturbation, vertigo, insomnia, and depression. Neurasthenia generally affected single women ... Women who had ambitions and desires, conscious and unconscious ... became victims of the collection of symptoms labelled neurasthenia.' Jane M. Ussher, *The Psychology of the Female Body* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 5.
64. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 135.
65. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 135.

66. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 139.
67. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 160.
68. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 183.
69. Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 179.
70. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 164.
71. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 165.
72. Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 165.
73. Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 7.
74. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 21.
75. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 21.
76. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 21.
77. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 18.
78. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 19.
79. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1999), p. 175.
80. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, pp. 21–2.
81. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 22.
82. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 27.
83. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 29.
84. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 252.
85. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 181.
86. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 99.
87. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 204.
88. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 161.
89. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, pp. 165–6.
90. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 163.
91. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 20.
92. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 14.
93. Alan A. Jackson writes that ‘Until the early 1930s ... most of the bourgeois resorts continued to offer bathing machines,’ which sheltered women from the eyes of men while they were bathing. However, what was seen and known of the female body was beginning to change radically, and ‘by 1930 ... most holidaymakers under middle age were starting to indulge in new rituals at the seaside, exposing faces and bodies to the full glare of the sun for as long as possible, in search of the tan which they were assured would give them additional physical attraction and health. Equally important, it provided tangible evidence on their return that the holiday had been successful. With the sun cult came more attractive and briefer bathing costumes (often never wetted by the sea) as well as special accessories and fashions.’ Alan A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes, 1900–1950* (Nairn: David St. John Thomas, 1991), pp. 309–10.

94. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 297.
95. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 153.
96. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, pp. 172–3.
97. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 17.
98. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 301.
99. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 23.
100. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 27.
101. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 69.
102. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 71.
103. Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 298.
104. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 20–1.

Conclusion

The exploration of women's bodies in the previous chapter provides a means to examine the ways in which golden age crime narratives construct strategies for dealing with the conflicting social and cultural forces that influenced depictions of gender in popular culture. The bodies of both killers and victims represent the disturbances of gender and social codes that become evident in a crime narrative's conflict. Like the 'burial' of the bodies, the narratives' conclusions bring closure, but the transgressive possibilities the bodies evoke demonstrate the influence of anxieties about gender and class being played out on a wider scale in British society. This is not to say that the anxieties shaping such representations in the narratives I examine remained static throughout the period; though I have addressed this issue to some extent in Chap. 2, it is worth acknowledging that the concerns of the 1920s certainly do not remain exactly the same throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and, consequently, the tones and themes of the texts I analyse can often be seen to reflect specific preoccupations. Radically changing ideals of femininity in the 1920s influenced the active, and sometimes transgressive, roles adopted by women in crime narratives; this can explicitly be seen in boyish young flapper Nick Buckley's murder of her traditionally feminine cousin Maggie in Agatha Christie's *Peril at End House*. In the 1930s, economic depression, accompanied by rising unemployment as well as concern about the spread of fascism in Europe, the abdication in 1936 of King Edward VIII and the looming threat of war are all factors that influence a more serious, reflective

and, in the late 1930s, nationalistic tone in many of these narratives. The representations of women in these novels and short stories reflect such anxieties; this is, perhaps not coincidentally, the decade in which many popular series detectives, including Dorothy L. Sayers' Wimsey, Margery Allingham's Campion and Ngaio Marsh's Alleyn first meet and court their wives. However, these attempts to negotiate companionate relationships in which women can have active careers while still conforming to a domestic ideal are, as has been discussed, often deeply ambivalent, reflecting the struggle to reconcile these frequently conflicting roles. The influence of the Second World War is apparent in the trajectories of many of the series I examine; Christie's *N or M?* and Allingham's *Traitor's Purse*, both published in 1941, directly engage their protagonists in tense adventures that have resolutions with national and even global impact. The conflicts in these novels represent a recognition of the war's predominance in the public consciousness, providing significantly wider implications than the investigation of one—or even several—murders. The war's influence upon the possibilities of agency (or lack thereof) for working women is also evident; for example, Allingham's Amanda Fitton's retreat from the workplace to raise her son in the wartime absence of her husband anticipates a post-war return to the domestic.

The diversity of the writers I have chosen to investigate is another factor that complicates my readings, along with the complex variety of forces that shaped the representation of women in the 1920s through the 1940s. Though the writers are all connected by genre, differences in style divide them; Christie's early adventure-romances such as *The Secret Adversary* (1922) or *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), for example, would seem, at first glance, to share little in common with some of Sayers' or Josephine Tey's later, more novelistic efforts. Such differences can, again, sometimes be attributed to shifting cultural concerns within the period. Some critics have argued that in the 1920s the evolution of the clue-puzzle narrative arose out of the need of those who had lived through the trauma of the First World War for what Alison Light calls a 'literature of convalescence', which engaged the mind without requiring an emotional response or depicting explicit violence.¹ In *Forever England*, Light writes that in Christie's work 'nothing is sacred. Crime makes not for tragedy, nor even for the shudders of melodrama, but oddly and startlingly, for a laugh.'² Indeed, the worlds created in golden age crime fiction are often distorted mirror images of reality in which conventions, mores and 'the sacred' are rendered meaningless. For example, Poirot's comment that Bella Tanios'

method of murdering her elderly aunt is ‘the kind that mother makes’ evokes a startlingly transgressive image that jars with the domestic ideal of the increasingly conservative social atmosphere of the 1930s. Even detective figures, supposed restorers of order, do not always embody a secure sense of morality: on more than one occasion, Gladys Mitchell’s Mrs Bradley herself condones—and even uses—murder as a viable means of achieving resolution. Such instances of irony exploit the instability of golden age crime fiction’s engagement with conflict and resolution, a tension that allows for order to be restored, but only up to a point, and often in a way that reveals the unreliability of conventional endings. Irony and humour are also used to create a space in which the boundaries of conventional plots can be stretched; Christie’s detective couple Tommy and Tuppence achieve a companionate ideal precisely because of the narratives’ parodic tone and over-the-top spy thriller plots, which enable them to undermine heteronormative and ageist assumptions.

By providing such portrayals, these narratives suggest alternatives to—or more nuanced interpretations of—the modes of femininity available during the period in which they were published. Nevertheless, this is not to say, for example, that similar issues do not arise in the way women are represented by men in golden age crime fiction, or in the ways in which gender has been represented, played with and negotiated in crime fiction that has been written before or since the period I examine. Rather, the significance of my analysis lies in the breadth of its examination of femininity in women’s golden age crime fiction. It both builds upon and adds to existing criticism on more widely examined texts as well as opening up new lines of inquiry in its readings of texts that have been previously overlooked. Moreover, by moving beyond the detective to consider killers, victims and romantic interests, a clearer yet more intricate and more nuanced picture emerges of the issues that arise when women write women.

NOTES

1. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 70–1.
2. Light, *Forever England*, pp. 67–8.

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