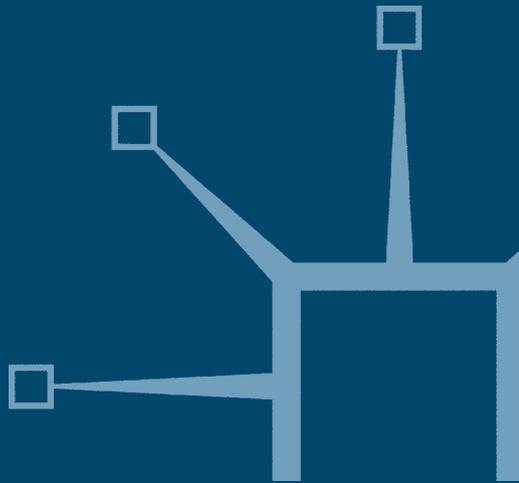


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Agatha Christie

Investigating Femininity

Merja Makinen



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Agatha Christie

Investigating Femininity

Merja Makinen

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Dedicated as always to my son Nick, in grateful thanks for his putting up with my neglect and preoccupation during the lengthy process of research, composition and editing. At least now he's got his mum back for a while . . .

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List of Abbreviations

<i>AF</i>	<i>After the Funeral</i>
<i>ABH</i>	<i>At Bertram's Hotel</i>
<i>AIS</i>	<i>Absent in the Spring</i>
<i>ATTWN</i>	<i>And Then There Were None</i>
<i>AWD</i>	<i>Appointment with Death</i>
<i>BF</i>	<i>The Big Four</i>
<i>BPOMT</i>	<i>By the Pricking of My Thumbs</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>The Clocks</i>
<i>CAP</i>	<i>Cat Among the Pigeons</i>
<i>'CDS'</i>	<i>'The Case of the Discontented Soldier'</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Crooked House</i>
<i>CM</i>	<i>A Caribbean Mystery</i>
<i>'CM'</i>	<i>'The Cornish Mystery'</i>
<i>COT</i>	<i>Cards on the Table</i>
<i>DCAE</i>	<i>Death Comes At the End</i>
<i>DMF</i>	<i>Dead Man's Folly</i>
<i>'DOMD'</i>	<i>'The Disappearance of Mr Davenheim'</i>
<i>DON</i>	<i>Death on the Nile</i>
<i>DU</i>	<i>Destination Unknown</i>
<i>DW</i>	<i>Dumb Witness</i>
<i>ECR</i>	<i>Elephants Can Remember</i>
<i>EN</i>	<i>Endless Night</i>
<i>EUS</i>	<i>Evil Under the Sun</i>
<i>FLP</i>	<i>Five Little Pigs</i>
<i>4.50FP</i>	<i>4.50 from Paddington</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>Giant's Bread</i>
<i>H</i>	<i>The Hollow</i>
<i>HDD</i>	<i>Hickory Dickory Dock</i>
<i>'HOD'</i>	<i>'The Herb of Death'</i>
<i>HP</i>	<i>Hallowe'en Party</i>
<i>LED</i>	<i>Lord Edgware Dies</i>
<i>LOH</i>	<i>The Labours of Hercules</i>
<i>MAAS</i>	<i>The Mysterious Affair at Styles</i>
<i>MAV</i>	<i>Murder At the Vicarage</i>
<i>MCFSTS</i>	<i>The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side</i>

MIA	<i>A Murder is Announced</i>
MIBS	<i>The Man in the Brown Suit</i>
MIE	<i>Murder is Easy</i>
MIM	<i>Murder in Mesopotamia</i>
MITM	<i>Murder in the Mews</i>
MMD	<i>Mrs McGinty's Dead</i>
MOE	<i>Murder on the Orient Express</i>
MOBT	<i>The Mystery of the Blue Train</i>
MOL	<i>Murder on the Links</i>
N	<i>Nemesis</i>
NM?	<i>N or M?</i>
OTBMS	<i>One Two Buckle My Shoe</i>
PH	<i>The Pale Horse</i>
PIC	<i>Partners in Crime</i>
POF	<i>Postern of Fate</i>
POR	<i>A Pocketful of Rye</i>
SA	<i>The Secret Adversary</i>
SaC	<i>Sad Cypress</i>
SpC	<i>Sparkling Cyanide</i>
SDM	<i>The Seven Dials Mystery</i>
TSM	<i>The Sittaford Mystery</i>
SM	<i>Sleeping Murder</i>
SOC	<i>The Secret of Chimneys</i>
TCTB	<i>They Came to Baghdad</i>
TDIWM	<i>They Do It With Mirrors</i>
TG	<i>Third Girl</i>
TZ	<i>Towards Zero</i>
WDTAE	<i>Why Didn't They Ask Evans?</i>

Introduction

Two aspects motivated this project: the first was the awareness that my reading of Christie, and what I found in her texts, seemed at odds with much of the criticism of her, particularly when it came to gender. I wanted to find a way of arguing that, plying her craft during the first half of the twentieth century, Christie was writing during a period of intense gender renegotiation in relation to the modern world and that a political conservatism did not necessarily rule out a questioning and even subversive attitude to cultural gender expectations. Where Christie's assumptions about class remained conservative and often reinforced retrograde, hidebound social divisions, her representation of femininity contested traditional expectations and found much in common with more left-wing writers such as Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, writing during the same period. The second aspect was that many critics, especially the more recent feminist attempts at recuperation of Christie, have tended to focus on just a few texts and make over-large generalisations about her *oeuvre* from those few examples. I felt a real need to document what was actually present in the texts and for that reason this work is unashamedly textual in its focus. Given such a practice, for example, it is now less possible for critics to argue that Christie's novels show a 'dislike of career women', because of one reference in the *Autobiography* written in her seventies, since I have demonstrated a whole raft of paeans on the pleasure and adventure of different careers, from schoolmistress to archaeologist and secretary. Christie's female characters are diverse, dominant, swashbuckling and violently active and, at a time when women were still seen as second-class citizens, Christie's portrayals are determinedly and deliberately egalitarian in relation to gender. Focus on Christie as the 'mistress of plotting', ingenious at concealing the murderer, which has concentrated analysis on the ending rather than

the process of the novel as a whole, alongside crime criticism's fetishisation of the detective to the detriment of all other characterisations, has prevented a true celebration of Christie's fiction's intervention in the representation of gender formations and expectations from 1920 to the early 1970s.

In Chapter 2, I examine the main detectives, inserting the Beresfords and Mrs Oliver alongside Poirot and Miss Marple, to suggest that the Christie of the twenties and thirties was attempting to re-draw new, more modern relationships between the active participants, which allowed women a more dominant, active role when young, when middle-aged and when elderly, while men adopt a more passive, even feminine position. Linking into the cultural gendering of ratiocination as masculine and intuition as feminine, I trace the five detectives' utilisation of both methods to suggest a modern melange of emotion, psychology, intuition and reason very different to the ratiocination of Sherlock Holmes. In Mrs Oliver's case, the texts exhibit a disturbed contradiction in the representation of feminine intuition.

In Chapter 3, I carry out a detailed, though by no means exhaustive, examination of a variety of positive feminine characterisations that argue for a diverse variety of available feminine positions within the books. Intrepid young adventurers, active bright young things, could be seen as early precursors of the feminist detective, active and eligible. Given so many critics' statement that career women were seen in a negative portrayal, I allowed myself a long look at how the books celebrate women working in a whole array of professions. The section 'Women outside the familial norms', considers the positive representations of mistresses, women who abandon their children, and unmarried mothers, while the final category, 'New forms of domesticity', analyses how Christie portrays the renegotiations of domestic relationships within the modern marriage. Negative representations are saved for the dutiful wife fulfilling traditional cultural expectations of selfless devotion to husband, children and domesticity, which are shown to stultify and harm the woman involved.

Having begun to demonstrate the array of positive feminine positions in the previous chapter, Chapter 4 turns its sights on the women behaving badly and traces the array of women who are allowed the active, destabilising role of the villain. Ahead of her time in her granting female agency to the villain as well as the detective, I concentrate on the variety of women and number of motives allowed to them. Christie's female villains run the whole gamut of types of women, from Members of Parliament and international gang leaders, to dutiful wives, devoted

nurses and insipid companions. They range in age from elderly spinsters to young girls, though the vast majority are competent middle-aged women in their prime.

Chapter 5 takes the issue of women villains a step further and questions whether, having more women as villains, the books treat them equally to the male villains or produce a double condemnation due to their gender, where they are punished for their unnatural femininity. Utilising recent feminist criminology, the chapter examines Christie's contemporary popular and press representations of female murderers in contrast to her own presentations and finds that where, during the twenties to the fifties, the popular portrayal was usually a passive creature who was carried away involuntarily by her emotions, Christie's female villains are accorded the dignity and responsibility of culpability in very much the kinds of way feminist criminologists advocated 40 to 70 years later, during the 1990s.

The final chapter 6, takes the notion of the feminine as cultural 'other' and questions what occurs when femininity impacts on the representation of other races. Examining Christie's depictions of a range of 'others' – European, Arab, Jew and Greek – it notes the excess and extremism allowed to Anglo-American women when travelling in the Middle East.

The book as a whole does not claim to be an exhaustive look at Christie's representations of the feminine and of gender in general, and given the huge number of her books such a claim would be boastful, but it argues for being a wider, more comprehensive examination than any to date, excepting Bargainier's 1980 study and Gill's 1990 biography, and the only one to concentrate on the representation of gender across such a wealth of the novels. Whereas other feminist critics may have the edge in the density of their theoretical examination, they often fall foul of the erroneous generalisation because of their refusal to engage with the whole *oeuvre*. This book is not in any sense a final word on Christie and femininity, but it may well allow a new consideration based on what is actually present in the texts, even though my own readings may prove more open to contestation by future scholars.

1

Preliminary Proceedings

Christie's cultural context, the new woman and the modern

Christie published her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in 1920 and the twenties was a period of intense gender negotiation. Legally, women over thirty gained the vote for the first time in 1918 and women's ability to engage in a profession followed in 1919, when Parliament dismantled the legislation preventing them from doing so. In 1928 the 'Flapper Vote' allowed women to vote at the same age as their male counterparts. Middle-class women's education, up until the First World War, focused on their dependant status as wives and daughters:

Middle-class women were ladies, for whom waged work was demeaning, indeed a slur on middle-class manhood. Middle-class girls' education, therefore, had to correspond to their status: it should inculcate the domestic ideal; and it should also polish the young lady through a training in the social graces, which would render her competitive on the marriage market. No need for grammar schools or university education, whose function was to prepare middle-class boys for service to Church or state.¹

However, during the twenties the 'modern girl' entered the labour market. While working-class women had always worked, Arthur Marwick argues middle-class women were 'a depressed class, tied to the apron strings of their mothers or chaperones, or to the purse strings of their fathers and husbands'.² Their condition changed, he suggests, during the First World War.

Now they were earning money on their own account, they had economic independence; now they were working away from home, they had social independence. Above all, in their awareness that they were performing arduous and worthwhile tasks, were living thought experiences once confined only to the most adventurous males, they gained a new self-consciousness and a new sense of status.³

The changes were not wholesale, as Jane Humphries argues in relation to women's paid work, 'The war of 1914–18 strengthened, not weakened, the social and cultural construction of women as wives and mothers primarily.'⁴ That acceptable femininity was under heated debate, as Penny Tinkler traces in the popular women's magazines of the time, in their portrayal of the 'modern girl' in contrast to the 'stay-at-home-girls of the past'.⁵

Magazines conveyed anxiety about what they saw as the independence and freedom of the modern girl. In this respect, they were part of a wider popular concern in the post-war years that women would reject marriage, motherhood and domesticity and expect more egalitarian relations between the sexes.⁶

And post-war journals shifted to subtly promoting a 'back-to-the-home-movement', with 'more subtle reworkings of the modern girl to draw out her links with traditional feminine ideals.'⁷

As Alison Light posed, in relation to women writing between the wars, there are a number of considerations in how we think about feminine suffrage within that time, that link to the more interior and domestic spaces of women.

What new kinds of social and personal opportunity, for example, were offered by the changing cultures of sport and entertainment, from tennis clubs to cinema-going... by new forms of domestic life which included the introduction of the daily servant rather than the live-in maid, new forms of household appliance, new attitudes to housework?⁸

She calls for a more informed appreciation of the minutiae of women's lives changing within the period, 'the realignment of public and private behaviours and values, of the norms and expectations of the pre-war years'. We need a way of charting these as important changes and emancipations. 'Compared with the elaborate coiffure of the 1980s, even

the softest and least bohemian shingle of 1935 was a species of radical change⁹ to the way women lived their lives. As a number of Christie critics have argued, Christie's novels, in the domestic minutiae of their settings, chart exactly these social changes, beginning in the 1920s and ending in the 1970s. Bargainnier, for example, suggests,

Christie rarely attempted to depict large political or economic changes. Rather she chose to present the effects of these changes on the everyday world of her characters. . . . Unconsciously, however, she left a social history of fifty years of upper middleclass English life, recording the changes, for good or for ill, which occurred.¹⁰

In the twenty-first century, there is more critical focus on what texts produce as active negotiations with cultural representations and formations. Christie's novels, in documenting cultural change, also depicted, 'consciously' as well as 'unconsciously', the shifting changes in what culture constructs as acceptable femininities and champion a range of differing modern formations being made available during the time in which she writes.

One small example, but one close to Christie's heart, was that of the woman driver. Ann Heilman has documented the significance of the bicycle to the Edwardian 'new woman': the 'bicycle had momentous repercussions on the lives and self-perception of late Victorian middle-class women and significantly contributed to the transformation of gender relations'.¹¹ In dismantling the chaperone system and allowing young people to meet the opposite sex, she cites Clementina Black's claim that the bicycle allowed a freedom of movement and liberty that did 'more for the independence of women than anything expressly designed to that end'.¹² Patricia Marks develops how the bicycle changed 'patterns of courtship, marriage and work. . . it altered dress styles and language, exercise and education'.¹³ The image of the bicycle became synonymous with the Edwardian 'new woman' in the popular press. The motor car had a similar significance to the 'modern girl', allowing a speed and exhilaration of motion, an independence and the ability to escape the chaperone system in a nippy two-seater. Christie's novels contain a number of competent 'modern' women who are marked by their love of driving, such as Henrietta Savernake, a modernist sculptor in *The Hollow*:

She shot away down the Mews, savouring the unfailing pleasure she always felt when setting off in the car alone. She much preferred to

be alone when driving. In that way she could realize to the full the intimate personal enjoyment that driving a car brought to her.

She enjoyed her own skill in traffic, she enjoyed nosing out new short-cuts out of London. She had routes of her own and when driving in London itself had as intimate a knowledge of its streets as any taxi-driver. (*H*, p. 82)

This competence, love of speed and exhilaration is felt by another 'modern girl', Bundle in *The Seven Dials Mystery*, filling 'her with the zest for living': 'She had skill and nerve and was a good driver; had it been otherwise her reckless pace would have ended in disaster more than once' (*SDM*, p. 34). Christie bought herself a car out of the serialisation of *The Man in the Brown Suit*, in the twenties. 'I will confess here and now that of the two things that have excited me most in my life the first was my car: my grey bottle-nosed Maurice Cowley.'¹⁴ The second and less momentous occasion was having tea at Buckingham Palace with the queen.

Christie is usually portrayed as an elderly conservatively minded writer harking back to an English Edwardian Golden Age, when gender constructions were fixed and women subservient. Such a construction is often linked to photographs of her in old age, the fact that she was born during the Victorian period in 1890, and the statements in the *Autobiography*, written in her seventies, about her happy second marriage and her dislike of 'feminism'. However, such a view unrealistically reads opinions held in her seventies as being synonymous with views held in her twenties and thirties – an untenable position and one which a close examination of the stories of the time will challenge. Such a view also occludes darker images that complicate this complacent, reminiscent narrative. Christie, as many critics agree, is one of the most restrained and secretive of writers when it comes to her own views, and the *Autobiography* is a supremely edited narrative, as readers searching for some understanding of her disappearance in 1926 discover, since it is simply omitted from the account of a life. A cosy Christie, the epitome of Edwardian English gentility, also ignores a Christie, half American, brought up by strong women, her mother and her grandmother, while both her father and latterly her brother proved at times financially unreliable; ignores the family needing to lease out their home and decamp to live abroad where the cost of living was cheaper; and ignores a young woman, initially writing for fun, being forced to view herself as a professional writer when her first marriage broke up so spectacularly with Christie's distraught 'disappearance'. After intense police and press

speculation, she was discovered staying at a hotel in Harrogate, under the name of her husband's mistress, with apparent amnesia. Even the second marriage, figured as so sunny in its companionship in the *Autobiography*, Jared Cade suggests, had its problems,¹⁵ though in this latter case infidelity did not lead to divorce. The instabilities of marriage and the need and love of work (Christie continued writing a novel a year and bemoaning the taxman long after she could financially benefit from the royalties) were issues confronting women as never before, from 1920 to the seventies, the time of her *oeuvre*. Fractures and crises in the apparently stable domestic role led to a wholesale feminine renegotiation of love, marriage motherhood and career during the twentieth century, and Christie's life and work bear witness to her engagement in these cultural adjustments and adaptations.

Previous critics, reading Christie as nostalgic for a fixed Edwardian past, have argued she does not engage with social comment or contemporary anxieties, while simply reinforcing traditional domestic roles for women. They therefore ignore the fact that the Edwardian period is anything but stable when it comes to gender. The Edwardian period was a time of intense gendered contention, with the agitation of the suffragettes and the suffragists, and New Woman novels that challenged the representation of feminine roles. Lyn Pykett argues that this time of gender crisis profoundly influenced the way twentieth-century women thought and wrote about femininity:

both as a crisis in social experience and as a crisis in representation, the turn-of-the-century gender crisis was an extremely important part of the social and intellectual formation in which (and by which) early twentieth-century fiction was produced. Modern woman (and hence modern man), modern marriage, free love, the artistic aspirations of women, female eroticism, these were 'the fundamental themes of the late Victorian dissolution.'¹⁶

The Edwardian Golden Age is largely a creation of reminiscence and nostalgia, post-war and post the 'complications' of modernity. To live through it was to experience it very differently and as Jane Eldridge Miller suggests, 'one of the most popular heroines in Edwardian fiction is the rebellious woman, and one of her main functions is to blatantly contradict conventional ideas about femininity and female behaviour'.¹⁷ If Christie is a product of her Edwardian upbringing, then it is surely partially as a product of the crisis of gender and of representation prevalent at the time.

Only in the twenty-first century, inspired predominately by Alison Light, have feminist critics such as Gill Plain and Susan Rowland begun to acknowledge Christie's textual engagement with and interrogation of cultural values in the manner in which I seek to do with Christie's representation of femininity. Christie's 'conservative' textual representations of issues of feminine modernisation, for example, bear marked similarities to the journalistic engagement of radical feminist writers, Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, during the twenties and the thirties. While Christie's political conservatism remains a factor, her views in relation to gendered formations are less easily construed as conservative, as a detailed textual examination of her novels illustrates.

Christie's critical reception in relation to gender

Despite this enormous shift in gendered configurations, little interest was initially shown to Christie, a young woman and, after the divorce, a single parent writing in a period of change for women, as representing femininity within her novels and charting the generational changes. Other writers of the period, Rebecca West, Winifred Holtby, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf, have all been given a detailed gender analysis. The focus for Christie has been more on her as a 'conservative' writer reinforcing stereotypes rather than contesting them.

Christie has attracted fan writers as well as the critics, writers whose main concern is adding to the knowledge base and demonstrating their affection. Anne Hart, in 1985, constructed a 'biography' of Miss Marple, *Agatha Christie's Miss Marple: The Life and Times of Miss Jane Marple*¹⁸, tracing the representation of Marple as if she were an actual person, 'Thus Miss Marple's appearance and health. What was she like as a person?'¹⁹ and documenting the changes and drawing maps of St Mary Mead. It is knowledgeable, demonstrating an enviable conversance with all the Marple novels and short stories in an easy, readable style.

In the last chapter of [*The Murder at the Vicarage*], Griselda Clement confides to her husband that she is expecting a baby; in *The Body in the Library* this baby is learning to crawl across the hearth rug, an indication that approximately a year and a half has passed between the discovery of one body in the Vicar's study and the discovery of another in Colonel Bantry's library.²⁰

And it has proved immensely popular with Christie's readership as a 'companion'. Published in the United States in 1985, it was picked up

by Macmillan in the UK a year later, went into paperback with Sphere Books in 1990 and with HarperCollins, Christie's own publishers, in 1997 and is still going strong. *Agatha Christie's Poirot: The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot*²¹ followed in 1990 and has proved equally successful. In 2004 Andrew Eames, a journalist and travel writer, published *The 8.55 to Baghdad*²², documenting his journey following the route of the Orient Express to Baghdad and tracing the journey Christie made in 1928. With copious comparisons of the places now to those described in Christie's *Autobiography* (1977) and *Come Tell Me How You Live* (1946) as well as the detective novels set in the Middle East, the book is part travelogue, part biography, documenting Eames' personal discovery of both Christie's life and the countries from the Balkans to the Middle East.

I had no idea that this doyenne of the drawing-room mystery had first travelled out to Iraq, alone, by train, as a thirty-something single mother. And that thereafter she'd spent thirty winter seasons living in testing conditions 3,000 miles from home, in a land of Kurds, Armenians and Palestinians, doling out the laxatives to help the sheikh's wives with their constipation.²³

As with Hart, the book appeals to the enormous Christie readership, alongside travel readers, and proves interesting in its insights. Neither writer would claim to be a literary critic of detective writing, but the enormous affection large elements of the public have for Christie's novels and film and television adaptations means they have a ready audience. The final 'companion' title that needs acknowledging is the excellent and indispensable *Agatha Christie A to Z* by Dawn Sova (1996)²⁴, listing alphabetically all the texts, their production history, story and all the characters that appear in each text. As a reference source, it brings Christie scholarship to one's fingertips.

But, what of Christie's reputation among the more academic writers? Detective fiction criticism has become more and more rigorous, and at times highly theoretical. What have the critics made of the widest-read detective author? During the eighties, the time of impact of feminist criticism on detective fiction, criticism continued on the path set by Colin Watson's *Snobbery with Violence* (1971)²⁵ in seeing Christie's fictional milieu as 'a sort of museum of nostalgia'²⁶ and Julian Symons in 'The Mistress of Complication' (1977)²⁷ that it 'was the plotting of crime that fascinated her . . . and it is as a constructor of plots that she stands supreme among modern crime writers.'²⁸ Dismissing the other detectives, Symons argues that it is the thirty-odd Poirot and eleven Marple

novels that form the 'main' Christie, with their supremacy resting on 'her originality in constructing puzzles'²⁹ from specifically 'visual and verbal clues'.³⁰ The idea that Christie is essentially a nostalgic conservative writer and of interest in relation to the puzzle plots of her texts predominates, partly perhaps because the writers are themselves mystery writers and so most interested in how she succeeds in her puzzles. Robert Barnard's *A Talent to Deceive* (1980)³¹ claims itself as an 'appreciation' rather than a critical book, since he is both mystery writer and professor of English Literature and values above all her blend of progressive mystification and enlightenment and examines her range of ingenuous plots. Barnard argues critics need to see Christie as a genre writer, since thin characterisation, for example, is a necessary part of Golden Age detective fiction, so as not to detract from the plot.

And almost all these stock outlines are drawn from a tiny part of the complex class structure of between-the-wars Britain. They are middle-middle to upper-middle class: army men, clergymen . . . , men from the colonies, country gentry, *successful* (or long established) doctors or dentists. And of course, the women who depend on them – which is what they do in Christie, and what (as she makes clear in the *Autobiography*) she thought they ought to do. As a cross-section of society it is, to say the least, inadequate.³²

This construction of the texts as conservative in relation to gender is based on her comments in her autobiography published when she was in her late eighties, 57 years after her first novel, and almost wilfully ignores the range of independent women in the novels. This blindness continues in Barnard's consideration of *Murder at the Vicarage*, that the setting of the village

is a world shut off from the political and social preoccupations of the day . . . Here the old outnumber the young and tradition wins small victories over innovation. The inhabitants of Mayhem Parva play bridge and garden and go to church. They approve of self-help, self-control and capital punishment. They disapprove of Socialism, the modern woman and contemporary literature.³³

Neither quote takes account of the changes in women's lives during these times and certainly cannot encompass Griselda, one of the key inhabitants in *Murder at the Vicarage*, a 'modern woman' rejecting outmoded domestic and maternal roles for women, let alone Lettice,

Anne Protheroe and Mrs Lestrangle, none of whom adopt traditional roles. Indeed, Barnard argues, Christie's novels do not offer 'some "criticism of life", some statement about the human condition'.³⁴ While this may be true of a general philosophy, my readings in the following pages argue for a critique of and a contesting of traditional views of women and suggests that, for many women readers of the time, Christie's novels could be emulatory and suggestive. Julian Symons, in his review of Barnard's book, believes her readership are 'predominantly feminine, by about two to one' (and further asserts, 'Few feminists or radicals are likely to read her').³⁵ Where Barnard is strong is in challenging the notion Christie is a 'cosy' writer, unpacking how 'beneath the surface calm . . . lurks a seething lava of crimes, sins, oddities and other potential disruptions – of which murder is only the most serious example'.³⁶ The texts unsettle the comfortable notion of a community, seeing evil in 'our wives, our friends, the quiet circle of which we are part'³⁷ so that the 'familiar . . . is transformed by the conclusion of the story into a bewilderingly strange emotional landscape'.³⁸ For him, Christie's detective fiction does not conclude with the restitution of a traditional status quo.

Earl Bargainnier's *The Gentle Art of Murder* of the same year argues, in contrast to Barnard, that the books should be read as fiction, rather than genre, although he admits that the literary reading of detective fiction is 'relatively new and there is no one critical method'.³⁹ He therefore classifies the major elements of the fiction: characters, themes, plots and settings. Bargainnier's view of Christie as a conservative, nostalgic writer is usefully complicated by her undoubted attempt to incorporate the social changes during the half century of her writing, 'to be "up-to-date"'. 'She recounts the movement from Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to Eddie Presweight, a rock star.'⁴⁰ Bargainnier gives the fascinating fact that, in her eighties, wishing to be a well-informed great-grandmother, she embarked on a reading programme of 'Modern Masters' that included 'Freud, Fanon, Chomsky and Wittengenstein'.⁴¹ He draws the accurate conclusion that her novels have 'a dual, even contradictory quality' – 'a nostalgia for a gracious past, with a clear-eyed amusement at its follies, and an acceptance, however regrettable, of the need for change.'⁴² For him, too, the blend of mystification and detection that makes up her plots is her primary strength, but his exhaustive classification of characters, and all the detectives (not just Poirot and Marple), allows more consideration of the women characters, though almost by default. For his analysis, Christie's rejection of physical clues for those that are verbal and behavioural shifts the detection

onto personality, onto characters, and therefore gives the solutions a fictional status, rather than being just puzzles.

Stephen Knight's chapter in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980)⁴³ looks mainly at the bourgeois ideology that speaks within Christie novels, less authoritarian than Doyle and reassuring to her middle-class readership. The clue-puzzle form 'replicates bourgeois thinking. Success in life is valued because it implies the unaided personal solving of life problems, dramatized self-sufficiency and calibrates personal achievement',⁴⁴ he claims, rather than looking for more communal solutions. His passing focus on gender issues suggests that Poirot lacks the heroic individualism of Holmes and that '[a]s a woman she had no interest in the active male narcissism common to much crime fiction'.⁴⁵ Knight sees Poirot's methods, as much as Miss Marple's, as feminine in their attention to domestic detail. In one instance, Poirot 'exhibits knowledge and concerns usually associated with women. Poirot gains a major insight because he knows laundries do not put starch in handkerchiefs'.⁴⁶ The detective's reduced authority and the focus on readerly solutions both accord with the middlebrow 'low intellectual order' and embrace the women readers 'whom earlier crime stories did not interest and satisfy'.⁴⁷

Patricia Maida and Nicholas Spornick's *Murder She Wrote* (1982)⁴⁸ is overly descriptive in its discussion as it strives to explore 'the inter-relationship between Christie and her works to seek the wholeness of the Christie experience'.⁴⁹ Even more than Barnard, they allow the views in the *Autobiography* to dictate the reading of the novels, finding, for example, the originals for the characters of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in Christie's own family members. Despite arguing that the 'primary force' in Christie's growing up was her family and noting that Christie's family was 'a tightly-knit middle-class unit dominated by strong women' and ruled by 'the matriarch', 'the Auntie-Grannie',⁵⁰ they do not allow this to unsettle their grasp of Christie's conservatively patriarchal views.

'And they lived happily ever after' – or so it seems in most of Christie's fiction. Match-making is a persistent motif in her work, for no marriageable character gets off without finding the 'right' mate. Christie herself was committed to the traditional roles for men and women, to marriage and to family. Admittedly, she was not a feminist. With a wry laugh, she dismisses the 'gains' of the 'so-called' modern liberation movements which permit women to work as hard as men.⁵¹

Romance does form an important motif, but this quote from the *Autobiography* does not do full justice to the ways in which women in her novels have a whole range of options from marriage: to career, to adventure or to liaisons outside of marriage. Neither does it give full weight to the numerous unhappy marriages, let alone murderous spouses. Many of Christie's female protagonists, far from accepting traditional roles, are striving to negotiate new, more modern formations of relationships. While David Grossvogel rehearses the view of Christie as peddling a form of regressive nostalgia for a readership confused by contemporary change, in 'Death deferred' (1983),⁵² the later eighties saw the beginning of the feminist debate on Christie. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan in *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (1986)⁵³ are unequivocal in their view of Miss Marple. While Christie, in having an elderly woman as detective, transmutes gossip and nosiness into something socially useful and thereby allows a feminine form of knowledge, Miss Marple's depiction, 'she simpers, flutters, flatters, dithers, and is subject to apparent meaningless digressions in conversation',⁵⁴ is 'a pejorative definition of the feminine' and so 'there is no authentic feminist voice in the stories'.⁵⁵ Cora Kaplan's 'An Unsuitable Genre for a Feminist' (1986)⁵⁶ reiterates their view. Placing Christie among the other Golden Age women writers, she claims 'Within a genre which in general upholds conservative social values our queens of crime have, with few exceptions, been good royalists', 'at worst explicitly anti-feminist and at best highly ambivalent about any disruption of traditional gender relations'.⁵⁷ Although she concedes that Miss Marple could be construed as rescuing the village spinster from contempt and a radical move to reinstate unmarried women as an independent force, Kaplan rejects such a reading for the thesis that her 'post-menopausal' status 'highlights the disruptive power of female sexuality in the populace at large'.⁵⁸ Kaplan is one of the first to notice the large number of female villains in Christie, but reads this as part of Christie's anti-feminist punishing of aspiring women trying to improve their status via 'sexual attachments' or 'professional insinuations'. She saw Golden Age detective fiction as allowing women writers the freedom to create a male persona or alter ego, Poirot in Christie's case, and so reinforce the value of the masculine; 'these writers' views of gender and sexuality were imbued with a class snobbery and a nostalgia for a social structure that the second world war would radically change'.⁵⁹ Michelle Slung, in contrast, three years later, in 'Let's hear it for Agatha Christie: A Feminist Appreciation' (1988),⁶⁰ suggests that three female characters argue for a feminist Christie. The irrepressible protagonist

Victoria Jones has a force of character, the writer Mrs Oliver is a feminist advocating a woman as the head of Scotland Yard, and for Slung, Miss Marple could be read as 'distinctly praiseworthy' since 'a true heroine was not bound by clichés of age and physical attractiveness'.⁶¹ By acknowledging the brevity of two of her chosen characters and their little-known status, Slung seems almost to concede the other, better-known Christie is different and less feminist. Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple's influential 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction' (1988)⁶², however, had a more ambivalent view of Christie in relation to feminism. Poirot reifies logocentricism, where Miss Marple's 'old and frail' passivity allows her to be accepted as a sleuth. While the forces of law are seen as bumbling and flawed, the consensus that Christie is 'the most conservative of writers'⁶³ is hardly challenged.

During the nineties, Christie's reputation began to be considered in relation to gender, although always in dialogue with her conservatism. Feminist readings were so large a part of the decade's literary analysis that they necessarily became a significant part of Christie scholarship and the nineties feminist pieces tend to question the earlier dismissals of Kaplan and Craig and Cadogan. The focus on her as puzzle-writer still continued. Marty Knepper's Christie entry in the *Great Women Mystery Writers* (1994) calls her 'the cleverest whodunit plotter ever'⁶⁴, and the editors of *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction* (1997) plus three of the four articles on Christie focus on her plot construction and as creator of puzzles.⁶⁵ Martin Priestman's *Detective Fiction and Literature* (1990)⁶⁶ gave an implicitly gendered discussion of women characters, the powerful, strong mother-figures, the English rose, the siren with a past, respectable wives, companion figures and 'Cinderella-like' unattached but overlooked women are all briefly considered alongside the 'weak-young-man'. 'But such individual elements do not finally seem as significant as the overall assumption that this world of country house-parties is the only world that matters.'⁶⁷ For Priestman, Christie's conservative 'somewhat passive acceptance of her world'⁶⁸ precludes any serious intervention in gender formations, in contrast to the earlier 'lady detective' writers.

[The Golden Age] is a branch of writing in which women have reigned supreme (indeed in a continuous succession of 'Queens of Crime'), but also one which seems highly resistant to any specifically feminist interpretation. In a long perspective it is arguable that this is a form which speaks of confinement and restriction . . . compared

to their nineteenth-century ancestors, there has been little attempt by women detective writers to explore this restriction *as* restriction by, for instance, allowing female characters to act very far outside the terms of their allotted place.⁶⁹

Despite the assumption that conservative writers will write conservatively about gender, Priestman suggests an interesting model of the Golden Age detective fiction as feminised because it is domestic, a form of 'household management . . . the problems and intricacies of organising social gatherings',⁷⁰ where the list of suspects become a 'guest list' to which the narrative gives an even distribution of attention. Anna-Marie Taylor's *'Home is Where the Hearth Is'* (1990) similarly gives insights into the feminine characters in the novels but denies any real subversive questioning because of Taylor's insistence on the cosily conservative nostalgia for the pre-war systems. Her complement to the idea that Christie's world is one of the leisured middle classes, though, is an important one.

Christie discusses and describes day-to-day circumstances of work much more frequently than in many more self-consciously literary works concerned with such participants. The carrying out of domestic chores, shopping, cleaning, clerical work, looking after the sick, raising children, the hiring and firing of servants; all these activities are recorded in detail. These mainly female pursuits also function as a means of crowding the action of the narrative . . .⁷²

This recognition of the usually unrecorded humdrum life of women, along with Marple's use of feminine gossip to uncover the criminal, proves simultaneously progressive and conservative: 'progressive in that they give worth to the circumstances of female domestic life, but conservative in that the texts limit women's influence to the domestic.'⁷³ Priestman and Taylor read the fiction as fetishising domesticity as the appropriate sphere for women, both focussing on the Miss Marple novels for such a conclusion.

Gillian Gill and Alison Light argue something very different, and much closer to my own thesis, that Christie in fact opens up a variety of roles for women as a quiet but sustained subversion and questioning of contemporary mores. Gill's literary biography *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries* (1990)⁷⁴ proves both knowledgeable and nuanced in its readings of female characters subversive of contemporary cultural representations.

In Christie's fictional world, intellect and sensibility, weakness and strength, drive and inertia, sexuality and morality are not simply factors of gender or age. In a Christie novel, young men are often frivolous sex objects, and appreciated as such, while young women are the solid breadwinners. A woman over sixty can not only dominate the life of her family and community but also seek to promote her personal happiness through marriage to a much younger mate.⁷⁵

However, Gill argues in relation to the biographical material that this is because Christie ignores her social contexts and retreats into her own unconscious to create these fantasy characterisations that fight shy of gendered expectations. 'Christie was significantly less enslaved by the ideology and structural prejudices of her culture, time and class than [her] contemporaries'⁷⁶, she argues, because 'she sought to create fictional correlatives for her inner world of fantasy rather than to offer a mirror to her time and social caste.'⁷⁷ A year later, Alison Light, in an equally valuable study, *Forever England* (1991), has a chapter looking at Christie's modern brand of conservatism⁷⁸, which argues that Christie is deliberately intervening in her time and social caste in articulating 'a conservative Englishness but in a modern form'.⁷⁹ Light raises two important issues in relation to previous studies of Christie, which prove vital for my analysis. The first, which comments on the views of Priestman, Taylor and a number of the eighties critics, is that conservative women writers can also be 'protofeminists', despite feminism's preferred belief 'that feminism and conservatism are mutually exclusive'.⁸⁰ That 'conservative mentalities . . . are not sealed off or separate from other ideological strains or existing apart from other, quite conflicting, even contradictory desires and beliefs'.⁸¹ Since my own thesis argues that Christie, while conservative about issues of mutating class structures, proves questioning and challenging in relation to a whole range of available modern femininities, this is an important thesis that has gained stronger ground during the twenty-first century. In relation to gender, Light sees the retreat from the Edwardian intense world of feelings, a complement to masculine heroics, in Christie's female characters as denying sexual difference and sacrificing the romantic for the domestic, '“nice” girls . . . sensible and unassuming, whose sexuality is muted'.⁸²

For Christie it was by denying the feminine (in its late Victorian and Edwardian dress) and by ventriloquising what had been the male part, cheerily domesticated, that she could find ways of speaking as

a modern woman. Reticence could be a form of conservative self-protection but also of new-found power.⁸³

Such a reading, though suggestive, ignores the range and potential of Christie's descriptions, but then gender is not Light's main focus. The central argument of the chapter is that far from harking to a pre-war nostalgia for an Edwardian era, Christie's texts negotiate and produce a new, modern (and popular modernist) literature of inter-war cultural mores, and that they intervene in the cultural debates, debunking past values and introducing new ones in a moderate, comic mode.

Misleading, then, to take the fiction at face value, and imagine that Agatha Christie never addresses any sense of social disturbance: on one level her writing speaks to nothing else. Far from suggesting a world in which every person knows their place, and in which values are firm and fixed, the fiction explores the difficulty of social belonging in a modern world in which the very idea of social status has something theatrical and impermanent about it.⁸⁴

Gill's nuanced readings of the female characters and Light's argument that Christie does engage with a society in transition, 'despite' being a conservative writer, helped to buoy up this project during its darker days. Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker's *Reflecting on Miss Marple*⁸⁵ (1991) completes the important trio of feminist books at the beginning of the nineties, renegotiating and rehabilitating Christie's *oeuvre*. Influenced by Kaplan, Shaw and Vanacker posit Christie's fiction, characterised as 'village settings, gossipy tea-parties and other old maidish pursuits'⁸⁶ as 'a highly conservative process... the world that is reconstructed... is one in which stable and idealized social relations, including traditional class and gender divisions, are upheld'.⁸⁷ The appeal of the Golden Age detectives, they believe, lies in their feminisation:

They may look silly, they may appear vain and affected but this is a surface which conceals their powers of reasoning and their quite ruthless quest for justice. It is easy to understand how such figures would appeal to women writers and readers; are not Poirot and his ilk very like women themselves – apparently trivial, but actually the ones who put the pattern together, who restore order to a shaken world?⁸⁸

The character of Miss Marple is further seen as revaluing feminine attributes, giving 'a high value to conventionally womanly attributes

and habits',⁸⁹ valorising gossip, trivia, long memories and 'the womanly, highly personalised approach to society'⁹⁰ but not as subverting traditional gender roles. Challenging Kaplan's reading of the female villains as punished for their attempted usurping of male status, they suggest 'the idea of the autonomous woman murderer led Christie into a greater psychological complexity, and even sympathy', with Miss Marple proving the 'complementary component of female conscience and rationality' who, if she is to be solitary, must culturally be old, since younger female sleuths 'have male partners to protect and stabilise them'.⁹¹ Arguing that Christie's *Autobiography* testifies to her rejection of feminism and career women, they yet see her *oeuvre* generically as influenced by its historical context. Golden Age women writers, though none of them 'declared feminists, they nevertheless partook of attitudes created by feminism, as well as by the changed conditions for women brought about by the war',⁹² allowing them to write texts of 'female worlds' (family, village, closed community) where rationality could control destinies. 'For them, the detective novel was an enabling genre . . . an intellectual enterprise to be entered into on equal terms with the men.'⁹³ Odette L'Henry Evans' 'Croquet and Serial Killers' (1994)⁹⁴ notes the use of female murderers in Christie, and that they tend to be more effective and less 'clumsy' than the males. Claiming that male killers are the norm for the early fiction, she yet chooses to focus on one of the earliest novels, *Murder on the Links* (1923). Taking a psychoanalytic approach and searching for a form of 'feminine writing' 'from within the female "criminal" perspective',⁹⁵ Evans argues that the female murderers do not upset gender conventions despite their aggression:

While qualifiers of sexual differences as posited by Freud . . . to the effect that 'anatomy is destiny', may appear blurred at times in Agatha Christie's stories, they can nevertheless be identified in her heroines' attitudes, well-mannered, often church-goers, outwardly respectable and eager to conform to the expectations of their social circle. Their refusal to accept the passive 'feminine' attitude and their assumption of the 'virile' role of murderer remains hidden and is never made explicit until they are unmasked.⁹⁶

L'Henry Evans, at this fascinating point, shifts her attention to suggest the need for a 'deeper level of feminist psychoanalytics, where writing can be seen to explore subconscious motives and reactions'.⁹⁷ Forgoing to clarify whether this is an investigation of the character's or the writer's

unconscious, she ends on this claim that a semiotic approach 'would enhance further a feminist reading of Agatha Christie's work'.⁹⁸ The short piece raises more issues than it attempts to solve, but nevertheless does ask some intelligent questions about the women 'serial killers'. Mary Anne Ackershoek's 'The Daughters of His Manhood' (1997)⁹⁹ agrees with Light's view (though she does not reference her) that 'Christie's world is shaped by its postwar context in subtle but important ways, and it is into this context of crisis and change that [her] achievements . . . must be placed.'¹⁰⁰ The most fundamental change, she sees as being a crisis of authority, since the devastations of the war proves the 'betrayal of *paternal trust*'¹⁰¹, and Poirot and Marple form part of an 'alternative authority' of feminised detectives 'deeply rooted in female experience'.¹⁰² This reading of the Golden Age genre accords with Shaw and Vanacker's view, though not of their assessment of Christie on career women, since Ackershoek celebrates the writer as a 'spectacularly successful one'¹⁰³ who never chose to return to a leisured existence, even when she was financially able. Rejecting the view of Christie's nostalgia for the leisured classes, she traces the representation of country houses as motifs of social change and class mutability, warping their inhabitants if they strive to fix them in an Edwardian past. Martin Priestman, in an otherwise sound review of detective fiction *Crime Fiction: From Poe to the Present* (1998), returns to his previous view of Christie as a 'famously very conservative' social writer and argues, in contrast to Light and Ackershoek,

As a woman who had herself found a degree of independence, as a wartime hospital worker and then as a highly successful writer, Christie might at least have been expected to celebrate the increase in women's rights accompanying the female Suffrage of 1928.¹⁰⁴

Miss Marple, 'the type of gossipy village spinster-with-nothing-better-to-do', he feels, is a poor '“celebration” (if it was that)¹⁰⁵ of such feminine emancipation.

The twenty-first century continues this see-saw effect of critics further developing Christie's subtle questioning of her contemporary gender norms and those who, focused on her as the quintessential puzzle-plotter, continue to suggest she is conservatively reinforcing gendered expectations. Gill Plain and Susan Rowland, both published in 2001, develop the feminist recuperation of Christie in their considerations of the gendered history of detective writers. Gill Plain's *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction*¹⁰⁶ argues that crime fiction has only superficially been

conservative because of its resolution, its 'transgressive potential' is expressed 'in the writing *before* the ending – in the body of the text' with its focus on the 'transgression of boundaries'.¹⁰⁷ 'Gender transgression and the disruption of "normative" sexuality have always been an integral part of crime narrative.'¹⁰⁸ Her chapter on Christie, 'Sacrificial Bodies: The Corporeal Anxieties of Agatha Christie', focuses on the inter-war fiction since she claims that 'it would take a strong stomach to sift through the entire 79 novels'.¹⁰⁹ Influenced by Light and deploying Ingman's inter-war stereotypes of the flapper and the 'surplus women' alongside the virgin, whore and mother, Plain pays particular attention to the flapper and the mother. She sees the flapper as boyishly 'asexual' in *Murder on the Links*, despite Cinderella's attention to her makeup, her impossibly scarlet lips and an 'impudence' that Hastings clearly sees as sexual and transgressive, in his terming her 'a minx'. Cinderella's active femininity, in leaping through the upstairs window to save the day, while Poirot and Hastings stand impotently outside the house, makes her 'both saviour and symptom of an emasculated postwar world'.¹¹⁰ The mother figure is seen as particularly deviant and problematic, 'Christie suggests that motherhood sets women outside the symbolic order . . . free to circumvent the patriarchal order' for the sake of their children,¹¹¹ and also 'a spectral presence' whose invisibility can be inauthentically assumed as a cloak.¹¹² Plain's historical, materialist placing of Christie, 'as part of a wider group of women writers concerned with redefining the domestic and remapping the relationship between the public and private spheres', reads 'the assumption underlying her interwar fiction [as] one of female agency'.¹¹³ Her psychoanalytic reading of the handful of detective texts, she considers argues that they are not generic puzzles, 'empty structures of pure form, but rather a carefully targeted articulation of socio-cultural anxieties, designed to provide a subtly modulated fictional therapy'.¹¹⁴ Susan Rowland's *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* continues the dense and detailed readings of specific individual texts as indicative of Christie's *oeuvre*, as it interrogates a number of critical issues in relation to the six women writers who have dominated crime fiction in Britain. 'A writer need not call herself a feminist . . . for her writing to be concerned with "feminist" questions of power, gender and the social roles of women', Rowland explains, concluding that all six of her female detective writers 'are inevitably fascinated by tensions over female participation in society'.¹¹⁵ Rowland's analyses of the feminisation of Poirot and his breakdown of the opposition between masculine science and feminine gossip in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* concludes,

In learning not to dismiss the gossipy buffoonery of Poirot, the feminine intelligence networks of the spinsters with their intuitive grasp of social interaction, the 'trivial' domestic clues in the Ackroyd house, and learning to *distrust* the confidant narrative of professional males, the reader is alerted to feminine modes of knowledge traditionally marginalized by the law.¹¹⁶

While Rowland's examination of particular texts is nuanced and illuminating, and she dedicates a chapter to female characterisation, her attempt to generalise from individual texts at times proves less convincing. Examining Tuppence in *Partners in Crime*, she suggests '[Christie's] works promote female self expression, but finally do not trouble conventional structures'¹¹⁷ since Tuppence marries and puts aside detection on becoming pregnant. Similarly, Midge Hardcastle, in *The Hollow*, allows her to argue that,

The potentially disturbing impact of professional women on conventional family patterns is typically resolved by the forthright independence of Christie's women finding true happiness within the world of family rather than employment.¹¹⁸

Marriage is an important focus, and at times closure, for Christie but my examination in Chapter 3 of the whole range and diversity of acceptable feminine roles complicates such a unitary conclusion. Rowland contrasts Christie to Sayers, whom she sees as engaging in 'two related feminine issues: the importance of professional work for personal integrity and the necessity to renegotiate power within traditional and "romance" conceptions of marriage'.¹¹⁹ I would want to argue, following the readings of her portrayal of career women and wives renegotiating marital roles, in Chapter 3, that quietly and less obtrusively, Christie is in accord with, rather than in contrast to, such feminist agendas. However, Rowland seems to agree with this later in her analysis, when she suggests Christie aims 'to reinvigorate conventional gender and sexual arrangements'.¹²⁰ Perhaps it comes down to how one reads 'renegotiation' in relation to 'reinvigoration' within the cultural crisis of gender norms of the inter-war years, since the two might not necessarily be mutually exclusive. While she believes that all the Golden Age women writers 'exhibit an unease with the concept of women *in* power but are critical of women *under* arbitrary power',¹²¹ she also examines the 'fascinating aspect of the golden age's genre's self-referentiality . . . that gender, and in particular the feminine, tends

to be inscribed as masquerade'.¹²² Despite my occasional disagreements with particular conclusions, Rowland's analysis of Christie's representations of gender are enormously useful and yet another ally in the thesis that 'The claim that detecting and crime fiction is an essentially conservative literary art rests upon the privileging of "closure" over "process" in storytelling' and that

The literary arts of these six crime writers have re-plotted the *process* of crime novels in ways that profoundly affect the reading experience. The ethics of aesthetics lie in the transformation of the narrative structures. For instance, Christie's fascination with masks and social types embodies an aesthetic of 'the menace behind the ordinariness' of traditional social structures, not at all dissipated by the neat endings.¹²³

However, alongside such questioning and innovative feminist readings of Christie come more traditional examinations such as *Agatha Christie: Modern Critical Views* (2002)¹²⁴ edited by Harold Bloom and Stephen Knight's *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000* (2004).¹²⁵ Disappointingly for my own agenda, though not of course for many other readers of Christie, Bloom reprints essays from the seventies and the eighties, with the one exception of Gill's 1990 'Afterward' to her biography. So the one focus on gender, Pam McAllister's 1979 'The Impact of Gender on Agatha and her Craft',¹²⁶ looks to Christie's *Autobiography* to argue her insistence on traditional feminine secondary roles within society. Stephen Knight's criticism places Christie within a chapter on 'The Clue-Puzzle Forms',¹²⁷ arguing that as a writer she 'caught a moment' to create 'a classic form for a type of crime fiction.'¹²⁸ In a welcome contrast to Bloom, Knight's work is fully conversant with the contemporary nineties work on Christie and benefits from its engagement with it, including Shaw and Vanacker, Gill and Light. Reiterating his earlier view of the feminisation of detective knowledge with Poirot, 'a heightened version of female domestic knowledge as a weapon against fictional disorder',¹²⁹ and continued with Miss Marple, he yet suggests Christie most preferred not having a serial detective. Christie's detective fiction has an ethical force because the disorder is 'a major personal betrayal', a disturbing 'intimate danger', so that it is her ability to constantly recreate in different plots the 'sense of personal unease and possible danger that emerged in... a world secluded from social and international disorder'¹³⁰ that makes her so successful. He therefore concludes his brief discussion with the view that Christie's puzzles are not 'cozy'

or 'sunny' but 'traumas of betrayal' that unleash 'dangerous anxieties' which the detectives need to protect the reader from.

This synopsis is not designed to denigrate the excellent scholarship of generic critics such as Stephen Knight or Martin Priestman, whose authoritative analyses of detective fiction history I am constantly indebted to, or to argue that the analysis of Christie's excellence as puzzle plotter is not of interest, but simply to point out that, in their perfectly justifiable focus elsewhere, such examinations do not do always do full justice to the complex articulations of femininity, contesting as well as reinforcing, present in Christie's contemporary formations. And finally, I make no apologies for rehearsing the Christie critical reception of the past three decades because one thing that has struck me during my research is how little Christie analysts are influenced by each other. Critics tend to work off their own bat and, while they may well cite one or two previous views, they do not engage in any real sense in the critical debate about their own readings. Each time, they 'invent the wheel', often echoing and re-echoing the arguments of other critics, as I initially set out to do myself in inventing 'my' wheel (as I thought) on Christie and femininity. This 'preliminary proceeding' may well serve – as I hope the whole book does – to develop such communal debate and to acknowledge the wealth of material already devoted to Christie and gender, in such writers as Slung, Gill, Taylor, Shaw and Vanacker, Light, l'Henry Evans, Ackershoek, Plain and Rowland, among others.

2

Detecting Deviancy

This chapter explores the gender configurations of Agatha Christie's detectives. Beginning in 1920, Christie wrote within the modern period and within a modern framework which questioned and challenged the old-style Victorian and Edwardian conventions and gender expectations. The twenties was a period of unsettled gender formations, with cultural debates on the role and rights of women spurred on by the 'new woman', female suffrage and the removal of legislative sex discrimination of women working in the professions, at least until they married. There were complications in the binary divide between what was culturally expected of masculinity brought about by men returning from the front suffering with the 'female malady' of neurasthenia, quickly renamed as shell-shock, and women's role renegotiated to work on the land and in the munitions factories as part of the war effort. Just because Christie's most well-known two detectives are both elderly from their inception does not mean that we can necessarily assume that Christie's narratives or characters will evince old-fashioned views or reinforce what was rapidly becoming outmoded ways of being. The twenties and thirties were a period of intense contentions, of unsettling the concepts of gender in relation to the 'modern' age, and Christie's novels form a small but definite part of that debate, and one that then continues for over fifty years, into the seventies.

Tommy and Tuppence Beresford

Poirot might be the most prolific of Agatha Christie's detectives and Miss Marple the favourite of many, but in order to illustrate the thesis that Christie's creation of her fictional detectives raises issues about gender

construction, not only culturally but also within the detective genre itself, I need to start with the detectives who appeared in her second novel in 1922 and, 50 years and 80 novels and short-story collections later, finally concluded their investigations in her final novel of 1973: Thomas and Tuppence Beresford.

Detectives, within the genre of detective fiction, are portrayed as the bastions of law and order, however much writers may play around with their flawed and eccentric characters. What they do in discovering, revealing and apprehending the criminal is seen as necessary and just. The generic tradition of the detective fiction constructs us, as readers, to accept this conventional acceptance of detecting as an activity. But that was not how it was viewed in the earliest beginnings of the tradition, when the public police force itself was still in its infancy and highly suspect. As I have discussed elsewhere¹, Andrew Forrest's detective, in his 1864 *The Revelations of a Lady Detective*, acknowledges the sleaziness involved in spying on society and devotes her opening chapter to trying to justify this duplicity. Anna Katherine Green, the 'mother of the detective novel' (starting with *The Leavenworth Case* in 1878), creates a busybody spinster, Miss Butterworth in *That Affair Next Door* (1897), to exploit this nosiness. Both in her *Autobiography*² and in the Poirot novel *The Clocks*,³ Christie pays testimony to the influence of the phenomenal bestseller of its time, *The Leavenworth Case*. Green's later younger socialite detective Violet Strange (*The Golden Slipper* 1915) displays an aristocratic fastidiousness against sleuthing, since it means spying on her friends and acquaintances, but is unable to prevent herself from becoming fascinated by the puzzle element of her mysteries. Detecting itself, at the turn of the century, was often seen as slightly deviant, dishonourable and ungentlemanly within the aristocratic society that was invariably its setting, until the advent of Sherlock Holmes. Indeed, its dishonourableness may hold the key to the plethora of 'lady detectives' popular during the early period, since femininity is often 'othered' by dominant discourses defining what is honourable and right within the sphere of the masculine. Tommy Beresford, the solid, upper-middle-class Englishman, voices such distaste in going undercover, in *N or M?* when he argues

'I – I feel a bit of a cad, you know.'

Tuppence nodded with complete understanding.

'Yes one does. In a way it is a foul job, this.'⁴

However, an interesting gender divide between the two detectives develops in the text's further analysis of undercover work and its dishonourableness, alongside its necessity:

Tommy said, flushing slightly:

'I don't like lying any better than you do –'

'I don't mind lying in the least. To be quite honest I get a lot of artistic pleasure out of my lies. What gets me down is those moments when one forgets to lie – the times when one is just oneself – and gets results that way that you couldn't have got any other way . . . That's what happened to you last night . . . that's why you feel so badly about it.' (NM?, p. 57)

In contrast to Poirot's fussy foreignness, which set him apart from the beginning as not 'one of us' and allowed a distance for the reader from some of his more outrageous questioning or reading of private letters in order to get at the truth – a distance often marked by Captain Hasting's distaste in a similar manner to Tommy's above – Tommy and Tuppence are decidedly 'one of us' if the 'us' is taken to be the middle-class English reading public of the time. Beginning in 1922 as two de-mobbed 'bright young things' looking for work and adventure after the First World War, the Beresfords are the least alienated of the detectives Christie created (for all that Tuppence's femininity is less constrained by establishment mores in the quote above), though they are not strictly detectives so much as intelligence agents. Christie made a distinction between the rigours of her detective novels and the lighter, more enjoyable thrillers which carry an element of the comedic, which many critics have linked to the tone of P.G. Wodehouse's 'Blandings' novels,⁵ and perhaps serves some of the same distancing tropes for the reader who is invited to take them less seriously than Poirot or Marple. Alison Light links their first novel's 'airy manner' to the modernist rejection of stuffy solemnity, allying them with Noel Coward plays and art deco; 'what marks Christie's work, for all time, as of the post-war generation is its brightness of tone and the premium placed on youth'.⁶ The distinction between Christie's thrillers and her detective fiction is one the critics have upheld on the whole, though Charles Osborne has made a valid argument for the similarities between the two sub-genres since the 'characters whom Tommy and Tuppence find themselves either collaborating with or pitting against are not only the clear-cut "goodies" and "baddies" of the usual thriller, but are potential suspects as well. . . . Christie . . . retains an element of the puzzle in her thrillers'.⁷ Traditional Christie critics

have dismissed the Beresford novels; Julian Symons calls them 'inferior tales not suited to the Christie talent'⁸ and argues that this is the general consensus, and Robert Barnard sees the novels as 'disastrous', 'cobbled together' and 'an obvious embarrassment'⁹ and likewise authoritatively states the Beresfords are 'everybody's least favourite sleuths'.¹⁰ Critics informed by gender issues, such as Susan Rowland, Gillian Gill, Patricia Maida and Nicholas Spornick, and Stephen Knight (2004), have viewed the novels differently, particularly focussing on the fact that Tuppence Beresford is the dominant partner. Rowland argues that, despite the apparent Toryism, Christie's portrayal of the British establishment is a more challenging one, locating 'the source of the crime firmly in the heart of the masculine establishment',¹¹ and Maida and Spornick suggest that Tuppence is 'a character whom many readers consider their favourite sleuth'.¹² Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan's *The Lady Investigates* disparage Tuppence as 'fluffy' and 'resolutely bright' but nevertheless argue, in a chapter on 'female helpmeets', '[o]f all the husband-and-wife detection teams, Tommy and Tuppence come nearest to representing an equal partnership. They take the initiative by turns and Tuppence is as quick off the mark as her spouse.'¹³

The Beresfords begin as twenty-somethings, after the 1914–18 war, when gender delineations were beginning to shift and the detective novel was one of the spaces to develop a less manly, less heroic form of masculinity. Light argues, 'Many of the sleuths in the 1920s and '30s were self-deprecating amateurs, like Allingham's Albert Campion or Berkley's Roger Sheringham.'¹⁴ The description could as easily describe Tommy Beresford – unimaginative, 'slow in mental processes' and 'rather block-headed' (*The Secret Adversary*, p. 315)¹⁵ – who diffidently puts their successes down to luck. As a more passive masculinity is re-negotiated, so too is a contrasting more active femininity. Tuppence is clearly the instigator of most of the adventures, craving excitement, with a unique, imaginative mind, a determined 'characteristic terrier shake' (*SA*, p. 80), and a 'plucky' refusal, when in a tight corner, to be 'killed off quietly like a lamb' (*SA*, p. 168). As Albert says, to cheer up the defeated Tommy, "'I don't believe anybody could put the Missus out, for good and all. You know what she is, sir, just like one of those rubber bones you buy for little dorgs – guaranteed indestructible'" (*SA*, p. 342). In the first of their novels, *The Secret Adversary* (1922), Tuppence is captured by the villains, and the sentimental American Julius Hersheimmer tries to construct her as a Victorian heroine-as-victim, "'it gets my goat to think of that innocent young girl in danger!'" but Tommy, in a new kind of gender relationship, reassures

him, ‘‘I’ve great faith in Tuppence’’ (SA, p. 268). Indeed throughout the five novels, there is a running trope that allows Tuppence to reject the concept of being weaker or inferior, and asserts a deliberate equality in their relationship.

‘I’ll look after her, sir,’ said Thomas.

‘And I’ll look after you,’ retorted Tuppence, resenting the manly assertion.

‘Well, then, look after each other,’ said Mr Carter [Tommy’s boss], smiling. (*The Secret Adversary*, 1922, p. 63)

‘I can look after her allright, sir,’ said Tommy, at exactly the same minute as Tuppence said, ‘I can take care of myself.’ (*Partners in Crime*, 1929, p. 324)¹⁶

‘But I suppose even you couldn’t persuade your wife to keep out of danger.’

Tommy said slowly:

‘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!’ (*NM?*, 1941, p. 47)

‘I wish to goodness you could look after Mother properly,’ said Deborah severely.

‘None of us have ever been able to look after her properly,’ said Tommy. (*By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, 1968, p. 261)¹⁷

‘Take care of Tuppence and tell Tuppence to take care of you.’ (*Postern of Fate*, 1973, p. 256)¹⁸

Christie consistently created a distinction between traditional, conservative gender relations, which the novels term ‘Victorian’ sentimentality and the new renegotiations of the ‘modern’, and placed masculine protectiveness as an outworn Victorian concept, as delineated in *Murder is Easy* (1939): ‘Good old sentimentality to the fore again, thought Luke. The protective male! Flourishing in the Victorian era, going strong in the Edwardian, and still showing signs of life despite . . . the rush and strain of modern life’ (*MIE*, p. 93).¹⁹ Tuppence is decidedly a modern woman throughout the fifty years of their marriage, independent and self-reliant and the relationship between her and Tommy is overtly constructed as

one of equality. Tuppence, a nurse and driver during the war, mirrors the new-found freedoms and confidence many young women experienced in the 1920s. Examining the romance heroines of the period, Jay Dixon finds a similar construction.

Mobilized as drivers [women] had freedom of movement and were not, as their male counterparts were, stuck in the mud of the trenches. As nurses they also had power over ill male bodies. Having gained a taste of independence, women refused to surrender it. This feeling of female power and efficiency fed into the portrayal of the heroines of the post-First World War Mills and Boons novels.²⁰

When Tuppence proposes they go into a 'joint venture' as the Young Adventurers, she offers her 'share' of the price of their advertisement (SA, p. 22), while taking tea in a Lyons corner house where 'we will each of us pay for our own' (SA, p. 14). It is a decidedly feminist event for the 1920s where a man was conventionally expected to pay. Six years later, in 1928, Winifred Holtby in a newspaper article, 'Should a Woman Pay?'²¹, argued that in the new circumstance of women working, the 'anachronism' of 'the economics of an earlier epoch when all women were theoretically dependent upon masculine finances'²² should be put aside, however much it may feed men's vanity to feel women are still dependent upon them; '[i]t made them feel strong and protecting and benevolent and gave them most agreeable sensations of superiority'.²³ But in the twenties, struggling for a new gender configuration within the changing modern world, Holtby argues for who pays for dinner being a site of struggle and re-negotiation for gender equality.

The only sensible way out of the difficulty is to drop this sentiment about 'a man's privilege'. If some women still think that any man, however ill he can afford it, ought to pay all bills for entertainments, it is time they learned the new code. If some men feel affronted, insulted and dishonoured every time a woman pays, it is time that they dropped their ridiculous pride and prejudice and learned to share and share alike.²⁴

However, it was to take second wave feminism's re-questioning in the 1970s for the custom of women paying to be widely adopted. Tuppence's insistence and Tommy's acquiescence in them sharing the bill in 1922 would place them as a couple striving to renegotiate gender relations. Cora Kaplan argued that Christie, as one of the 'Queens of Crime' during

the inter-war years, peddled a form of nostalgia, harking back to a fixed 'social order that is decidedly on the wane if it has not actually disappeared from the real world some decades before',²⁵ but a close reading of the narrative argues something different in relation to gender in many of Christie's texts of the twenties and thirties. As Alison Light argued persuasively, in *Forever England*, the inter-war years marked 'for many women their entry into modernity, a modernity which was felt and lived in the most interior and private of places . . . a time when older forms of relationship and intimate behaviour were being recast and when even the most traditional of attitudes took new form'.²⁶

In *Partners in Crime*, of the 14 cases their detective agency solves, each of them provides the solution for seven of the cases,²⁷ reinforcing that it is a joint venture (a reference that returns in *N or M?*: 'That was what his life with Tuppence had been and would always be – A Joint Venture'²⁸). Some critics have picked up on the fact that in the mock Detective Agency, Tommy purports to be the great detective while Tuppence's role is the dutiful secretary, overlooking the point that as soon as the client has exited, she resumes her equality in discussing the case. The role as demure secretary, in the face of her active detecting, highlights the gender expectations of society in general and serves to call attention to the inherent sexism as does a comment in a later novel, such as ' "It's a man's job always to deal with lawyers. They just think women are silly and don't pay attention" ' (*BPOMT*, p. 74). Her comment is not inviting a sexist acceptance of the status quo but indicting the sexism of the legal establishment. In the final *Postern of Fate* (1973), the now elderly couple pursue their own lines of enquiry, but Tommy insists that both their methods are equally effective and they are finally toasted on their success as 'a gifted pair' (*POF*, p. 391). The complementarity is consistently egalitarian, spanning as it does the majority of the twentieth century. What seems commonplace in the seventies *Postern of Fate* was still radical in the twenties and thirties.

But though equal, they are not the same. The texts construct a range of gender differences, often along stereotypical constructions. In *The Secret Adversary*, their boss Carter delineates the differences in their characters, arguing that Tommy has 'common-sense', 'he worries things out slowly, and once he's got hold of anything he doesn't let go'; Tuppence is more intuitive and together they supply 'pace and stamina' (*SA*, pp. 315–6). Tuppence continues the early lady detective's ability to 'instinctively' pick out the criminal (Mr Whittington in *The Secret Adversary*, Mary Chilcott in *Partners in Crime*) and as the master criminal notes of the pair, 'she has intuitive flashes that might be dangerous . . . He is not clever but it is hard to blind his eyes to facts' (*SA*, p. 393). This factual

common-sense masculinity versus a feminine intuition sensitive to atmosphere and personality is an unsurprising stereotype and one that continues throughout their career. In the final *Postern of Fate*, much is made of their different methods of solving the mystery Tuppence uncovers: Tuppence's enquiries involve the private sphere of people's memories and hearsay while Tommy examines the public sphere of marriage and death records in Somerset House and the public censuses.

The twist comes in the insistence on Tuppence as instigator and driving force for the adventures, her insatiability for solving mysteries, and her intelligence. Whereas Tommy discovers his spy (N) by accident, a fortuitous fall that uncovers the secret Nazi wireless, Tuppence realises who M is in a 'flash of bewildering light she saw everything – saw the whole business revealed in terms of blinding clarity' (*NM?*, p. 203) that makes her the great detective figure and Tommy the dim-witted sidekick exasperatedly trying to understand the solution.²⁹ Tuppence is the Poirot-like genius, congratulated for having a 'most unusual mind' (*POF*, p. 389) but one who also craves danger and excitement as an action figure. And it is this positive evaluation of her dominant, active femininity that is interesting. When she outwits Tommy and the secret service to ensure she is part of the undercover operation, Tommy reacts with 'admiration' (*N or M?*, p. 16) and 'pride' (*N or M?*, p. 47) and his boss, Grant, acknowledges "'I take my hat off to the woman. She's one in a thousand'" (*N or M?*, p. 46). Ingenuity, bravery and quick-wittedness are celebrated in the feminine heroine.

In the Second World War context of *N or M?*, a focus is also placed on motherhood; in relation to Tuppence, concerned about her children fighting in the war, the spy M masquerading as a mother using an interned Pole's child as camouflage, and the vindictive German Anna whose son died in the last war. Despite a problematically monolithic depiction, where all mothers are assumed to have the same reactions – 'No mother alive could risk it, and that's a fact' (*N or M?*, p. 114) – and the Biblical reference to the judgement of Solomon (where a mother selflessly gives up her claim to her child rather than see it harmed), the textual depictions are of a more violently dangerous, ferocious delineation of motherhood, not the usual loving nurture. Tuppence marvels at 'the strange forces maternity will set loose in an ordinary, commonplace young woman' (*N or M?*, p. 116) as Mrs Sprot contemplates shooting the abductor of her child; and later at similar forces in Anna who stands over her with a gun,

Tuppence looked at the broad, impassive face. It reminded her of the Polish woman, Vanda Polonska. That same frightening ferocity and singleness of purpose. Motherhood – unrelenting! So, no doubt, felt many a quiet Mrs Jones and Mrs Smith all over England. There was no arguing with the female of the species – the mother deprived of her young. (*N or M?*, p. 202)

The British establishment of the secret service boss, Grant, might assert that Tuppence’s brand of femininity is unusual, one in a thousand, but this passage seems to assert a similar determinacy on a larger scale that crosses national boundaries and gives maternal femininity a power and dangerousness to meet the exigencies of the war.

Tuppence’s brand of modern femininity kicks over the traces of the previous generation’s expectations. Like Winifred Holtby, Christie links the terms ‘sentiment’ and ‘sentimentality’ to an anachronistic Victorian way of being female and announces that modern women are more concerned with being business-like, so marrying millionaires is the only sensible thing to do. Tuppence’s father expects her to devote herself to ‘housework and mother’s meetings’ (*SA*, p. 19) and views short skirts and smoking as immoral, while Tuppence sees herself as a ‘changeling’, out of step with the ‘early Victorian View’ (*SA*, p. 19). Tommy’s misogynist grandfather bewails the fact that “‘Girls aren’t what they used to be in my young day”” (*SA*, p. 384) but approves of her pertness. She rejects the concept that love is the central concern of women, by refusing to admit to her own ‘sentimentality’ about Tommy, and even after she has admitted her concern and love for the captured man, is able to continue sleuthing, thereby demonstrating her professionalism (*SA*, pp. 216–7). Love is not the be-all and end-all; discovering the solution to the mystery takes precedence and the modern marriage is conceived of as a ‘sport’ rather than the more usual constructions: ‘a haven, a refuge, and a crowning glory, and a state of bondage’ (*SA*, p. 400). As Rowland has argued, Tuppence renegotiates traditional gender roles, within the social structure of marriage itself, in her dissatisfaction ‘with the mundane “happy ever after” of her marriage’³⁰ at the beginning of *Partners in Crime*. Where the married woman is supposed to devote herself to her home and husband, Tuppence confesses to ‘a wild secret yearning for romance – adventure – life’ (*PIC*, p. 9), and dismisses the ‘Woman’s sphere’ of domesticity as demanding only “‘Twenty minutes work after breakfast”” (*PIC*, p. 9). She only agrees to stop sleuthing when she discovers she is going to have a different kind of adventure, ‘[s]omething ever so much more exciting’ (*PIC*, p. 347) – pregnancy.

Though marriage and pregnancy are depicted as dynamic, vigorous, and uninhibiting to the modern independent woman, with motherhood portrayed as having its own ferocity, it is notable that motherhood is the one thing that does halt the indomitable Tuppence. She does not return to sleuthing until her twins are grown-up, in *N or M?*, a text that insists it is impossible for a woman agent to involve a young child in her exploits. However, as Gill has argued, the 'Beresford's . . . lead conventional lives only in the spaces between the novels',³¹ and the aging Tuppence who returns to the textual fray identifies with the elderly's habit of claiming to be famous personages: "It'll be boring to have only one role to play . . . Desperately you want something to do to amuse yourself so you try on some public character and see what it feels like when you are in it" (*BTPOMT*, p. 67). She is exuberantly pleased to find that Tommy's Aunt Ada still disapproves of her: "Well at my age . . . and what with my neat and respectable and slightly boring appearance, its nice to think that you might be taken for a depraved woman of fatal sexual charm" (*BTPOMT*, p. 41). Ever the unconventional active femininity, Tuppence in her seventies dangerously scoots down hills in a child's toy horse-and-cart in *Postern of Fate*.

The five Beresford novels not only renegotiate a modern, more independent cultural femininity, they also highlight the lack of feminine models generically within classic detective fiction. In *The Secret Adversary*, Tuppence is referred to as 'Sherlock' when she proposes 'to reason in a logical manner' (*SA*, p. 78) and she resolves to be a 'Private Investigator' in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (*BTPOMT*, p. 80) but it is their second novel, *Partners in Crime* written in the thirties, that contains a wholesale pastiche of Christie's contemporary detectives and where Tuppence's gender blindness in adopting detective personalities highlights the absence of female fictional detectives. Also, in ignoring gender specificity, Tuppence's deployment points to a destabilising, subversive potential, offering alternative models of female subjectivity. As Tess Cosslett argued in relation to Jeanette Winterson's deliberate gender-blindness in her novels, partial identification with the male hero 'neatly avoids whatever restrictions' were placed on the contemporary female characters but also 'the "male" hero is to some degree "feminised" . . . Gender boundaries are crossed and blurred, though not abolished.'³² Throughout the novels, the Beresfords' competitiveness is given a gendered edge, and in the pastiches of contemporary detectives, this links to who solves the crimes. Where Tommy takes the star detective role, and Tuppence the sidekick – Tommy's Thorndyke to Tuppence's Polton; His Desmond Oakwood to her Francis Oakwood; He

as *The Old Man in the Corner*, she as Polly Burton – it is the sidekick, Tuppence who solves the mystery or discovers the main clue, thereby further destabilising the dominance and subservience of the traditional constructions. Only in the last case, with Tommy as the fictional Poirot, a neat piece of (post)modern intertextual irony, does he reject Tuppence solving it as Hastings, with the authoritative ‘Once the idiot friend, always the idiot friend.’ (*PIC*, p. 329).

At other times, it is Tuppence who adopts the star detective role: her McCarty to his Riordan, she is Roger Sheringham, and she is Dr Fortune to his Inspector Bell. There are also pastiches of the more heroic kind, with Bulldog Drummond and Edgar Wallace, and the rejection of Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown as ineffective in solving the particular cases in question. Thornley Cotton and Inspector French are taken in a more unproblematic pastiche. The twist of the gender blindness, since there are not enough female role models for Tuppence, and the power politics involved in whether the great detective or the sidekick solves the case argue that these rewritings are as much parodies as pastiches in signalling an ironic critique behind the playful repetition, and a critique that is gendered in relation to the power politics of the traditional detective duo, the very thing that the Beresfords problematise in their own sexual/textual relationships. The parodic treatment also points to a more critically engaged involvement in the genre than is usually assumed. As I have argued in relation to Angela Carter’s rewriting of Perrault’s fairytales, ironic rewriting does

not simply ‘rewrite’ the old tales by fixing roles of active sexuality for their female protagonists – they ‘re-write’ them by playing upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version . . . It is not read as a story read for the first time, with a positively imaged heroine. It is read, with the original story encoded within it, so that one reads *both* texts, aware of how the new one refers back to and implicitly critiques the old.³³

Such a ‘playful’ and ‘polyvalent’ language serves to subvert the conventional order. As Kristeva has argued in relation to dissident modernist writers, ‘[a] playful language therefore gives rise to a law that is overturned, violated and pluralized, a law upheld only to allow a polyvalent, polylogic sense of play that sets the being of the law ablaze in a peaceful relaxing void’.³⁴ Far from being ‘tiresome’, Christie’s lightness of tone and playful intertextual use of contemporary detectives point to a critique of the genre of her time and an attempt to rectify gender issues

raised by the modern period. If the Beresfords critique Christie's contemporary detective scene, Parker Pyne³⁵ (and Harley Quinn)³⁶ crosses genre boundaries in an even more extraordinary melange of the investigative and the romance narratives that tap into the desire for adventure within the mundane world, voiced continually by Tuppence. Christie's experiments with the boundaries of detective fiction, however, have not proved her most popular fiction. That is reserved for the less subversive and apparently more canonical detectives, Poirot and latterly, Miss Marple.

Hercule Poirot

If a reading of the Beresfords alerts us to the textual negotiations of gender and the modern in Christie's detective fiction, how does this impact on an analysis of Poirot? Her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), ushers in Christie's most famous and prolific detective, Hercule Poirot, who appeared in 33 novels and over 60 short stories. Poirot's first name, a diminution of 'Hercules', continues the parodic element of her fictional engagement with the genre, since the short (five foot four), egg-headed, dapper figure who is opposed to action, to 'doing' rather than reflecting, with his momentous moustaches, meticulous clothes and patent leather shoes, is anything but a heroic figure. As Light, Rowland and Plain argue, he is a comment on the post-war 1920s attempt to find a new model for masculinity as a reaction to the machismo heroic model demanded before and during the war. 'Like so many of the anti-heroes of the period, Poirot is "a little man". Under stress he builds houses of cards or when the going gets really rough orders a special *tisane*.'³⁷ Maida and Spornick, looking at earlier detective prototypes, suggest alongside Robert Barr's comic Frenchman Eugene Valmont, A.E.W. Mason's Inspector Hanaud, since 'Mason openly revolted against the superman detective heroes of his day'.³⁸ Poirot is fussy, concerned about his health and his comforts, and flaunts his inactivity, in contrast to Ariadne Oliver, who forever implores him to *do* something,

'Have you done *anything*?'

'You are always so sceptical,' said Poirot. 'You always consider that I do nothing, that I sit in a chair and repose myself.'

'Well I think you sit in a chair and think,' admitted Mrs Oliver, 'but I quite agree that you don't often go out and do things.' (*ECR*, p. 245)³⁹

In 'The Disappearance of Mr Davenheim' (1923),⁴⁰ he challenges Inspector Japp that he can solve the mystery of the absent financier without once leaving his flat. However, as Barnard points out, he is 'completely versatile',⁴¹ at times employing sedentary reflection, and at others examining details within a room, as in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, or insisting on interviewing all the suspects himself, as in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934).

The majority of critics argue that Poirot is unchanging, that he makes his appearance fully fledged in 1920, and that Christie does not vary an obviously winning formula. Anne Hart, for example, explains that Poirot 'made his debut as a fully formed foreign eccentric on page thirty-four of his creator's first book'.⁴² Earl Bargainnier first retails a useful Christie quote on his characteristics: 'There are moments when I have felt: "Why-Why – Why did I ever invent this detestable bombastic, tiresome little creature? . . . eternally straightening things, eternally boasting, eternally twirling his moustache and tilting his egg-shaped head"';⁴³ and secondly argues that Poirot is 'unchanging. Christie was too shrewd to alter him in any significant way after his first appearance.'⁴⁴ Maida and Spornick believe 'he barely changes' after the twenties.⁴⁵ This is not quite accurate. Initially Poirot 'acts out' his foreignness in an extreme spectacle, while in later novels this is tempered into his own manipulation of it as he gains more assurity and composure.

At some point in almost every Poirot novel is a little Englander figure who constructs him as a ridiculous foreigner, an 'other'. Hastings, the sidekick who embodies all the boys' own heroics, concern for status and Edwardian sentimentality about women, is often used to illuminate Poirot's foreignness. Poirot himself, particularly in the later novels, plays on this reaction, making himself more foreign, more the outsider, to gain information that the interlocutor might be more wary of giving to an apparently intelligent character, as he explains to Mrs Oliver ' "Everyone tells everything to me sooner or later. I'm only a foreigner, you see, so it does not matter. It is easier because I am a foreigner." ' (ECR, p. 36) Indeed, in the later texts, Poirot's accentuated foreignness, as a way of manipulating the English suspects, turns their xenophobic dismissal of him as less intelligent against them and thus implicitly indicts their prejudice.

In her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, however, the character is less in control of this characteristic, and overtly 'acts out' his difference. On greeting Hastings, he kisses him warmly, to the Englishman's discomfort. When angry with himself for missing a clue, he abuses himself extravagantly and rushes from the room 'like a mad bull' (MAAS,

p. 75)⁴⁶, leaving Hastings and Mary Cavendish staring after him in amused astonishment. And then towards the end of the book, when he has proof that confirms his diagnosis:

‘Ah my friend, I am like a giant refreshed. I run! I leap!’

And in very truth, run and leap he did, gambolling wildly down the stretch of lawn outside the long window.

‘What is your remarkable little friend doing?’ asked a voice behind me, and I turned to find Mary Cavendish at my elbow.

She smiled and so did I. (MAAS, p. 149)

That such behaviour is ‘ridiculous’ to English eyes is being written into this depiction, and it is a view that includes the reader. Finally, as Hastings unwittingly gives him the final clue, Poirot is presented in an overt spectacle of the genius at work in a representation that is deliberately constructed as completely other to, foreign to, the English mentality (metonymically Hastings and Mary Cavendish in tandem).

Poirot, uttering a hoarse and inarticulate cry . . . and putting his hands over his eyes swayed backwards and forwards, apparently suffering the keenest agony.

‘Good heavens, Poirot,’ I cried. ‘What is the matter? Are you taken ill?’

‘No, no’ he gasped. ‘It is – it is – that I have an idea!’ . . .

Suddenly clasping me in his arms, he kissed me warmly on both cheeks, and before I had recovered from my surprise ran headlong from the room.

Mary Cavendish entered at that moment.

‘What is the matter with Monsieur Poirot? He rushed past me crying out: “A garage! For the love of Heaven direct me to a garage, madame!” And, before I could answer, he had dashed out into the street.’

I hurried to the window. True enough, there he was, tearing down the street, hatless and gesticulating as he went. I turned to Mary with a gesture of despair.

‘He’ll be stopped by a policeman in another minute. There he goes, round the corner!’

Our eyes met, and we stared helplessly at each other.’ (MAAS, p. 178–9)

In this passage it is not only the little-Englander who finds Poirot’s emotionalism amusing and faintly ridiculous, the character

is constructed as low comedy, with the reader implicated in Hastings's and Mary Cavendish's Anglo-Saxon astonishment at his aberrant behaviour. Poirot's behaviour is being positioned as childish and ungovernable by the patrician rulers of an Empire. This Poirot, for all his 'celebrity' status, 'past triumphs' and present astonishing revelations (e.g. his ability to explicate the new will made by the murdered woman just before her death and then destroyed), is at times a figure of fun because of his nationality. The later Poirot, often because no longer narrated by Hastings, has more seriousness and weight of character, has a worldly assuredness missing from this first depiction. In *Appointment with Death* (1938), for example, the 'power in Transjordanian', Colonel Carberry, 'had been interested to see this world-famous person to whose gifts his old friend and ally in the Intelligence had paid such unstinting tribute' (*AWD*, p. 129)⁴⁷ and Poirot reveals the solution 'with dignity' (*AWD*, p. 284). At the beginning of *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), the English woman's first view of him is presented as 'A ridiculous-looking little man. The sort of little man one could never take seriously' (*MOOE*, p. 13),⁴⁸ but this is no longer a sentiment we are asked to share in as readers, since we have already been privy to Poirot's discreet but momentous services to 'the honour of the French army – you have saved much blood-shed' (*MOOE*, p. 11), and so the xenophobia backfires, indicting the thinker as small-minded and wrong in ways that are not always present during the process of reading *Styles*. In the 1959 *Cat Among the Pigeons*, the text is specific about the reaction, as Poirot, going to interview a headmistress, 'prepared himself to beat down an insular prejudice... against aged foreigners with pointed patent leather shoes and large moustaches' (*CAP*, p. 257).

That Christie feminised the genre has been a truism since Chandler first argued it in 1944,⁴⁹ with the small, elderly dandy, over-concerned with the appearance of his clothes and hair, in ways no conventional masculinity between the wars would parade, and Hastings functions as a continual demonstration of this, as sidekick. Poirot's bombastic vanity at his reputation is alien to Hastings, 'I looked at the extraordinary little man, divided between annoyance and amusement. He was so tremendously sure of himself.' (*MAAS*, p. 85) His concern for his clothes is overtly un-masculine, the 'neatness of his attire was incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have cause him more pain than a bullet wound' (*MAAS*, p. 23), voices the Captain invalided home from the Front. And this concern for neatness carries over into the domestic, as Poirot mechanically straightens ornaments on a mantelpiece, comments

on the symmetry of the flower beds and, when John Cavendish tosses a spent match with manly disregard, the 'proceeding... was too much for Poirot's feelings. He retrieved it and buried it neatly' (*MAAS*, p. 40). In the 1936 *Murder in Mesopotamia*, the narrator Nurse Leatheran comments, 'He patted me on the shoulder. A woman couldn't have been kinder' (*MIM*, p. 148) and designates his methods as 'there wasn't anything – no small scrap of insignificant gossip – in which he wasn't interested. Men aren't usually so gossipy' (*MIM*, p. 98). But it is not just his vanity at his reputation, his concern for his appearance and for tidiness and symmetry in furnishings and an interest in gossip that position him as the other of conventional turn-of-the-century masculinity, and ally him to traits traditionally constructed as feminine. Poirot's emotionality and, in the early novels, his inability to govern his reactions also position him as other, whereby his foreignness bleeds into a separate otherness of the feminine, both constructed as oppositions to a traditional English, slightly obtuse, heroic masculinity. Christie did construct detectives who embodied more traditionally masculine components: the stolid, forceful, mountain-like figure of the patriarchal Superintendent Battle⁵⁰; the dashing, lean-figured, tanned adventurer Colonel Race⁵¹ as military hero: But neither lasted for more than 4 novels in contrast to Poirot's 33 novels and 65 short stories. Though she could construct conventionally gendered male figures who embodied the policing establishments, representations that challenged and tweaked at the conventional proved of more lasting interest.

Certainly Poirot's rationality and his tidiness of mind are the most important elements to him as a detective, as he employs 'the little grey cells' (*MAAS*, p. 156) and a method of logical rationality. In relation to detecting, Poirot is the master and Hastings the subservient ignoramus, and the butt of Poirot's amusement, a turning-of-the-tables that the reader does not share in since we too, ignorant of the solution, remain in a subordinate position:

'Come,' he said, 'now to examine the coffee cups!'

'My dear Poirot! What on earth is the good of that, now that we know about the cocoa?'

'Oh, là là! That miserable cocoa!' cried Poirot flippantly.

He laughed with apparent enjoyment, raising his arms to heaven in mock despair...

'... Allow me to interest myself in my coffee cups, and I will respect your cocoa. There! Is that a bargain?' (*MAAS*, p. 58)

The narrative leaves no doubt about Hastings's erroneousness and Poirot's mastery, but does not explicate why this is so. This power placement can create quite complex patterns when Poirot's assuredness is linked to his feminine otherness:

'We waited in a tense silence. Poirot alone seemed perfectly at his ease, and dusted a forgotten corner of the bookcase.' (MAAS, p. 67)⁵²

His 'feminine' concern for domestic details in uncovering the solution – how big a dinner someone ate, where a missing cup had gone to, why a key had a wire tag, a grease stain or mud on a carpet – links to his concern with furnishings and are allied to his ability to solve the mystery. 'We will arrange the facts, neatly, each in his proper place. We will examine and reject' (MAAS, p. 37). But the neatness, the method, also links to an uncompromising logic of the factual, an almost superman rationality that makes his eyes glow green, like a cat's, 'Everything must be taken into account. If the fact will not fit the theory – let the theory go.' (MAAS, p. 82) Disorder is linked to a mental confusion that can only be prevented by organising the thoughts once they are free of the emotions into an almost scientific classification usually connoted as masculine logocentricism.⁵³ At his most confused in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, he resorts to building a house of cards because 'With precision of the fingers goes the precision of the brain . . . mathematical precision' (MAAS, p. 178). And yet this ratiocination, an almost cold logic of the sciences and mathematics, is married to his emotionalism, since his house of cards leads to his 'stupendous' idea which has him race from the house in the scene quoted above, where Hastings and Mary fear for his arrest. Poirot is never completely the masculine ratiocinative, and Christie develops a complex representation of the intuitive, the imaginative and the rational in a way that echoes the complementarity of Tuppence's feminine intuition to Tommy's rationality. However, for Poirot, Hastings's excess of imagination makes him a poor detective unlike Tuppence, whose imagination leads to solutions: 'Imagination is a good servant and a bad master. The simplest explanation is always the most likely', he expounds (MAAS, p. 80). The rational/intuitive dialogue will develop most overtly when Ariadne Oliver is his sidekick (see below), but it is also present in first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Evelyn Howard introduces the concept of feminine intuition familiar with a contemporary readership since the raft of 'Lady Detectives' such as *Lady Molly of the Yard*,⁵⁴ who instinctively know who the villain is, as Evelyn claims, "'I'd feel it in my finger-tips if [a murderer]

came near”’ (MAAS, p. 12). But her illogicality is not ridiculed as one would accept from a doyenne of the Golden Age writers, who positioned themselves as the logical, rational arm of the genre in contrast to the feminine intuition school.⁵⁵ Instead, Poirot comments much later on Evelyn, ‘Instinct is a marvellous thing’, mused Poirot. ‘It can neither be explained nor ignored’ (MAAS, p. 127). Although her instincts do not have a place in the solving of the crime, and indeed could be classed as one of Christie’s red herrings, Poirot is not dismissive and later claims his own instinct has been instrumental in uncovering the crime: “‘My instinct was right... The instinct that lead me to insist on examining those coffee cups”’ (MAAS, p. 63). Indeed, Christie at times even included the paranormal, in the form of spinsters interested in spiritualism and séances in *Dumb Witness* (1937) and *The Pale Horse* (1961), for example. She gives the message from a ouija board a central importance in *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931), for all the novel’s solution is a rational one. Susan Rowland notes how all the Golden Age women writers address the occult and spiritualism in some form in their novels and that Christie’s mother experimented with spiritualism and theosophy.⁵⁶ In *Dumb Witness*, Hastings is amazed that Poirot seems to take the spiritualist Misses Tripps seriously and Poirot admonishes him by asking whether a fake scarab necessarily discredits the whole science of Egyptology? ‘I have an open mind on the subject. I have never studied any of its manifestations myself, but it must be accepted that many men of science and learning have pronounced themselves satisfied’ (*DW*, p. 104).⁵⁷ Although Poirot’s recourse for validity is the phallogocentric ‘men of science’, in contrast to credulous, batty spinsters, and hence a reification of ‘masculine’ forms of knowledge, the fact remains that Poirot allows the irrational and emotional sensitivities to complement his logocentric methodology of facts. This is an inclusive construction of knowledge and ‘truth’ that allows validation for both those construed as ‘masculine’ and as ‘feminine’ by Christie’s contemporary culture.

The shift from detective fiction’s Victorian scientific rationalism of Sherlock Holmes into a more modern melange of facts, personality and the unexplained irrational is part of Poirot’s makeup. His overall methodology of arranging the facts into a logical sequence of events remains constant, but how he gains those facts also shifts through the decades of publication. Initially seeking clues and examining rooms, during the thirties he begins to focus as much on ‘the psychology’ of actions and insists on interviewing the suspects for their unconscious betrayal of the truth: ‘One has only to let the criminal talk – sooner or later he will tell you everything’ (*AWD*, p. 217). This is not to say that Christie

did not employ the term earlier. In 'The Cornish Mystery' of 1923, for example, Poirot chides Hastings's erroneous Edwardian view of women with the amused comment, 'You admire *les femmes* . . . but psychologically you know nothing whatever about them' ('CM', p. 278)⁵⁸. But psychology here, as often in Poirot's usage, can be construed as 'character' or 'mentality'. As Barnard describes for all of Poirot's stories, but accurate I believe only for the early novels,

For though Poirot frequently brandishes psychology in our faces . . . we are not going to be exposed to the Freudian naïvetés of the American school or the murky in-depth analyses of some recent British practitioners. He means by psychology nothing more . . . than the sort of folk-wisdom about human behaviour one might expect from an advice to the love-lorn advice column . . . there can be no psychology where there is no depth of character.⁵⁹

It is during the thirties and forties that Poirot's use of psychology encompasses the more complex re-thinking of the components of personality linked to the modern period. A sense of 'character' as a superficial mask donned for social acceptance, of buried depths that fracture the sense of self, and of the 'self' as a work in process. As the wise Hori explains in *Death Comes At the End* (1945)⁶⁰, the self is always becoming, never fixed.

'It is like my measures here. I take half and add to it a quarter, and then a tenth and then a twenty-fourth – and ast the end, you see, it is a different quantity altogether'

'But I am just Resnib.'

'But Resnib has something added to her all the time, so she becomes all the time a different Resnib!'

'No, no. You are the same Hori.'

'You may think so, but it is not so.' (*DCATE*, p. 29)

Odette l'Henry Evans quotes a first-hand description of Freud's method of psychoanalytic investigation, noting its similarity to the way Poirot proceeds in his detective work:

Freud started asking questions, in a desultory manner, virtually anywhere, dealing with apparently unimportant elements. When he had a number of elements in hand, he discards some, digs further

here and there and eventually standing at the centre shovels deeper and deeper in a single-minded search.⁶¹

Susan Rowland also identifies Poirot's interviewing of suspects as an analogous 'talking cure', and his interest specifically in 'inconsistencies and slips of the tongue'⁶² as being a form of analysis but argues that for Golden Age women writers,

Psychoanalysis can be used to help understand crime and murder in these novels but for no one author is it a full and sufficient explanation: it cannot provide that form of closure.⁶³

Psychology and psychoanalysis were modern conceptions of the self that acknowledge an irrationality, a subconscious logic that runs counter to the reasoning, rational mind. Subjectivity becomes split into a variety of fluid selves, of which only some are ever recoverable. In 1928, Christie wrote a literary, non-detective novel *Giant's Bread* (1930)⁶⁴ under the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott (the name under which she published all her non-mystery novels), which specifically links psychology with a concept of the modern. The novel is about a modernist musician, Vernon Deyre, who moves to Russia and influenced by the modernist school (Tatlin's monument to the Third Internationale, Mayerhold and Stravinsky are cited), composes an atonal opera, '[t]he music of tomorrow,' 'The Giant' (*GB*, p. 169). Uncompromisingly modernist, '[t]his was no opera, as commonly understood. It told no story, featured no individuals' (*GB*, p. 167), it is also portrayed as the work of a true genius. Deyre, the modernist musician, is forced to reject the old, traditional life, symbolised by his ancestral home Abbots Puissant and his meek, conventional wife, in order to find the freedom and breadth to compose, living with his actress mistress in the Russia of Tatlin, Mayakovsky and Diaghlev. The break from the old, traditional hierarchies to the clean sweep of the modern is managed by a loss of memory linked to the ravages of the First World War. Like Rebecca West's *Return of the Soldier* (1918) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Christie uses the First World War as a fracture of the old and the new and, like Woolf, the narrative reifies the new, modernist way of existence (Christie creates a similar scenario in her Poirot novel, *The Hollow* of 1946, whose ending echoes *Giant's Bread*). Shell-shock, that contemporary theme of the post-war era where soldiers suffered a neurasthenia that until then had been ascribed as a purely feminine hysteria,⁶⁵ and that 'undermined the

validity of stoicism and emotional repression as the defining characteristics of the manly ideal',⁶⁶ allows Vernon a clean slate and the ability to escape the ties that hold him back from his creativity. But, where the other modern women writers, West and Woolf, mobilise shell-shock as a trope to attack the horrors of war and the inhumanity of the war-mongers, Christie gives it a purely personal, romantic focus. Vernon's 'trauma' comes from discovering that his beloved wife has re-married in his absence. A 'specialist' confirms the diagnosis and treats Vernon with a form of hypnosis to recover the lost memory and identity (*GB*, p. 438), although there is only one short scene with the specialist, who seems to combine a 'talking cure' and hypnosis to help Vernon come to terms with his being in denial.

In December 1926, Christie disappeared mysteriously, after her first husband's confession of his sexual unfaithfulness and his desire for a divorce. Christie's family claimed she had suffered a complete amnesia, when she was discovered in a Harrogate hotel living under the name of Christie's mistress, Theresa Neale. The press at the time, and Charles Osborne,⁶⁷ suspected a more deliberate spite against her husband, who came under suspicion of her murder. Christie was seen by a neurologist as well as a GP, and then attended a course of therapy with a psychiatrist in London, who diagnosed a 'hysterical fugue' and treated it partially by hypnosis.⁶⁸

During the thirties, Christie's use of psychology takes on more depth and demonstrates a grasp of both the workings of the psychologist and the unconscious. *Lord Edward Dies* (1933) has Poirot explain to Hastings, 'Do you not know, my friend, that each one of us is a dark mystery, a maze of conflicting passions and desires and aptitudes? *Mais oui, c'est vrai.*' (*LED*, p. 14)⁶⁹ and concludes 'one cannot be interested in crime without being interested in psychology' (*LED*, p. 15). *The A.B.C Murders* (1936), *Dumb Witness* (1937) and *Appointment with Death* (1938), all contain either psychologists or, in *Dumb Witness*, a doctor who diagnoses 'a complete nervous breakdown' with 'delusions' and 'persecution mania' and prescribes skilled 'psychological treatment' (*DW*, pp. 200–1). In these novels, the 'psychology' of the murderer is the 'essential clue' to unmasking the murderer as it is in other novels of the thirties; *Cards on the Table* (1936) has Poirot solve the case by studying the psychology of the four suspects betrayed in how they play bridge. *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955) contains an over-eager psychology student, and where the hostel's housekeeper rejects its usefulness, Poirot and the text demur, because 'the underlying principles are sound enough'. (*HDD*, p. 39)⁷⁰ *Appointment with Death* contains the most

developed focus on psychology, through the world-famous expert on schizophrenia, Dr Gerrard. Psychology is portrayed as arguing ‘an underlying basis of sex to most phenomenon’ (AWD, p. 22) and beneath the ‘mask’ of ordinary life lies something that ‘surged and eddied underneath – something too deep and formless for words’ (AWD, p. 29), that clearly gestures towards an accessible popular depiction of the unconscious. The novel circles round a psychological examination of tyranny, and why people submit to it, a question apposite in the late thirties, with the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe, but located on the domestic narrative of the wicked stepmother as a ‘pathological’⁷¹ ‘sadist’⁷² and ‘*dompteuse*’: (AWD, p. 35)

There are such strange things buried down in the unconscious. A lust for power – a lust for cruelty – a savage desire to tear and rend – all the inheritance of our past racial memories . . . We shut the door on them and deny them conscious life, but sometimes – they are too strong. . . . We see it all around us today – in political creeds, in the conduct of nations. . . . They are opening the doors, these apostles of violence, they are letting up the old savagery, the old delight *for cruelty for its own sake!* (AWD, p. 56)

The ordinary, non-psychologist, represented by Mr Cope, is unable to comprehend what is occurring within the Boynton family, who have been ‘hypnotized . . . to believe that *they cannot disobey her*’ (AWD, p. 57), but the two medical doctors have access to the real situation, because of their grasp of psychology. The daughter, Jinny, has a similar desire for dominance, but benefits from Dr Gerrard’s treatment to guide it into dramatic performance as an actress, channelling the desire into creativity rather than thwarted destructiveness. Interestingly, until rescued, she too is undergoing a ‘persecution mania’ (AWD, p. 89) similar to that of *Dumb Witness* of the year before, which takes the form of believing she is someone else, a kidnapped princess. ‘She has already begun to display symptoms of schizophrenia. Unable to bear the suppression of her life, she is escaping into a realm of fantasy’ (AWD, p. 153). Fascinating as it might be to question the links to Christie’s own ‘hysterical fugue’, and to the body of gendered discussion of hysteria in relation to the cultural oppression of femininity, in this argument I would point to the authority with which psychology is being granted in explaining crime (though not, in this case, the murderer) and Poirot’s own acceptance of psychology as the key to the investigation. Working in tandem with Gerrard, his explication of the crime expounds both

the 'facts' and the 'psychology' of the case. 'My arguments are mainly psychological', said Poirot (*AWD*, p. 252), and accepts without question Dr Gerrard's professional insistence that Jinny's psychology is not appropriate for a logical, 'reasoned crime' (*AWD*, p. 288). Poirot's adoption of a 'talking cure' to uncover the events, and his belief in trusting the 'the psychology' of a case, deepens after 1926 and further links him, as it did Vernon Deyre, to the modern and the modern conception of subjectivity. As Alison Light develops, Poirot is a 'committed modernist':

He evinces a penchant for pure form, and for the minimalist rejection of the florid and the ornate. Living in a block of newly built service flats... 'ultra-modern, very abstract, all squares and cubes' (*Hallowe'en Party*[1969], p. 144), with chrome furniture and geometric designs, even a square toaster, Poirot revels in being the *dernier cri*... clearly a creature of the Jazz Age as much as he is a left-over from the Edwardian Riviera.⁷³

Poirot, the 'feminised' masculinity who incorporates the illogical and the psychological into his logocentric analysis of crime in some ways, stands as an 'othered' masculinity, liberated by the modernist smashing of the old and gesturing towards the divergent possibilities of the new. But, as Light's final sentence hints, though the main characteristic, the modern is not the only one. For all Poirot's approval of women who are dynamic and independent, who have professions and who even have illegitimate children (*Cat Among the Pigeons*, 1959; *Hallowe'en Party*, 1969), he can still at times voice the odd phallogocentric comment such as, "'You are a *man*. Behave then like a *man*! It is against Nature for a man to grovel"' (*MIM*, p. 173),⁷⁴ when another weak man is being dominated by a tyrannical woman in the 1936 *Murder in Mesopotamia*. (Nurse Leatheran, the narrator, counters this with 'men don't understand how their mannerisms can get on a woman's nerves, so that you feel you just have to snap' *MIM*, p. 133). By the 1960s, he also confesses a delight in the old-fashioned, early twentieth-century feminine allure of a Countess Rossakoff ('The Capture of Cerebus', 1947) or Bess Hardwick (*At Bertram's Hotel*, 1965). As no one novel is ever wholly consistent or coherent in its textuality, one cannot expect 33 over five decades to be. Nevertheless, Poirot is on the whole construed as modern well into the fifties, until the gender configurations of the swinging sixties prove more than a match and he slides into a polite attempt to comprehend, which links him to an earlier, Edwardian bemused gentility.

Ariadne Oliver

The fictional female crime writer Ariadne Oliver appears in seven novels and one short story spanning the thirties to the seventies.⁷⁵ She functions much more than Tuppence as a sidekick, secondary to the star detective and contributes narrative humour and inventiveness. For the majority of the novels, she aids Poirot, but in the short story 'The Case of the Discontented Soldier', she is part of Mr Parker Pyne's entourage creating fantasy lives for Pyne's clients, and in *The Pale Horse*, the main detective is the amateur of sorts (since a retired Malaysian policeman), Mark Easterbrook. Her appearance is often outrageous, excessive and points to the constructedness of feminine appearance. A change of hairstyle, 'the focal point of a woman's appearance' (*TG*, p. 109),⁷⁶ and the 'altered... shape of her mouth by an application of lipstick' (*TG*, p. 110) quickly make her unrecognisable when being a gumshoe. A large middle-aged woman, with a lot of slapstick humour involved in getting her into or out of small cars (*Cards on the Table*, *Mrs McGinty's Dead*), she wears 'unbecoming apple green brocade' and covers her study in riotously inappropriate wallpaper. Hair is an important focal point, always standing on end, and – whether a large quantity of rebellious hair, additional coils of false hair or in a tight-curved pompadour – the unstable adaptability of hair in signifying appearance often helps to give a clue to the female villain, masquerading as two separate characters via a wig (*The Third Girl*, *Elephants Can Remember*). In her final appearance, *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), Mrs Oliver's willingness to experiment with hairstyles is overtly indicative of her *joie de vivre* and her openness to new things. Hairstyling, the attempt to figure one fluid aspect of the body to signal contemporary modishness, becomes implicated in the variant constructedness of femininities, very much as the bob signalled modernity in the twenties. As an older, matronly figure, Mrs Oliver's hair works as a part of her (failed) attempts to be 'with it', but the focus on hair as a signifier in the situating and placing of women remains a constant trope.

Mrs Oliver's rambling, incoherent speech is a constant butt of textual humour and tied to a pastiche of femininity, since it is invariably men who find it excruciating. Poirot learns to appreciate a differently evaluative mind, represented as a 'stream of consciousness' flux, accepting that what is interesting to her could be either commonplace or extraordinary for him. Feminine inconsequence bleeds into the creative chaos of the writer as she uses vivid but inconsequential verbal descriptions ('The Peacock' in *Third Girl*, elephants in *Elephants Can Remember*)

that gain their own narrative momentum. Ariadne Oliver is a very different feminine detective representation to Tuppence Beresford. Her size, age, flamboyant and chaotic taste place her outside the fashionable scene and are allowed to feed into a denigration of the matronly as inconsequential and a butt of humour. As a successful professional woman, though, she gains credence as her literary 'seriousness' evolves from the thirties to the sixties.

Most critics have discussed her similarity to Christie, with her boredom with her best-selling detective, Sven Hjerson, the Finnish vegetarian, echoing Christie's tiredness with Poirot: "Why a Finn when I know nothing about Finland? Why a vegetarian? Why all the idiotic mannerisms he's got? You try something – and people seem to like it – and then you go on – and [he's] . . . tied to you for life" (MMD, p. 201).⁷⁷ In 1934 Oliver's work is not deemed special, she is a sensational novelist with hackneyed plots, two years later she has become a successful writer 'of detective and other sensational stories' (COT, p. 15),⁷⁸ and by 1952 she is simply a detective writer, the sensational aspect has been dropped. In 1969, she has developed into a celebrated best-seller, interviewed by the media on all types of subjects, with the assertion that "she is a very good writer. No doubt of that" (HP, p. 129).⁷⁹ Mrs Oliver's characterisation allows Christie to write about the horrors of adapting novels for the stage (*Mrs McGinty's Dead*), the agonies of having to prune an abundance of ideas for a plot (*Dead Man's Folly*, *Hallowe'en Party*), the hard slog of writing once the excitement of the initial idea has passed (*The Pale Horse*), the feeling of aimlessness once the typescript is completed (*The Third Girl*), how she gets her inspiration for characters (*Hallowe'en Party*), and her shyness and insecurity about her own work (*Elephants Can Remember*). Oliver's career as a professional novelist is thus given important space and focus in the novel. Where her fashionable femininity may go awry, her undomestic, professional femininity succeeds.

However, it is her feminism and her intuitive methodology that is my main interest. The early Oliver insists in each novel that a woman heading Scotland Yard would improve the police's capabilities in apprehending the murderer,⁸⁰ and this is linked to her being 'a hot-headed feminist' (COT, p. 15). The feminist statements are not taken seriously by the male detectives and this characteristic concurs with her 'sensational' writing; as the feminism is toned down, so the 'seriousness' of her *oeuvre* grows. However, her characteristic methodology, 'she was an earnest believer in women's intuition' (COT, p. 15), is something that remains constant and, while the other feminist elements are used as vehicles of humour, intuition is finally in the later books granted

a grudging validation. The narrative binary opposition set up is again conventionally gendered; female intuition in contrast to the male reliance on fact and evidence. With Mrs Oliver, Poirot initially gives her intuition less credence than he does with Evelyn Howard, because Oliver is stridently feminist. Despite Poirot's own modulations of the intuitive and the psychological forms of apprehending and deducing knowledge, when he is teamed with Mrs Oliver, he denigrates her jumping to intuitive conclusions and her depiction links this denigration not simply to the feminine but to the feminist. Simplistic stridency in one is linked to simplistic conclusions in the other. The Detection Club formed by G.K. Chesterton and Dorothy L Sayers during the twenties made their writers swear not to use unfair methods, such as 'Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition . . . Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery Pokery, Coincidence or the Act of God'.⁸¹ Christie, who ran foul of their rules in having the narrator as villain in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), was less than acquiescent in relation to feminine intuition as well, except when it came to Mrs Oliver. In *Cards on the Table* (1936), Mrs Oliver's impetuosity and intuitiveness is contrasted to the men's thoughtfulness and their regard for evidence and the closure dismisses her as erroneous in her final claim, 'I always said he did it!' However, this textual dismissal raises a series of interesting and unexplained inconsistencies. Mrs Oliver 'instinctively' names the doctor, 20 pages later shifts it to Anne Meredith, and then to 'the girl or the doctor' (*COT*, p. 57) and this is her position for the majority of the novel until she decides that the doctor is perhaps too obvious and claims she 'never thought it was him' (*COT*, p. 149). The doctor is unmasked as the chief murderer, Anne Meredith is then prevented from succeeding in another murder, and yet the narrative states that Mrs Oliver is 'not quite truthful' (*COT*, p. 218) in claiming she intuitively knew. While it is true she did not 'always' argue it was the doctor, the narrative has a blind spot in overlooking that out of the four suspects, she has in fact named the two villains accurately. In continuing to denigrate Mrs Oliver's feminine intuition, later novels further compound this inconsistency. In *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), Poirot 'gallantly forbode to remind Mrs Oliver of her rapid changes of suspicion' (*MMD*, p. 127) on the Shaitana case, and in *Dead Man's Folly* (1956) he dismisses her claim for feminine intuition as being even more erroneous:

'Now, don't laugh at my woman's intuition. Haven't I always spotted the murderer right away?'

Poirot was gallantly silent. Otherwise he might have replied, 'At the fifth attempt, perhaps, and not always then!' (*DMF*, p. 17)

Although this accurately describes the case in *Dead Man's Folly* itself, the narrative's claim that it relates to the earlier cases which Poirot and Oliver shared is wrong, since Mrs Oliver *did* name the doctor straight away. The textual inconsistencies point to an ambivalence about feminine intuition when tied to a feminist stance, as if the feminine and the feminist create a disjunction in the narrative symmetry. In the first three novels (1936–56), female intuition as a way of solving crimes is ridiculed by the narrative and may well have reference to the Detection Club rules. In *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, Mrs Oliver sits waiting in the car of the murderer, unaware that he is committing the murder and Poirot rubs it in with his '“I'm afraid . . . that your woman's intuition was taking a day off”' (*MMD*, p. 323). Her prediction that Dr Rendell was the murderer again proves instinctively true, since he is revealed to have attempted to murder Poirot and his first wife, even though she is wrong in his not being the murderer of Mrs McGinty and in this 1952 novel Poirot laughingly toasts her intuition. The humour comes, on the surface, from her accidental correctness, but laid alongside *Cards on the Table*, could be read in an other, subterranean narrative underwriting feminine modes of knowledge almost despite itself. In *Dead Man's Folly*, Poirot tries to give a rational explanation for her 'intuition', since it is undoubtedly her feeling that the 'atmosphere' is wrong that summons him to try and prevent a murder. Again her feminine intuition proves correct, despite the narrative's overt refusal to give it credibility, and Poirot's attempts to rationalise the irrational perhaps signals the narrative's discordance in its cumbersome prose:

I am quite ready to believe that you have noticed something, or heard something, that has definitely aroused in you anxiety. I think it is possible that you yourself may not even know just what it is that you have seen or noticed or heard. You are aware only of the *result*. If I may so put it, you do not know what it is that you know. You may label that intuition if you like. (*DMF*, pp. 21–2)

The fact remains though that it is Mrs Oliver's feeling that something is wrong that proves the impetus for Poirot's arrival on the scene and is proved correct when the murder duly occurs, as he has to acknowledge. Furthermore, her sensitivity to people and atmosphere has her unwittingly writing the clues into her fictional murder scenario. The book insists that it needs the masculine rationality of Poirot to uncover those clues and explain her to herself; as the feminine, she is unaware of her knowledge: ' . . . you have always known more about this crime than

you realised yourself' (*DMF*, p. 263). Yet this explanation, while at pains to depict the feminine knowledge as passive and buried, to the masculine active archaeology of detection, does admit she has a knowledge of sorts. By *The Third Girl* (1966) the ambivalence creates real textual discomfort as it both dismisses Mrs Oliver's intuition and looks for a 'natural' explanation of it, all within the same page. Initially dismissing people's general claims to have felt evil as only 'hindsight', Poirot turns to consider Mrs Oliver herself and puts her claims down to her plethora of different intuitions from which she later opportunistically selects the correct one. The next paragraph undercuts this dismissal of ungovernable feminine invention as he cites the experience of dumb animals and accepts, through the prejudiced analogy, Mrs Oliver's experience as accurate. Femininity, as closer to nature, othered into the animalistic and quite divorced from rationality, is yet grudgingly included in the textual world of detection; 'And yet one shared very often with animals the uneasiness of a dog or a cat before a thunderstorm, the knowledge that there is *something* wrong, although one does not know what it is that is wrong' (*TG*, p. 214). By *The Hallowe'en Party* (1969), Poirot is unproblematically validating Mrs Oliver's intuition without any caveat, 'What an unerring instinct she has!' (*HP*, p. 44) and the text highlights as accurate her 'I still don't like the feel of things' (*HP*, p. 165) about the murder, and her 'I've got rather a funny feeling about them. A feeling as though they mattered, as though they are mixed up in some interesting drama' (*HP*, p. 168), about two characters who are crucial to the solving of the crime. Poirot claims 'I shall rely, as so often, on your intuition, Madame' (*HP*, p. 173). Now, her sensitivity and intuition are linked to her writer's creativity, to set her apart from the general use of hindsight, and it is noticeable that Mrs Oliver has dropped her strident feminism, so that the dichotomy between feminine intuition and masculine rationality no longer carries a politically gendered focus. The final text where they appear together, *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), ignores the fact/intuition opposition of the two characters for the doing/thinking dichotomy, with Oliver demanding ineffective action and Poirot passive cerebration, already becoming apparent in the sixties texts.

Mrs Oliver is always the fallible friend to the star detective, and as Tommy Beresford's intertextual reference to Poirot's fiction asserted, the idiot friend can never solve the crime. Moreover, she is a specifically feminine type of fallible friend, so that the textual presentation creates swirls and eddies in the cross-currents. While Poirot (and Tuppence) is allowed to incorporate intuition as star detective,

Mrs Oliver (and Hastings) is not, and when sidekick status is tied to feminine and feminist stereotypes that Christie upholds, the confluence of dichotomies creates quite marked inconsistencies. As Plain notes, the epithet 'feminism' 'is an unstable one and its categories are constantly evolving'⁸² particularly after women attained suffrage and inter-war feminism split between Lady Rhondda's 'equality feminists' and Eleanor Rathbone who asserted women's 'difference'. In a 1926 article, 'Feminism Divided',⁸³ Winifred Holtby describes these two positions as the 'old feminists' and the 'new feminists' respectively, and allies herself with the old feminists. Since Christie's texts portray elements of both positions, it is, as Plain says, difficult to fit her into either camp but more importantly, given Mrs Oliver's simplistic statements on feminism it is difficult to fit *her* into either camp. If feminism itself proved an unstable epithet, then Mrs Oliver's 'feminist' intuition mirrors and refracts this instability in its narrative inconsistency.

From the sixties onwards Mrs Oliver is less a butt of humour and more a good friend and ally of Poirot. She is useful in detecting clues, becomes an active 'gumshoe' in *The Third Girl*, and functions as giving Poirot the sorts of uncomprehending clues that used to be Hastings's role but she has the added benefit of being able to interview women with an insider's knowledge that is often useful. As a large woman of middle age, she is as much outside of the cultural archetype of the feminine as the elderly spinster Miss Marple, with whom she shares the apparently inconsequential train of thought, but with more exuberance, creativity and overt feminist leanings. Thematically she allows the texts to conduct a consistent and ambivalent consideration of the role and validity of *feminine* intuition within detective fiction.

Miss Marple

Earl Bargainnier's (1980) examination of Miss Marple still stands the test of time and many a later discussion is indebted to his findings. Calling Marple 'the most famous of female fictional detectives',⁸⁴ he positions her structurally as an insider, in contrast to Poirot the outsider, the village spinster in the centre of village life. This centrality is true in that she is part of the fabric of the community, though not in the sense that the figure of the spinster is marginalised by phallogocentric society. While Poirot's acquaintances initially dismiss him because of his foreignness, Miss Marple's 'white hair, gentle manner, and apparent frailty'⁸⁵ similarly disarm, 'her image as elderly spinster effectively camouflages from

strangers her detectival activities'.⁸⁶ However Bargainnier stresses, this is ignorant prejudice since, as the Reverend Clement states in *Murder at the Vicarage*, "There is no detective in England equal to the spinster lady of uncertain age with plenty of time on her hands."⁸⁷ Miss Marple's element of masquerade, her manipulating this prejudice in a structurally similar enactment to Poirot's playing on his otherness, turns the unthinking prejudice against the suspects into a textual rewriting, that both plays upon and preys upon the stereotype.

She realises that people expect old women to gossip and snoop; it would be noticeable if they did not. People may be bored by an old lady's rambling conversation, but they do not suspect her of an ulterior motive. Her use of social conversation requires her to be a consummate actress, and she is. It is her success in playing the expected spinster role which enables her to gather needed information.⁸⁸

As Shaw and Vanacker accurately comment in their more gender-focused analysis, 'Christie takes the patriarchal notion of the trivial and transforms it.'⁸⁹

Much of the pleasure of reading about Miss Marple, and watching her in the televised versions, stems from the contradiction involved in seeing a little old lady, a figure whom society in its ageism condemns as, at best, charmingly quaint and, at worst, as a tiresome nuisance, prove more inexorably logical than the most skilful policemen, and more depraved than the most ambitious evil-doer in the sense that... 'she knows more about the different kinds of human wickedness than anyone I've ever known'. (Mrs Calthrop, *The Moving Finger*, Ch. 14)⁹⁰

Susan Rowland suggests that Miss Marple is 'the most extra-legal detective... Her methods remain unrecognised and *unrecognisable* to the legal system until the final denouement, when legal proof or confession will be provided.'⁹¹

Shaw and Vanacker are particularly illuminating in their contextual examination of the spinster or divorced woman, the tacitly "surplus women" whose presence in the population had been an issue since the middle years of the nineteenth century'.⁹² In the 1920s, the figures for 'surplus women' in England and Wales were close to two million and 'of every thousand persons in the population 43 were spinsters or widows

(Adam, 1975:85).⁹³ The twenties was, for Ruth Adam in *A Woman's Place*, 'the era of the spinster. At last, after so many years of being grudged the right to exist at all, she came into her own' (Adam, 1975: 100).⁹⁴ Shaw and Vanacker place Christie's creation of Miss Marple, at the moment she finds herself divorced and a single mother, within the context of feminist and proto-feminist women writers of the twenties exploring the 'surplus' or woman alone: May Sinclair, Radclyffe Hall, Winifred Holtby and Sylvia Townsend Warner.⁹⁵ Christie's writing 'shows an astute awareness of the circumstances and range of spinster life'⁹⁶ and Miss Marple should be viewed within a context of cultural concern about the lone woman. They cite Sheila Jeffries' thesis that the beginning of the twentieth century was particularly virulent against the figure of the spinster and include her quote from the *Freewoman*:

Not of the mother of sons, but of her barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vessel under whose pale shadow we chill and whiten, of the Spinster I write. Because of her power and dominion. She, unobtrusive, meek, soft-footed, silent, shamefaced, bloodless and boneless, thinned to spirit, enters the secret recesses of the mind, sits at the secret springs of action, and moulds and fashions our emasculate society. She is our social nemesis.⁹⁷ (*Freewoman*, November 1911, quoted in Jeffreys, 1985: 95)

Gill Plain also agrees, citing Heather Ingman's view that 'surplus women' were seen as threatening 'the social fabric' after the First World War, but claims Christie did not play to this antagonistic stereotype, 'the spinster is seldom psychotic in Christie's interwar fiction'.⁹⁸ Shaw and Vanacker argue Christie harnesses many of the complex and disturbing images of the spinster in her creation of Miss Marple. 'The spinster is moral arbiter, curb of licence and disorder, and image of repression; she is also what lies outside the normal expectations of a woman's life as it is lived in patriarchal society'. Christie utilises 'the spinster's potential as both fearsome oddity and moral force'.⁹⁹ For Rowland, the female 'otherness' outside of patriarchal structures allows Miss Marple to contain an 'occult, spectral legacy', which Christie in *Nemesis* termed 'the menace just behind the ordinariness' in crones.¹⁰⁰

Such a thesis clearly places the construction of Miss Marple as yet another intervention in the debate circulating around the spinster or the lone woman, including what Jane Edridge Miller terms the 'marriage

problem' and the 'anti-courtship' novels of the beginning of the twentieth century,¹⁰¹ here made doubly marginal by Miss Marple's age; not just the spinster but the elderly spinster. They nevertheless argue that Christie was 'no obvious feminist', citing the *Autobiography* published in her seventies and without Plain's complicating of the meaning of the term from specific historical moments, and that 'she shows a deep dislike of career women' (something I will contest in the next chapter). However, Christie did value 'conventionally womanly attributes and habits and showed them, in the figure of Miss Marple, as vehicles of logic, morality, and justice'.¹⁰² *Reflecting on Miss Marple* follows the traditional view of detective fiction as inherently conservative, a thesis that I challenged in *Feminist Popular Fiction* (published simultaneously with Plain and Rowland who also argue for process not conclusion) by arguing first that only canonical detective fiction could be seen in these terms and much of the genre did and does challenge a whole raft of cultural and gender norms, and secondly by questioning whether a text's unpicking of the complex fissures, disruptions and masquerades behind the status quo can ever be resolved by the simple denouement of catching the criminal. Miss Marple, for Shaw and Vanacker, becomes synonymous with the 'Victorian values' of Thatcherism, in defending the status quo because detective fiction and Christie adaptations found a renaissance during the eighties. 'She is Auntie-Grannie offering the comforts of cowslip wine, camomile tea... and firm but kindly government.'¹⁰³ Susan Rowland, in a more circumspect analysis, suggests that Christie's novels aimed 'to reinvigorate conventional gender and sexual arrangements'¹⁰⁴ and so 'Miss Marple proves a defender of women within the domestic sphere without wishing for meaningful alternatives.'¹⁰⁵ While the reinforcement of heterosexual familial norms resolves the novels, the texts still find ways of subtly challenging and questioning the ways those norms themselves are structured and delineated, in an attempt to redraw and 'invigorate' them. Rowland's conception of Miss Marple's conservatism is a more contested form than Shaw and Vanacker's.

Certainly, Christie employs the stereotype of the nosy, elderly woman spying on her neighbours for her own ends, and the depiction can be read as conservative. Previous feminist analysis during the eighties and nineties, including this writer among them, tended to argue that only female detectives who were both agents and sexually active challenged patriarchal precepts. Since Miss Marple's age effectively discounts her sexuality, it thus creates no conflict of representation with her effective

ratiocination. But a closer reading could also argue for an unpacking of the performativity of femininity, as masquerade, and Miss Marple's character as a complex amalgam of the scripted forms of Victorian and modern femininity. Miss Marple is consistently defined as an 'old pussy', and the short story 'The Herb of Death' (1932) defines 'pussy': "'I didn't mean a *cat*, you know,' said Mrs Bantry. 'It's quite different. Just a big soft white purry person. Always very sweet'" ('HOD').¹⁰⁶ Initially, in *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) Miss Marple is one of 'the gossiping old cats [who] has nothing better to do than look out of her window all night' (*MAV*, 1930, p. 149),¹⁰⁷ but as many critics have argued, she mellows as she develops. In 1930, Miss Marple is introduced as 'a white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner' (*MV*, p. 12) but 'for all her fragile appearance . . . capable of holding her own with any policeman or Chief Constable in existence' (*MV*, p. 51). Those who do not know her, betray their phallogocentric ageism in a manner close to the *Freewoman's* prose, "'that wizen-up old maid thinks she knows everything there is to know. And hardly been out of this village all her life. Preposterous. What can she know of life?'" (*MV*, p. 57). Two years later, in 'The Blue Geranium', she is dismissed as "'Quite a dear, but hopelessly behind the times." In *Sleeping Murder* (written in the early 1940s as Marple's last case, and published in 1976), she is introduced by her nephew, the modernist writer Raymond West, as 'a perfect Period Piece. Victorian to the core. All her dressing-tables have their legs swathed in chintz' (*SM*, p. 22) and in *The Body in the Library* (1942), she is 'an old lady with a sweet, placid spinsterish face, and a mind that has plumbed the depths of human iniquity and taken it as all in the day's work' (p. 101). The construction of the elderly amateur detective hinges on the disjunction of her appearance and her knowledge of human depravity. Though she may have 'her old maid's way of referring to the opposite sex as though they were a species of wild animal' (*BITL*, p. 114), that does not prevent her demonstrating a knowledge of the dynamics of sexual relationships, and referring knowledgeably to the differences between married and illicit sex: "'Married people, I have noticed, quite enjoy their battles and the – er – appropriate reconciliations'" (*BITL*, p. 192). Such references remind the reader that modern views of the Victorians assume an ignorance, because sex was an 'unsaid'. 'None of the ladies present would have dreamed of alluding to an actual baby till it was safely in the cradle, visible to all', comments the vicar who narrates *Murder at the Vicarage* (p. 13), of the elderly women his wife presides over in her "'duty as the Vicaress. Tea and scandal at four-thirty'" (p. 7) but that does not prevent them enthusiastically discussing illicit

sexual liaisons by implication. The playful irony calls attention to the ways mores in relation to elderly women are performed, rather than naturalising them. The textual focus on Miss Marple's appearance, the pink cheeks and the fluffy knitting, the apparently meandering talk, all point to an awareness of elderly femininity as a form of masquerade, a performance that lives up to expectations in order to gain its own advantages. In *Sleeping Murder*, Miss Marple's interview with her doctor humorously uncovers the power dynamics of the conversation:

'Let's hear why you sent for me,' he said. 'Just tell me what it's to be and I'll repeat it after you. You want my professional opinion that what you need is sea air –'
 'I knew you'd understand,' said Miss Marple gratefully. (*SM*, p. 37)

Unlike Poirot's playing on his foreignness, Miss Marple's masquerade points beyond her own individual identity to femininity as a whole. In *The Body in the Library* (1942), Colonel Bantry admonishes his wife and Miss Marple for their determination to enjoy the murder and in *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), Canon Prescott has a similar role of patriarchal enforcement of 'inappropriate' feminine pleasure, which the elderly women circumvent:

'Joan,' said the Canon in an admonitory voice. 'Perhaps it would be wise to say no more.' . . .

'It's odd how one gets impressions isn't it?' said Miss Marple innocently. Her eyes met Miss Prescott's for a moment. A flash of womanly understanding passed between them.

A more sensitive man than Canon Prescott might have felt that he was *de trop*.

Another signal passed between the women. It said clearly as if the words had been spoken: '*Some other time . . .*' (*CM*, p. 20)

Men in positions of power, Canons, Vicars, Colonels and Doctors, are seen to police the acceptable social behaviour of women, and Miss Marple is scrupulous in paying lip service to this, as evidenced in her consultation with the doctor quoted above, but what both episodes illustrate is that while women demur to such performances, their real lives and characters are very different and have their own feminine momentum directly at odds with those of their policemen. And, given the focus on the elderly and the Victorian, the text further challenges the naturalising of cultural feminine norms by indicating the relativity

of their historical change: Christie's Victorian women may find it hard to speak openly about sex where her modern female characters do, but these precepts for feminine behaviour by their very relativity point to them as learnt behaviour and hence performative.

Given my interest in Christie's muddying the waters of the ratiocination of Golden Age investigative knowledge with the more despised form of 'feminine' intuition depreciated by the Detective Club, Miss Marple's sleuthing proves an interesting additional crossing of the borders. She gains much of her information by that denigrated form of communication, gossiping: "In shops – and waiting for buses. Old ladies are supposed to be inquisitive. Yes, one can pick up quite a lot of local news" (SM, p. 84). She also gains evidence through her intimate acquaintance with what might be called a specialised feminine form of knowledge,

'Nonsense,' said Miss Marple. 'Bitten nails and close cut nails are quite different! Nobody could mistake them who knew anything about girl's nails – very ugly, bitten nails . . . Those nails, you see, were a fact. And they could only mean one thing. *The body in Colonel Bantry's library wasn't Ruby Keene at all.*' (BiL, p. 212)

However, her main detecting comes through her famous utilisation of character types, 'to link up trivial village happenings with graver problems in such a way as to throw light upon the latter' (BiL, p. 22), so that her friends demand "'Village parallels please'" (BiL, p. 119). She denies this method is 'feminine intuition' in that novel, insisting on its being simply 'specialised knowledge' (BiL, p. 102). In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, where she gives her disquisition on her methodology, she initially allies it to 'what people call intuition and make such a fuss about':

'Intuition is like reading a word without having to spell it out. A child can't do that because they've seen it often before. You catch my meaning, vicar?'

'Yes,' I said slowly, 'I think I do. You mean that if a thing reminds you of something else – well it's probably the same kind of thing.' (MV, p. 65)

This form of analogy, she links to scientific classification, allowing Sir Henry Clithering, in *The Body in the Library*, to approve it as 'the scientific

attitude' (p. 209), and a number of critics have taken this up to argue she carries her logocentric detecting into the male camp.

One begins to classify people, quite definitely, just as though they were birds or flowers, group so-and-so, genus this, species that . . . It is so fascinating, you know, to apply one's judgement and find that one is right. (*MV*, pp. 162–3)

Miss Marple here may not be claiming to adopt a scientific enquiry so much as attributing accuracy and logic to the practice of gossip and snooping, validating the feminine enquiry via a masculine rationale, since she is at that moment speaking to a man. In other words, she could be translating the feminine into masculine terminology, rather than adopting the masculine position, if one were to categorise knowledge within such gender binaries.

'I remember,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully, ' . . . sitting behind Grace Lamble and feeling more and more worried about her. Quite sure that something was wrong – badly wrong – and yet being quite unable to say why. A most disturbing feeling and very, very definite.'

'And was there something wrong?'

'Oh yes. Her father . . . nearly killed her. . . .'

'And you'd actually had a premonition that day in church?'

'I wouldn't call it a premonition. It was founded on *fact* – these things usually are, though one doesn't always recognise it at the time. She was wearing her Sunday hat the wrong way round. Very significant, really, because Grace Lamble was a most precise woman . . .'
(*They Do It With Mirrors* (1952: pp. 517–18))

While Poirot needed to translate the knowledge Mrs Oliver did not know she knew, Miss Marple, as main detective, is in control of the complete process, both the initial 'feminine' disquiet and the 'masculine' explanation of the facts. Perhaps the more interesting aspect is that, again, she blurs the boundaries between the two, creating a liminal space where gossip and intuition meet scientific classification. Particularly since, in novel after novel, she claims to 'know' (rather than just suspect) who the murderer is, long before she has gained the 'proof' or evidence to lay before the police. Poirot rarely claims this. Rowland's description of it as '*unrecognisable* to the legal system' is cogent. As Inspector Neele comments in *A Pocketful of Rye*, "'It's all pure assumption, you

know" (p. 311). Her triumph in having this feminised specialist knowledge proved right has a further scientific analogy in *A Pocketful of Rye* (1953): 'a surge of triumph – the triumph some specialist might feel who has successfully reconstructed an extinct animal from a fragment of jawbone and a couple of teeth' (*PFR*, p. 317).

Miss Marple's conservatism comes in her belief that humanity is much the same, "You'd be surprised if you knew how very few distinct types there are in all' (*MV*, p. 163), since the main factors boil down to money, sexual attraction or insanity. Surface appearances are always suspect, no one can be trusted to tell the truth, and 'most people are a little queer and the normal do such astonishing things and the abnormal are sometimes very sane and ordinary' (*MV*, p. 163). Again, the boundaries of the status quo, the normal and the abnormal, even in a quiet country village, are unsettled and made dangerous. Normal social community unveils itself as fissured with huge cracks of greed, desire and the abnormal that remain constant, for all one or two culprits are apprehended and incarcerated or hung. It is this dangerous, fluid and uncertain concept of social cohesion that Miss Marple uncovers when she says, as she so often does, "I'm afraid that observing human nature for as long as I have done, one gets not to expect very much from it" (*MV*, p. 16).

Despite the amorphous and fissured nature of social cohesion, Miss Marple has a definite and unproblematic grasp of morality, utilising Christian, religious terminology to categorise murder as 'wicked'. Her main concern is the protection of the incriminated innocent. "There are times when it is one's *duty* – an innocent person accused – suspicion resting on various other people – a dangerous criminal at large who may strike again" (*SM*, p. 35). Although, in more stern moralising, she can also be determined that evil should not be allowed to get away with it, and in this guise, Miss Marple comes close to Shaw and Vanaker's description as 'the admonitory figure of childhood, of fairy-stories and the morality tale: the maiden aunt, the spinster schoolteacher, the wise woman of the village'.¹⁰⁸ The difference with the denouement of the Miss Marple novels is that the men in positions of power are amazed and impressed by her feminine knowledge, and this needs to be constantly textually embedded. Poirot's successes have less need to be.

The character of Miss Marple was created during the time of cultural debate circulating around the concept of the 'surplus' woman, the lone woman of the 'marriage problem' and 'anti-courtship' novels of the New Woman and the Suffragette Movement, during the turn of the century and the modern period. Perhaps, by addressing the question of the 'use' of such spinsters and whether they are a threat to society,

Christie not only questions the concept of social cohesion but in her spinster detective argues that elderly surplus women could on the whole (she does have some wickedly effective elderly spinsters as murderers at times) be hugely useful to an unappreciative community. The ageism and the prejudice against spinsters is consistently shown to be erroneous, Miss Marple's astute shrewdness about all aspects of human life put her at the centre of society, rather than at the margins. As many critics have acknowledged, the novels revalue that denigrated form of inter-female communication – gossip, and in the middle-aged women's enjoyment of this communal interaction, the novels further highlight how phallogocentrism strives to police at least middle-class women's behaviour, the masquerade women perform to fit into expectations and, even more importantly, how the feminine drive for pleasure subversively circumvents those precepts.

Christie's detectives raise a number of issues and challenges to aspects of the contemporary gender debates within her culture and, though none could be argued to be overtly feminist, they do each of them raise issues about gender, knowledge and success. What might be termed the contradictions and instabilities present in the complex narrative of what were gender expectations and norms are present even within what could be seen as mainly traditional and middle-class representations of the detective. Tommy and Tuppence Beresford are perhaps the most obvious in their renegotiation of heterosexual relationships away from the Victorian/Edwardian sentimentality that viewed women's lives as solely defined within the terrain of domesticity and emotions, to allow femininity an equally central place within the workplace and the role of courageous adventurer. Poirot's renegotiation of an 'othered' and distanced masculinity, within the context of the modern formations of gender, allows him a fussy concern with his own importance and with domestic symmetry and tidiness that are very different from Victorian and Edwardian delineations of masculine success. His adoption of the modern knowledge of Freudian psychology leads to an unsettling of the fixity of character. A fluidity that Miss Marple could be said to challenge through her deterministic classification of human nature were it not for her insistence, along with Poirot, that the characters' social behaviour masks indeterminable desires and Marple's three 'factors' of sex, money and insanity come close to early Freudian views of the unconscious drives to pleasure and displeasure described in social terms. Ariadne Oliver and Miss Marple, in their different ways, raise the issue of the 'surplus' woman outside patriarchal structures of social belonging, and demonstrate their usefulness and, particularly with Miss Marple, their

centrality for morality and the renegotiated policing of society. And finally, Christie consistently blurs the boundaries between ratiocination and intuition, and accommodates feminine and feminised forms of detecting, or of knowledge, throughout her four main detectives' methodologies. Although the detectives are not the characters who form the major contentions and complications to modern contested gender norms in Christie's detective novels, they do nevertheless form discreet and confined challenges of their own.

3

Available Femininities

In *Dumb Witness* (1937), Christie depicts Emily Arundell, in her seventies, as belonging to a different, earlier generation, 'one of the old school. Not many like her nowadays' (*DW*, p. 10), and she is introduced arguing that of the two visitors the young woman should have the less convenient bedroom. 'In Miss Arundell's day, women took second place. Men were the important members of society' (*DW*, p. 8). The obvious implication of this textual representation is that times have changed and women take a more equal social status in the textual present. One of the things Christie's novels explore is the range of different, possible ways of being feminine within the twentieth century, and the Victorian/Edwardian expectations are often used as a contrast to illustrate the modernity of her young female characters. One of Christie's strengths as a writer is the wide range of available femininities that she develops in her novels. Of course, there are the stock types, the spinsters, dutiful wives and domesticated mothers, but also alongside these come a whole raft of sympathetic women living 'otherwise': the intrepid female adventurers, the career women, women outside the familial norms such as mistresses and unmarried mothers, and the fiancées and wives attempting to negotiate a new, modern formation of married life in the shifting mores of the twentieth century. Gillian Gill argues that writing from her own fantasy world, rather than topical observation, allowed Christie to depict femininity as different from both 'her time and her social caste' or the 'conventions of fiction':

In Christie's fictional world, intellect and sensibility, weakness and strength, drive and inertia, sexuality and morality are not simply factors of gender or age. . . . Christie's heroines. . . do not easily toe the patriarchal line. Handsome, hard-headed, and ambitious, they desire money and men, and are active in their pursuit of both.¹

Gill is correct in her argument for Christie's female characters challenging patriarchal prescriptions, both fictional and cultural, though Alison Light suggests that these characteristics *were* typical of the time among a number of women writers.

Indeed, the more I read of writing by women in the post-war years the more I was struck by a sense of something radically other to, and rebelling against, the domestic world pre-1918 which at the same time was quite compatible with deeply defensive urges . . . Even those who would by no means call themselves feminists . . . were linked to a resistance to 'the feminine' as it had been thought of in late-Victorian or Edwardian times.²

In Christie, it is not only the challenge to Edwardian domesticity, spirituality and passivity that proves critically important but also the range of differing femininities that are made available and sympathetic. Plain succinctly suggests as much, 'Young and old, married, single or widowed, mothers or career girls – in Christie's novels women have their own agendas, and are assumed to be responsible for their own actions.'³ The large number of texts that needs discussing, in any comment about Christie's fiction, prevents monolithic statements ever being completely accurate, for every claim there is always one text that could be used to argue the opposite. Nevertheless, I do want to argue, bearing this proviso in mind, that the novels posit a whole raft of attractive and sympathetic depictions of femininity. Only in the sixties, when attempting to encompass the 'swinging sixties' femininity, does Christie's tone and inclusiveness falter. Throughout the majority of her career, major parts of Christie's fiction resist easy stereotyping and produce instead a range of renegotiated gendered formations.

More than that, one of the main ways of making the women sympathetic and available to reader identification was to make them the subject of a romance element. Sally Munt argues in *Murder By the Book?* that feminist discussion of how the introduction of romance into detective fiction complicates and unsettles the norms of the fictional world has primarily centred on Dorothy L. Sayers' three 1930s Harriet Vane novels. Sue Ellen Campbell sees Sayers's Vane trilogy as changing the direction of the genre, both for introducing 'the first', as she claims, strong, independent and sexually active female detective and for blending the genres of detective and romance fiction.⁴ But Christie had been doing both since the 1920s, Tuppence Beresford and the intrepid young adventurers below pre-date Harriet Vane both in their strength and independence

and in their utilisation of the romance genre. Gayle F. Wald, agreeing with Ellen Campbell, argues that the romance genre demystifies the detective's claim to order and stability, 'the murder mystery has a solution that can be arrived at through careful reasoning, the love story remains dangerous because unsolvable'.⁵ The amalgamation of these tropes, Munt argues, 'prefiguring the anticrime novel . . . accords Sayers with such a significant genre shift, via the quintessentially feminine intervention of romance'⁶, and she cites Valerie Pitt as agreeing, 'Sayers breaks away . . . from the unquestioning neutrality, the usual moral simplicities of the genre'.⁷ *Gaudy Night*, as I have argued in *Feminist Popular Fiction*, 'with its subtext of an intelligent woman's role in society and the choice between marriage or an intellectual career, has fuelled a debate among feminist critics of detective fiction, as to whether its subversive content is proto-feminist'.⁸ In concentrating on Christie as a puzzle-plot writer, or only on Poirot and Miss Marple as detectives, the majority of critics seem to have overlooked her innovations from 1920 onwards in relation to detective genre or the challenges to feminine prototypes within detective fiction, in the range of her available femininities. While not discounting the gendered focus of her Vane trilogy, and *Gaudy Nights* in particular, the claim for shifting Golden Age genre traits and for innovation needs to be given not to Sayers, but to Christie, writing some ten years earlier.

Intrepid young adventurers

Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones look at the feminist appropriation of the hard-boiled tradition during the eighties and nineties, in *Detective Agency*, and cite Delys Bird and Brenda Walker's view:

'Women's crime fiction tells women readers a story about their own lives. It presents the fictional possibility of controlling events and issues that affect our lives and of bringing a measure of understanding to them' (38). These works also establish the distinctive voice of an empowered female subject, and this, clearly, is not just a formal but is also a political gesture.⁹

Sixty years earlier, beginning in the twenties, and running throughout her career, Christie has a series of bright young things, independent, adventurous women who assume the dominant position of hero or detective in uncovering the mystery. Developing on from Tuppence Beresford, these women serve as both detectives exhibiting agency, as

well as the subjects of the romance plots – an early form of active, intelligent and sexualised femininity that foreshadows the protagonists of Paretsky, McDerimid *et al.* in their empowerment (if not in their wholesale feminist critique). Turning the masculine investigator into a female can lead to ‘reinscribing and revising prior discourses’ and ‘does, potentially, allow a space for differential practices’.¹⁰ Christie’s women create just such a differential space in their fictional controlling of events, and their characterisation argues for a writer who contests and reconfigures the available possibilities for femininity, expanding as well as contesting certain gender norms. Christie’s intrepid adventurers appear in her lesser-known thrillers, which she saw as ‘lighter’ forms of composition than the labyrinthine plots of the detective novels, but they also appear in the detective fiction as part of a romantic duo. Thrillers such as *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), *They Came to Baghdad* (1951) and *Destination Unknown* (1954) sport lone protagonists, whereas detective stories such as *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931), *Why Didn’t They Ask Evans?* (1934), *Murder Is Easy* (1939) and *The Pale Horse* (1961) contain the feminine half of a duo that redefines the concept of the female sidekick, since they exhibit the brains and the courage. Bargainnier places them as imaginative creations constructed at the beginning of her career, ‘vivacious, peppy, energetic, pert, courageous, brisk, brimming with life, for . . . they are of a type: the “modern” young woman of the 1920s’.¹¹

The early *Man in the Brown Suit*¹² opens with the orphaned Anne Beddingfield freed from drab, mundane domesticity when her father dies. Challenging romantic views of familial ties between father and daughter, Professor Beddingfield cared only for his work and, since he did not love her, she feels no filial love in return. Reiterating her longing ‘for adventure’, Anne rejects the ‘Safety – and a Comfortable Home’ (*MBS*, p. 17) offered to her in a marriage proposal. Vera Brittain’s later, ‘I Denounce Domesticity’, argued marriage chained the emancipated woman ‘to trivial and irrelevant cares which arouse resentment in herself’¹³ and Anne similarly rejects domesticity as ‘uninteresting’. What she craves is the excitement of being a heroine, citing the fictional cinema serial ‘Perils of Pauline’, and she reinvents herself as ‘Anna the Adventuress’ (*MBS*, p. 20). Anne critiques the contemporary media representation rather than simply reproducing it, hence perhaps Christie’s dislike of the novel’s renaming for the *Evening News* serial, as parody is disarmed to become the very thing it critiques. ‘[T]he newspaper intended to call the serial version “Anna the Adventuress”, as silly a title as she had ever heard’, claims Charles Osborne

(2002).¹⁴ In *The Man in the Brown Suit*, the text presents such ‘adventuress’ young sidekicks as Sexton Blake’s Yvonne (1913), or Nelson Lee’s Eileen (1916–17), in the fictional ‘Perils of Pauline’:

Pamela was a magnificent young woman. Nothing daunted her. She fell out of aeroplanes, adventured in submarines, climbed skyscrapers and crept about in the Underworld without turning a hair. (*MBS*, p. 13)

But the plot necessitated her being caught by the ‘Master Criminal’ each week to provide the serial’s cliffhanger and to allow her to be rescued by the hero, so even though magnificent, ‘She was not really clever’ (*MBS*, p. 13). Although Anne is twice rescued by the hero, she usually saves herself. The text highlights the feminine masquerade in Anne’s need to conform to social expectations of an old-fashioned femininity, very different from Pamela’s, but which has a coercive co-existence in society. ‘He seemed to fear that it would be a great ordeal for me, and I had to conceal from him my complete composure’ (*MBS*, p. 25). She assumes the expected orphan demeanour, deliberately de-beautifying herself to allay a wife’s hostility and further acts the little, helpless woman in order to manipulate male support: ‘I permitted my eyes to tell him what a hero he was’ (*MBS*, p. 59). Accidentally caught up in a death and a murder, she blows all the money she has in the world, on a boat ticket to Cape Town, to follow a nebulous clue. She rejects the idea that she should have ‘qualms’ in

‘Starting off alone with practically no money. What will you do when you find yourself in a strange country with all your money gone . . . I couldn’t start off gaily with a few pounds in my pocket and no idea as to what I was doing and where I was going.’

‘But that’s the fun of it,’ I cried, thoroughly roused. ‘It gives one such a splendid feeling of adventure.’ (*MBS*, p. 86)

Unlike the fictional Pamela, Anne does at times feel daunted, particularly when first captured by the enemy, and realises, in a parodic aside, that ‘in real life there was absolutely no guarantee that Anna the Adventuress might not terminate abruptly at the end of any Episode’ (*MBS*, p. 118). Despite fighting off two attempts on her life, it is only when she realises she poses a real threat to the enemy that ‘For the first time, I began to lose my nerve’ (*MBS*, p. 137). This is a woman, rather than a cardboard cut-out adventure figure, and she is intelligent enough to feel

threatened. But, at her lowest point, she rallies herself with a particularly feminine form of succour that reinforces her youth: ice cream,

I walked into Cartwright's and ordered two coffee ice-cream sodas – to steady my nerves. A man, I suppose, would have had a stiff peg; but girls derive a lot of comfort from ice-cream sodas. I applied myself to the end of the straw with gusto. (*MBS*, p. 138)

This is not a simple role reversal of the male hero; the text is rewriting gendered reactions with special reference to the feminine body and sugar consumption. Anne is brave, undaunted from her self-appointed task to solve the mystery, by the attempt to throw her overboard, tricked over a cliff, captured and imprisoned, followed and fired at. Anne does not class women as 'weak', leaving that to children and animals, though she acknowledges that social norms fit them into this masquerade of weakness, and advances an interestingly historical relativism. When asked, 'So you don't class women as "weak things"?' she replies:

'No, I don't think I do – though they are, I suppose. That is, they are nowadays. But Papa always said that in the beginning men and women roamed the world together, equal in strength – like lions and tigers . . . They were nomadic, you see. It wasn't till they settled down in communities, and woman did one kind of thing and men another, that women got weak. And of course, underneath, one is still the same – one feels the same, I mean'. (*MBS*, p. 153)

This is a textual debate on gendered behaviour and seems to argue that it is domesticity itself that undermines women's empowerment. Certainly the two main female protagonists, Anne and Suzanne Blair, the married woman fellow passenger to whom Anne turns for help, in a form of early 'sisterhood' and feminine solidarity that rejects the various powerful and adventurous men in their entourage, are spending the textual present 'roaming the world'. Anne twice rejects proposals because 'I don't want to get married' (*MBS*, p. 92), since she conceives of marriage as suburban domesticity (a mistake that Suzanne has not made). And, in the denouement, when her wedding trousseau and the ceremony is being planned, she feels 'absolutely stifled – as though I couldn't breathe' (*MBS*, p. 233) and elopes instead to live happily ever after on an island on the Zambesi, away from the trappings and expectations of English, middle-class gender norms.

Anne's role and emotions as the romantic heroine are also very different from the norm. Rejecting marriage as the appropriate career for a woman, since she rejects domesticity, her experience of desire is particularly passionate, a 'high explosive' (MBS, p. 94).

Just seeing him has turned my whole life upside-down. I love him. I want him. I'll walk all over Africa barefoot till I find him, and I'll make him care for me. I'd die for him. I'd work for him, slave for him, steal for him, even beg or borrow for him! (MBS, p. 95)

It is an aggressively forthright naming of her desire and an active pursuit of it. This is not a woman who waits for the man to name her desire for her, but one who will track the man down and 'make him' want her. The desire is also highly sexual, enjoying the surge of the dangerous, the precarious and, in the proper romance genre mode, the sadistic:

'... do you realize that you are in my power this minute? I could take you by the throat like this.' With a swift gesture he suited the action to the word. I felt his two hands clasp my throat and press – ever so little. 'Like this – and squeeze the life out of you! ... What do you say to that?'

I said nothing. I laughed. And yet I knew the danger was real. Just at that moment he hated me. But I knew that I loved the danger, loved the feeling of his hands on my throat. That I would not have exchanged that moment for any moment in my life.' (MBS, p. 104)

One is reminded forcibly of Angela Carter's 'Little Red Riding Hood' figure who laughs in the face of the wolf, since 'she knew she was nobody's meat'¹⁵ (1979), rejecting the notion that women are sexually passive victims of male desire. Jay Dixon argues that while twenties romance fiction sported vulnerable boy heroes, who appealed to the maternal aspect of women, another sub-genre developed due to the phenomenal success of E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919), with women travellers encountering passionate Mediterranean lovers.¹⁶ *The Man in the Brown Suit* could be read as tapping into this popularity, though Anne is not aristocratic, practically penniless and the machismo hero is English, although living in Africa. Suzanne Blair calls Anne a 'gypsy', and her passion 'un-English', but the point is that she is English, raised in suburban domesticity, and that 'underneath' their domestic roles women do still feel, as this novel constructs it, both 'nomadic' and

strongly so, despite the masquerade of 'weakness' that English social expectations actively present as the norm.

Anne Beddingfield's other rejection of the traditional mystery novel's generic format is the condemnation of the villain.

Never, to this day, have I been able to rid myself of a sneaking fondness for Sir Eustace. I dare say it's reprehensible, but there it is. I admired him. He was a thorough-going villain, I dare say – but he was a pleasant one. I've never met anyone half so amusing since.

I concealed my feelings, of course. Naturally Colonel Race would feel differently about it. He wanted Sir Eustace brought to justice. (MBS, p. 229)

In contrast to the male characters' vilification of the villain's lawbreaking and detective fiction's uncompromising labelling of the good and the bad at the denouement, Anne is resistant to simplistic categorisation and voices her ambivalence in her admiration. Life is more complex than bourgeois, patriarchal notions of law and order would have us believe. When Sir Eustace writes to her, the hero is outraged, but Anne again acknowledges a more complicated psychological reading of character:

Harry was furious. It is the one point on which he and I do not see eye to eye. To him, Sir Eustace was the man who tried to murder me . . . Sir Eustace's attempts on my life have always puzzled me. They are not in the picture, so to speak. For I am sure that he always had a genuinely kindly feeling towards me.

Then why did he twice attempt to take my life? Harry says 'because he's a damned scoundrel,' and seems to think that settles the matter. Suzanne is more discriminating. I talked it over with her, and she put it down to a 'fear complex'. (MBS, p. 237)

Male verdicts are being written as too simplistic, and with them self-reflexively the simplistic ethos of the detective/thriller, the feminine is more 'discriminating' and allows for motives that are both deeper and more conflictual. It is a strange ending to a mystery thriller; with no master criminal apprehended nor the hero and heroine in a high society wedding, *The Man in the Brown Suit* both parodies and rewrites a particular genre in relation to gendered delineations. It does not reject the genre, there is still a hero and a heroine and they do end up happily

married after vanquishing the master criminal, but the representations of the majority of the generic staples of the denouement – the heroine, the marriage and the villain – are all called into question and rescripted. This is not a closure that reinforces the conservative status quo – as thrillers are supposed to do – but one that opens out and questions a variety of aspects of the genre, making it available to a much more resistant and challenging analysis.

The Seven Dials Mystery (1929) has an even more unusual denouement for a thriller, since the arch enemy leading the circle of the Seven Dials secret society, turns out to be the epitome of solid law and order, Superintendent Battle, and the society a means of safeguarding British society. Rather than vanquishing the Seven Dials, the hero, Bundle, is recruited and absorbed into it. This confusion of enemy and friend (since her allies in solving the mystery turn out to be the real villains) is explained by an intertextual reference: that such secret societies exist only in books and not in real life, so Battle has enlisted the spirit of romance and adventure such texts speak to to create the secret group that yet does good in the real world. Both the denouements of the thrillers of the fifties set in the Middle East, *They Came to Baghdad* and *Destination Unknown*, similarly have an air of fictionality to their resolutions: while the former's group of young scientists trying for world domination are led by a villain described in Miltonian terms, 'Lucifer, Son of the Morning, how art thou fallen?' (*TCTB*, p. 314), *Destination Unknown's* band of young scientists is only a front, a fictionalised smokescreen for one man's greed. However, it is true that the later thrillers have a less problematic sense of categorising good and evil, and the evil are vanquished. The fifties thrillers are thrillers, rather than engaging parodies of thrillers. The gender configurations of the intrepid young protagonist also shift in their tone.

Bundle, the other twenties hero, has a parallel depiction to Anne Beddingfield. 'Cool, efficient and logical' (*SDM*, p. 38), she works out the clues, is in the fray of things, carrying bodies, 'Bundle, for all her slimness, was strong. She had muscles of whipcord' (*SDM*, p. 36), shinning out of windows, and manages the impossible in spying on the Seven Dials meeting, "'You never know what mad thing she won't be up to next. She's so frightfully unexpected. And the worst of it is, she's so astonishingly successful'" (*SDM*, p. 142). Resourceful, quick-witted and intelligent 'to remain quiescent when something daring and exciting might be going on was a sheer impossibility to Bundle' (*SDM*, p. 109). In this novel, there is moreover a deliberate textual comparison with the young men involved in solving the mystery, who appear foppishly inactive and unintelligent, in the post-First World War, P.G Woodhouse

style of vacuous passive men and resourceful women. The men are finally revealed as masquerading behind this stereotype and as more resourceful and authoritative than they appear (in order to make one an appropriately attractive romance hero for Bundle) but for 30 of the 34 chapters, the text engages with and questions gender constructions. Where the men have extreme difficulty in rising before noon, Bundle is energetically pursuing three distinct plans by 8.30 a.m., and when the men pull gendered rank and insist on the women retiring while they do the dangerous work, Bundle acquiesces only because she has already made her own arrangements and has noted the flaw in their plan, and covers that herself. And it is Bundle, not one of the men, who succeeds in spying on the clandestine group:

Extraordinary girl, Bundle! Fancy having the nerve and the daring actually to get into the midst of that Seven Dials place. Why hadn't he had the nerve and initiative to think of that? (*SDM*, p. 105)

There is a focused, textual foregrounding of the inappropriate way in which modern young women are perceived, and a writing of their equality – if not superiority – when it comes to adventure. 'Her own meek acquiescence in the tame role assigned to her gave her an infinity of pleasure, though she wondered scornfully how either of the two men could be so easily deceived' (*SDM*, p. 107). Bundle's relationship with her father, a man of 'amiable inertia', whom she takes care of, also reverses the father-daughter conventions, advising him to "stay quietly at home" (*SDM*, p. 69) while she assays into danger. Again the novel pokes fun at the notion that marriage and domesticity are the main roles for women, though in a different way to *The Man in the Brown Suit*. Here, having rejected the supremely eligible partner to whom she is not attracted, she accepts the proposal of Bill Eversleigh, while captured by the 'enemy'. It is Bill who becomes dreamy-eyed and emotional, while Bundle remains matter-of-fact and concerned with the work in hand. Love and romance are designated masculine domains, in an about-turn of the gendered formations.

'And do you really love me?' said Bill incredulously, for the twentieth time as he at last released her.

'Yes – yes – yes. Now do let's be sensible. I've got a racking head still, and I've been nearly squeezed to death by you. I want to get the hang of things. Where are we and what's happened?' (*SDM*, p. 174)

Christie's twenties intrepid female protagonists fit into what tended to be termed the 'boyish' heroines, a nomenclature that calls attention both to the gender-crisis and to a poverty of explanation for the empowered women after the First World War. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, remembering the inter-wars era, argued that the removal of women's corsets, necessitated initially by war work, meant the loss of the Edwardian 'hour glass figure' while during 'the war, the shortage of sugar and butter and the popularisation of hockey and tennis greatly reduced women's weight', so that the (in their terms) 'over-fed under-exercised monumental woman' gave way to a more 'neatly cylindrical' 'boyish figure'.¹⁷ In 2001, Gillian Plain describes these characters as 'the asexual, boyish flapper',¹⁸ 'who would much rather climb a tree than entice a man to murder'.¹⁹ But my reading does not see these 'plucky' adventurous characters as asexual, so much as attempting to transform attractive feminine sexuality. Graves and Hodge quote an American woman's comment of London Society, 'Men won't dance with you if you are all laced up'²⁰ which implies that the 'flapper' figure was more sexually attractive. Active femininity should not need to be explained by recourse to masculinity, especially an immature masculinity. It is notable that while Plain calls Cinderella from *Murder on the Links* 'boy-girl',²¹ Christie's own description is 'a curious mixture of child and woman' (*MOL*, p. 7). Hastings immediately succumbs to the allure of her impudence, an attractive mix of the 'perfectly worldly-wise' and the 'ingenuous' that debunks traditional forms of feminine behaviour, and concludes by marrying her. These adventurous and active young women do need to be textually distanced from the old-fashioned sexual sirens, the vampish figures who use their sexuality to dominate men, and the negotiation of plucky jauntiness could be read as a further attempt to establish an equal sexuality, where men are not forcibly enthralled (often despite themselves, see John Christow and Veronica Lake in *The Hollow* and Richard Carey and Mrs Leidner in *Murder in Mesopotamia* as examples of vamp figures whose lovers resent their entrapment). But the fact that so many of the bright young women are positioned as the romance element in the novels belies the view that they are asexual, rather than an alternative sexuality, hampered perhaps by the fact that Christie is restrained in her depictions of passion (apart from the odd anomaly such as Anne Beddingfield's pleasurable thrill at being half-strangled). Critics such as Ingman and Plain view the flapper stereotype as frivolous, 'the frivolity of the flapper',²² implying a negative configuration to Christie's depictions. However, Graves and Hodge recall that the term had a different evaluation during the early twenties, the time when Christie

started utilising the characteristics, a more positive description for 'the popular heroine she had become when working on the munitions in factories'.

'Flapper' was now a term for a comradely, sporting, active young woman, who would ride pillion in the 'flapper-bracket' of a motorcycle. It did not become a term of reproach again, with the connotation of complete irresponsibility, until 1927, when *Punch* noted: 'Flapper is the popular press catchword for an adult woman worker aged 21 to 30, when it is a question of giving her the vote under the same conditions as men of the same age.'²³

I would suggest that Christie's use of the flapper-type 'modern girl' dates from before the pejorative stereotype and accords with the 'comradely, sporting, active' characteristics, rather than the frivolous.

The fifties heroes are less stridently feminised, and have a denser, more realistic characterisation, and a less heroic demeanour, while remaining the protagonists of their plots. The protagonists have a background history to their actions, and a depth of realisation. They are still negotiating an acceptable feminine life but in a different manner. The post-war fifties was a very different context to that of the twenties, and readers expected a difference in tone and realisation. *They Came to Baghdad* has two female heroes. The cool super-efficient secret agent Anna Schiele manages to elude the traps set for her and turn up at the international conference to use her superior financial knowledge to unmask the enemy, but she is just a name for the majority of the novel. Victoria Jones is 'generous, warmhearted and courageous' with a 'natural leaning towards adventure' and a

tendency to tell lies at both opportune and inopportune moments. The superior fascination of fiction to fact was always irresistible to Victoria. She lied with fluency, ease and artistic fervour. (*TCTB*, p. 19)

Like Tuppence (and in a subtly different way, Ariadne Oliver), a tendency to enjoy lying, or embroidering the truth, is being linked to fiction and femininity. Impecunious, having lost her job, Victoria meets a young man on a park bench and resolves to follow him to Baghdad. The unproblematic naming of her desire and resolve to adventure recall Anne Beddingfield.

Victoria had come to two decisions: the first was that . . . she loved this young man, and meant to have him.

The second decision that Victoria had come to was that as Edward would shortly be in Baghdad, the only thing to do was for her to go to Baghdad also . . . She was a young woman of optimism and force of character. (*TCTB*, p. 33)

But the simplicity of the love-at-first-sight narrative appropriate for the twenties is nullified in the fifties by the realisation that she has been manipulated by a heartless enemy, feeling only a 'calf love' for his 'glamour' (*TCTB*, p. 314) while her feelings for the true romantic hero are slower and more worked through. Hilary Craven, in *Destination Unknown*, with a dead daughter and a husband who has defected to the Soviet Union, agrees to the adventure because she has nothing left to live for, a much more harrowing choice than the debonair ease of the twenties. Hilary is a woman who has been deprived of domesticity, but is encumbered by painful memories and a sense that her life is over because of that. In *They Came to Baghdad*, Victoria occasionally shares the twenties protagonists' swashbuckling physical adventures, resiliently escaping from abduction and imprisonment and fighting for her life, but the fifties thrillers deal much more with the women impersonating others to get close to the enemy's plans. The plot is darkened, romance rejected as unrealistic, and undercover masquerade enforces a more passive yet equally dangerous role. The dream of world domination by the 'Young Seigfrieds' is a more tangibly serious threat. *Destination Unknown*, three years later, takes practically the same plot (young scientists disappearing in an ideological attempt at totalitarianism) but unmasks the plot as a fiction, 'it had never been what it pretended to be . . . a fiction set up to obscure the truth' (*DU*, p. 259), hiding a much more 'real' motive of financial gain. Despite its utilisation of Cold War trappings, capitalism, rather than ideology, is seen as the real danger. Hilary is the least physically active protagonist, enforced to a passive role as a duplicate wife in the closed worlds of car, plane and building. Issues of feminine masquerade abound, since no one is who they seem, and the easiest mask is the conventional 'facade' (*DU*, p. 153).

All her comments and remarks were natural, normal, everyday currency, but one had a suspicion that the whole thing was like an actor playing a part for perhaps the seven-hundredth time . . . (*DU*, p. 141)

This is no longer an aspect of feminine mastery of misguided social expectations, but a matter of suspicion and repulsion at the ease with which the enemy can utilise conventions. *Destination Unknown* has a more specifically referential focus, based upon the real-life defection of two physicists (Bruno Pontecorvo and Klaus Fuchs) to the USSR, and its focus lies more with the concept of an 'enemy within'. *They Came to Baghdad*, in contrast, still contains elements of the masquerade as a critique of social expectations, such as when Victoria finds it easy to pretend to be an anthropologist,

Luckily, thought Victoria, men were always so superior about women that any slip she did make would be treated less as a suspicious circumstance than as proof of how ridiculously addepleted all women were! (*TCTB*, p. 273)

Hilary's attraction is less her activity than her intelligence, 'your spirit, your courage, the fact that you have a mind of your own' (*DU*, p. 271), and her ability to name the flaws in ideological arguments. Her interest in the domestic, which the text defines as normal feminine things, is in contrast to the single-minded female scientists, who despise the mundane:

'Silly creatures,' said Mrs Baker, 'it's hard to have patience with them. I suppose babies and clothes are their only interest in life.' (*DU*, p. 138)

It is the young adventurers who fear domesticity, Hilary's age and previous experience of having chosen the domestic allows her to value it differently, particularly since mundane reality is the binary opposite to the ideological fanaticism. The enemy are more fanatical, more seriously dangerous as in traditional thrillers and the British, French and American secret services are unable to stop them and it takes the intervention of the British Judicial Service to accomplish that. The British legal system is reified, unproblematically, in the figure of the aged former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Alverstoke, the only one among the luminaries at the end who is disinterestedly concerned with 'truth' and has the power to defeat the financial megalomaniac, the only one who could not be bullied or bought. This more conservative reification of law and order, alongside an imperial vision of Britain as a defender of the faith, comes at a time when Britain in the fifties, post Suez, needed a fictionalised reinvention of its importance upon the world stage, exemplified in the many novels of that much more conventional thriller writer,

Ian Fleming. James Bond in *From Russia With Love* (1957) three years later is chosen as the target for an international plot because Smersh fear only the British Secret Service and need to discredit them. Critics from Jerry Palmer to Bloom²⁴ have read the thriller as a conservatively jingoistic compensation for Britain's lack of international status and as a codification of Cold War ethics paranoia against the imperialising size and technological industrialisation of the Soviet Union. Christie's *Destination Unknown* is her only thriller to use this jingoistic ideology and it is notable that, despite the actual originals, the Soviet Union is not the real enemy in her thriller. Despite utilising Cold War motifs, a detective novel published two years earlier has a more objective view of the English prejudice against the Russians. In *They Do It With Mirrors* (1952), the police detective is portrayed as unreasonable in his prejudice against Russians, and the national dislike is given a historical reading.

'Russians' to Inspector Curry where what 'Bony' had been in the early days of the nineteenth century, and what 'the Huns' had been in the early twentieth century. Anything to do with Russia was bad in Inspector Curry's opinion. (*TDIWM*, p. 628)

Christie's thrillers were initially parodically discursive in their challenges to the available roles for femininity, but shifted during the fifties to a more sober and slightly more conventionally conservative generic rendition. The female intrepid protagonists who succeed in foiling the enemy have to acknowledge a more complicated, darker world and a less wide-reaching ability to save society.

The detective fiction of the period in between, particularly the thirties, has a number of similarly active women, demonstrating much of the intelligence, agency and sexual allure of Bundle, Anne and Victoria, while fitting the generic role of romantic partner to the male detective. One of the things the women helping the male detectives in *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931), *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (1934), *Murder Is Easy* (1939), and in *The Pale Horse* thirty years later (1961) share is that they are constructed as equal partners rather than a feminine secondary role. Emily propositions Charles, offering him 'a kind of partnership' (*SM*, p. 120), 'Luke and I are in this together' (*MIE*, p. 198), while Mark in *The Pale Horse*, when Ginger believes his story and wants to help, declares, "I was no longer alone" (*PH*, p. 89). All four women are characterised by their modern, bright intelligence. Emily has 'an atmosphere of common sense, savoir faire, invincible determination and a most tantalizing fascination' (*SM*, pp. 113–14), Frankie, wearing brightly coloured

clothes, smokes in public, frequents exclusive nightclubs and parties until dawn. Bridget has 'force, brains, a cool clear intelligence' (*MIE*, p. 40) and Ginger, wearing the sixties bohemian 'skin-tight pants, a Sloppy Joe jersey and black woollen stockings' (*PH*, p. 88) with a similar sharp intelligence and enthusiasm, ends up masterminding the investigation. Emily, in *The Sittaford Mystery*, is even more the instigator, using a feminine masquerade of helplessness to enlist Charles's aid, and is after a very different power relations: 'a kind of bond slave . . . The whole point was that she was to be the boss, but the matter needed managing tactfully' (*SM*, p. 120). All the women are active and brave, risking their lives as part of the investigation. They have 'guts' (Frankie), laugh in the face of danger (Bridget), a 'gallant spirit' (Ginger). Ginger also echoes Tuppence and Bundle in being linked by simile to 'an energetic terrier' (*PH*, p. 108). Although logical and clear-headed, they can marshal different forms of feminine knowledge. For Emily, this is a network of female information, "'The chambermaid told me, and her sister is married to Constable Graves, so of course she knows everything the police think.'" (*SM*, p. 124). Ginger wheedles information out of a girl-friend because feminine gossip is not seen as informing; "'Girls-together stuff. You wouldn't understand. The point is that if a girl tells things to another girl it doesn't really count'" (*PH*, p. 94). Bridget evinces the kind of feminine knowledge used by Ariadne Oliver and Miss Marple, "'You wouldn't wear a scarlet hat with carrotty hair. It's the sort of thing a man wouldn't realize'" (*MIE*, p. 65).

Sympathetically portrayed as intelligent and active partners in the detection, they understandably echo a modern distrust of the traditional conventions of marriage, kicking against their generic positioning in the romantic closure. Emily, in *The Sittaford Mystery*, is the most renegade in her conclusion. Initially resolving to solve the murder to clear her fiancée, a typical 'lady detective' plot where women have temporary agency in order to save a husband or father wrongly accused, Emily turns the convention on its head by declaring her superior intelligence and resolve. Her fiancée is 'dear, sweet, boyish, helpless and impractical. . . So utterly to be depended on to do the wrong thing at the wrong moment' (*SM*, p. 131). She acknowledges that he is a weak character and not worthy of her, but still rejects the stronger, attractive detective, Charles, at the end. Despite minor characters trying to steer her towards the conventional closure, she refuses because she will be able to 'manage' the absent, weaker of the two men in a deliberate generic anticlimax to the romantic pairing of her and Charles throughout the text. Frankie rejects romance's economic reification of female social

mobility in marrying beneath her, emigrating with her man to Kenya to a life lived outside English domesticity and it is interestingly her 'pluck', her bravery, that wins him over. Bridget, like Tuppence, distrusts sentimental views of romance and plumps initially to marry for money.

I don't tell myself fairy stories . . . 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 . . . The only difference is the salary. (*MIE*, p. 113)

Although she does not go through with it, it is a voiced and logical feminine option, while it is the male protagonist who experiences love as a 'fairy story' and believes himself 'bewitched'. The denouement rejects romantic passion for a more downbeat, anti-romantic feeling. 'Liking is more important than loving' states Bridget, and Luke agrees that liking is "'founded on reality'" (*MIE*, p. 223). Ginger, in 1961, has a more permissive attitude to romance, rejecting herself as pretending to be the straight-laced fiancée because "'I'm quite the wrong type – I'd probably go and live in sin with you'" (*PH*, p. 111). Romance is present, in these detective novels, but the women co-partners are being subtly redrawn as forthright, intelligent and active, and these characteristics are perceived as admirable and emulatory.

Christie's women detectives, alongside her thriller agents, present an adventurous, swashbuckling demeanour and a disinterest in marriage and domesticity that is portrayed as attractive and sympathetic. They suggest a different available role for young women, beginning in the twenties and running through the decades up to the early sixties. For all things do change, particularly in the thriller *Destination Unknown* (though it is perhaps pertinent that Hilary is older and more mature), these female protagonists offer the female reader, to repeat Bird and Walker, 'the fictional possibility of controlling events and issues that affect our lives', their agency an exciting political practice that challenges notions of women as passive or secondary. The texts celebrate their intelligence, their ingenuity, their courage and their zest for adventure. It is an opening out of feminine horizons, and allows a space for being seen as sexually attractive alongside a more forthright demeanour. It is true, as some critics argue, that Christie does not write sexual attraction in its passionate and unruly form, that her middle-class romance figures are restrained and downbeat in their allure, but they are still the rightful objects of male desire because of their agency, not despite

it. Ginger's energetic pluck makes her more eligible than Hermia's statuesque poise, in *The Pale Horse*, and Frankie's 'guts' make her more sexually alluring than Moira's helplessness.

'The truth of the matter is you have guts and she hasn't,' said Roger with decision.

Frankie felt complimented . . . Roger, it was clear, did not like them helpless . . .

Roger said quietly:

'If you like, Frankie, you could make anything you chose of a man . . .'

Frankie felt a sudden little thrill – and at the same time acute embarrassment. (*WDTAE*, p. 120)

Young modern women necessitate new formations of romance, new ways of being lovers and wives that intervene in the contemporary debates on women's role in society. Christie's intrepid young female adventurers are not, perhaps, the most frequent examples she exhibits, but they are consistent throughout the decades and offer one definitive strand of questioning both to generic detective/agent and to how a sympathetic femininity can be conceived.

Career women

Shaw and Vanacker claim Christie's novels were antagonistic towards women who devote themselves to a job, 'in her novels she shows a deep dislike of career women'.²⁵ Anne-Marie Taylor similarly argues, 'Women who live or work outside the social organisation of home and family tend to come to grief.'²⁶ It is noticeable that both critical works focus on Miss Marple, and the country-village milieu certainly offers less scope for the successful career woman than Poirot's more open, urban and worldly settings, but the argument cannot be sustained that Christie's work denigrates women who devote themselves to a profession as well as, or rather than, a husband. Christie's very first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, contains two attractive women who work, the ebullient Cynthia is a pharmaceutical dispenser in a hospital (Christie's own work during the war) as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) while the unhappily married Mary Cavendish, the object of Hastings's romantic fervour, works as a land girl certain days of the week. Women as working and efficient are portrayed as admirable. '“Women are doing great work nowadays”', states Poirot (*MAAS*, p. 132). However, these women might, perhaps,

not be described as 'career women', since the jobs are a voluntary part of the war effort. Christie's *oeuvre* spans fifty years, from the twenties up to the early seventies, and one of the things that changes markedly during this period is the cultural attitude to women who work. One year before her first novel, 1919, saw the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Bill passed in Parliament, allowing women to sit the professional exams that would allow them to qualify and practice. Up until that point, a few favoured women had been allowed to attend Oxbridge universities, indeed had their own colleges, but had not been allowed to qualify for the professions. Trade unions still prevented women continuing in professions such as teaching and the Civil Service after their marriage, however.

Christie's early novels chart the changes and women work during the war effort, in the VADs, but it is during the late thirties and the forties that her novels really develop the issue of professional women and the differing demands a profession puts upon a woman's life. By the fifties and through the sixties, the fact that women work is less remarkable and more accepted as part of the social scene. Christie's novels, in part, chart the changing attitudes to middle-class women and work (since working-class women have of necessity always had to work at more mundane jobs). Anne-Marie Taylor²⁷ and Susan Rowland²⁸ both discuss the unease that Christie's texts had with women in power and in public life, but this is something I want to unpack by looking at how the exploration of feminine roles is played out. Christie has a range of women dedicated to a profession. Some are constructed as egoists, their self-centredness defined by their focus on a career to the detriment of their men. Hermia, in *The Pale Horse* (1961), is one such, a young university lecturer who refuses to help Mark in his investigations because of the demands of her career, "'I'm most terribly busy. There's my article for the Journal. And the Byzantium thing. And I've promised two of my students - '". The novel depicts her as earnest rather than conscientious, "So handsome, so mature, so intellectual, so well read . . . So - yes, so damnably dull!" (*PH*, p. 74). Marina Gregg, the successful Hollywood actress in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962), is histrionic and egotistical, demanding devoted attention from her entourage and husband, and the Hollywood actress in *The Hollow* (1946) 'was a woman whose egoism was quite abnormal. Veronica was accustomed to getting her own way, and beneath the smooth beautiful contours of flesh he seemed to sense an ugly determination' (*H*, p. 131). The type of the Hollywood actress comes to stand for self-absorbed egotism in Christie's work, for all the

text tries to explain and comprehend Marina Gregg's histrionics, the sense of always being on show.

Being unspoilt and natural. You learn how to do it, and then you have to go on being it all the time. Just think of the hell of it – never able to chuck something and say, 'Oh, for the Lord's sake stop bothering me.' I dare say that in sheer self-defence you have to have drunken parties or orgies. (*MCFSTS*, p. 338)

The text has no such consideration for the exigencies of Veronica Lake's profession because she functions in a different structural position in *The Hollow's* examination of women and devotion to work. Veronica is the woman who puts herself and her career single-mindedly before anything else, including the man she claims to love, expecting him to give up his work as a research doctor, to live on her money in California, "My life and career were much more important than yours. Anyone can be a doctor" (*H*, p. 135) and such a view is designated as selfish, 'a nasty bit of work'. John Christow's vacuous and selfless wife is positioned not as the ideal but, structurally, as Veronica's opposite and is equally unsympathetic in her helplessness. These twin pillars of feminine selfish devotion to a career and selfless devotion to a man present Henrietta Savernake with the parameters within which to negotiate her love for John and her obsession with her art. Henrietta is an internationally renowned, modern sculptor, 'she doesn't just carve animals or children's heads but does advanced things like that curious affair in metal and plaster that she exhibited at the New Artists last year' (*H*, p. 13). Her work is not feminised, but placed in the centre of an International, modernist abstraction and it is accorded the accolade of 'a touch of real genius' (*H*, p. 13). The text explores the 'blind, intense ferocity' (*H*, p. 21) of her artistic obsession in empathetically full detail as she models one piece and remembers the creation of another, 'Nausicca' and 'The Worshipper'. 'And driving her, harrying her, was that urgent incessant longing' (*H*, p. 23) and, once the image has become concrete in her mind, 'it was nice . . . to be a human being again . . . and not that other thing . . . Now, thank goodness, there would be only hard work – and who minded hard work?' (*H*, p. 26). Henrietta's career as a sculptor is given textual seriousness and density and Christow is used to explain the attraction of a woman with a mind of her own and a career of her own, in preference to a cloying selfless devotion. Henrietta is contrasted to Veronica in being interested in his medical research, reading up on his subject in order to understand his conversations and inspiring him

to further thought through the intelligence of her questions, but she refuses to devote herself to him. John acknowledges he is being 'unfair' in expecting her to, jealous of the distraction that takes her away from him, 'It was only on very rare occasions that her absorption with some inner vision spoiled the completeness of her interest in him' (*H*, p. 70). But he also has the conflictual outmoded desire that he should 'come first'. In answer to his question, 'Would you give all this up if I asked you to?' Henrietta gives the appropriate Christie response, people are more important than careers, particularly to women, but careers are not negligible, certainly not Henrietta's international standing. The strength of such a deprivation is encased in the metaphor, enforcing the point.

'I suppose so. If it was necessary.'

'Necessary? What do you mean by necessary?'

'I don't really know what I mean by it, John. Necessary, as an amputation might be necessary.'

'Nothing short of a surgical operation in fact!'

...

'I want to come first.'

'You do, John.'

'No. If I were dead, the first thing you'd do, with the tears streaming down your face, would be to start modelling some damned mourning woman or some figure of grief.' (*H*, pp. 70–1)

His prophecy proves accurate, since this is how Henrietta closes the novel focused on her public rather than personal role, acknowledging that as a driven artist she is not 'whole' like other people, and her grief manifests itself in sculpture.²⁹ The contrast at the end is with Midge, who endured working in a dress shop and gladly gives it up on her marriage. Even Midge's soul-destroying work is seen in positive terms, since her refusal to be dependant on her relatives is depicted as 'some sturdy independence of spirit' (*H*, p. 192), which demands she make her own way in the world, however disagreeable. Henrietta's work is a vocation, demanding an important part of her life, and the novel allows a full weight to this devotion to a career and a full sympathy to Henrietta, the intelligent, kind genius who charts the modern woman's path through a meditation on the twin demands of a career and love. Both Henrietta and Veronica are placed within the more emotive, artistic parameters, while John has the science, and it is true that the women who do appear as straight scientists in Christie's work tend to be mad and evil (see Madame Olivier in *The Big Four*, Helga Needham in *Destination*

Unknown). Despite this gendered stereotyping, both man and woman in the couple are granted an equally valid career and it is the conflicting demands of these that are explored in relation to both sexes, as they try to come to terms with women working. John acknowledges that he is being selfish in demanding to come first, wrestling with his own internalised Edwardian expectations of masculinity, unable to automatically accord her the same equality because of the ingrained expectations of a woman's subservience. In *Christow*, Christie explores the conflictual pulls of wanting an equal companion and a residual desire for woman's devotion: '(“Just what you object to in Gerda, in fact” said his private imp, bobbing up again.) The truth of it was that he was completely illogical. He didn't know what he wanted' (*H*, p. 54). Shifting gender roles create tensions and crises in masculinity as well as femininity, and *The Hollow* examines these from a number of angles, in relation to women and work.

Appointment with Death (1938) has a similar thematic focus. The protagonist, the young medical practitioner Sarah King, has newly graduated and is flattered to find the world-renowned psychologist Dr Gerard travelling in her party and enjoys professional discussions about their fellow travellers that are not appreciated by the laymen.

'You think old Mrs Boynton is a kind of sadist?'

'I am almost sure of it. I think she rejoices in the infliction of pain – mental pain . . .'

...

Gerard told her of his conversation with Jefferson Cope. 'He doesn't realise what is going on?' she said thoughtfully.

'How should he? He's not a psychologist.'

'True. He hasn't got our disgusting minds!' (*AWD*, p. 446)

Sarah King's interest is only partially professional, since she is romantically interested in the younger Boynton son, Raymond, and this conflict of interest becomes acute when she is the medical doctor to officiate at the discovery of the mother's corpse, while he is one of major suspects. Professionally, she rejects his evidence, insisting on the mother's death an hour before the son claims he spoke to her. Sarah's professionalism wins out over her desire:

'I'd bow to [Dr Gerard's] superior medical knowledge naturally – in this case he had nothing whatever to go on. I suppose they can have a P.M. in Jerusalem if they like – if they are not satisfied with my verdict. (*AWD*, p. 501)

She looked at him point-blank. He noticed again the firm set of her mouth.

'Well,' said Sarah, 'I'm young and I haven't got much experience of dead bodies – but I know enough to be quite sure of one thing. Mrs Boynton had been dead at least an hour when I examined her body. (AWD, p. 505)

Her medical training necessitates the truth as she knows it, whatever the consequences to her lover. Despite this scrupulousness, her involvement with Raymond makes her 'an interested party' (AWD, p. 497). Her love interest places her among the suspects, whereas Gerard and Poirot remain the career professionals. As a woman in love, she is deprived of her professional standing as a doctor, and her status shifts ambivalently between someone to be pronounced upon (as suspect) and one of those who pronounce (as doctor). Nevertheless, she stands as a figure of a young, attractive woman who has chosen an important career, executes it efficiently, and is the most sympathetic of the characters, in contrast to less attractive career women. Lady Westholme, the female politician who just missed out on a cabinet position, is both unsympathetic and a figure of fun, despite her imposing career. What Westholme voices, in the novel, is the challenge to male supremacy through the first wave women's movement, though here the overtly political aspect of the feminism is ridiculed by the stridency and the obsession with which she voices it. (Sarah King's feminism, being within the realm of the personal, carries more textual acceptance.)

It being borne in upon her, however, that politics was not Lord Westholme's metier in life and never would be, she graciously allowed him to resume his sporting activities and herself stood for Parliament. Being elected with a substantial majority, Lady Westholme threw herself with vigour into political life, being especially active at Question Time. Cartoons of her soon began to appear (always a sure sign of success). (AWD, p. 466)

Lady Westholme looked with grim satisfaction after the departing car. 'Men always think they can impose upon women,' she said.

Sarah thought it would be a brave man who thought he could impose upon Lady Westholme! (AWD, p. 467)

Sadly, the epilogue does not contain any direct reference to Sarah's continuing in the medical profession. Happily married to Raymond, we

hear of his successful career, but no mention is made of hers. The aporia surrounding her career, given its founding aspect of her characterisation throughout the novel, is surprising and could easily be deciphered as an indication of her renouncing the career once married (the norm during the late thirties). Yet Ginevra, having married Gerard, is triumphantly pursuing her career on the stage and the psychologist constructs Jinny as needing the histrionic, dramatising profession in order to channel energies that would otherwise lead to schizophrenia. A woman's career is thus being represented as a psychological necessity to keep sane. Since one married woman keeps her career, the silence surrounding Sarah could as easily be read as her continuing. It is the ambivalence of the refusal to say which can prove unsettling to the reader.

Of course, during the thirties there were working practices that prevented women working once married even if they so chose. Winifred Holtby, in an article for the *Manchester Guardian*, 'The Wearer and the Shoe' (1930), highlights that women were not allowed to continue working in the Civil Service or the teaching professions after they were married. Discussing the findings of the Service's Clerical Association's poll on whether women desired to have the marriage bar lifted if the gratuity they received on resigning were also to go, Holtby examines the fact that women overwhelmingly voted no. She questions a male politician's assumption that this means

The normal woman looks forward to marriage, and knows that whether she retires on marriage or not retirement will be inevitable as soon as the children come. I think most women, therefore, who contemplate marriage know that sooner or later they will have to make the choice between their home and a business career . . .³⁰

Holtby argues that the vote comes from the lowly paid clerical workers, with little chance of advancement in their careers since they were expected by their employers to leave. Moreover, the marriage gratuity vitally funded 'the first instalment of one's furniture'³¹ when setting up home. In these circumstances, the negative vote is not necessarily a challenge to feminist attempts to change working habits. (The more militant Federation of Women Civil Servants was calling for the abolition of the marriage bar.) And she goes on to contemplate the farsighted minority who did vote for its abolition.

I think they saw the prospect of marriage before them, but not marriage demanding that cruel alternative – a home or a career.

I think they saw themselves and their husbands working apart during the day and meeting together at night, able to put aside a little money for harder times, to enjoy their additional income, and to save for their children's education.³²

This ideal, where men and women work equally and negotiate new marital or sexual relationships, was being hotly debated in the press and in the business world during the thirties and is one that Christie's novels in 1938 and 1946 topically engage with. Henrietta Savernake, international sculptor, and Sarah King, medical practitioner, two young career women whose careers do not carry the same kind of marriage bar, are both immensely attractive characters and depicted as carrying a significant amount of textual identification and sympathy. Their presence belies the opinion that Christie was antagonistic to career women, indeed their two novels can be read as complex meditations on the issue of women having professions and lovers during the late thirties and mid-forties, a historical moment that stretches into women returning to employment in large numbers during the Second World War. That one character ends the novel at work without her lover (Henrietta) and the other with a silence surrounding her career once married (Sarah) bears witness to the cultural and emotional tensions and expectations surrounding married women and work. Holtby's feminist vision was still only an ideal, but an ideal, interestingly that John Chrsitow is wrestling with in relation to his perfect mate. *The Hollow* (1946) and *Appointment with Death* (1939) articulate these crises around women and work and countenance career women as both attractive and sympathetic.

In the cast of minor characters and suspects in almost all of Christie's detective novels, there is at least one woman who works and many of them are professionals such as the anthropologist Venetia, whom Victoria impersonates in *They Came to Baghdad* (1951), the severe and scientific Dr Alice Cunningham in 'The Capture of Cerebus' (1947) writing a book on criminal psychology, or Angela Warren in *Five Little Pigs* (1943) who 'made rather a name for herself. Digs up things and goes trekking to the back of beyond' (*FLP*, p. 21). Poirot attends a lecture given by Angela Warren at the Royal Geographical,

There was very little human interest in the lecture. It was an admirable recital of concise facts, adequately illustrated by excellent slides, and with intelligent deductions from the facts recited. Dry, precise, clear, lucid, highly technical.

The soul of Hercule Poirot approved. Here, he considered, was an orderly mind. (*FLP*, pp. 105–06)

As with Henreitta Savernake's sculptures, the text is careful to suggest the career woman holds her own within the masculine-dominated centre of the profession, rather than in some feminine periphery. Angela Warren has a scientific mind and the text is careful to delineate that her choice of a career gives her full satisfaction, it is not the secondary, pitiful fall-back of a woman who could not get a husband (Angela Warren has a disfiguring scar):

a vital and forceful woman, a woman of considerable mental power and gifted with abundant energy to accomplish ambitious purposes. She was a woman, Poirot felt sure, both happy and successful. Her life was full and vivid and eminently enjoyable. (*FLP*, p. 107)

Lady Westholme, the eminent woman MP in *Appointment with Death*, who has a husband, has a similar approval for being fitted for her career. And, of course, there is the repeated example of Ariadne Oliver, the successful author, as another form of fulfilled career woman (see Chapter 2). Indeed, there are women characters who highlight how the impossibility of upper-middle-class women gaining a profession during earlier periods stunted their emotional and intellectual development. Miss Waynflete, the elderly spinster in *Murder is Easy* (1939), continues the theme of women and careers during the late thirties, since her thwarted potential turns to the bad. "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" (*MIE*, p. 204). Clotilde Bradbury-Scott, in *Nemesis* (1971), a classics scholar of strong intelligence and presence, was unable to pursue a career. Her past history is ambiguous. The elderly maid explains she "went to university and is very brainy" (*N*, p. 73), whereas Mrs Merrypit argues "she's clever... Would have liked to go to university but she had to look after her mother who was an invalid for a long time" (*N*, p. 125), and the Archdeacon explains "Clotilde herself was an intellectual and a well educated woman" (*N*, p. 143), but her class prevented any attempt at a career and she ends up one of the elderly 'distressed gentlewomen' (*N*, p. 61), thwarted and baffled in her desires. A professional career, with or without a husband, is one valuable and healthy form of work being depicted as open to women to choose, and female education is granted a value, despite Christie's own lack of formal education.³³

Cat Among the Pigeons (1959) is set in a private girl's boarding school which is run and taught by career women, all single. It is a completely female environment, the only men being a couple of gardeners. Miss Bulstrode, the charismatic headmistress, is a strong, independent and positive characterisation and the 'success of her school (and Meadowbank was one of the most successful schools in England) was entirely due to the personality of its Headmistress' (*CAP*, p. 17). Her work as headmistress is depicted as exciting and fulfilling:

During her career as its headmistress, she herself had never felt dull. There had been difficulties to combat, unforeseen crises, irritations with parents, with children: domestic upheavals. She had met and dealt with incipient disasters and turned them into triumphs. It had all been stimulating, exciting, supremely worthwhile. (*CAP*, p. 98)

And the novel keeps returning to the challenges and the adventure of her career in creating the school, rejecting the idea that it might be 'dull'. It is seen as creative, needing courage to bring to fruition an individual conception of a school.

I took chances. I upset lots of people. I bullied and cajoled, and refused to follow the pattern of other schools. (*CAP*, p. 103)

Miss Bulstrode had enjoyed the adventure, the hazard of it all . . . Miss Bulstrode had been uninterested in safety. She had her vision of what a school should be and she had pursued it unafraid. And she had been justified in her audacity. (*CAP*, p. 206)

Such descriptions are close to Henrietta's creation of sculpture or Vernon Deyre's modernist composition. Administrative work is being held up as creative, an adventure, and endlessly challenging. The eight school-teachers are varied in their characterisation and in their enjoyment of the mix of teaching, administration and dealing with parents. Some give their lives to the school (Miss Johnson and Miss Chadwick), while others have more outside interests (Madame Blanche, Miss Rowan, Miss Blake). School-teaching as a career is thus presented as suiting different types of women. Bulstrode's attractive, efficient secretary Ann Shapland, who 'could be attractive when she wanted to be but life had taught her that efficiency and competence often paid better results and avoided painful complications' (*CAP*, p. 9), appears to do a similar 'hard-sell' on the delights of being a secretary.

'You don't find it monotonous?'

'I suppose I've been lucky. I've had a lot of different jobs. I was with Sir Mervyn Todhunter, the archaeologist, for a year, then I was with Sir Andrew Peters in Shell. I was secretary to Monica Lord, the actress for a while – that was really hectic!' She smiled in remembrance. (CAP, pp. 100–01)

if you are really good you can pick and choose your posts. You see different places and you see different kinds of life. At the moment I'm seeing school life. The best school in England seen from within!' (CAP, p. 213)

Ann Shapland's career as a secretary is so interesting and varied that she refuses the offer to 'settle down' because to marry and give up work would be the dull, monotonous thing to do.

Throughout Christie's novels, particularly from the forties to the sixties, there are a variety of career women characters as a matter of course and not all of them eminent. Miss Lemon, Poirot's secretary, makes her appearance in the late thirties (1939), and continues through the forties, fifties and sixties and even into the 1970s.³⁴ Miss Lemon is the epitome of efficiency, cool and immaculate, and the plot of the first novel in which she appears with Poirot starts when she uncharacteristically makes three mistakes in typing a letter, because of her concern for her sister who manages a youth hostel (*Hickory Dickory Dock*, 1955). Letitia Blacklock, trained as a financial accountant and secretary to a financier who treats her as a junior partner, had the 'adventurous spirit' that 'enjoyed the whole money-making game so much – it wasn't just the money – it was the adventure, the risks, the excitement of it all' (*A Murder is Announced*, 1950, p. 221). By this period, of course, it was more commonplace for women to work, even after they were married. *The Clocks* (1963) gives over a large part of its cast to the 'Cavendish Secretarial and Typewriting Bureau' run by Miss Martindale, and its assorted women typists. Claudia Reece-Holland, in *Third Girl* (1966), the daughter of an M.P., is an efficient personal secretary to the head of a company, and the text calls attention to the fact that times have changed as the more mature characters comment, "'The young girls, they all do jobs nowadays.'" "Everybody's supposed to do a job... Even when they get married they're always being persuaded back into industry or back into teaching" (*TG*, p. 52). Ariadne Oliver has to organise her sleuthing around this change of female employment, turning up at Borodene Mansion flats at 7 pm, the 'kind of time when girls in jobs might be

presumed to have returned [home]' (*TG*, p. 38). In her final novel, *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), Mrs Oliver has her own 'Miss Lemon', though much less efficient, in the shape of Miss Livingstone and the memory of the more satisfactory personal secretary, Miss Sedgewick.

There are also women who work in a more domestic sphere. There are, of course, a whole raft of distressed and dependant 'companions' to elderly or sick or lonely rich characters, usually portrayed as pitiful characters (perhaps because they have lacked the courage to make something of themselves?), but there are also women who have made a career out of private nursing, such as Nurse Carruthers in *Dumb Witness* (1937) or Nurse O'Brien and Nurse Hopkins in *Sad Cypress* (1954), living in with elderly or sick patients. Nursing demands a level of training and professionalism and Nurse Leatheran in *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) voices her pride and enjoyment of her profession, remembering assisting at a home operation,

'Well of course it was just splendid for me! Nobody to have a look in! I was in charge of everything . . . everything went splendidly! I had each thing ready as he asked for it, and he actually told me I'd done first-rate after it was over – and that's a thing most doctors wouldn't bother to do!' (*MIM*, p. 125)

A few women make a profession out of housekeeping, and here I absent the 'dutiful' or not so dutiful working-class housekeepers, who are granted only bit parts, for the new breed of housekeeper exemplified by Mary Dove in *A Pocketful of Rye* (1953). Having both brains and breeding, Mary Dove has discovered that, in the post-war crisis over domestic servants, a well-paid career can be made out of running the household smoothly, interviewing and appointing the staff, ensuring the day-to-day running of the household, choosing menus and keeping household accounts, a mix of duties that encompasses the roles both of housekeeper and of mistress of the house. The 'admirable Miss Crichton' has found a niche, working for the rich and when the Inspector voices surprise that with her 'brains and education' she should be doing 'this type of job', she replies, 'this is the perfect racket. People will pay anything – anything – to be spared domestic worries . . . it takes a certain capacity which most of these people haven't got' (*MCFSTS*, pp. 179–80). The university-educated Lucy Eylesbarrow takes on a similar role at Rutherford Hall in *4.50 from Paddington* (1957). Anne-Marie Taylor suggests that 'By the transference of her powers of reasoning and deduction from the academic to the domestic, Lucy's intelligence is tamed.'³⁵ Such a

reading overlooks the career prospects as a complex job of work that this managing of a household becomes during the fifties, charting the increasing professionalism of the post in a post-1945 world bereft of suitable rafts of servants.

Christie seems to have been particularly interested in the complex issues arising out of women working, from the late thirties right through to the sixties and beyond. Far from being conservatively antagonistic to career women as so many critics have argued, her fiction raises issues in relation to women's employment, intellectual engagement and the wastes of domesticity, which were also being raised by such socialist feminists as Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain. At times, these themes are central to the texts, and focussed on the main female protagonists, at other times the career women are minor characters. Certainly the expectation that women could work and find emotional and intellectual fulfilment from their employment is a founding consideration of many of the novels. There are selfish, unpleasant career women characters, but there are just as many, if not more, who are sympathetic, attractive and even emulatory. Women who, because of an Edwardian or Victorian childhood, were unable to attend university or pursue a career are more likely to be perceived as living stunted, wasted lives, pointing to the twentieth-century broadening of the world of work as a freedom to those women who desire it. As Mary Anne Ackershoek argues in relation to Christie herself,

We should not ignore the fact that she was a career woman, and a spectacularly successful one. She may have begun her career as a wife and mother who wrote detective stories as a pleasant and moderately lucrative hobby, but her traumatic divorce made writing necessary to her survival.³⁶

Women outside the familial norms

Christie has a number of women, not large in number – given the novel count – but persistent in their presence, who exist happily outside of the traditional conventions of married domesticity, inhabiting the tabooed grounds beyond what was perceived as culturally acceptable familial norms. Among these characters can be found empathetic depictions of women usually presented in negative terms: illegitimate daughters, unmarried mothers, mothers who turn their backs on the husband and child, mistresses and lesbians. Bargainnier, insistent that Christie is conservative and nostalgic for the Edwardian age, argues,

Though she strived to be “up-to-date,” as in [*After the Funeral*] where there is no condemnation of a sympathetic character’s illegitimate child, she continued to hold Edwardian, if not Victorian, attitudes toward moral and social values.³⁷

His recourse to the author, rather than the text itself, and his inherent belief in a stereotyped view of the Victorian ignore the fact that *After the Funeral* is not an isolated example; illegitimacy is present in a number of novels throughout her career and is always treated from an understanding, feminised viewpoint. Even Miss Marple herself, at the beginning of *At Bertram’s Hotel*, contemplates how her life might have been different if less effectively chaperoned in her youth; ‘nowadays’ girls had no mothers to protect them ‘from silly affairs, illegitimate babies, and early and unfortunate marriages’ (*ABH*, p. 26).

Christie has a small number of unmarried mothers in her novels, sometimes with their children, usually daughters (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* contains an illegitimate son). While the social stigma of illegitimacy is always present in these novels and often proves an important plot motivation, the characterisation is sympathetic and there is no textual opprobrium, only understanding. In the days before effective contraception, unwanted pregnancy was a fact of women’s lives and middle-class denigration of illegitimacy was strong, until the seventies. Christie’s novels reflect this stigmatisation but do not take a hand in producing it. Her unmarried mothers often become pregnant when they are very young, by implication, before they know the ways of the world, and during the sixties this is laid at the feet of the dearth of an effective chaperoning system, to look after vulnerable young girls, as there had been previously:

‘People were looking after them. Their mothers looked after them. Their aunts and their older sisters looked after them. Their younger sisters and brothers knew what was going on. Their fathers were not averse to kicking the wrong young men out of the house. Sometimes, of course, the girls used to run away with one of the bad lots. Nowadays there’s no need even to do that. Mother doesn’t know who the girl’s out with, her father’s not told who the girl is out with, brothers know who the girl is out with but they think ‘more fool her’. (*Hallowe’en Party*, 1969, p. 34)

Despite this more dangerous permissiveness of the sixties, unmarried mothers had always been a minor staple. In the 1939 short story, ‘Murder

in the Mews', Mrs Allen is initially blackmailed and then, unable to face the future, commits suicide because of the information that she was an unmarried mother:

'she was only seventeen and he was a married man years older than her. Then she had a baby. She could have put it in a home but she wouldn't hear of that. She went off to some out of the way spot and came back calling herself Mrs Allen.' ('MM', p. 53)

The child dies before the narrative begins, and the woman is described as both 'a lady – a real lady' and having 'class' and kind and gentle, 'so sweet and helpless' (p. 53). The textual focus is distaste for the blackmailer, rather than the woman who is almost too insistently portrayed as lacking in guilt, but Poirot's final assessment of her weakness, for committing suicide, could perhaps bleed into her unmarried state by implication. There is less ambivalence about Laura Welman in *Sad Cypress* (1940), but an equally detailed insistence on the mitigating circumstances of the case: Mrs Welman being 'a widow of some years and capable of deep and passionate love' (SC, p. 151), while the man has a lunatic wife incarcerated in an asylum with no chance of a divorce. The cultural opprobrium the novel is writing against is reflected in the necessary extremism of their marital situations. Both parties being of social standing, they were 'discreet and careful to keep up appearances' (SC, p. 152). This is as respectable a liaison, as could be envisaged, the extremity indicating Christie's desire to mitigate and make respectable. Those in the know are keen to keep the liaison quiet even after their deaths, since "'What would be the use of raking up mud and an old story, and she a decent elderly woman with never a breath of scandal about her, and dying respected and looked up to by everybody?'" (SC, p. 133). She keeps the daughter within sight, settling a maid and 'her' baby at the Lodge with an arranged husband. As the apparent daughter of a faithful retainer, Mrs Welman is then free to take an interest in her, paying for her schooling and finishing. Christie depicts a mutual affection, a 'natural' love between the two, despite the daughter's ignorance, and the text opens on their tenderness and intimacy. The narrative is clear that the mother's elaborate pretence was only partially to protect her own social respectability and as much to protect her daughter from social stigma, so that she "'was able to hold up her head and she'd no cause to feel ashamed'" and, "'Why should anyone have to know she was a bastard'" (SC, pp. 152, 153). There is no question that the daughter would have suffered from this social stigma, had it been made public, and there

is repeated explanation that the mother had acted for the best, that the daughter 'would be happier', poor but respectable. Only on her deathbed does the mother question whether it was her 'pride' in her social standing that motivated her, "One means to do the best one can; but it's so difficult to know what is best – what is right" (*SC*, p. 24). The tenderness between the mother and the unknowing daughter sets the scene and reinforces the mother's care involved in parting with her daughter. The illegitimacy comes back to haunt and threaten the family, but not through the daughter, who is represented as both beautiful and angelic in her kindness and rectitude. Both illicit mother and daughter are depicted as thoughtful, caring and, above all, respectable characters. It is the cruel social mores that are presented as necessitating the elaborate and inhuman arrangement, but such a system is, as in 'Murder in the Mews', accepted as a reality, rather than criticised. The focus is not political, and there is no textual call for the overhaul of social views, simply an interest in how individual characters cope with an existing, harsh situation. The 1953 *After the Funeral* has Helen Abernethie living in Cyprus with her illegitimate son. The married Canadian she nursed during the war, "never knew about – our child. He would not have wanted it. I did. It seemed like a miracle to me – a middle-aged woman with everything behind her" (*ATF*, p. 191). This 'miracle' needs to be hidden away so she is forced to live abroad, to keep it from her relatives, "I never told Richard, he was fond of me and I of him – but he would not have understood", and she passes the child off as her "so-called nephew" (*ATF*, p. 191).

Cat Among the Pigeons (1959) and *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), at either end of the 'permissive sixties', make less of a fuss about unmarried mothers since times have begun to change from the thirties and forties and even the early fifties. The texts still create a sense of stigma, but it is one that can be overcome and is less threatening to either mother or daughter. Miss Rich, in *Cat Among the Pigeons*, is the most valued of the teachers, with a true vocation, and the text awards her the highest accolade of the viable successor to the headmistress, Miss Bulstrode. Miss Rich, having hidden her pregnancy and disguised the confinement as 'an illness', believes the scandal would prevent her being appointed to run a prestigious girls' school, and in the forties the text would have agreed. In 1959, however, the indomitable and unconventional Miss Bulstrode dismisses this objection:

'Of course I want you,' said Miss Bulstrode. 'You haven't murdered anyone, have you? – not gone mad over jewels and planned to kill

to get them? I'll tell you what you've done. You've probably denied your instincts too long. There was a man, you fell in love with him and you had a child. I suppose you couldn't marry . . . You had a love affair and a child . . . So that's that.' (CAP, pp. 336–7)

Social opprobrium, though still present, is not insurmountable, and is neither the best judge of a woman's character and worth. It is noticeable, however, that the text is keen to insist that Miss Rich wanted to have the child, and this may refer back to Laura Welman's choice to have her child only at arm's length (a strangely perverse logic within the context of a boarding school, but probably more to do with the acknowledgement and owning of the child). Mr Robinson, in a final coda that also plays on the stigma, will not hand over the jewels to their rightful heir until he has physically seen the marriage certificate that proves the child is 'legitimate'. The lovely Judith, resembling a water spirit, and her 'wood nymph' daughter Miranda, in *The Hallowe'en Party*, are possibly the most attractive of Christie's unmarried families. The myth of a dead husband, after the confinement in a far part of the country, continues but now the reason for the necessity is slightly different: a fear of the real father. It is important, the text insists, that Miranda is protected from knowledge of her illegitimate status and the mother's fabrication is therefore justified. The 1963 *The Clocks* unusually has the illegitimate daughter as an adult, and able to voice her view of this silence: "'People do sometimes try and hide that sort of thing from children. It's very stupid. They'd much better just tell them the real truth. It doesn't matter as much nowadays'" (C, p. 166). Christie's conception of what is 'natural' once again creates a bond that transcends knowledge between parent and child in *The Hallowe'en Party* despite the father's callousness: 'there was a bond between them. A natural affinity' (HP, p. 220). In relation to unmarried mothers and illegitimate children, Christie's texts refuse to reinforce the cultural production of opprobrium, although they reflect it as a social existence and whereas the late thirties and forties texts use it as a convenient plot motive for blackmail or murder by the unscrupulous bystander, the late fifties and sixties dismiss its cultural negativity and allow the mothers to be emulatory in their presence or their gifts.

Mothers who are married but abandon respectability for a lover are also present, and here the sense of guilt is more complex. Where unmarried mothers stand by their children, in some sense at least, the mother who puts her own needs before her children's is a much harder textual representation to mitigate. That all marriages do not end as a 'happily ever after' is a truism in Christie's *oeuvre*, littered with unhappy

marriages, love affairs and spouses scheming the other's death, but the mother who abandons the semblance of respectability to openly run off with a lover elicits social outrage. *Giant's Bread* (1930), the Westmacott novel on modernist art and relationships, has more space to focus on a range of marriages and liaisons, both traditional and modern. Vernon Deyre's aunt, the previous generation's negotiation of marriage and desire, escapes a painful marriage by leaving with someone who adores her, risking social ostracism ('social ostriches' as the young child makes sense of it) as a 'Bad Lot'. But Nina takes her daughter with her, to become a 'sophisticated hotel child' (*GB*, p. 223) and follow her mother's example. The father's hate necessitates and explains Nina's uprooting of her daughter, and this concern for her is part of the ambivalence of the text. An argument between the social view of moral outrage, of the woman as disgracing the family name for which the remedy is to 'cast her off utterly as she deserves' (*GB*, p. 206), since no respectable woman would live under the same roof, is rejected as 'Traditional scene from a melodrama' (*GB*, p. 206). Instead, the text highlights the double standard that allows men to get away with infidelity, where women are ostracised (both Walter and Sydney reiterate this point). The more open textual rendition argues Nina is a fool but she has principles, refusing monetary support from either her husband or lover, her fault being depicted as an excess of emotions, not lust or avarice: 'it's always her affections that run away with her common sense' (*GB*, p. 207). In the same year, the detective novel *Murder At the Vicarage* has another mother abandoning an impossible marriage for love, this time leaving her daughter behind, and the depiction is equally open. The mysterious Mrs Lestrangle is 'beautiful and attractive', 'with 'a very strong magnetic charm' (*MV*, p. 120) and accorded respect. The negative evaluation rests on the hard-hearted and pompous husband, an unattractive character from the first, who refuses to allow the dying mother to see her daughter,

'Father was a beast. He said she'd forfeited all claim, and that I thought she was dead – as though I'd ever swallowed that story! Men like father never see an inch before their noses!' (*MV*, p. 186)

The outmoded terminology of 'forfeiting claims' to a child links Colonel Protheroe to an Edwardian morality, and Mrs Lestrangle's insistence on seeing her daughter despite his verdict is constructed as the properly maternal feelings of a strong, magnetic woman. Like Nina, she dies before old age, and this could easily be construed as a textual punishment for a misspent life, the censorious generic plotting in conflict

with the more open textual engagement with the character. This is because the mothers who abandon their children do rehearse the earlier, Victorian denouement that insists they die or suffer for their lapse in a modified continuation of the 'fallen women' of Dickens, George Eliot or Mrs Gaskell, who die or (if particularly sympathetic) emigrate, so as not to pollute the resolved, happy ending. Blanche, the mother who runs off with a series of lovers in *Absent in the Spring*, is seen by the pompous protagonist as socially fallen and physically raddled, her 'decadence a tragedy of the first water' (*AIS*, p. 11). Blanche is, however, a structural contrast of warmth and of emotions risked, of life lived to the full, and she rejects the protagonist's complacent pity, "'Nice of you, darling, but don't waste sympathy. I've had lots of fun'" (*AIS*, p. 10). Blanche leaves two children, and the 'straighlaced' protagonist tries to reconcile this with her generosity of spirit: 'A warm-hearted kindly creature, Blanche. And yet she had left her children, gone off callously and deserted the two little creatures she herself had brought into the world' (*AIS*, p. 71). The second sentence exemplifies the protagonist's 'lazy thinking', since we have already had Blanche's explanation of her actions.

'Rotten of me, wasn't it?' said Blanche. 'Of course I knew they'd be all right with Tom. He always adored them. He married a really nice domestic girl. Suited him far better than I ever did. She saw that he had decent meals and mended his underclothes and all that. Dear Tom, he was always a pet. He used to send me a card at Christmas and Easter for years afterwards which was nice of him, don't you think?' (*AIS*, p. 8)

The sending of cards denotes the lack of acrimony on the part of the abandoned husband, and the quotation acknowledges different types of femininity, only some of whom are 'domestic' and, the implication goes, children need domesticity. Blanche openly acknowledges her temperament is not primarily maternal, leaves her children and yet remains a positive character of openness and warmth. The protagonist, blindly living out the expectations of feminine domesticity, remains with her children and emotionally damages all of them. Motherhood, in this novel, is being depicted as more complicated and less 'natural' a role for women, and traditional domesticity a negative and selfish choice of the narrow-minded. Though not all the marriages in the novel are negative, the marriage of the husband's mistress is seen as successful, due to her generosity both as wife and as mistress. It is not the living of the traditional roles, but the character of the woman and the spirit in which

she lives her life, that is being exonerated in *Absent in the Spring*, and a mother can leave her children to another's care and follow her sexual desires and still remain an attractive character. Lady Bess Sedgewick, the exuberantly swashbuckling female adventurer in *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965), deliberately leaves her daughter because she knows her nature is not just un-maternal, but specifically dangerous. Famous for her daring, '[f]or over thirty years now, Bess Sedgewick had been reported by the Press as doing this or that outrageous or extraordinary thing' (*ABH*, p. 27). Miss Marple and the daughter's guardians remonstrate that she should see her daughter, but she rejects the sentimental mother and child reunion. "'Danger has been my drug. But people who live as I do can be a source of harm to others. . . You keep that girl well away from me. I can do her no good. Only harm"' (*ABH*, p. 68). Bess Sedgewick is constructed as an exceptional woman, and outside the norm because of her taste for danger and excitement, but the fact that such women exist is accommodated in the text and the discussion of how they negotiate being mothers is a major part of the treatment. Questioned by the police, she explains her actions and acknowledges that while done for her daughter's benefit, her decision may have been the wrong one:

'I've not seen her or had anything to do with her since she was two years old, when I ran away from my husband. . . I didn't think it was – safe for her.'

'On moral grounds?'

'No. Not on moral grounds. Plenty of adultery nowadays. Children have to learn about it, have to grow up with it. No. It's just that *I* am not a really safe person to be with. The life I'd lead wouldn't be a safe life. You can't help the way you're born. I was born to live dangerously. I'm not law-abiding or conventional. I thought it would be better for Elvira, happier, to have a proper English conventional bringing-up. Shielded, looked after. . .

'But minus a mother's love?'

'I thought if she learned to love me it might bring sorrow to her. Oh, you mayn't believe me, but that's what I felt.'

'I see. Do you still think you were right?'

'No,' said Bess. 'I don't. I think now I may have been entirely wrong.' (*ABH*, p. 252)

The mother's realisation that she has been wrong relates less to leaving her daughter than to refusing to see her during the daughter's lifetime, and her honesty in admitting the mistake links to her fearless facing of

truths that are unpleasant and so adds to her attractiveness as a character. 'Vibrant, alive, a personality one could not ignore for a moment' (ABH, p. 238), Bess Sedgwick, like Blanche, is depicted as a woman who lives life to the full, and this attractive characterisation encompasses the fact that they leave their children. Both texts insist on deliberating over that fact, rather than sweeping it to one side, but the deliberation results in the sense that children need stability and domesticity. Bess proves her maternal love in sacrificing herself for her daughter, it is not that she lacks a mother's love but that she lacks the taste for domesticity. Mothers who leave children for their own needs and desires are not seen in purely negative terms, and often they prove the most vibrant and attractive of the characters in their respective novels.

The other corollary of a liaison outside of marriage, the mistress of a married man, carries much more textual negativity. Such women are portrayed as vamps, like Mrs Chantry in 'Triangle at Rhodes', the short story that concentrates on the 'eternal triangle', 'famous since sixteen for her beauty' she 'had had five husbands and innumerable lovers' ('TAR', p. 170). Those watching her seduction of Douglas Gold comment, "'Can't she leave any man alone?'" ('TAR', p. 175). Lucky Dyson has a similar predatory liaison with Edward Hillingdon in *A Caribbean Mystery*, so that Miss Marple's comments on the Dyson and Hillingdon foursome of friends, "'I wasn't sure which was married to which'" (CM, p. 20). Such women, overtly sexualised, deliberately set out to wreck marriages. Mrs Chantry's previous husbands 'had been shed negligently in the divorce court' ('TAR', p. 170), indicating her lack of appreciation of the sanctity of marriage. These women are represented differently to those spouses or fiancées, usually men, who helplessly fall in love at first sight with someone else, and honestly confess this to their partner. The 'man mad' mistresses are constructed as seducing men for their own aggrandisement, for selfish reasons, and are roundly condemned. Indeed, such extra-marital liaisons are one staple of the make-up of the murderers in Christie's work, if the murder is committed by more than one (*Murder on the Orient Express* excepted). Christie's novels, in highlighting the vulnerability of the long-term marriage commitment founded on transient sexual desire, perhaps clarifies why the intrepid hero Bridget insisted on a betrothal anchored in 'liking' rather than 'loving' because it was more 'real', in *Murder is Easy*. In *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945), the married politician Stephen Farraday's passionate liaison with the beautiful Rosemary Barton ends when she threatens his ruin by disclosure. 'She was smiling up at him, that same enchanting smile that had once made his heart turn over and his bones ache with longing.

Now it made him merely impatient' (*SC*, p. 65). Sexual desire does not last without compatibility, 'He looked at her with eyes from which the last traces of scales had fallen. A lovely creature with the brains of a hen! He'd been mad – utterly and completely mad. But he was sane again now' (*SC*, p. 66). Interestingly, what sobers the man in the illicit liaison is when the mistress insists he give up his work for her, as Veronica Cray did with John Christow.

She didn't realize. She didn't care. She took no interest in his work, in his ambitions, in his career. All she wanted was to hear him reiterate again and again that he loved her. 'Just as much as ever? Tell me again that you *really* love me?' (*SC*, p. 64)

It is this lack of concern in the man himself, and particularly in his ambitions in relation to his work, and the use of him as simply a boost to the woman's egoistic concern with her own loveliness in her ability to ensnare, that spells the death knell for desire in Christie's sexual affairs. Compatibility and mutual interest are needed for long-term happiness. Love and sexual desire are not enough. Few men, in Christie's *oeuvre*, will give up everything for love of a mistress, though they may well plot to keep everything and the mistress, by murdering a wealthy wife.

Marriage is an important institution in Christie's texts, but there is at least one spectacularly sympathetic mistress, in *The Hollow*, Henrietta Savernake. Susan Rowland has called her a 'respectable' mistress,³⁸ and despite the apparent illogicality of this phrase it is an accurate description. Like Mrs Welman and Sir Lewis Rycroft in *Sad Cypress*, the liaison is discreet. Only after John Christow's death can Henrietta voice her emotions in public.

As she spoke, Midge realized with a slight sense of shock that this was the first time the bald fact had been put into words. It had been accepted by them all, by Lucy and Henry, by Midge, by Edward even, that Henrietta loved John Christow, but nobody had ever so much as hinted at the fact in words before. (*H*, p. 301)

Unlike the vamps, Henrietta does not flaunt the affair in public, but keeps it discreetly hidden where it does no damage to the reputation of the institution of marriage, and this is linked both to discretion and to class, Henrietta is a leisured upper-class Angkatell (class and social discretion were important in *Sad Cypress* too). Nevertheless, Henrietta's liaison with John Christow is not only known by all the group, but

more importantly is accepted as such by all but Edward. They do not disapprove (the double negative is a more appropriate description of their acceptance, than a positive). Lucy Angkatell relies on Henrietta's kindness to look after the wife as well as amusing the husband, and Henrietta's kindness and goodness is carefully established before the reader has to negotiate that she is a mistress. Henrietta refuses to hide the fact, once John's death has ended the marriage, rejecting Poirot's description as John's lover because "One likes to describe things as – as accurately as possible". His interest in Henrietta Savernake grew stronger. He said: "You had been Dr Christow's mistress" (H, p. 235). The text, unlike the liaison, is anything but discreet, Henrietta's relationship is foregrounded, as is its social acceptance among the group. As she explains to the old-fashioned Edward, "John doesn't want to get a divorce from his wife. And I don't know that I should want to marry John if he did. It isn't – it isn't the least like you think" (H, p. 92). – for this is, in fact, a completely workable *ménage à trois*. Henrietta explains to Poirot,

I suppose you're thinking that if I cared at all about Gerda's peace of mind, I would never have become John's mistress. But you don't understand – it was not like that. I did not break up his married life. (H, p. 237)

Henrietta's real difference from the vamps is this insistence on supporting the marriage and her selflessness in loving 'John Christow better than she loved herself' (H, p. 253). Rather than taking him away from his work, she enables his medical research, reading up on it, refusing to let him make love to her as an escape from facing its difficulties, and after his death, encouraging his patient so that his work will live on. She contemplates giving up her own career of sculpture for him if it were necessary and finally supports his wife after his death.

He was asking me to protect Gerda. You see, he loved Gerda . . . And he knew that I would do anything he wanted, because I loved him. (H, p. 372)

Henrietta's empathetic generosity marks her as different from the usual run of mistresses, using their sexuality for selfish reasons, and in making her 'respectable' also constructs her as sympathetic. The textual identification lies, subversively, with the mistress figure. Different characters

insist that John ‘really’ loved both Gerda and Henrietta, and could not bear to lose either. This is not a case of a husband tired of his wife, for all it initially appears as such, it is a true *ménage à trois*. The text is insistent on such a triangle as a viable option and the mistress, Henrietta, is presented as an independent woman, strong, caring and ‘really kind – kind all through, not just on the top’ (*H*, p. 11). She has an ‘unswerving rectitude’ (*H*, p. 37), has ‘integrity’ (*H*, p. 233), and Poirot concludes his denouement with the approving, “I have admired you always very much” (*H*, p. 375). Indeed, the novel makes so little fuss about the arrangement, and creates so attractive and independent a character in Henrietta, that it can obscure how illicit, how subversive, within conventional terms, the situation is. Here, the career woman with sexual desires finds an arrangement that fulfils all her needs, allowing her the independence to carry on her sculpture without the need to subjugate herself to a husband and domesticity, while enjoying the full emotional and sexual pleasures of a deep and committed love affair. The surprise is that Christie’s representation on the page denigrates neither the situation nor the characters. *The Hollow* is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the favourite for many feminist readers of Christie; the text has a density in its focus on characterisation and on the problems surrounding how men and women negotiate the needs of both career and love. In the Westmacott *Giant’s Bread* (1930), the composer Vernon Deyre turns to living with his mistress, the singer Jane Harding, after his wife denies his return from the dead, in order to keep her conventionality and her second, prosperous marriage. Jane’s sacrifice of her own career for his, damaging her voice in premiering his opera, presents her as selfless mistress and their living in Russia protects the conventional institution from scandal. Like Henrietta, Jane proves the most kind and sympathetic of the protagonists. Another Westmacott novel, *Absent in the Spring* (1944), which contains another more discreet and equally sympathetic mistress in Leslie Sherston, has the knowledgeable headmistress apportion careers to ‘girls of marked intelligence’ while ‘to those of a more domestic calibre the duties of wifedom and motherhood were mentioned’ (*AIS*, p. 69). Novels such as *The Hollow* (1946) and *Appointment with Death* (1939) meditate on alternative ways in which intelligent, career women need not remain spinsters. While Sarah King marries a feminised man, Henrietta falls for the vibrant John Christow, whom Poirot designates as having ‘self-assurance, confidence, virility – all the intensive male qualities’ (*H*, p. 246), and the viable relationship between these two powerful, career-minded lovers is a subversive one of a *ménage à trois*. Henrietta, Leslie Sherston and

Laura Welman are not the norm when it comes to the *oeuvre's* representation of mistresses, but they are intensely interesting exceptions in relation to the construction of differing, viable femininities outside the familial norm.

In *Nemesis* (1971), female love becomes more doubly deviant in its illicit, unspoken nature. Clotilde Bradbury-Scott is an elderly distressed gentlewoman living with her two sisters. Christie allows Miss Marple to sense her true nature, even while her gender expectations prevent her seeing the truth:

she would have made a magnificent Clytemnestra – she could have stabbed a husband in his bath with exultation. But since she had never had a husband, that solution wouldn't do. Miss Marple could not see her murdering anyone else but a husband – and there had been no Agammemnon in this house³⁹.

In this case it is Miss Marple's conventional heterosexuality that prevents her seeing that Clotilde has murdered her lover to prevent her leaving to 'live with a man and have children, marriage and normality'.⁴⁰ While heterosexuality is held up as 'normal', and the deviant behaviour of murder is linked to the deviancy of lesbianism in this text, Clotilde's love is nevertheless portrayed as a true passion, which prevents her disfiguring the corpse and suffering real grief. In making this qualification, I read the representation of lesbian desire as slightly more complex than Susan Rowland's acceptance that 'it is unsurprising that lesbian desire becomes the menace behind the ordinariness in *Nemesis*'.⁴¹ It is true that Miss Marple's insistence upon the normalcy of heterosexuality is strident in the seventies, but the text does assert the depth of Clotilde's feelings. Twenty years earlier, and only two years after Radcliffe Hall's banned *The Well of Loneliness* became legally available again,⁴² in the 1950 *Murder is Announced*, what is even more surprising is that the lesbian relationship of the 'mannish' Miss Hinchcliffe and the fluffy Miss Murgatroyd is presented with unquestioned and unremarked acceptance of their viable partnership and Hinch's grief at her partner's murder is treated sympathetically and given depth of feeling.

Nobody offered Miss Hinchcliffe sympathy or mentioned Miss Murgatroyd's death. The ravaged face of the tall vigorous woman told its own tale, and would have made any expression of sympathy an impertinence. (*MIA*, p. 325)

Christie has not always treated lesbianism as abnormal, and she undoubtedly unsettles complacent beliefs in 'compulsory heterosexuality'⁴³ by including lesbian partnerships in her novels.

New forms of domesticity

Christie's texts tend to negatively represent the dutiful, selfless wife of the Victorian or Edwardian ideal, the image of the dependant ivy twining round the masculine rugged oak tree. Like the women unable to access education and a career, such dutiful women are thwarted and baffled in their lives. Joan Scudamore, the conventional wife in the Mary Westmacott novel, *Absent in the Spring* (1944), stranded in the desert away from her normal duties as wife and mother, slowly begins to unravel the sham that her life had become, the 'absence' of self as the title indicates, in trying to encompass the appropriate appearance of middle-class conventions, marrying the man she loves, 'And you wanted children? And a comfortable home. . . . And to live happily ever after' (*AIS*, p. 15). The novel slowly unpacks this domestic ideal, revealing the empty, bloodless lack of life. Beginning with her complacent comparison of her life against the woman who abandoned her family for love and the woman who sticks by a family outside respectability (because of the husband's embezzlement), both alternative women are shown to be failures neither as mothers nor as wives but depicted as vibrant and generous. It is Joan who is presented as 'bloodless' and 'a prig'. The novel opens with her self-satisfied view of her domestic life:

They were all nice-looking healthy children with pleasant manners. . . . Joan felt a little gentle glow as she turned away from her image in the glass. She thought, Well it's nice to feel one's been a success at one's job. I never wanted a career, or anything of that kind. I was quite content to be a wife and mother. (*AIS*, pp. 4–5)

The quote's focus is on social appearance, a veneer that brings credit on the mother. Forced to examine her life, Joan has to acknowledge that her children are alienated from her, the youngest 'was so unhappy at home that she'd married the first man who asked her in order to escape' (*AIS*, p. 8), the husband has succumbed to a socially acceptable job that leaves him 'half a man', 'unhappy and unfulfilled' (*AIS*, p. 95), and on the death of his mistress he suffers a nervous breakdown. The children challenge her belief that she runs the household, insisting that is due to their servants,

and that far from 'sacrificing' herself for them, she has selfishly forced them to fit into the crippling norms and conventions of social success. Joan briefly acknowledges the monstrous egoism and the 'lazy thinking' in slavishly fitting into the 'Edwardian' (*AIS*, pp. 99–100) conventions of domesticity, and the harm this has done to the whole family, 'all my silly pretenses and shams fell away' (*AIS*, p. 143). Convention has created a self that exists separately, 'She mustn't think of Joan Scudamore. But that's myself! No it isn't. Yes it is. . . . Odd the feeling she had of someone walking with her. Someone she knew quite well' (*AIS*, p. 114). It is a realisation that does not last, her return to domesticity invokes a return to her blind, self-satisfied complacency with surfaces. Beneath the surface of the domestic, middle-class woman's view of her life, the text indicates an empty abyss. 'Life', the novel argues, 'is meant to be lived, not glossed over' (*AIS*, p. 70). The novel gradually and unerringly unpacks the emptiness of a 'circumscribed' domesticity lived to fit social conventions, the very trivialising of feminine intelligence that Vera Brittain castigated in 1932 in 'I Denounce Domesticity!'⁴⁴ and the woman who claims to have 'devoted' herself to the husband and children is shown to be monstrous in her self-satisfied blind lack of empathy, and isolated, understanding nothing at all about love. *Absent in the Spring* is a book-length indictment of traditional, conventional middle-class wifedom. Gerda, in *The Hollow*, the dutiful wife John Chrsitow chose, fulfils even more the Victorian ideal of selfless devotion, 'someone who'd take her ideas of life from him, who would accept his decisions and who wouldn't have, for one moment, any ideas of her own' (*H*, p. 44), proves an irritation in her stupidity, and he turns to the detached ingeniousness of Henrietta as a welcome contrast. Gerda is constructed as paralysed by indecision and lack of self-worth, unable to decide for a whole chapter, whether to send the mutton back to be re-heated at lunch. She is portrayed in one of Henrietta's sculptures as 'The Worshipper', 'submission, adoration – and that final devotion that is beyond, not this side, of idolatry' (*H*, p. 28). The conventional, devoted wife figure not only demonstrates the damage done to the woman, but goes on to demonstrate further that a life devoted to the convention can turn vindictive and dangerous if the myth is not fulfilled since that invalidates her life of second-placed submission, destroying Gerda's notion of her life's worth as harshly as Joan's. John's liaison with the actress Veronica Cray (not his long-term relationship with Henrietta) cracks the veneer of her conventional marriage, as she explains to Henrietta:

I'd trusted John. I'd believed in him – as though he were God. I thought he was the noblest man in the world. I thought he was

everything that was fine and noble. And it was all a lie! I was left with nothing at all.' (*H*, p. 367)

Patriarchal constructions of domesticity, with the wife devoted and subservient to the husband, are unpicked to show the mythic nature of the masculine power relation. Such a traditionally conventional relationship proves both unsatisfying to masculinity (in contrast to equality of relationship) and damaging to femininity, but the unmasking of the pretence, the myth, can prove not only unsettling, but also dangerous. Bella Tanois, in *Dumb Witness* (1937), is a similarly baffled wife who has devoted herself to husband and children, and does not get the expected reward for her devotion. Maude Abernethie's devotion to her invalid husband, in *After the Funeral* (1953), is represented not as heroic, but perverse.

This big, stalwart matter-of-fact woman, so healthy, so vigorous, so full of common sense, and yet so strangely, almost pitifully, vulnerable in one spot. Her love for her husband was maternal love. . . Her invalid husband had become her child, to be shielded, guarded, watched over. And perhaps, being the stronger character of the two, she had unconsciously imposed on him a state of invalidism greater than might otherwise have been the case.

'Poor Mrs Tim,' thought Mr Entwhistle to himself. (*AF*, p. 51)

Many of the novels, both detective and straight literary ones, unpack the emptiness, insufficiency and perversity of the unequal power relations of the traditional marital roles of devoted wife and masterful husband. Dorothy Hughes's (2002) view of the theme of all the Westmacott novels, 'Sacrificial love destroys, not redeems',⁴⁵ is one that can be extended to a large part of the detective novels as well, in the representation of married life. Wives who sacrifice their own desires to serve husband and children are castigated rather than praised; their thwarted lives often damaging those they strive to care for. But if conventional, patriarchal marital power relations are found wanting, what types of viable marital partnerships does Christie offer in their place? The representation of young couples offers a range of unconventional viable modern domestic relationships that work.

In *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962), Jason Rudd questions the notion of marriage as a sufficient narrative closure or fairy-tale ending, in discussing his wife's unrealistic expectations:

She is incapable, Mr Craddock, of taking a rational, prudent view of life. In her previous marriages she has expected, like a child reading a fairy story, to live happy ever afterwards. . . . But marriage is not like that, Chief-Inspector. There can be no rapture continued indefinitely. We are fortunate indeed if we can achieve a life of quiet content, affection, and serene and sober happiness. (*MCFSTS*, p. 396)

Indeed, a few couples try and hang on to the rapture by pretending they are not married, attempting to keep the excitement and rapture of an affair after the wedding. Basil Blake in *Body in the Library* (1942) and his peroxide 'girlfriend' fail to deceive Miss Marple and in *One Two Buckle My Shoe* (1940), a married couple choose not to live together but meet clandestinely as if they were lovers because 'it kept the romance alive. . . we enjoyed the secrecy of it. We should have found open domesticity dull' (*OTBMS*, p. 245), highlighting the problematic nature of a long-term commitment for those who like excitement.

Wives, in particular, attempt new marriage formations in contrast to their male partners, unless the focus is specifically on relationships, as in *The Hollow*. The 'old-fashioned' Captain Hastings's betrothal to his unconventional 'modern neurotic girl who jazes from morning till night, smokes like a chimney, and uses language which would make a Billingsgate fishwoman blush' (*MOL*, p. 5) has her rejecting the conventional ending of Cinderella and her Prince Charming, and highlighting in her negation what Cranny Francis terms 'economic stories displaced into love story terms',⁴⁶ the primacy of feminine social mobility in 'catching' the rich husband: "'Cinderella married the Prince, you remember. I'm not a Prince but – "She interrupted me. "Cinderella warned him, I'm sure. You see, she couldn't promise to turn into a princess. She was only a little scullion after all –"' (*MOL*, p. 220). Like Anne Beddingfield in *The Man in the Brown Suit* of four years later, Dulcie Duveen and Hastings emigrate to run a ranch in Argentina, and away from conventional English expectations have a happy marriage and four children. Mrs Suzanne Blair, Anne's accomplice in the thriller, holidays alone to South Africa, annoying her Foreign Office husband with her extravagant telegrams and enjoying innocent flirtations with unattached men such as Race, since "'it is so safe and pleasant to make love to a devoted wife"' (*MIBS*, p. 92). Devoted to her husband, she acknowledges he finds her "'wearing to live with"' and "'loves being married"' (*MIBS*, p. 92) since they happily inhabit separate lives and, at times, separate continents. Such a representation takes even further the concept of the 'semi-detached marriage' that Vera Brittain advocates

in 1928. 'Many recently married men and women . . . now understand that true comradeship means something more than always being in one another's company, that . . . perpetual association is unnecessary though intermittent reunion is desirable.'⁴⁷ In the 1952 *They Do It With Mirrors*, Gina attempts a similar pleasurable flirtation with her two artistic cousins but, since the husband is not secure in her affections, the result is less happy. Wally forces a showdown, demanding '“My idea of a wife is the kind of wife who used to go along with the old pioneers, ready for anything, hardship, unfamiliar country, danger, strange surroundings”' (*TDIWM*, p. 638) and Gina's final capitulation has Miss Marple referring approvingly to Kate's 'taming' in *The Taming of the Shrew*, implying that marital relationships of strong, wayward women have not changed much since Shakespeare's time. The issue here, though, is partly Wally's passive, secondary status during the majority of the novel. Mrs Marple's approval is partly of his reassertion of his own equality, since the wish is for his wife to share adventurously in his 'danger' rather than simply to be subservient. Despard rescues the strong-minded, adventurous Rhoda in *Cards on the Table* (1957), and in *The Pale Horse* (1961), the protagonist visits them at home. Rhoda's married life is very much country life, helping organise the village fete and forever involved with her large dogs. The dogs appear three times, while the children never do, for all they are living at home not at boarding school. Rhoda is attracted by the adventure of detection, but Despard paternalistically refuses to allow her to intervene. Initially falling 'into laughing argument' (*PH*, p. 64), Rhoda is allowed to be 'annoyed' when Despard insists she is his 'responsibility' and she cannot get involved (*PH*, 126). Despite Despard's high handedness, theirs is portrayed as a successful, happy marriage.

Sometimes it is the woman who holds the dominance, particularly if she holds the purse strings. Lady Tamplin, in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), marries a fourth time 'for pure pleasure . . . an extremely good-looking young man of twenty-seven, with delightful manners, a keen love of sport, and an appreciation of this world's goods' (*MBT*, pp. 46–7). The vacuous but handsome Chubby does not object to Lady Tamplin's imperiousness and it is a contented marriage despite the power switch. Sophia, in *The Crooked House* (1949), succeeds to the position of 'pater-familias', the domestic tyrant of the Leonides dynasty because she is the strongest character of the family. And Sarah King, in *Appointment with Death* (1930), is attracted to the weaker, feminine Raymond and the text calls attention to the power switch in relation to gendered expectations: 'It was St George and the Dragon reversed. It was she who was the rescuer

and Raymond who was the chained victim' (*AID*, p. 481). But Christie has always countenanced strong women with 'feminine' men, what matters is the complementariness of the relationship, rather than the gender stereotypes. 'Yes . . . definitely the type to appeal to her temperamentally. Sarah King had strength – she possessed well-balanced nerves, cool wits and a resolute will. Dr Gerard judged the young man to be sensitive, perceptive, diffident and intensely suggestible' (*AID*, p. 431). The text that has specifically questioned gender stereotypes goes on to reject the binary opposition of the categories in a statement worthy of Kristeva or Toril Moi in the 1980s arguing for the mythic cultural construction of gender,⁴⁸ when young professional doctor, Sarah King, forcefully argues,

'I'm sorry but I do hate this differentiation between the sexes. "*The modern girl has a thoroughly business-like attitude towards life.*" That sort of thing. It's not a bit true! Some girls are business-like and some aren't. Some men are sentimental and muddle-headed, others are clear-headed and logical. There are just different types of brains. Sex only matters where sex is directly concerned.' (*AWD*, p. 471)

Christie's strength lies in depicting a whole range and diversity of femininities and masculinities that form workable relationships. Some female characters inhabit culturally construed 'feminine' behaviour, some 'masculine'; and so do the male characters. Where Wodehouse would find men dominated by their women risible, Christie finds it an acceptable partnership. The worldly, perceptive Mrs Dane Clement, in *The Moving Finger* and *The Pale Horse*, complements her husband's work as the vicar:

'My husband's a very good man . . . And that makes things difficult sometimes. Good people, you see, don't really understand evil. . . . I think it had better be *me*'

A faint smile came to my lips. 'Is evil your department?' I asked.

'Yes it is. It's important in a parish to know all about the various – well – sins that are going on.'

'Isn't sin your husband's province? His official business, so to speak?'

'The forgiveness of sins,' she corrected me. 'He can give absolution. I can't. But I . . . can get sin arranged and classified for him.' (*PH*, p. 67)

Happy marriages are not usually about domesticity in the usual sense but about affection and compatibility, and some young wives are deliberately anti-domestic, without being either unsympathetic or unattractive.

Grisleda, the young wife of the vicar Len Clement in *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) is introduced as 'a shocking housekeeper' (MAV, p. 5) and apparently inappropriate for a mature vicar's wife.

Griselda is nearly twenty years younger than myself. She is most distractingly pretty and quite incapable of taking anything seriously. She is incompetent in every way, and extremely trying to live with. She treats the parish as a huge kind of joke arranged for her amusement. I have endeavoured to form her mind and failed. I am more than ever convinced that celibacy is desirable for the clergy. I have frequently hinted as much to Griselda, but she has only laughed. (MAV, p. 6)

Such a mismatched couple function well because of the equality of their relationship, once Len accepts the impossibility of an old-fashioned 'forming' of a wife's 'mind'. Ebullient, witty and intelligent, Griselda has rejected the role of a trophy wife of a more successful man, 'a feather in their cap' (MAV, p. 9). Throughout the novel there is a running joke about her domestic incompetence, the appalling food and poorly trained servant, but as she argues, "Bad food and lots of dust and dead wasps is really nothing to make a fuss about" (MAV, p. 8) in a marriage where the wife is interested in her husband's problems, sympathetic and affectionate and sexually desirable. When she finds herself pregnant, Griselda resolves to be conventional, 'a real "wife and mother"(as they say in books)', purchasing two books on 'Household Management' and one on 'Mother Love' to 'turn me out a pattern', the required normalcy which she is aware she transgresses. However, Griselda is too intelligent to take the books seriously; 'They are all screamingly funny – not intentionally, you know' (MAV, p. 187). The text reinforces the point that, although completely undomesticated and inappropriate for a 'vicaress', she is 'a very good wife' and the marriage is happy, because of their mutual love; "What more do you want?" "Nothing" (MAV, pp. 187–8). Maureen Summerhayes, in *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), is similarly domestically incompetent, and Poirot 'suffers' in her Guest House where, by the fifties, it is impossible to get any staff other than a daily. The rooms are poorly dusted, upholstery is faded and dirty, and pictures hang crookedly. The food is similarly inedible, 'Luncheon was under-stewed oxtail, watery potatoes, and what Maureen hoped optimistically might turn out to be pancakes' (MMD, p. 123). Like Rhoda, Maureen is also accompanied by large dogs that sleep on the chairs, eat the hen's food and attack the ducks, since for Christie large dogs signify country

living. The haphazard, incompetent attempt at market gardening and a Guest House does nothing to affect her sympathetic characterisation, with her 'red hair and an attractively freckled face' (*MMD*, p. 42) and an unconventionality that has her exiting via windows to help her husband pick spinach. For the immaculate Poirot, the only part of the Guest House he can 'tolerate was his hostess' (*MMD*, p. 44) and Dr Rendell finds her 'charming' (*MMD*, p. 109). Characterisations such as Maureen Summerhayes and Griselda Clementa argue that domesticity is not the issue within successful marriages, but love, equality of power relations and a complementariness. Beauty and charm are employed to make them eminently successful as wives for their husbands despite their lack of culinary and dusting skills. Maureen's children are away at boarding school and make no appearance and only one reference, to their fun in running wild in the holidays. In *The Clocks* (1963), the harassed Mrs Ramsay gives an unsentimental view of middle-class boys home from boarding school for the holidays, as she counts the days for their return and sweeps up the broken crockery and mollifies the neighbours.

How heavenly it had been five weeks ago when she met them at the station. Their tempestuous and affectionate welcome! The way they had rushed all over the house and garden. A special cake baked for tea. And now – what was she looking forward to now? A day of complete peace. No enormous meals to prepare, no incessant cleaning up. She loved the boys – they were fine boys, no doubt of that. She was proud of them. But they were so exhausting. Their appetite, their vitality, the *noise* they made. (*C*, p. 69)

The text, and Inspector Hardcastle, agrees that they are 'fine fellows' but boisterous, and it transpires that she is managing alone because she has refused to follow her defecting husband to Russia for the sake of the boys. Loving her husband, this has been 'a knockout blow' but 'He's got to choose his way of life and I've got to choose mine' (*C*, p. 171). Maternal love triumphs, as the text implies it should do, but there is a deliberate anti-sentimental depiction of the realities of bringing up two high-spirited boys alone. Gerda or Joan are able to inhabit a mythic maternal role because they are blind to the realities of their children's needs and personalities, and their lack of comprehension stunts the children. Mrs Ramsay's harassed exhaustion of a woman refusing to dutifully follow her husband represents a mother in tune with her children's needs and the realities of bringing up children.

Quietly, around the perimeters of the plot of detection, Christie's novels challenge the traditional views of the feminine role within marriage, rejecting the old domestic ideal of homemaker, for one of more partnership and wit. Strong, dominant women can be as happily married as strong men, but then so can gentler, more passive and incompetent women too. As Sarah King insists in *Appointment with Death*, in Christie it is not the sex, or the gender expectations, that is important but the various, diverse ways in which couples negotiate their domestic relationships. The modern wives in her novels, including Tuppence Beresford, argue the need to forge workable partnerships of equal status in new, more modern ways alongside the older characters living the lives of a different, more traditional generation. Both within and outside of the familial institutions, Christie's novels chart a whole range of available femininities within the middle classes that are attractive and, at times, emulatory. As Walton and Jones implied, 'Women's crime fiction tells women readers a story about their own lives' and Agatha Christie's fiction, by its rejection of the easy stereotypes and its huge variety of differing, sympathetic female characters, offers women readers choices and an open-minded thoughtfulness about the roles and expectations of femininity.

4

Women Behaving Badly

Most critics of detective fiction focus on the detectives. They may also analyse the types of crime or plotting, such as the puzzle plot or the locked room plot, or the hard-boiled tradition. Few focus directly on the villain. In relation to Christie, Bargainnier (1980) is the one major exception,¹ since he argued that to not do so, when analysing her fiction, would prove 'both awkward and artificial'.² Insisting that he is giving serious weight to her writing, he therefore finds it 'impossible for me to approach that fiction as a mere puzzle, whose "answer" is its only importance'.³ It is an important argument since, in considering the gender of villains in Christie's *oeuvre*, we find perhaps one of her most innovatory and subversive elements. Bargainnier, though he discusses the fact that 'anyone' can be a murderer and notes six women alongside six men, never develops the concept of women behaving badly because his main focus is on classification of the different kinds of crime, though in the latter regard he does note that more women murder for love, than do men, 'For Christie, love is more overpowering in women than in men, the traditional view of her time and class'.⁴ This silence around her villains is partly explained by Agatha Christie Ltd's previous insistence that critics should not reveal the criminal, an embargo that hampered Shaw and Vanacker's (1991) examination of Miss Marple.⁵ Gillian Gill's excellent biography (1990), surprisingly, benefited from an easing of the stranglehold, and was able to mention a number of villains and argue for their gendered openness (though in her introduction she pointed out that she named in only 5, leaving 73 others still a mystery). Odette l'Henry Evans' brief 'Croquet and Serial Killers' (1994) also discusses female killers and places them as more subtle and interesting than the male murderers, but the brevity of her piece with the consequent lack of many quotations allowed it to slip passed notice. The

Christie company, in continuing to fetishise the identity of the criminals for initially understandable commercial reasons, appears to have reinforced the critical focus on the puzzle element of the detective stories as if this was the most important part of her novels, to the detriment of the literary elements. It also perhaps explains partially why less feminist focus has been accorded to Christie than to her fellow Golden Age writer, Dorothy L. Sayers, who has been credited with making gendered innovations which Christie had made ten years before her. For many Christie fans and readers, re-reading the novels is as pleasurable as the first read, since character interaction and thematic issues are just as important as the undoubted ingenuity of the plotting, and it has been noticeable, when combing second-hand bookshops for material, how few people jettison their Christie texts in contrast to later detective texts (Patricia Cornwall seems particularly to suffer from being jettisoned). The boost in sales concurrent with a film or television adaptation demonstrates that knowing the conclusion does not adversely affect saleability and by now, decades on from their first publication, most people 'know' who killed Roger Ackroyd or the corpse on the Orient Express. On the BBC Radio Four programme 'A Good Read' in June of this year, while reviewing *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the mystery writer Kate Mosse⁶ suggested one could not go wrong in re-reading all Christie's detective novels once a year. The enormous affection that Christie readers have for the novels points to them containing much more than just a crossword puzzle ingenuity for hiding the villain.

The late Angela Carter was fond of arguing that whereas men can be villains in a wonderful plethora of ways, women in literature are judged purely by their sexual practices. In the introduction to the anthology *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* (1986) she argues, 'morality as regards woman has nothing to do with ethics; it means sexual morality and nothing but sexual morality. To be a wayward girl usually has something to do with pre-marital sex; to be a wicked woman has something to do with adultery. . . . What hypocrisy!'⁷ To challenge traditional concepts of ethics and femininity, Carter became fascinated with the story of Lizzie Borden, the girl who killed her parents, and during the eighties and nineties, Carter wrote two short stories on the subject and considered writing a novel.⁸ However, from the twenties onwards, Agatha Christie had been consistently considering women equally able to commit wickedness and depicted them as blackmailers, thieves and murderers for over four decades. Traditionally within detective fiction, while women could be blackmailers or thieves, they were rarely murderers, since that was seen as aggressively unfeminine. So, when the crimes involved in

the detective novel narrowed down to the solving of the classic murder, the whodunit of the Golden Age format, women became the victims, even the suspects, but rarely the murderer, Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935), set in a woman's college, being an exception. Where the American hard-boiled tradition created the vamp, reinforcing a fear of feminine sexual power, 'In familiar patriarchal terms her main weapon (her defining characteristic and only value) is her body with which she attempts to seduce and destroy her detective pursuer.'⁹ As Gill puts it, 'Unlike almost all her English mystery-writing contemporaries, male and female, Agatha Christie does not assume that murder is essentially a masculine business or that women murderers exude the naked female sexuality loved and feared by the American "hard-boiled" school.'¹⁰

A glance at Christie's villains reveals a different and subversive treatment of femininity. From her first novel to her last, from the 1920s to the 1970s, Christie's detective novels contain a plethora of female villains. *After the Funeral*, *And Then There Were None*, *Appointment with Death*, *At Bertram's Hotel*, *The Big Four*, *The Body in the Library*, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, *Cards on the Table*, *Cat Among the Pigeons*, *The Clocks*, *Crooked House*, *Classic Mysteries*, *Death Comes at the End*, *Curtain*, *Death on the Nile*, *Dumb Witness*, *Elephants Can Remember*, *Endless Night*, *Evil Under the Sun*, *Five Little Pigs*, *Hickory Dickory Dock*, *Hallowe'en Party*, *The Hollow*, *Lord Edgeware Dies*, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Murder at the Vicarage*, *Murder is Easy*, *Murder on the Links*, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *N or M?*, *Nemesis*, *One Two Buckle My Shoe*, *Ordeal by Innocence*, *Partners in Crime*, *Peril at End House*, *Postern of Fate*, *Sad Cypress*, *Sparkling Cyanide*, *Third Girl*, *The Seven Dials Mystery*, *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* – all have some form of female villain or crook, though not necessarily the murderer. Many of the novels, such as *And Then There Were None*, *Cards on the Table* and *Cat Among the Pigeons* have a number of women crooks and murderers within the one text, while others may have women purely as a sidekick partner in the crime. Gill documents,

Christie's balanced presentation of the sexes is very noticeable in the even-handedness with which she chooses male and female murderers. Married or lover accomplices conspire to murder in fourteen novels, while unabettted murderess operate in sixteen novels and unabettted murderers in nineteen novels.¹¹

Odetta l'Henry Evans, one of the few feminist critics to note the preponderance of female murderers, argues that they only make their

appearance in the later novels, with male murderers being the norm in the earlier work,¹² but examination does not bear this out. Consistently, throughout her career, Christie allows women the powerful centrality of disruptive agency. Christie's women behaving badly portray an equality with the male villains, the same madness and sanity, the same greed and egotism, that is even more subversive of femininity in her villains than in her detectives. In her villains, Christie challenges gender stereotypes and expectations in much the same way as her protagonist in *Appointment with Death* (1938) did, 'I'm sorry but I do hate this differentiation between the sexes . . . There are just different types of brains' (AWD, p. 471).

Traditional critics considering femininity often quote from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), the statement from the criminal narrator: 'Surely if a woman committed a crime like murder, she'd be sufficiently cold-blooded to enjoy the fruits of it without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance' (MRA, p. 10).¹³ What they ignore is the crucial qualification by a woman that follows this monolithic statement: 'There probably are women like that, but Mrs Ferrars wasn't one of them. She was a mass of nerves.' Christie consistently problematises attempts to stereotype what constitutes femininity, and one of the strengths of her presentations is her insistence upon a whole variety and complexity of viable models of femininity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the creation of her female villains, where one of Christie's main strength is their diversity. What is surprising is just how prominent female murderers are throughout her work. Christie insists on an equal agency in behaving badly and asserts the competency of femininity to disrupt society. Women in the roles of the villain are displayed as disruptive, deviant and actively 'evil'. Evil agency is not reserved solely for the vamp figure since as Susan Rowland argues, Christie's plots 'detoxify feminine sexuality as the unproblematic spur to crime'¹⁴ because femmes fatales are rarely keys to the murders, but just another red-herring. Female murderers are motivated by greed and fear of disclosure, as much as by sex and, where sex/love is the motive, the conventionally feminine figures are often the culprits rather than the 'man mad' (Christie and Miss Marple's usual term for 'nymphomaniacs').¹⁵ Christie has some gloriously subversive female villains who disrupt conventional textual and cultural expectations, because of her predilection to choose the 'the least likely suspect'.¹⁶ She plays with the readers' conventional stereotypes, turning them to her advantage in constructing the whodunit, as has often been noted. What tends to be overlooked is how she profoundly unsettles what constitutes femininity as well, making a whole range of female behaviour dangerously, murderously active.

The most approved and attractive of the female villains are thieves rather than killers and, in Countess Rossakoff and Lady Bess Sedgewick, Christie constructs mature and swashbuckling women characters who earn the detectives' and the texts' admiration. Bess Sedgewick, as well as being a mother who refuses to accept the maternal role, is the brains and daring behind a gang of train and bank robbers, a complex and sophisticated crime syndicate. Famous for her amazing adventures, the detective admits,

She's a woman in a thousand . . . One of the wild ones. Oh we've some of them in every generation. You can't tame them, you can't bring them into the community and make them live in law and order. They go their own way. (*ABH*, p. 315)

The fact that she breaks the law and lives outside of the community's rules is not held against her, indeed it gives her the extra edge to her adventurousness:

Everything about Bess Sedgewick was positive. Her vitality, her energy, her magnetic attraction. He admired Lady Sedgewick. He always had admired her. He admired her courage and had always been excited by her exploits . . . He took his hat off to her, mentally. (*ABH*, p. 238)

Even Miss Marple 'with the most intense interest . . . indulged in a frankly avid stare' (*ABH*, p. 27) at this personage always in the papers. Exciting and beautiful she 'was said to be the second best-dressed woman in Europe' (*ABH*, p. 27) and lived life to the full. Lady Bess does not steal out of sordid monetary gain, but for the adventure of it. And the fact that she is aristocratic is also important to this characterisation; bourgeois swashbuckling would not have the same élan. It is vital to the depiction that no one gets killed in the robberies and that they are managed with flair and brilliance, to add to the element of swashbuckling lawlessness. Bess Sedgewick, always admirable as a character, redeems herself even further at the close by sacrificing her life for her daughter. Countess Vera Rossakoff also combines many of these characteristics. She is determinedly upper class, Russian *ancien régime*, and when, in 'The Capture of Cerebus' (1947), it is hinted that this may be false, Poirot rejects the idea. 'He enjoyed the Countess Rossakoff's society partly because of her aristocratic *provenance*' ('CoC', p. 838). Upper-class credentials are necessary to get away with flamboyant larger-than-life gestures in Christie but, in Rossakoff if not Sedgewick, class can be assumed rather than inherited.

In *The Big Four* (1927), the Countess also changes sides and aids Poirot and Hastings, for the sake of her son. Placing the child above their own safety allows both exceptional women to be reabsorbed into a form of acceptable femininity despite, or alongside, their lawless adventurousness. Poirot claims Rossakoff has 'no sense of right or wrong' in relation to stealing jewels, but he is wrong, she draws the line at drug smuggling which 'causes pain, misery and degeneration' ('CoC', p. 849). Jewel robbery is another bloodless crime, and one that has glamour.

The memory of the adroit way she stole jewellery roused the old admiration. He remembered the magnificent aplomb with which she has admitted the fact when taxed with it. A woman in a thousand – a million! ('CoC', p. 833)

For Vera Rossakoff's attractiveness also stretches to her sexual allure, since she is the only woman Poirot ever desires and contemplates proposing to. This is partly humorous, 'small men always admire big flamboyant women' (*BF*, p. 159), but partly an insistence upon the sexual allure of mature, large women – desirableness is not only linked to youth or slimness. Bess Sedgewick unsuspectingly shares her lover with her youthful daughter, and the older, flamboyant woman has the more secure hold over him. Poirot compares favourably Vera Rossakoff's feminine charms to the youthful Alice Cunningham who 'does not make the most of herself' ('CoC', p. 836), and is enamoured of Rossakoff's 'resplendent', 'sumptuous' and luxuriously attired femininity that denotes, '[t]he exuberance, the full-blooded enjoyment of life' ('CoC', p. 833). She too 'is a personality – People feel it' ('CoC', p. 837). Femininity can steal and, linked to beauty, maturity and aristocracy, be admired as simply a 'wild' exuberant love of life. It is not just the Countess who lacks a sense of right or wrong, but also the textual admiration of stories such as 'The Double Clue' (1923), *The Big Four* (1927), 'The Capture of Cerberus' (1947) and *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965).

Not all the mature female villains are flamboyant, some are competent, bossy and rather large. Evelyn Howard, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), is 'a great sport . . . as game as they come' (*MAAS*, p. 6). A staunch friend and companion of the murdered woman, with a blunt gruffness of speech, she is described as,

a pleasant-looking woman of about forty, with a deep voice almost manly in its stentorian tones, and had a large sensible square body, with feet to match – these last encased in good thick boots. (*MAAS*, p. 8)

Poirot sums her up much later as “A woman with a head and a heart too . . . Though the good God gave her no beauty!” (MAAS, p. 70). Her faithfulness and her energy have Poirot enlisting her as an ‘ally’ and claiming, ‘She is an excellent specimen of well balanced English beef and brawn. She is sanity itself!’ (MAAS, p. 117) and yet she proves to be ‘the master mind’ of the complex plot. Gillian Gill goes even further, in her biography, in arguing that Evelyn Howard, Christie’s first co-murderer, inhabits the position of Christie herself living with her widowed mother at the time of writing,

Evelyn competently acts as the Styles Court factotum . . . Like Agatha, Evelyn is exceptionally competent, and her image as the soul of reliability will be one of Evelyn’s chief assets as a murderer. Agatha’s ability to cast herself, or part of herself, in the role of murderer will prove one of her most surprising and enduring strengths as a novelist.¹⁷

Rowena Drake, in *The Hallowe’en Party* (1969), is another middle-aged large and competent woman secretly involved with a younger man. (Interestingly, given Christie’s own second overtly happy marriage to a younger man, the textual representation of disparity of age where the woman is older, often spells disaster – Lady Tamplin aside – as if the conventions of fictional representation proved stronger than experiential knowledge.)

Mrs Drake was certainly something, Poirot thought. She was a tall, handsome woman of forty-odd, her golden hair was lightly tinged with grey, her eyes were brilliantly blue, she oozed competence from her fingertips downwards. (*HP*, p. 45)

The widowed Mrs Drake has a ‘most admirably kept house . . . everything was scrupulously polished and cleaned’ (*HP*, p. 45) but this efficiency does not make her an attractive figure, rather the opposite. Having established her conscientious worthiness and her pillar of the community status, a number of characters are invoked to establish the unattractive ‘bossy’ element of her character. Poirot reflects that, ‘Rowena Drake was that dominant type of personality whom everyone expects to run the show, and whom nobody has much affection for while she is doing it’ (*HP*, p. 129). This middle-aged ‘dynamic’, forceful organiser of Church fetes and children’s Hallowe’en parties proves to be not only a sexually ‘passionate woman’ (*HP*, p. 216), but also the epitome of Lady Macbeth, whom Poirot envisages as “a handsome woman – efficient

and competent – a born administrator”’ (*HP*, p. 215), murdering to allow her lover the advancement he desires.

Quite the opposite to the mature and competent, young and beautiful women are also effective villains, often invoking a helplessness that the male characters find enticing. Loraine Wade, a ‘small fair girl’ in *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), meek and guileless, is a deliberate contrasting femininity to the adventurous, active Bundle. The diminutives – her ‘small mouth’, ‘small face’, ‘little chin’ and ‘small resolute jaw’ – are used to construct her as a passive femininity in contrast to Bundle, allowing Jimmy Thessinger to argue, “I mean you can’t let a girl like that run into danger!”’ (*SDM*, p. 74) and Bundle to contemplate his lack of tact, since he allows her to. Passivity also seamlessly encompasses romance figurations, allowing Thessinger to be protective and to propose, in an apparent implication that feminine helplessness is more attractive to men than competence. But Loraine’s depiction is complicated by her resolution and strength of purpose, alongside the fearfulness, and the hint of her ‘delusive appearance of meekness and decorum’ (*SDM*, p. 141). Bundle is astonished to find she was one of a partnership of villains,

‘What I can’t get over is Loraine being in it. She was such a gentle little thing.’

‘Ah!’ said the Superintendent, ‘So was the Pentonville murderess that killed five children. You can’t go by that.’ (*SDM*, p. 187)

The comment allows for a number of readings, one could argue for meekness as a simple masquerade that women can assume to be culturally accepted, the other though could argue for gentleness, meekness and timidity existing alongside the resolution and aggressiveness in a more complex, multi-layered characterisation of femininity. Marthe Daubreuil, a young ‘goddess’, ‘perfect angel’ and ‘innocent child’, who speaks in breathless whispers, passively anxious for her mother and then her fiancée, ensnares Hastings with her beauty, but Poirot warns him, “Some of the greatest criminals I have known had the faces of angels... A malformation of the grey cells may coincide quite easily with the face of a Madonna”’ (*MoL*, p. 61). Anne Meredith, in *Cards on the Table* (1936), similarly shivers with fear, appears a ‘timid little creature’ (note the diminutive), a coward and spiritless in contrast to the ‘gallant boyish’ Rhoda, and most commentators on the triangle of attraction with the adventurer Despard assume he is attracted to Anne’s helplessness. “Of course he has fallen for her. Anne’s awfully pretty. But

a bit wishy-washy”’ (COT, p. 141). The gentle, fearful and ‘remarkably pretty’ female character proves eminently dangerous exactly because she is frightened and fragile, because she inhabits the ‘feminine’ secondary role:

‘Mademoiselle Anne is young, she is fragile, she looks timid and frightened – oh yes, she seems a very worthy subject for compassion. But I, I *do not agree* . . . She is dangerous, madame, that little Mademoiselle Anne! Where her own safety, her own comfort, is concerned she will strike wildly – treacherously. With Mademoiselle Anne *those two crimes will not be an end*. She will gain confidence from them . . . (COT, p. 195)

Femininity taught to be meek, timid and spiritless becomes dangerous because of its lack of courage, and through violence comes to gain the very ‘confidence’ and competency denied it in an open-ended aggression that threatens society by its lack of ‘end’. Miss Marple, in *Murder Is Announced* (1950), explains, ‘once a weak person gets *really* frightened, they get quite savage with terror and they’ve no self control at all’ (MIA, p. 363). Ann Shapland, the attractive, efficient young secretary in *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959), becomes the romantic heroine in relation to both her boyfriend, Dennis, who proposes, and the detective Ronnie. Neat, business-like and intelligent, she is one of the few women in the school to be called by their first name. While the surnames invoke an appropriate address for schoolmistresses, they also have a distancing effect, while ‘Ann’ has more intimacy and hence reader identification. Yet Ann is unmasked as a ‘natural’ killer, an agent infamous for her depravity from the age of 17. ‘They said then that she was a killer. Although she was so young. One of the most dangerous agents they had. Angelica was her code name’ (CAP, p. 323). Where Anne Meredith kills to protect herself, and Loraine to help her man, Ann Shapland kills professionally. Sue Ellen Campbell, Gayle F. Wald and Sally Munt argued that romance complicates the detective novel, when it is associated with the female detective, demystifying the genre’s claims towards order and stability and drawing it nearer to the more complex world of literary fiction, as I discuss at the beginning of Chapter 3, on available femininities. But if romance in relation to the detective challenges fictional stability, how much more subversive does it become when romance is deployed in relation to the feminine, attractive murderer? Not in the utilisation of the hard-boiled vamp figuration, since these meek and mild attractive figures do not flaunt their

sexuality or their promiscuous availability; on the contrary, they prove supremely subversive because they inhabit the very terrain of an idealised traditional feminine passivity. The very security of expectant reader identification is twisted in upon itself, confounded to encompass both meekly feminine and dangerous aggression, as Christie's 'least likely' suspect interrogates and unpacks gender expectations of both reader and culture. The complication, of course, is that Christie does not always invoke the idealised passive femininity as villain, it is as likely to be invoked for a legitimate romance interest, for one of Christie's *oeuvre's* strengths is its very diversity of villains, whichever their gender.

However, perhaps a favourite type of female villain is the wife plotting her rich husband's death for the inheritance, often in partnership with a younger lover, though husbands with their mistresses killing their wealthy wives are just as common (e.g., *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *Murder on the Nile*, *Caribbean Mystery*). Marriage is portrayed as a particularly fraught and deadly institution. In 'The Tragedy of Marsden Moor' (1923), the beautiful Mrs Maltravers, apparently prostrate with grief, has murdered her husband for the insurance money and Poirot comments upon the male inability to judge accurately character, 'where there is . . . question of a beautiful woman' ('TMM', p. 85). Lady Edgware, in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), is a similarly beautiful gold-digger and her extreme 'childlike' self-obsession nearly fools Poirot. 'From Poirot's own peculiar point of view the case was one of his failures' (*LED*, p. 9).¹⁸ Alongside such sordid and despicable wives, though, are more attractive characterisations. The sixty-year-old Mrs Lorrimer, in *Cards on the Table* (1936), is the most estimable of the four murderers 'collected' in that novel, and confesses to having killed her husband in the past. Poirot, at dinner, decides '[h]er judgements were sound and her criticisms apt . . . he found her a well-informed and thoroughly intelligent woman' (*COT*, p. 20). Poirot argues that her cool, clear-headed resolution makes her 'the kind of woman to commit an ideal murder' (*COT*, p. 184) and yet also insists she is "'a high-principled woman – sort of woman who might be headmistress of a girl's school'" (*COT*, p. 58). Apparently her refusal to justify her murder reinforces his view of her, since 'He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Permit me to tell you, madame, that you are a most remarkable woman. All my homage and respect"' (*COT*, p. 196). Anne Protheroe, in *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), is also a sympathetic character. Initially viewed as supremely self-controlled and above suspicion, 'There has always been rather a suggestion of Caesar's wife about Mrs Protheroe – a quiet, self-contained woman whom one would not suspect of any great depths of feeling' (*MAV*, p. 21). She

values the narrating vicar and his wife Griselda as her best friends, alongside “that funny old Miss Marple” (MAV, p. 135). Yet, discovered with her lover, she exhibits a completely different character to that of the long-suffering and dutiful wife.

The quiet and self-contained woman that I knew had vanished. In her place was a quick-breathing, desperate creature. For the first time I realised that Ann Protheroe was beautiful. . . She was flushed now and her bosom heaved. It was as though a statue had suddenly come to life. (MAV, p. 21)

The passionate woman lurking behind the mask of the dutiful wife is not the only killer. Some wives dutifully aid their husbands to murder relatives for the inheritance, enacting the conventionally required wifely behaviour with deadly consequence. In ‘The Mystery Of Hunter’s Lodge’ (1923),¹⁹ the modern flapper-figure, Zoe Havering, with a ‘slender boyishness of her figure. On her dark head was a little hat of flame-coloured leather. Even the present tragedy could not dim the vitality of her personality’ (‘MHL’, p. 134), kills the elderly uncle while her husband establishes a perfect alibi. The Haverings manage to fool the police, but ‘Justice’ or ‘Nemesis’ catches up with them in a comforting closure, when they die in a plane crash. The wife of Albert Blunt, in *One Two Buckle My Shoe* (1940), occupies a more shadowy, accomplice role in aiding her husband’s crime. But if dutiful wives can aid their husbands in killing, they can also turn on them, when their devotion to them is betrayed. In *The Hollow* (1946) it is the dutiful and devoted wife and mother, Gerda, fulfilling the idealised Victorian stereotype of matrimony, who shoots her husband and here the text places the motive for killing firmly upon her acceptance of this misplaced wifely devotion: ‘She built up a pedestal for him and attributed every splendid and noble and unselfish characteristic to him. And if you cast down an idol, *there’s nothing left*’;²⁰ ‘Blind devotion thrown back on itself, disillusioned, dangerous’.²¹ A wife’s devotion to her husband becomes the motive that can spur the most submissive of woman into behaving badly, thereby indicting the conventional view of what a wife’s duties should be.

Alongside wives, comes a range of nurturing and dependent women, such as housekeepers, companions and nurses. On the whole, housekeepers are rare as villains, since the working classes are outside the parameters of the suspects. Alison Light’s claim that working-class characters never murder is erroneous because, given the number of novels by Christie, it is not advisable to say ‘never’, but they are certainly

unusual. In *And Then There were None* (1939), five men and three women are systematically murdered for their crimes. Two of the women are in nurturing roles: one is a housekeeper, who aided her husband, the butler, in withholding life-saving medicine from her employer, the other was a children's nurse or governess, who encouraged her young charge to swim too far out, so that her lover may benefit from an inheritance. In *After the Funeral* (1953), the distressed gentlewoman companion is described as 'a pleasant unassuming woman – quite ordinary' (ATF, p. 94), and her plan works well since, as she argues, "No, one doesn't bother to look at a mere companion-help... A drudge, a domestic drudge! Almost a servant!" (ATF, p. 187). Years of dependent drudgery push her over the brink.

'You don't know how boring it is listening to somebody going on about the same things, hour after hour and day after day. And saying, 'Oh yes, Mrs Lansquenet' and 'Really, Mrs Lansquenet?' Pretending to be interested. And really bored – bored – *bored*. (ATF, p. 188)

Miss Gilchrist kills two people for the money to set up a teashop, "I was going to call it the Palm Tree. And have little camels as menu holders... I'm sure I could have made a success of it" (ATF, p. 189). The incredulity of the middle-class family that someone would murder for such small amounts of money indicts their lack of appreciation for the poverty and paucity of experience involved in being a paid companion. Dora Bunner, companion to Letitia Blacklock in *A Murder is Announced* (1950), reiterates the different experience of the distressed: 'the comfortably off do not know the deeper abysses of human nature' (MIA, p. 202). In *Sad Cypress* (1940), Nurse 'Hopkins', one of two elderly gossip nurses who tend Mrs Welman, kills two people for greed during the course of the novel, and an earlier career is finally uncovered.

There was a patient of hers, an old lady, who left her 'dear Nurse Riley' a very snug little legacy, and whose death was somewhat of a puzzle to the doctor attending her. [Her] husband insured his life in her favour for a considerable sum, and his death was sudden and unaccountable... Other deaths may lay at her door. It is certain she is a remorseless and unscrupulous woman. (SC, pp. 188–9)

Miss Marple recounts the story of Nurse Ellerton, in *A Murder is Announced* (1950), " – really an excellent kindly woman", who feeds her elderly patients morphine once they have willed their money to her.

‘“Done in the kindest way, and the shocking thing was that the woman herself really couldn’t see that she’d done anything wrong”’ (*MIA*, p. 208). In *The Labours of Hercules* (1947), a collection of short stories where six of the nine stories involving villains have female villains, ‘the Lernian Hydra’ has the unpleasant and ailing wife murdered by her nurse-companion, ‘a gentle womanly creature’²² with ‘the calm, serene features of a Madonna with big sympathetic dark eyes’.²³ Nurses and companions raise questions about stereotypes of femininity in relation to nurturance and care, especially when such nursing is the paid profession of the women, turning their very safety as life-carers into something unsettling and threatening. (Doctors are also a great favourite for the same ‘least likely’ motive.)

Christie also has a range of career women, alongside those women within the roles of the domestic and the nurturing, to expand the kinds of femininity that can prove dangerous, from the overlooked homemakers to the prominent and publicly successful. Lady Westholme (*Appointment with Death*), the successful politician who just misses a place in the cabinet, and is depicted in newspaper cartoons, is one such public villain. Madame Olivier, in *The Big Four* (1927), ‘the world famous scientist’, is striking, ‘the wonderful power of this woman, with her long nun’s face and burning eyes – this brilliant successor of Becquerel and the Curies’ (*BF*, p. 50) and yet proves to be ‘Number Two’ of the four high criminals running a worldwide syndicate. Hastings is allowed to raise the issue of gender in relation to science. ‘It had always seemed to me extraordinary that a woman should go so far in the scientific world. I should have thought a purely masculine brain was needed for such work’ (*BF*, p. 39). The text evokes a different kind of femininity, that of a ‘nun’, ‘cool’ and obsessive, to indicate a form of single-minded dedication and devotion that has always been accommodated within the concept of the feminine. Valerie Hobhouse, in *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955), is a much younger woman just starting out in her career, a successful model or ‘mannequin’ and buyer for the beauty parlour Sabrina Fair. She ‘has brains, is modern in outlook and education’ (*HDD*, p. 73) and her ‘outlook is commercial’ (*HDD*, p. 106). Cool, elegant and with an ironic humour, she is one of the most attractive characters and yet masterminds a smuggling operation, taking drugs and jewels across the Continent. However, not all career women are coolly organised, intelligent and well planned in their crimes. Miss Chadwick, in *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959), despite being brilliant at mathematics, is no Madame Olivier, though brisk and efficient, her main characteristics are that of secondary character, ‘faithful and reliable’, to Miss Bulstrode’s genius.

Chaddy's academic distinctions had been better than her, but . . . Chaddy had been content to teach soundly but unexcitingly what she knew. Chaddy's supreme achievement had always been to be *there*, at hand, the faithful buffer, quick to render assistance when assistance was needed. (*CAP*, p. 98)

Miss Chadwick has dedicated her life to the school, Meadowbanks, as the pupils comment, "“She really loves the school . . . It's her whole life”" (*CAP*, p. 297), and kills out of a baffled jealousy, when another mistress appears to be taking over the running of it, 'only half conscious of what she was doing . . . for she is not a natural killer, Miss Chadwick. She was driven, as some are driven, by jealousy and obsession. The obsession of love for Meadowbank' (*CAP*, p. 332). Female villains can kill for huge financial gains through smuggling, for the wealthy inheritance of relatives or husbands, or, for the love of a school or a teashop. (The designer Michael Garfield, in *Hallowe'en Party*, 1969, kills for an even stranger reason, to make a garden on a Greek island.)

Given the wealth of texts, some very odd female villains emerge from the plethora of least likely suspects, such as a blind woman, a young girl, an elderly lesbian, and – a personal favourite – an elderly spinster in the Miss Marple vein. In *The Clocks* (1963) the tall, elderly, calm Miss Pebmarsh is blind. A schoolteacher ambitious to progress in her profession, when she became blind she trained in Braille and continued at a school for the blind. "“To be blind is not necessarily to be helpless”" (*C*, p. 12), she explains and she copes well living alone and carrying on her career. 'Sensible' and 'observant', the Detective Inspector is 'impressed, as he always was impressed, by Miss Pebmarsh's personality' (*C*, p. 132). Yet, she is an important enemy agent involved in Cold War espionage, smuggling out secrets in microfilm disguised as Braille, and calmly tries to stab the British agent with 'a small very deadly knife' (*C*, p. 219) when her cover is blown. Despising sympathy as weakness, quoting 'Lenin's dictum: "Away with softness"', she resolves to continue recruiting for communism in prison motivated by a 'dedication' that is construed as 'indoctrination' (*C*, p. 219). In *Crooked House* (1949), one of Christie's own favourite of her novels, another apparently vulnerable existence, that of a child, is shown to be just as dangerous a source of violence. The young girl, Josephine, takes lessons with her brother and carries out her own detection of the murder. The amateur detective, Charles Hayward, considers 'that everybody, perhaps, is capable of murder' (*CH*, p. 22) but his prejudice fails to include the youngest child in that calculation, and this is implicitly because of her gender,

since he does consider her brother as a possible suspect. Josephine has brains but is 'a fantastically ugly child' (CH, p. 58) and so rejected by the actress mother, unable to pose with her picturesquely. A neglected, ghoulish child who enjoys bloodthirsty stories, she pries and listens at doors because it is the only practicable way to find things out. As a young girl unable to participate in the beauty myth, she is ignored and passed over. Alternately seen as the victim, the child to be taken care of since she knows too much, or as unpleasantly arrogant and sly, Josephine constantly oscillates in readerly sympathy. She rejects her brother's dismissal of her sleuthing and posits herself as omnipotent. '“He says women can't ever be great detectives. But I say they can. I'm going to write down everything in a notebook and then, when the police are quite baffled, I shall come forward and say “I can tell you who did it”' (CH, p. 61). And, as the murderer, of course she can. 'I had never considered her because she was a child', explains the amateur detective, 'But children have committed murders, and this particular murder had been well within a child's compass' (CH, p. 157). Josephine is seen as being abnormal, a monster. 'With her precocious mental development had gone a retarded moral sense' (CH, p. 158) and family ruthlessness had combined with thwarted vanity. The 'pitifully childish and inadequate' (CH, p. 159) motive for the first murder, the fact that she was not allowed to do ballet – made bathetic by the misspelling as 'bally' – creates a complex reaction, both of rejection and of pity:

'She's such a little monster – and yet – and yet its so terribly pathetic.'

I felt the same.

I had liked Josephine . . . I still felt a fondness for her . . . You do not like anyone less because they have tuberculosis or some other fatal disease. Josephine was . . . a little monster. She had been born with a kink. (CH, p. 160)

The fictional representations of the childish create sympathy despite the pathological characterisation, and the text plays on this complexity in relation to her 'monstrosity'. Josephine cannot help herself, partly as child and partly as flawed heredity of a madness that makes her certifiable, and this is signalled by her never being described as 'evil'. The following unusual feminine culprit, though mad and certifiable, is constructed as extremely evil since she is an adult and therefore, despite her insanity construed as responsible for her actions.

Murder is Easy (1939) has the elderly country spinster, a Miss Marple figure, the confidante of the protagonist who brings all his evidence to

her and who offers detection advice and suggestions. Like Josephine, though at opposite ends of the age scale, Miss Waynflete is the amateur detective's ally. This little old lady is unveiled as a spectacularly successful, lethal serial killer framing the man who jilted her in her youth (she has carried out seven murders and is apprehended during her attempt at the eighth). Insanity is reserved for those whose baffled egotism, as Christie terms it, becomes vindictive. Both Miss Waynflete and Clotilde kill to frame men who have either jilted them or stolen their lover, and it is this egotistic desire for vengeance that is termed 'mad'. 'The whole thing was such fun' (*MIS*, p. 206) she repeats, because 'You see . . . I enjoyed the killing'. Part of Miss Waynflete's pleasure, as Gerda's in *The Hollow*, comes from manipulating the masquerade of feminine respectability. This masquerade is particularly highlighted in the female villains, since they hide their true motives, and the complex variety of women murdering for love, from mothers and wives to elderly spinsters, further underlines the instability of femininity itself as a social practice. Miss Waynflete overtly turns this masquerade to her advantage: 'How I hated him then! But I never showed my feelings. We were taught that as girls – a most valuable training. That, I always think, is where breeding tells' (*MIE*, p. 204). Genteel femininity can hide a homicidal maniac, as Miss Waynflete's laugh illuminates: 'It was a horrible laugh, soft and musical and ladylike, and quite inhuman' (*MIE*, p. 203). Gentility is further implicated in preventing her from using her brains fruitfully in a profession because of her social status. Instead, her intelligence is turned to successfully plotting the framing of the male suspect, whose guilt is more easily accepted by both the textual world and the reader because, as a man he is expected to have agency. As the detective, Luke Fitzwilliam finally realises, 'Not a *man* – she never mentioned a *man* – you assumed it was a man because you were thinking of a man – but *she* never said so' (*MIE*, p. 215). Christie's texts indict conventional beliefs as being foolish stereotypes that hide the truths of femininity – or at least the truths of some feminine natures. Jealous women are unveiled as being criminal agents of their fate and they unsettle gender expectations in being as aggressive, calculating, cunning and as insolently egotistic as any of her male villains. 'Remember . . . if a woman is not happy she is capable of terrible things' (*MIE*, p. 213). The serial killer of children in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968), Mrs Lancater has a similarly disturbing role as elderly confidant and victim.

In *Nemesis* (1971) Clotilde Bradbury-Scott's desire is for another woman and her lesbianism is portrayed as stiflingly possessive and

deadly in preventing escape to normalcy. Miss Marple's summation as 'nemesis' underlines the dangerous nature of deviant love ostracised by the outside world and the desperation to hold on to the love object so as not to be isolated.

[Love] is a frightening word. You loved Verity too much. She meant everything in the world to you . . . She wanted a normal woman's life. To live with the man of her choice, to have children by him. She wanted marriage and the happiness of normality. (*N*, pp. 172–3)

While heterosexuality is held up as 'normal', and the deviant behaviour of murder is linked to the deviancy of lesbianism in this text, in 'Herb of Death' (1932) Christie has an elderly male guardian, Sir Ambrose Bercy, murder his young ward Sylvia Keene for similar reasons. Such obsessive ownership of the loved one, 'a mad jealousy', is a crime of passion open to both heterosexual and same-sex desire. What both murderers have in common is the age in contrast to the youth of the loved one. 'Gentlemen of that age are sometimes very peculiar indeed where young girls are concerned' comments Miss Marple ('HoD').

During the sixties, however, the tone of how the villains are rendered changes. Now in her seventies, Agatha Christie's books kept up with the times, writing about the world of beatniks and the Beatles, but the differing performance of femininity during the swinging sixties was deeply at variance with the femininity of her own generation. Poirot voices this in *Third Girl* (1966): 'These girls! Do they not even try to make something of themselves? Well made up, attractively dressed, hair that has been arranged by a good hairdresser, then perhaps she might pass. But now!'

His visitor was a girl of perhaps twenty-odd. Long straggly hair . . . Black high leather boots, white open-work woollen stockings of doubtful cleanliness, a skimpy skirt, and a long and sloppy pullover of heavy wool. Anyone of Poirot's age and generation would have had only one desire. To drop the girl into a bath as soon as possible. He had often felt this reaction walking along the streets. There were hundreds of girls looking exactly the same. (*TG*, pp. 7–8)

The girls not only reject the paraphernalia of pre-war glamour, they also reject its domesticity. 'The young girls, they all do jobs nowadays' (*TG*, p. 36). Due to this generation gap, the delineation of the female murderers is less inclusive in the sixties. The murderer is no longer

what Bargainnier calls 'one of us'²⁴ but now 'one of them' – the new generation – and there is a coolness and distance to their portrayals and a waspishness in delineating their efficiency. Increasingly after the late forties, a type of young, modern professional criminal, successful, modishly fashionable and calculating appears, particularly involved in drug smuggling – a particularly heinous crime because of the misery and degradation it causes. In one of the two stories where the type appears in *The Labours of Hercules*, 'The Capture of Cerebus' (1947),²⁵ the 'earnest, scientific psychologist with a medical degree and spectacles' Dr Alice Cunningham, who writes books on criminal psychology while smuggling cocaine, is set against the older generation of female criminal, the attractive, swashbuckling jewel thief Countess Vera Rossakoff.

'Frankly,' cried the Countess, 'I cannot understand the young people of nowadays. They do not try any more to please – always, in my youth, I tried, the colours that suited me – a little padding in the frocks – the corset laced tight around the waist – the hair perhaps a more interesting shade . . . To be content with what Nature has given you, that – that is *stupid!* It is also arrogant!' ('CoC', p. 836)

The final adjective is a serious indictment within Christie's canon, since vanity and arrogance are the supreme depictions of evil, usually reserved for the murderers who set themselves above God. Poirot, alarmed by the severe younger generation, is used to reinforce the Countess's view; Poirot, the text informs the reader, 'was not going to have his enjoyment spoiled by a spectacled little girl with boiled gooseberry eyes and a degree in psychology' ('CoC', p. 838). It is a particularly negative depiction. Alice masterminds a smuggling racket, while Frances Cary, the villain of *The Third Girl*, ran a successful art forgery and heroin smuggling racket before she also instigates an impersonation to gain an inheritance and murders two people to safeguard the secret. Francis Cary, the young villain of *Third Girl*, is a consummate actress, being two of the characters in the text. She and her accomplice murder those who might unmask them, but she masterminds the smuggling and efficiently kills both victims. The fact that Cary is calmly framing the victim and drugging her to make her think she is going mad is partly what distances her from the readership. And this is also true of the coolly beautiful and efficient Greta Andersen in *Endless Night* (1967). Greta is perhaps the epitome of these modern, efficient feminine villains. Stunningly beautiful and 'sex personified' (*EN*, p. 178), practical, strong and a great organiser – a sixties 'superwoman' if ever there was one – Greta arranges the marriage of an

heiress, against her family's wishes, to a shiftless psychopath she picks up and makes her lover, in order to murder her friend and companion and share the riches with her lover. In these later novels, where there is a partnership in crime, it is notable that it is the woman who is the agent, planning the crime with her superior intellect and practicality, and often carrying out the murders as well. Women are the instigators in deviant behaviour, the men being carried along as necessary baggage. (Though in Greta's case the psychopath turns his love of killing against her in the final pages.) In these texts, the female villains are forceful, intelligent, practical and successful within the public sphere. The texts employ an alienating attempt to drive mad an innocent and vulnerable young girl not much older than themselves, or to frame a woman of the older generation for the crimes, and this does carry with it a textual opprobrium. *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965) focuses directly on this generation gap in its portrayal of both the mother and the daughter as criminals. The mother, the notorious Lady Bess Sedgwick, rejects domesticity for a flamboyant career of swashbuckling robberies and fast young men. In contrast, her daughter is the 'negative' to her 'positive', underhand and 'sly'. She shoots the man who might threaten her inheritance in the back, because she needs to buy the dashing racing driver who had been her mother's lover. 'She wanted him on any terms. She was desperately in love with him' (p. 251). And the final nail in her depiction is that she will coolly allow her mother's memory to take the blame for her crime, something Miss Marple revolts against, as Poirot did Alice's framing of Rossakoff. There is little difference in the construction of these later female murderers, apart from the fact that they are invariably young, they are just as emotional or as efficient in their plotting and in the execution of the plans as the earlier female murderers, but the tone of their delineation is more distanced and cool. There is less acceptance but not, one notes, thereby any employment of the double rejection for their gender, just for their youth and type of femininity.

Women murder for love, in some form, and on the face of it this does reinforce the domestic and emotional aspect of femininity. It is the kinds of women who do it, though, that is more disturbing. Women murdering for love are not seen as mad, but as having been carried too far by their emotions. Nurse Harrison, Poirot comments, in 'The Lernian Hydra' (1947), 'would have made, probably, a good wife and mother. . . Her emotions were just a little too strong for her' ('LH', p. 688). But if women murdered simply for passionate reasons, they could be argued as merely reinforcing the feminine sphere as one of the domestic, the emotional and the threat of unruly female sexuality, while the male has the public,

worldly sphere of competent self-containment. However, just as many texts have women villains motivated by greed, for money or to protect their public reputation.

Christie, unlike most of her contemporary Golden Age writers, in her villains allows women an agency, an importance and a dangerous competency to disrupt society. Moreover, she does this while negating stereotypes of femininity and challenging earlier Victorian ideals. Her female villains range from young women in love to elderly spinsters, from devoted housewives to successful Members of Parliament, doctors of psychology and leaders of international smuggling rings. Her texts present female psychopaths and sadists and even challenge the assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality. Femininity is presented as a complex and varied masquerade, powerful, dominating and dangerous. Christie's female villains prove subversive and explosive. Deviant women behaving badly have the potential to disrupt the textual world and the preconceptions of Christie's readership. Finally, the plethora of active female criminals and the diversity of their ages, status and the roles they perform across the whole range of domestic and public spheres posit a need to re-assess Christie as a more exploratory and subversive writer of femininity than can ever be explored by only looking at Poirot and Miss Marple.

5

Representing Women of Violence, Agatha Christie and Her Contemporary Culture

As with the majority of the Golden Age detective fiction, the crime involved in most of Agatha Christie's detective fiction is that of murder. Where she differs from writers such as Margery Allingham or Dorothy L. Sayers, however, is in the gender of her murderers since for most Golden Age writers, agency, particularly a potent, dangerous agency, demanded the virility of a masculine criminal. Interesting as Christie is, given her consistent representation of women behaving badly, the real issue might be the question of how the texts negotiate the depiction of these female murderers. A detailed analysis of the textual treatment of Agatha Christie's female villains reveals a matter-of-fact acceptance of women as murderers, in a way that refuses to either demonise them for their rejection of gender stereotypes or to negate their agency and thus their power to disrupt society. Christie's novels and short stories depict them in exactly the same tone as the male villains, an equality of treatment that crosses the gender divide.

This is not to argue that Christie approved of female murderers far from it (murderers whatever their gender were unequivocally evil), but simply to argue that her texts challenge conventional cultural inscriptions in relation to gender and push the possibilities of femininity in ways that subvert and circumnavigate expectations. In 1977, Christie reflected on the writing of crime in her autobiography and stated categorically that, the murderer is 'tainted with the germs of ruthlessness and hatred, for whom other people's lives go for nothing... in plain English, *wicked*'.¹ Yet, she goes on to reflect that in an earlier age, such 'defects' were in fact 'qualities' which allowed humanity to conquer new habitats and to survive. 'He was necessary then, but he is not necessary and is a danger now.'² This ability to acknowledge a relativity of values in relation to cruelty, ruthlessness and lack of mercy belies the simplistic

dualism of good and evil usually associated with those using the terms 'evil' or 'wicked', and points to a more relative, even pragmatic, but also profoundly ambivalent view of the agent who kills.

I can suspend judgement on those who kill – but I think they are evil for the community: they bring in nothing except hate, and take from it all they can. I am willing to believe that they are born with a disability, for which, perhaps, one should pity them; but even then, I think, not spare them – because you cannot spare them any more than you could spare the man who staggers out from the plague-stricken village in the Middle Ages to mix with innocent and healthy children in a nearby village. The *innocent* must be protected: they must be able to live at peace and charity with their neighbours.³

Despite this ambivalence in her view of real-life criminals at the age of 75, her recollection of her treatment of crime in her novels is on the surface more categorical. And has usually been read as unproblematic.

When I began writing detective stories I was not in the mood to criticise them or to think seriously about crime. The detective story was the story of the chase; it was also very much a story with a moral... At the time, the time of the 1914 war, the doer of evil was not a hero: the *enemy* was wicked, the *hero* was good: it was as crude and as simple as that. We had not then begun to wallow in psychology. I was like everyone else who wrote books or read them, *against* the criminal and *for* the innocent victim.⁴

That the murderers are evil and deserve to be uncovered by the detective hero and brought to justice is almost invariably true in Christie's work, but this passage is ambiguous. Poirot, her first detective, despite being called Hercule, a diminutive of Hercules, is no hero but a fussy, vain and weak man. Moreover, he solves the crimes by the exclusive focus of 'the little grey cells' to the 'psychology' of the case. On closer inspection, this passage locates this simplistic view of crime as where she starts from in 1914, and the 'crude' treatment of hero and villain is allied to the propaganda of the war years in relation to the 'enemy'. During the First World War, British propaganda was particularly rabid and portrayed the enemy in appallingly simplistic terms. Christie could be read as distancing herself from these early views of the villain and arguing, 68 books and over a hundred short stories later, for a more complex and psychological treatment (for all the verb 'wallow' carries pejorative

undertones). When asked by Graham Greene to help in writing propaganda during the Second World War, she refused because 'I lacked the single-mindedness to see only one side of a case. . . . You want to be able to say "X is as black as night" and *feel* it. I didn't think I could ever be like that.'⁵ Such a statement is an important qualification to her notion of the criminal as evil and links more effectively to the early thrillers' gendered problematising of villains, as Anne Beddingfield on Sir Eustace, in *The Man in the Brown Suit*. While many of her murderers, male and female, are dismissed as immoral egoists or mad, not all of them are. One perspicacious character in *They Do It With Mirrors* (1952) admits that although she has suspected her philanthropist husband, revealed as the murderer and an embezzler, this has not affected his attractiveness, 'People who can be very good can be very bad, too. I always knew that was true about Lewis. . . . But he loved me very much – and I loved him.'⁶ A similarly ambivalent presentation of a female murderer can be found in *Dumb Witness* (1937). The murderer of the elderly, rich relative turns out to be the drab daughter unhappily married to a Greek Doctor, and he pronounces, "'She was much too good for me – always." A strange epitaph on a self-confessed murderer!' (*DW*, p. 249). Such representations at the height of the denouement argue for a more complex and ambivalent depiction of the agents of violence, than simply horror or revulsion and Christie's murderers span the range from heinous to surprisingly attractive. Whether or not one reads the woman writer as sensitive to the complexity and relativity of crime and criminality, the texts are open to such an interpretation, but before examining Christie's detective fiction and its representation of female murderers, I want to outline the criteria for judging her characterisations and to do this, I need to rehearse feminist theory on women and violence.

Contemporary feminist thought on violent women

Traditionally, books on women and violence have been about violence meted out to women, women as victims. As perpetrators of violence, feminist analysis has been slower to develop a discussion, though the nineties saw a handful of books: Anne Jones, *Women Who Kill*, 1991; Helen Birch, *Moving Targets, Women, Murder and Representation*, 1993; Alice Myers and Sarah Wight, *No Angels: Women Who Commit Violence*, 1996; and Carol Anne Davis, *Women Who Kill: Female Serial Killers*, 2001. What these texts in varying degrees of depth focus on is first the silence surrounding women who kill and second on how the violent woman, to quote Beatrix Campbell, 'is exactly what she is supposed not to be. Her

act is deemed not only unnatural but impossible in a real woman; so she is “unwomaned” by her violence and seen as the classic aberration, exiled from her community and her gender.⁷ The feminist focus has been on how the representation of this ‘impossible’ femininity functions in two contrasting ways – either to demonise the woman as doubly unnatural (where men are only blamed for killing and not also for being a man who kills) or to deny the woman agency for her actions, as in some way taken over by her emotions or hormones, so that she does not know what she is doing.

Theorists looking at the vilification of women murderers, whose transgression threatens the institutionalised production of gender, argue that they are both reported on and sentenced more harshly than their male counterparts. Myra Hindley’s conviction in 1965 or Sara Thornton’s imprisonment in 1990 for murdering her brutal, abusive husband, when in the same year a husband was freed for killing his wife, on the grounds that her constant nagging made his action comprehensible, are pointed to as illustrations of this double standard. Francis Heidenson argued that ‘female criminals have been consistently portrayed down the ages as peculiarly evil and depraved’⁸ and that this representation effects sentencing. ‘They are seen as twice or doubly deviant – as rare, abnormal female offenders for breaking social rules and as “unfeminine and unnatural” women who have broken out of their conventional roles.’⁹ Anette Ballinger, looking at the trials of women murderers who were given the death penalty, argues that all the women executed in the twentieth century had in one way or another ‘stepped beyond the boundary of acceptable female conduct and behaviour’¹⁰ and were being doubly punished for transgressing their performance as women.

The opposite social strategy for dealing with violent women is to deny them the authorship of their actions, to deny their agency and hence render them in effect passive victims of circumstance. Sean French, in a study ‘Partners in Crime’,¹¹ argues that the courts, reluctant to admit women’s capacity for violence, consistently shift the responsibility to the male partner as the instigator of murder. Hilary Allen, in a fascinating analysis of the professional reports commissioned by the courts for serious criminal offences, examines how the report explains away female violence by suppressing the intentionality and hence culpability of the woman. Where male reports stress external, material aspects of behaviour, female reports focus on psychological states and give a ‘simple denial of the woman’s mental engagement with her behaviour, as if such an unreasoning and unreasonable condition were a quite natural state of womankind, for which no exceptional cause need be sought’.¹²

Women's moral agency and responsibility is revoked, 'across the whole drama there is an absence of intention, of will, of responsibility for action'.¹³ One example cites the comment, 'It may well be that she was unaware that by putting a plastic bag over [the victim's] head and tying a flex around her neck that she was thereby killing her.'¹⁴ The female offender has simply been swept away involuntarily by her emotions, hormones or ignorance. This much more comfortable representation of the woman offender reinvokes gender stereotypes and often leads to a charge of manslaughter rather than murder, and hence lighter sentencing. However, as Allen concludes, such paternalistic reconfiguring denies women 'the full dignity of responsibility, culpability and dangerousness'.¹⁵

Contemporary feminist theory has focussed on this dichotomy of representation of feminine violence and has called for an acknowledgment that

The female of the species is neither deadlier than the male nor incapable of aggression. However, if every act of female aggression must be explored first and foremost by looking at gender, then adequate explanations will never be possible. A climate must be created in which women's violence can be seen for what it is: as complicated and dependant on individual circumstances as men's, in which being a woman is neither an asset nor a liability in the courts.¹⁶

Before turning to Christie's representation of female murderers and arguing that she accords them a responsible agency and a dangerous deviancy exactly equal to her male murderers, refusing to demonise their violence with a matter-of-fact acceptance that contemporary feminist theory should applaud, I want to examine the representations and explanations for female violence current at the time of her fiction's production, in order to underline how exemplary Christie's portrayals were for her time, as well as for more recent gender interrogations. What was Christie's contemporary readership used to reading about female murderers? Recent feminist analysis argues the dichotomy of mad or bad, but was this true of her own time? What was the contemporary thinking about female transgression during the publication of her novels and how was it represented?

I appreciate a need to be careful to avoid an unproblematic slippage from real crime to crime fiction in this part of the discussion. Clearly audiences react differently to the painful and often horrific realities of an actual murder and the pleasurable enjoyment of a fictional

'whodunnit' devoid of pain or blood. Readership is sophisticated in the codes and expectations of these different generic forms: fiction and nonfiction. But that is not to say that they do not, in some ways, bleed into each other. As postmodern critiques of history and historiography have shown,¹⁷ the opposition of fact and fiction blurs when it comes to the question of written representations, and each can feed off the other in quite complex formations. My interest, in looking at contemporary presentations of female murderers, was to try and gauge the general cultural reception and audience acceptance and expectations of images of feminine aggression. Spanning the 1920s–1950s, in order to encompass a large part of Christie's *oeuvre*, my brief study took three forms: analysis of newspaper coverage of female murderers, popular books on female murderers and the current criminological explanation of female offenders.

Contemporary reception of women who kill

From the twenties through to the forties, the accepted criminology on women offenders was Cesare Lombroso's *La Donna Delinquente* of 1893, whose nineteenth-century enthusiasm for measuring the skulls of convicted criminals led him to argue that women commit less crime because they were less evolved, more like big children, and had less scope for degeneration. If they did degenerate, this led more to prostitution than to crime, and the few exceptions were explained as being unfeminine. Female criminals had less maternal feelings and less passivity and thus located as unnatural in being masculinised as virile. Female criminals were born criminals because they were insufficiently womanly, and hence were inherently evil and monstrous. 'As a double exception, the criminal woman is consequently a monster – her wickedness must have been enormous.'¹⁸

A more popular book looking at female criminals was Renee Huggett and Paul Berry's *Daughters of Cain*,¹⁹ published in Britain in 1956. *Daughters of Cain*, a book written to condemn capital punishment, takes a slightly more demonising tone, while still insisting on the women's passivity. Looking at the stories of the lives of eight women executed since 1923, the text asserts,

The woman criminal is often prompted by violent passions. Her victims and enterprises are not selected but discovered; she takes the near at hand, the obvious. Her behaviour arises out of her life and

circumstances. . . . The characteristics one may expect to find in criminal women are vanity; dishonesty; craftiness; sensuality; a violent temper; contradictory religious tendencies; a capacity to lead a double life; and the tendency to place themselves in tortuous situations.²⁰

This examination of feminine violence shifts from condemning their abnormality to constructing them as helpless victims who do not deserve to die, and often leads the writers into misogynistic representations. Hugget and Berry explain the violence of the female murderers, Susan Newell and Charlotte Bryant (1936), as due to their illiteracy. This allows them to infantilise the women, treating them as ignorant children with no recourse but to their emotions, while still hypothesising a scenario that makes the killing accidental or involuntary. But the opprobrium that should be explained away persists. Newell is 'simply stupid' and 'a moron', and while considering Bryant the authors complacently ask, 'What thoughts pass through the mind of a person who has never read a book?'²¹ Dorothea Waddingham (1936) is contrasted to male criminals who plan their crimes deliberately, while she 'drift[s] carelessly and subconsciously into a situation where crime is possible',²² and is thereby a 'forlorn and pathetic figure'.²³ In contrast, ironically, Margaret Allen (1948–49), a cross dresser who went by the name of Bill, is treated respectfully because of her 'manful' behaviour in facing up to her crime, even though the crime is senseless and needs to be hypothetically pathologised as due to the menopause. 'Her masculine nature made it possible for her to use violence', the book argues; if she had been a woman she would have scolded, it continues, ignoring for the moment the fact that it is dealing with women murderers, but because of her 'masculine temperament . . . when raised to anger she fought with her fists like a man'.²⁴ The irony here is that the masculine attributes bring a level of admiration and phallogocentric acceptance not met with anywhere else in the book, thus showing up the opprobrium meted out to aggressive femininity, while her helplessness is reinscribed as being taken over by the irrational emotions of the feminine menopause. The highest condemnation is reserved for Louie Calvert (1926), Ethel Major (1934) and Styllou Christofi (1954), all of whom allow rage and jealousy to destroy the family unit unnecessarily. Louie Calvert is defined as the 'criminal type' and hence inherently evil, though this is also a class evaluation. Having previously got away with one murder, Calvert tricked her husband into marriage through a pretend pregnancy, which she then tried to verify by buying a baby while away 'giving birth'. Accused of stealing by the woman with whom she was lodging,

Calvert kills her and later returns to steal more items from the house. The authors argue incongruously that this murder is 'motiveless' because they see her as sufficiently provided for by her husband. She is castigated as a 'poseur' with a 'vicious temper' given to 'violent and murderous outbursts' which she cannot contain. Sustained by her vanity, she is constructed as betrayed by a subconscious wish to be discovered, in leaving a telltale letter at the scene of the crime. 'Is it something the unconscious mind insists upon, unknown to the egotistical personality that believes it will never be discovered?' they question authoritatively.²⁵ Ethel Major also becomes a victim to her 'pride' when she discovers her husband's infidelity, a misfortune she is seen as bringing upon herself in not confessing her own illegitimate child before her marriage, and she too is swept away by 'a wild round of revenge and malice'.²⁶ Unlike Newell and Bryant, Major is seen as culpable despite being carried away by her emotions: 'Her motive was hatred, her method poison, and where could that be fitted into extenuating circumstances?'²⁷ they ask rhetorically. Styllou Christofi, their last example, a Greek Cypriot who killed her daughter-in-law allows them to parade their erudition of Ancient Greek literature, and for this privilege they dismiss the prosecution's description of her as a stupid illiterate peasant with the lofty comment 'Tragedies are not dismissed by abuse.'²⁸ Conveniently forgetting, in their cultured dismissal, their own delineations of Bryant and Newell one-hundred pages earlier who were unable to provide Classical antecedents to their crimes. The authors go to town constructing the crime as a contemporary Greek tragedy with copious quotes from *Oedipus Rex* and *The Oresteia*. Terming Christofi the 'Clymenestra of the twentieth century', they objectify her as 'the Matriarch' throughout their narrative and argue, 'here was a full-blooded slaughter for mother-love, vengeance, hatred. It was as simple and primitive as Oedipus, and as cruel.'²⁹ Nevertheless, they still manage to turn the powerful, vengeful woman they have constructed into a passive, helpless subject in their hypothetical narrative:

Her jealousy must have been so strong, her fear of losing her son so overwhelming, that in the end it became stronger than herself, an evil fate of which she herself was also the victim.³⁰

In a more salacious narrative *Daughters of Cain* reinforces female offenders as passive, while see-sawing between delineating them as evil and as helpless. The women are either stupid or swept away by overwhelming, disembodied emotions, and sometimes both. Newell was

'simply stupid, intelligence or morals did not enter into the functioning of her mind';³¹ Merrifield was 'a stupid woman and mentally dull';³² Bryant was illiterate and hence 'stupid' with 'only the natural and primitive outlet for its anger, she directed her thoughts to destruction';³³ Christofi, though illiterate, reminds the authors of Greek Tragedy and so is swept away by 'the evil fate' of her 'overwhelming' jealousy; Calvert is carried away by her 'violent and murderous outbursts';³⁴ Major by 'a wild round of revenge and malice';³⁵ Waddingham 'drifts carelessly and subconsciously' into a situation that becomes an 'irresistible temptation'.³⁶ Margaret/Bill Allen is the only one not delineated as either stupid or emotionally incontinent, because of her masculinity. Nevertheless, she is brought down by that most feminine of physiological occurrences, the menopause, which is hypothesised as more violent and hence abnormal because of her previous lesbian identity. In the text's conception, it is the enforced excessive feminisation of the masculine identity that creates the murderous action. This popular book of the fifties, clearly reinterprets aggressive femininity within a comforting stereotype of ignorance and over-emotionality. The women are both victims and so harmless, and culpable for their excessive performance of femininity (their ignorance/emotionality). In contrast to Lombroso, whose explanation for female agency is to blame their unnatural over-masculinity, Huggett and Berry argue that it is the excessiveness of their feminine attributes, as Margaret/Bill Allen exemplifies, that is the cause. Huggett and Berry, castigate the women murderers for being uncontrollable because of their hypothetical excess of ignorance and of emotions.

Finally, I want to examine some of the newspaper coverage of female murderers. I studied the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Sketch*. The *Daily Mirror* was chosen for its focus on a female audience (19 out of the 20 adverts are for cosmetics, or for the domestic and nurturing products from Oxo to Vick's Vapour Rub).³⁷ The paper was instrumental through its advertisers in producing a discourse of acceptable femininity, that at times reinscribed the personal, the beauty myth and the domestic, regulated by the family. So how does this newspaper, addressed towards a female readership, handle news coverage of feminine transgression and female killers? It is worth stating that I am not arguing a consistency across the newspaper as a whole, but am concentrating on just the coverage of court proceedings usually found on the second page. Alternative views of femininity may be found in the 'News about the People' gossip sections, the home decoration or the fashion items,

Dorothy Dix's agony aunt column or even in the strip, 'Jane's Journal – The Diary of a Bright Young Thing' and the serial stories by writers such as Barbara Cartland, but when it comes to reporting female transgression, a specific discourse comes into play. I examined nine women convicted of killing adults (since Christie has no child victims, though the odd child murderer) who were accorded the ultimate opprobrium of the death penalty, from the twenties to the fifties. Before the Second World War, the newspaper coverage is factual and sober in tone, after the war, more commentaries appear in opinion pieces. While other pages within the *Mirror* might offer variant views of feminine experience, the *Mirror's* court proceedings strive to construct the women as mothers first and foremost, often of the most adulterous and un-nurturing women. Louie Calvert is defined as 'Mother of 3' leaving a poignant letter for her eldest child before the execution,³⁸ Charlotte Bryant is 'Mother of 5' and her eldest carries 'a tear-stained note' from the condemned cell.³⁹ Both women were particularly unconcerned about their children while deceiving their husbands: Calvert buys a baby to justify the rushed marriage and Bryant kills the husband who knowingly looked after the children while she was off having an affair with her lover of two years. The *Mirror* also has a nice sideline in the grieving parents, preferably the mother, suffering at the trial (four of the nine trials report the anguish of an aged parent). Alongside the domestication and the refusal to dwell on their aggression or transgressions, the *Mirror* constructs them as swaying and fainting in the dock, and hanging their heads in shame, where male accomplices hold their heads high and remain calm. Edith Thompson and Freddy Bywater, hanged for the murder of Percy Thompson in 1923, exemplify this gender dichotomy, but it runs throughout the years: Bywater 'steps boldly into the dock . . . not a semblance of fear about him . . . looks defiantly at the . . . jury, faces the court with head erect'. Edith Thompson has to be carried into the dock, 'A pathetic figure . . . She buried her face for a few seconds in her hands and seemed on the point of collapse . . . and then by a supreme effort, she throws her head back and her face is revealed, deathly pale.'⁴⁰ Indeed, Ruth Ellis's problem, twenty years later (1956), was that she did not succumb to the properly feminine role of the weak and pitiful victim of her own act. 'Model smiles at Death sentence'⁴¹ cried the headline, arguing that Ellis was the calmest person in the court and needing to invoke the surprise of the most 'hardened woman officials in Holloway' to underline its abnormality. In the face of a determined shooting, a psychiatrist is widely reported (twice over) as explaining the effects of jealousy particularly upon the feminine subject, to explain away the violence.⁴²

Just after the granting of female suffrage, the *Daily Mirror* twice argues that it is justifiable to execute women, given women's demand for equality (Thompson, 1922 and Major, 1934). After the war, opinion pieces comment on the women's crimes, allowing the paper to take more of a stand. Louisa Merrifield's conviction for poisoning elderly people for money occasions the article 'Louisa Merrifield's One Charm',⁴³ arguing that the fault was that she was not content to settle down with a husband and children, like 'normal girls', but 'she found she wanted something else – money excitement', 'turning an ordinary drab housewife' into 'a ruthless, coldblooded, calculating poisoner'. The commentary on Ruth Ellis, 'The Bright Lights Led Her to the Death Cell',⁴⁴ argues that she turned from an ordinary girl into a jealous woman who killed, because desperate to 'break into Society' and respectability by marrying the public-schooled racing-driver, and when this failed she shot him. Both discussions assert that it is the two women's refusal to know their place and accept an ordinary, working-class domesticity that led to their transgressions. Styllou Christofi's jealous murder of her daughter-in-law in 1954 so disturbed the paper that a 'behind the headlines' article, 'What Makes A Woman Want to Kill?',⁴⁵ was needed to remind the readership that few women kill, that most of them are infanticides where the mother 'is out of her mind at the time', and that women usually use poison. Reinstating the gender divide, it reminds us that while women murderers are rare, women are often the 'cause' of men killing, mainly wives, mistresses or other men because of women (turning women victims into the 'cause' of their own demise). Ordinarily, it argues, when a man becomes angry, 'he may become murderous', while an angry woman 'just nags', and concludes proudly that men have the 'monopoly' on killing in a fight, when drunk, or shooting a policeman – clearly all more active and virile and less underhand methods. *The Daily Mirror*, like the other commentaries, constructs female aggression as passive and helpless, reinstating them within the domestic circle wherever possible and castigating those that it construes as transgressing because they reject the dutiful life of housewife and mother.

The *Daily Sketch* was chosen as a comparable newspaper not addressed primarily at women, though it too carries a number of adverts for domestic products and has a prominent women's page and feminine-focused serial stories. Its focus on a slightly more titillating reportage (with photographs angled at women's cleavages or long bared legs as early as 1954) was seen as a useful complement to the *Mirror's* more Victorian attitudes. Again, the analysis of the court proceedings does not

argue for a total coverage of the newspaper's representation of femininities, simply for its construction of women who kill. The *Daily Sketch* was not as concerned with coverage of the courts, often sampling only for the dramatic or the quirky 'human interest' angle. Its coverage of Edith Thompson made much of the fact that Bywater had been a school friend of Thompson's brother, and that in recommending him to a job, Edith's husband became 'one of Bywater's greatest benefactors'⁴⁶ an irony not lost on the *Sketch's* readership. At the close of the Merrifields' trial, the *Sketch* focused on the twist of fate that has Mr Merrifield unable to understand that the charges had been dropped, 'By some irony he did not hear the jury. He had forgotten to switch on his hearing aid.'⁴⁷ Where the *Mirror* is keen to construct the murderers as mothers, the *Sketch* is less concerned, unless it can add an extra touch of drama: 'Mother of 5 on Murder Charge: Arrested After Seeing Family Off the School',⁴⁸ the headline proclaimed about Bryant, going to town on the macabre family details: 'Pets Die in Inquiry', explaining that 'all of the pets of the Bryant children were killed (humanely) and examined'⁴⁹ for traces of poison.

The paper enjoys caricaturing the women with labels. Ethel Major is the 'woman without a friend', Louisa Merrifield 'the woman who talked herself into a Murder Trial', and her victim Rickett is 'the difficult widow', Styllou Christofi's victim it calls the 'Frightened Woman of Mayfair', even though her only connection to Mayfair was that she had been employed there. Wives who murder their husbands are of little interest, Calvert's case was not covered and Major's trial was minimally covered simply for the fact that the son had to give evidence against the murdered father. Ethel Major only becomes of interest once she has been condemned, in a discussion of capital punishment for women. In 1934 the question 'Will another Woman be Hanged?' raises 'the question whether any distinction should be made between the sexes in the application of capital punishment'.⁵⁰ A question it does not seek to answer in 1934, but is on more secure ground in 1955. The *Sketch* was for capital punishment and, in the case of Ruth Ellis, allows an opinion piece by 'Candidus' before the Home Secretary's decision, to argue strongly that she should hang, 'It is time that feminists learned that sex equality works both ways . . . Are we to hang the traitors and cage the tigress?'⁵¹ After Lloyd George's decision to allow the death penalty, the *Sketch* runs a half page of readers' letters castigating Ellis to support his decision, claiming that he is 'backed by nine out of ten of the hundreds of women who have written', and almost as an afterthought, '7 out of 10 of the men think she should hang'⁵² as well.

A comparison with the *Mirror's* coverage of the same trials throws up some interesting contrasts. The women are not constructed as weeping and as passively swooning to the same extent as in the *Mirror*. Usually, though not invariably, the women are seen as more active and even disruptive. The archetype of passivity Edith Thompson is they agree often in a near state of collapse, but they seem as interested in the fact that she wears the same evening clothes in which she was arrested throughout the trial. At the sentencing, where the *Mirror* has her 'swooning and moaning', the *Sketch* has her more actively engaging in a 'passionate outburst of weeping'.⁵³ Bryant in the dock is also active, 'her dark eyes wandered restlessly round the court, her fingers drumming a tattoo on the wooden partition', a direct contrast to the 'exhausted' police officer who has spent the last 24 hours searching her house and who sat clasping his head in his hands, 'apparently tired out'.⁵⁴ The contrast implies a much more disruptive femininity that exhausts the male powers of law and order. A similar element creeps into the depiction of the trial of Nurse Waddingham, where her angry outbursts are unable to be contained by the court. Her angry outbursts against the witnesses include 'You filthy man. You are a liar and it is all lies.'⁵⁵ The trial needs to be adjourned because of her 'hysterical state', 'she had lost complete nervous control'.⁵⁶ Once the trial had been resumed, she screamed on hearing the verdict, 'became hysterical and could not be restrained'.⁵⁷ She proved so disruptive that she had to be removed from the court altogether. On her return, she has another 'outburst' and needs to be removed again. The next appearance in the dock is with her baby, who then proceeds to disrupt the court on her behalf. It is handed back and forth from wardress to mother to try and pacify it. As evidence is heard the baby's crying 'prevents prosecution from continuing' and the trial is halted for her to nurse the child. Eventually 'the crying became so loud and troublesome'⁵⁸ that a detective had to take the baby out of court. The following two days, she continues to shout and scream at the witnesses and has to be remonstrated with the judge. At the sentencing, Nurse Waddingham becomes less uncontrollable in a dramatic rendition:

With a calmness rare in women... There was all the stoicism of the professional that accepts death unflinchingly in the nurse's face... Not a muscle moved. There were no tears, no hysterical outburst, no wild gestures. It was as if she had not heard. She took her own death sentence with a silence which was a final, proud gesture to a relentless court.⁵⁹

For the previously disruptive woman it is an almost valedictory description, although the calmness is located as unusual for femininity and ascribed to professional training. A comparison with the *Mirror's* description raises the question of whether they were at the same trial.

Her face was red and her figure swayed slowly as she stepped half a pace forward in the dock. 'GUILTY', the word echoed and before it had died a hush went around. Nurse Wagddingham swayed. Her tongue touched her dry lips. Her head fell slowly forward. . . . A second passed – a second that seemed eternity. Then Nurse Waddingham tottered, a broken figure, to the cells below.⁶⁰

The contrast illustrates how the *Sketch's* representation of the female murderers allows them to be figures of power, even though the power is often linked to a disruptive, 'hysterical' lack of control, where the *Mirror* insists on their passive pitifulness. With Louisa Merrifield, and Ruth Ellis, the lack of self-control is further constructed as an excess of femininity. Louisa Merrifield dubbed by the *Sketch*, 'The Woman who talked herself into a Murder Trial', is depicted as a woman who cannot hold her tongue, and whose 'foolish talk' betrays her in an irrational loss of control. Under the headline, 'Mrs Merrifield's talk lead her to the death cell',⁶¹ the paper describes her life history with the same delineation, as she 'talks' people into doing what she wants. Loquaciousness becomes the determinate aspect of her character, and is linked to irrationality, since she betrays herself by it. Ellis too is constructed as femininely irrational. 'Frenzy drove blonde to kill the man she needed most'⁶² one headline declares, milking the irony of her irrationality, and develops it in the defence's questioning: 'Why did you do it? – I don't know. I was upset. When you said you had a peculiar idea you wanted to shoot him, were you able to control it? – No.'⁶³ The doctor's verdict on her emotional immaturity and her 'disturbed mind at the time of the shooting' is reported alongside the psychologist on feminine jealousy, which can 'so work as to unseat the reason and can operate to a degree which, in the male mind, it is quite incapable of operating'.⁶⁴ The *Daily Sketch* represents the murderers as irrational and lacking in control due to an excess of femininity, but this depiction also allows them a disruptive power able to confound the bastions of law and order, up until the time of their execution.

When looking at depictions of the female murderers published during the time of Christie's own fictional representations, whether of the criminology of the time, popular explanations or newspaper coverage,

though the depictions shift from text to text, they do largely fall into the areas explored by twentieth-century feminist research, particularly in arguing away their culpability and recasting them as victims. The fact is that Agatha Christie's representations of female murderers do not accord with the contemporary textual stereotypes of female misbehaviour, since they grant them a reasoned efficiency in their murderous plans in the novels which challenge dominant gender discourses, asserting the potential and powerful possibilities of transgressive femininity.

Christie's female murderers

In *After the Funeral* (1953), Miss Gilchrist, a faded-looking fifty-year-old companion, discusses real-life murder in relation to newspaper coverage, in a useful link between actual murderers and textual villains. "One reads about them of course", said Miss Gilchrist relegating crimes to their proper sphere. "And even *that* I'm not very fond of doing. So *sordid* most of them" (AF, p. 20). In response, the family lawyer reflects,

Murderers, as far as he could judge, seemed to be of all sorts and kinds. Some had over-sweeping vanity, some had a lust for power, some like Seddon had been mean and avaricious, others like Smith and Rouse had had an incredible fascination for women; some like Armstrong had been pleasant fellows to meet. Edith Thompson had lived in a world of violent unreality, Nurse Waddingham had put her elderly patients out of the way with business-like cheerfulness. (AF, p. 50)

This brief portrayal of real-life murderers argues for their ordinariness, rejecting the idea that they are monsters, and includes women who can be both overly emotional *and* business-like, as well as men swept away by their emotions. The novel ends with the revelation that Miss Gilchrist herself is the villain, with one of the characters crying: 'I've never imagined a *lady-like* murderer. It's horrible' (AF, p. 189) to which the lawyer comments 'Why not? . . . It takes all sorts.' His view is that women murderers are average and everyday but, he does not construct Miss Gilchrist as lacking in self-control. On the contrary, he is at pains to conclude 'Sane as you or I when she planned that murder. Carried it out in cold blood. She's got a good head on her, you know, underneath the fluffy manner' (AF, p. 192). Like the majority of Christie's killers, she only 'goes mad' once she has been discovered and apprehended, her baffled egotism unable to comprehend failure.

Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), has an even-handed equality in its portrayal of the two cousins plotting for the man to marry a rich woman whom they will then kill. The husband is an unctuous gold-digger but the woman, the wife's companion and best friend, is more attractive, 'a great sport', sensible and outspoken. Poirot reveals that she is 'the mastermind of that affair' (MAAS, p. 194), while he is 'the man of method' (MAAS, p. 193) who organises it. Clearly Evelyn is not swept away by passion or circumstances, this is a deliberate and 'cleverly conceived' plan.

In the 1930s there are more multiple murderers in *The Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and in *Cards on the Table* (1936). *The Murder on the Orient Express*, based on the true kidnapping of the American aviator Charles Lindberg's infant son, is one of the few murders represented as justifiable, since the kidnapper is ritually executed by the family of the murdered little Daisy Armstrong. Usually Christie delineates murder as unproblematically 'evil' and due to defects in the person's moral character. The ritual execution is not left to the male members of the household, the women too play their part and out of the seven men and five women, three of the women are particularly notable characters and prominent in the crime. Mary Debenham, the young, straightforward Englishwoman, is the only one of the twelve to have the 'cool, intelligent, resourceful brain' (MOOE, p. 139) to conceive of the plot that will allow them to escape justice. The aged imperious Russian Princess Dragomiroff has an indomitable will, far greater than her strength, and Mrs Hubbard is revealed as the world-famous actress Mrs Arden. In contrast the men pale into insignificance.

In *Cards on the Table*, the reader knows that all four suspects are successful murderers and once again there is a gendered equality, two of either sex – Dr Roberts, a genial man of the world, Major Despard, a rugged adventurer, the elderly Mrs Lorrimer, a well-bred, intelligent woman of society, and shy, sweet young Ann Meredith. Two are cool and intelligent, Lorrimer and Despard, two are more emotional. Poirot argues that Mrs Lorrimer is 'the one with the best brains, with the coolest, most logical head' (COT, p. 184) and the best of the four at planning a successful murder. But in this text, the more emotional murderers are the dangerous ones; though it is notable they act for wealth, Lorrimer and Despard in some sense are involved in murder in relation to love and therefore more sympathetic. Anne Meredith, the subject of a romance sub-plot, is revealed not as 'nice but rather helpless' as she portrays herself, but with 'the temperament of a thief' committing 'safe', 'hopeful' murders of those who might unmask her.

The more 'deliberate audacious purposeful' murder in this book is done by the doctor. Taken on its own, this book may seem to reinforce gender conventions, but it is notable that Poirot does not explain away Anne's violence, but accords it an agency that is both extremely threatening and open-ended:

She is dangerous, that little Mademoiselle Anne! Where her own safety, her own comfort is concerned, she will strike wildly – treacherously. With Mademoiselle Anne those two crimes will not be the end. She will gain confidence from them'. (*COT*, p. 195)

Anne is dangerous, emotional, but not a psychopath – only 'weak'. Miss Waynflete, in *Murder is Easy* (1939), the frail elderly village spinster helping the amateur detective, is a much madder serial killer, carefully studying criminology to revenge herself on the man who jilted her in her youth and on those who patronise her. She is 'a homicidal maniac', 'evil', a 'very wicked woman' (*MIE*, p. 213), and almost gets away with it because of the gender bias of the detective: Christie can make them mad, though they are not the majority, but hardly any of her women 'drift into' killing (Miss Chadwick, in *Cat Among the Pigeons*, is one of the few). The murders are deliberate and deliberated. Miss Waynflete explains the complex premeditated plans she develops, to frame Gordon Whitfield, 'I read a lot of books on crime. I chose my victims carefully – there was not to be too much suspicion at first' (*MIE*, p. 205). Slipping arsenic into the tea of one, she lays a false clue that is ignored, 'telling the nurse how Mrs Horton had complained of the bitter taste of Lord Whitfield's grapes! The stupid woman never repeated that, which was such a pity' (*MIE*, p. 206). Pushing one drunk into the river, a child off a windowsill and an elderly lady into the path of a speeding car are all easily encompassed. But killing the doctor takes more ingenuity, and she dresses his wound with poison culled from a cat's infected ear. 'Of course it mightn't have worked – it was just a long shot. I was delighted when it did' (*MIE*, p. 207). This serial killer of seven people, apprehended as she attempts the eighth, points not only to feminine active agency, but also to a creative inventiveness. Dr Roberts, one of the four murderers suspected of killing Shaitana, in *Cards on the Table*, gets away with killing one man in a similar manner, infecting his shaving brush with anthrax, and then goes on to inject a woman with blood poisoning, in the guise of a tetanus injection. He is, says Inspector Battle, 'a clever devil'. In his stabbing of Shaitana, 'he took a long chance and played his cards well', 'sheer bold, audacious bluff' (*COT*, p. 221). Miss Waynflete kills

seven, whereas the doctor murders only four that we know of (Battle suspects he's murdered 'quite a lot of people' *MIE*, p. 77), and she is deranged where he is more rational, recognising when he is outwitted and confessing. Nevertheless, the mix of audacious improvisation and careful deliberation in using technical knowledge is shown to be a *modus operandi* open to murderers of either gender.

In *The Body in the Library* (1942), the killers are a secretly married couple trying to hang on to a large inheritance. Josie Turner, cousin of the murdered Ruby, is 'shrewd, practical, hard as nails, and *all out for money*' (*BIL*, p. 213). Callously she disguises a schoolgirl, bleaching her hair and painting her nails before the girl is strangled by her husband. Both actions produce disgust in Miss Marple, Josie 'makes me sick to think of' (*BIL*, p. 214) plus 'Really I feel quite pleased to think of him being hanged.' Josie kills her cousin and disposes of the body. 'She was very thorough' we are told, and 'thought of everything' (*BIL*, p. 215) but was betrayed by the man talking too much and going to pieces, rather like Mrs Merrifield's delineation in the *Sketch*. Josie, the text concludes, 'was always the strong character. It was her plan throughout' (p. 217).

In contrast to the media coverage during the 1920s–1950s as harmless and carried away involuntarily by strong emotions, or drifting into crime through circumstance, Christie's female murderers during the same period are not. Given the generic necessities of detective fiction with its intricate plotting and suspense, the murders are more usually premeditated, calculated and intelligently carried out and this accords to her women murderers as well as the men. Christie's female murderers are actively violent, even when insane, and are often motivated by greed. The taking of another life for gain is delineated as evil and so the women criminals are specifically delineated as culpable agents and often, as with Anne Meredith and Miss Waynflete, acknowledged as disruptively dangerous not just to individuals but to the whole of society. These are, it should be noted, the very things Hilary Allen was arguing for in the representation of female offenders, in 1987: 'the full dignity of responsibility, culpability and dangerousness'.⁶⁵

'Culpability' though is a slippery term, particularly in Christie's novels where the issue of determinism arises. Miss Marple is the more categorical, that murder is in a person's nature as she classifies people into 'types' but Poirot's use of the psychology of the criminal or suspect has a similar emphasis, for all that psychology is less fixed than scientific classification. For both, often, murder is in a criminal's nature, whether male

or female, even down to the type of murder committed – frightened, bold, inventive or cruel. Poirot rejects Mrs Lorrimer's confession, since the crime does not suit her personality, '*you cannot have killed him in the way you say you did. No one can do a thing that is not dans son caractère!*' (COT, p. 191) and he is proved correct. At least two detective novels consider the issue not only of 'nature' but of heredity, of 'bad blood', in relation to murder and tease out various complications. *Crooked House* (1949) constructs heredity as something inescapable, though random in its mix of attributes. *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952) sees heredity as having less impact on culpability. The narrator of *Crooked House*, Charles Hayward, is implicated in discovering the murderer because he wants to marry into the Leonides family and his intended insists on him discovering the truth before they become affianced because, "'You see, we're a very queer family. . . . There's a lot of *ruthlessness* in us – and – different kinds of ruthlessness. That's what's so disturbing. The different kinds'" (CH, p. 22). Aristides' 'poor Greek' unconcern for human life has been allied through marriage to upper-class English arrogance, 'All those fox-hunting forbears – and the old general, the shoot-'em down types' (CH, p. 23, Christie is at least even-handed in her stereotypes). It is this heredity that creates the 'nature' arrogant enough to kill, for all that the upbringing may also affect the personality. Josephine's sensitivity to being rejected by her mother as 'a changeling' because ugly and overlooked because only a girl, in contrast to her brother's superiority of gender and beauty, aggravate the inferiority that craves attention and the limelight, but the text locates these as aspects of nature, rather than nurture. Josephine, the text insists, is 'not normal', but her psychopathic personality is consistently linked to her heredity, and the ending confirms Sophia's opening explanation:

Perhaps, too, the various factors of heredity – what Sophia had called the 'ruthlessness of the family' – had met together.

She had had an authoritarian ruthlessness of her grandmother's family, and the ruthless egoism of Magda, [her mother] seeing only her own point of view. She had also presumably suffered, sensitive like Philip, [her father] from the stigma of being the unattractive – the changeling child – of the family. Finally, in her very marrow had run the essential crooked strain of old Leonides. She had been Leonides' grandchild, she had resembled him in brain and cunning – but where his love had gone outwards to family and friends, hers had turned inward to herself. (CH, p. 158)

This heredity is linked specifically to culpability – ‘You do not like someone less because they have . . . some . . . fatal disease . . . She had been born with a kink – the crooked child of the little crooked House’ (*CH*, p. 160). Josephine’s arrogant vanity is linked to her heredity ‘crookedness’ as something she could not help. Had she lived, she would have been ‘sent to a reformatory or a special school. Later she would have been released – or possibly certified’ (*CH*, p. 160), less as a punishment than as a safeguard to society, since ‘she was a source of danger’ (*CH*, p. 158). But heredity, though constant, is also mutable and random. ‘In poor little Josephine all the worst of the family came together’ whereas Sophia inherits ‘all that is bravest and best in the Leonides family’ (*CH*, p. 160).

Three years later, Christie returns to the issue, as if unsatisfied with the resolution of a fixed heredity, allowing the child with inherited genes to reach adult responsibility and hence complicate the issue of culpability, in *Mrs McGinty’s Dead*. The theme is introduced via a newspaper feature on ‘Women Associated With Crime’, and the murders committed by the offspring of one of them to hide their identity. Interestingly, the initial fictionalised newspaper article represents the women as passive and mitigates their culpability in a manner similar to that of the actual *Daily Mirror* coverage. The fictional *Sunday Comet* represents Eva Kane as the innocent accessory to a husband’s murder of his wife, ‘the pitiful young girl, seduced in her trusting youth by a cold-blooded murderer’ (*MMD*, p. 94). Christie’s policemen, however, suspect she has a more active agency, ‘she was by no means the innocent victim that the public thought her’ (*MMD*, p. 145) but the murderer, ‘she not only thought of it, but she did it’ (*MMD*, p. 145). The daughter of the husband hung in Kane’s place insists at the end, ‘“She was a nasty bit of goods all right – children know! My father was just – weak. And besotted by her. But he took the rap. For something, I’ve always believed, that *she* did”’ (*MMD*, p. 326). In contrast to the fictionalised newspaper’s representation, Christie’s depiction has the woman as active killer, and husband as weak accomplice. A second woman, ‘Janice Courtland, the “tragic wife” whose husband was a fiend in human form’ (*HDD*, p. 92), is also revealed as less passive in her agency and culpability.

‘A nasty bit of goods. If we hanged Edith Thompson we certainly ought to have hanged Janice Courtland. . . . she worked on that young man until she had him all up in arms. But all the time, mark you, there was a rich man in the background, and it was to marry him she wanted her husband out of the way.’ (*MMD*, p. 146)

The novel reinforces the point that newspaper reportage constructs women as passive but that this is ‘treacly sentiment’ (*MMD*, p. 99), as the reporter admits, “No point in accuracy. Whole thing was a romantic farrago from beginning to end” (*MDD*, p. 102). While being an accurate fictional representation of contemporary newspaper coverage of female murderers, Christie’s text rejects the press stereotypes and insists on giving the women ‘the full dignity of responsibility, culpability and dangerousness’.⁶⁶ As Poirot comments, ‘at least one of these “tragic women” was something more than a tragic woman – that she was a murderess’ (*MMD*, p. 146). Given *Crooked House*’s focus on a child murderer, the inclusion of another child among the ‘tragic women’, Lily Gambol, continues the issue of culpability in relation to minors. Lily kills her autocratic aunt forbidding her going to the cinema, another childish ‘inadequate’ motive, as Josephine’s not being allowed to do ballet. It is the ‘treacly’ newspaper that advances the opinion that ‘it is not the child, but the system, that we must blame. . . . Brought up in ignorance, little Lily was the victim of her environment’ (*MDD*, p. 96), while Poirot disagrees and refuses to overlook the death. When the police point to her ‘making good’ in reform school and suggesting, “people don’t hold it against a kid of twelve for doing something in a fit of temper. What about washing her out?” (*MDD*, p. 147), again Poirot cannot concur, this time because Christie has made the murder the same as that of Lily’s *modus operandi*. For him, Lily can never be ‘nice’ and so remains culpable and potentially dangerous.

The theme of heredity is introduced by Mrs Upward, and raises the whole nurture/nature debate:

‘You can’t get away from heredity – in people as well as dogs.’

Shelagh Rendell murmured:

‘Don’t you think it’s environment?’

Mrs Upward cut her short.

‘No my dear, I don’t. Environment can give a veneer – no more. It’s what’s bred in people that counts.’ (*MDD*, p. 184)

Shelagh Rendell passionately denounces this as ‘“cruel – unfair”’, and Mrs Oliver’s biblical quote on “things are handed down. Unto the third and fourth generation” is allowed to be capped by Maureen Summerhayes, “But that quotation goes on: ‘And show mercy unto thousands’” (*MDD*, pp. 184–5). The presentation remains ambiguous, with strong arguments placed on either side and no resolution. Much

later, Poirot judges Mrs Upward as holding “Quite fanatical views on the subject of heredity” (MDD, p. 314). The murderer, when he is finally apprehended as the son of Eva Kane, claims “And anyway it isn’t my fault. . . I’m not responsible. It’s in my blood. I can’t help it. You can’t hang me for something that isn’t my fault” (MMD, p. 315) but this thesis is rejected as erroneous, ‘Under his breath Spence muttered: “Can’t we? You see if we don’t!”’ (MMD, p. 315). Heredity, or some form of determined ‘nature’, does not excuse or mitigate the responsibility of murder, though it may complicate it. Christie’s murderers of whatever gender are brought to book for their crimes, except in the case of some minors.

In Christie’s representation the women are created as equally bad as the male villains, neither more nor less wicked. Often the women have been sympathetic characters during the development of the plot. Attractive, forthright, sensible and at times the subject of romance, they are revealed as having a moral weakness in their character. Just as Alison Light, in *Forever England*, argues that Christie sidesteps the public’s self-righteous and salacious reactions to cross-class criminals in texts such as *The Body in the Library*,⁶⁷ Christie’s texts also refuse to castigate female murderers for rejecting the stereotypes of nurture and subservience because these have not been the mainstays of characterising femininity in her books. From the 1930s to the 1970s, Christie’s villains unproblematically assume either gender, and the female villains enact exactly the same motives as the males, delineated by Bargainnier as ‘money, fear, revenge and love’ and fuelled by a ‘moral immaturity and egoism’.⁶⁸ It is interesting how, despite *Daughters of Cain* and the *Daily Mirror*’s attempts to construct female murderers as emotional or monsters, the crimes tied to domestic emotions of love and jealousy, Christie gives her women more public-focussed motives of greed and vanity, and takes pains to normalise them as ordinary people. Where the *Mirror* consistently portrays them as mothers and as housewives, Christie has a much more varied delineation: impoverished companions, dutiful wives, spinsters, Members of Parliament, doctors of psychology and leaders of international gangs of smugglers and train robbers. Christie’s representations during the twenties to the seventies allow women a dangerous competency within the masculine-gendered public world without any attendant opprobrium or vilification. They are never seen as ‘doubly deviant’ because of their gender. Even with the young female murderers of the sixties and seventies, the beatnik and Beatles generation, there is little difference in the construction of these later female murderers, apart from the fact that they are invariably young,

they are just as emotional or as efficient in their plotting and in the execution of the plans as the earlier female murderers, but the tone of their delineation is more distanced and cool. There is less textual acceptance but not, one notes, thereby any employment of the double rejection for their gender, just for their youth and type of femininity.

6

An Examination of Otherness, as the West Encounters the East

If Christie's texts repudiate the othering of English femininity, representing it as a central, unalienated 'part of us' within the books, what occurs to the portrayal of gender when the further formulation of the 'alien' or 'other', that of race and nationality, compounds the depiction? Christie's 'conservative' reputation includes a racist, anti-Semitic position and this too needed detailed textual examination to decipher how founded a reputation it was, in relation to the othering of the East. A postcolonial awareness of how English writers of the 1930s and 1940s construct foreign cultures, particularly Arabic-speaking countries, has grown more and more sophisticated since Said,¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin,² and Bhaba.³ Said's seminal range of stereotypes that Occidental writers invoke in their binary divide between East and West to assert the European superiority, with the Orient as the 'other' of Occidental mastery, have been challenged and complicated, but they still prove useful to someone analysing English representations of the East. Christie's representations of foreign cultures delineate three major types of the East – the Arab, the Jew and the Greek (often linked textually to the Turkish) – and where the latter two are encountered in England, the Arabic-speaking countries are encountered via the English abroad. A comparison of the Western Mediterranean of the fashionable Riviera in France and Italy with the Arabic-speaking, Eastern Mediterranean of Egypt, Israel and Jordan notes what differences occur in these settings of leisure and licence, away from the prying eyes of little England, particularly in relation to murder. How does the practice of othering variant cultures come into play within the terrain of crime and opprobrium as well as the terrain of gender delineation?

Christie had an unconventional upbringing, she was not sent to school and spent much of her childhood in France, as the impoverished

family let out the family home to live on the proceeds. After her marriage to her second husband, an archaeologist, she also lived for periods of time in the Middle East and had a house in Baghdad either side of the Second World War. This informed, experiential knowledge of both the Western and Eastern Mediterranean is developed in the representations of the different cultures. As Sara Mills⁴ and Mary Louise Pratt⁵ have argued, in relation to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women travellers and explorers, women travellers' experiences though no less imperialist are complicated by the gender power relations that come into play, since they are also 'othered' by their own phallogentric imperialist culture. Often their representations are more ambivalent and less focused on issues of conquest, mastery and exploitation than their male counterparts. They

cannot be said to speak from outside colonial discourse, but their relation to [it] is problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of 'femininity', which were operating on them in equal, and sometimes stronger, measure. Because of these discursive pressures, their work exhibits contradictory elements which may act as a critique of some of the components of other colonial writings.⁶

What might then be highlighted are the contradictions and instabilities present within any conservative, middle-class construction of otherness by a woman writer aware of the tensions between traditional quasi-Edwardian constructions of gender and the more modern, radical dissensions. I would want to argue that, while the representations Christie invokes are usually within the field of conventional British stereotypes and problematically monolithic in their national attributions, the attitudes mobilised towards the stereotyped representations are at times more resistant than audiences only familiar with the blockbuster movies, *Death on the Nile* or on *The Orient Express* or the conservative, nostalgic renditions on the television, might expect. They often refuse to castigate or 'blame' otherness, arguing instead for a broader acceptance of difference. Jon Thompson, in *Fiction, Crime and Empire*, argues for both a conservative and a resistant, critical form of spy thriller and suggests Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* is the former because

the novel offers almost no vantage point from which the reader can evaluate competing points of view, no belief system that calls into question the values and rationales that inform the novel's imperial vision of India. . . . In short, Kipling's dominating point of view means

that there is little dialogic interaction between what Henry James referred to as different 'centers of consciousness': because there is only one authorially ratified center of consciousness, there is only one style. That is to say, there is no interaction between the different styles such that they call into question the ideological presuppositions of the dominant, pseudo-objective, descriptive style of the novel. Despite the Indian words and phrases incorporated into the novel, there is little attempt to grasp the cultures that those languages articulate . . .⁷

Christie does to some extent try to grasp the cultures of Eastern Europe and the Middle East for all that she raises other issues in her attempts to 'explain' and categorise these cultures to her English audiences. I want to take Mills's concept of women writers' representation of divergent cultures as being more ambivalent and Thompson's model of dialogic, competing points of views that contest a dominant ideology and attempt to grasp divergent cultures as a critical, resistant practice and argue that while Christie invokes and reproduces traditional stereotypes in her detective fiction, what she does with them, the textual treatment of them, is more complex and contradictory. Gillian Gill, in her biography of Christie, argues that what makes her novels readable in the twenty-first century is her 'refusal to subscribe to the tribal loyalties of her nation and class'.⁸ While I am less convinced about Christie's challenge to class construction, indeed I think she reinforces the commonplace, she does often prove more resistant in relation to nationality.

Biography

During Agatha Christie's childhood, one acceptable way for the prosperous middle classes to cope with financial problems was to rent out their family home and live abroad, where the cost of living was cheaper. At the age of five years, the Christie family had money difficulties and rented out the family home. The young Agatha went to live in the south of France, first at Pau and then, when the weather became too hot, in Couteret in the Pyrenees. Since upper-middle-class mothers did not devote themselves to childcare, a young French maid was engaged as Agatha's companion and nurse, and became so indispensable that she accompanied the family on their return to England. In her biography, Christie gives a thoughtful analysis of what it must have been like for Marie, living as a foreigner in England. Having explained the unthinking acceptance of a child, that the nurse should leave her own family and

homeland, she turns the tables and asks, 'What I wonder now is what it meant to *her*?'⁹ Placing herself in the experience of the young maid, lonely and alienated, she explains in detail how, because Marie's mores were different from the English servants, she was ostracised until the family remonstrated against her enforced isolation below stairs. Where the English servants spent their wages on new clothes and hats, Marie saved her money for her *dot* and wore always the same drab, plain clothes, raising scorn for her difference. In a dialogic rendition of the culture clash, Christie characteristically presents both points of view, refusing to privilege either. Sympathetically, Christie notes the mores of both the young French maid and the 'girls in good service and the shop-girls'¹⁰ in England, explaining the divergent clash of cultural expectations and even-handedly refusing to demonise the English servants who made her beloved Marie unhappy. Christie's unconventional schooling ends with eighteen months in a pensionnat in Paris, followed by a finishing school in the same city.

If Christie's childhood included time spent in France, the second half of her adult life was to be spent in Syria and Iraq. But her first experience of the Middle East comes soon after her return to England. On her return, her mother fell ill and they decided to winter in Egypt for her health. In Cairo, young Agatha lived the life of what she was later to term the 'Mem Sahib', the colonial ex-patriots, filled with parties, dances and polo. Years later, when her marriage to Archie Christie collapsed, Agatha and her daughter repaired to the Canary Isles, where she envisioned herself for the first time as a professional writer. With Rosalind returned to school, inspired by a chance diner-party conversation, she set out for Baghdad in 1928, travelling as a woman alone, into 'the first truly oriental city'¹¹ she had ever seen. Deliberately escaping the rule of the mem sahib of her first visit, which she represents as a prison, she booked into a Baghdad hotel to experience Iraq first-hand. The surprisingly modern representation of an independent young mother travelling alone while her daughter is in boarding school, in the much later *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959), portrays the love of escaping into a different culture. Mrs Upjohn refuses to follow the usual tourist itinerary and loses herself in the interior of Anatolia, journeying on local buses and interacting with the local women, much to the exasperation of the English Inspector trying to locate her:

When the child said a bus, I thought a proper coach tour, running to schedule, and a party all booked together. But that's not it at all. Seems she's just taking local buses to any place she happens to fancy!

She's not done it through Cook's or a recognised travel agency. She's all on her own, wandering about. What can you do with a woman like that? She might be anywhere.¹²

Travelling femininity is seen by the Inspector as wayward and unaccountable, but the narrative shows a more accepting portrait of the English woman enjoying the encounter with other, different women as they share intimate talk of children and miscarriages, creating bonds despite the different cultural evaluations of the maternal. What could be portrayed as astonishing in 1959 to an insular character was just as surprising in 1928. Agatha Christie returned to Iraq the following season and met her second husband Max Mallowan, an archaeologist at the dig at Ur. With him she visited Syria and Iraq and, after their marriage, lived with him on sites in both countries and owned a house in Baghdad, either side of the Second World War.

Her *Autobiography* (written in 1965 and published in 1977) and *Come Tell me How You Live* (1946) stand testimony to an Englishwoman's love of the Middle East, of the land and the people. The *Autobiography* is interesting in its representations of both the east and the west Mediterranean countries, encapsulated in the quote describing her train journey as a woman travelling alone, from Turkey to Syria in 1928: 'There was a subtle difference on passing from Europe into Asia. It was as though time had less meaning.'¹³ Given her formative experiences in France, Christie constructs herself as European here, rather than simply British, but even this is not placed as normative. In the descriptions, she does not privilege the West over the East, rather on this journey, she is taught to think of time in profoundly different terms by an Anglo-Indian friend,

from that moment I realise that something happened to me – not a change of heart, not quite a change of outlook, but somehow I saw things more in proportion; myself less large; as only one facet of a whole, in a vast world with hundreds of inter-connections.¹⁴

It is this openness that has her declare of her experiences, 'I learnt soon enough that nothing in the Near East is what it appears to be. One's rules of life and conduct, observation and behaviour, have all to be reversed and relearnt.'¹⁵ From the outset in the late 1920s, Agatha Christie's experience of Syria and Iraq was to acknowledge the differences in the culture, but accommodate her ideological grasp of the world to that difference, rather than 'othering' it as alien, just as she had done earlier in considering the young French woman, Marie. She is open to

're-learn' and to re-configure her view of life in ways that, though not 'oriental', attempt to interpret the oriental within her own ideological grasp. Christie formulates conventional stereotypes in relation to orientalising the Middle East and moreover she is over-fond of classifying all Arabs in monolithic terms as the following quotes example:

The driver, the soul of politeness and delicacy, as indeed all Arabs are, moved away.¹⁶

The workmen, like all Arabs, were oblivious to vertigo.¹⁷

Warm-hearted, simple, full of enjoyment of life, and so well able to laugh at everything. Arabs are great ones for laughing, great ones for hospitality too.¹⁸

What needs acknowledging, alongside the problematically monolithic silencing of the differences among the peoples of the Middle East, and the emotional and the overly courteous stereotyping, is the overwhelmingly positive images that are conveyed. When contemplating the ancient Iraqi artefacts found by her husband in Nimrud, her awe at their creativity is expressed by the exclamation notable for its inclusiveness, 'One does feel proud to belong to the human race when one sees the wonderful things human beings have fashioned with their hands. They have been creators.'¹⁹ The passage goes on to discuss an Iraqi carpenter's embellishment of a towel-rail and the voicing of the beauty of it, for him, though the Europeans see it as hideous. Again, the text does not strive to assert the dominant view as British, but argues dialogically for the equal validity of both views: 'Well, it seemed hideous to us, but it was beautiful to him, and he made it in the spirit of creation, *because* it was beautiful'²⁰ and concludes by allying the same desire for beauty in the craftsmen who built the English cathedrals. Agatha Christie, writing in retrospect in the 1960s, finds it important to acknowledge cultural differences and refuses any textual practice of exclusivity in 'othering' foreign cultures, whether of the Western or the Eastern Mediterranean. Is this relative openness apparent in the novels as well, where different textual conventions and generic expectations come into force?

The Western Mediterranean

The representations of the European Mediterranean are remarkably few. *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and 'Triangle at Rhodes' (1936) are the most notable, and of these three,

two take place centrally on trains, places of liminality and fluidity, while the third on the holidaying beach at Rhodes offers a similar context of liminality and licence.

Luxury and glamour are invoked in all three settings as the texts examine the English abroad. The ex-pat Chubby Evans, living in Nice but with only a smattering of French, 'was one of those staunch patriotic Britons who, having made a portion of a foreign country their own, strongly resent the original inhabitants of it'.²¹ The little Englander mentality is clearly being ridiculed, not a figure of authority but the fifth husband of Lady Tamplin who, having used the past four marriages to climb socially, has married for pleasure a much younger, poorer but handsome man who 'knows which way his bread is buttered'.²² Colonel Arbuthnot, the voice of little England in *Murder on the Orient Express*, is also shown as failing in his dismissive assessment, "'Only some damned foreigner'"²³ for, of course, the renowned Hercule Poirot. Christie's European Mediterranean is not a site for English characters to define the foreigners as 'other' to their proud national traits but for foreigners, particularly through the eyes of Poirot, to 'other' the stereotype of English reserve and emotional discomfiture as something peculiar. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, the two young women seated opposite each other while the train is in England, when they catch each other's eye, ignore each other: 'The faces of both women hardened to well-bred impassiveness'²⁴ and it is only once the train is in France, that they are able to unbend and to chat 'together in a friendly fashion'.²⁵ On the Taurus Express, Poirot notes of the two English travellers, one male and one female, who have apparently just met, '[t]rue to their nationality, the two English people were not chatty. They exchanged a few brief remarks and then the girl rose and went back to her compartment.'²⁶ On the beach in Rhodes, one of the young women prides herself on people watching, and so,

[u]nlike most English people, she was capable of speaking to strangers on sight instead of allowing four days to a week to elapse before making the first cautious advance as is the customary British habit. (TR, p. 547)

The observation of 'as is the customary British habit' exemplifies how Christie's narratives seem to use the foreign context to distance many of the English characteristics generalised as national traits and these are presented as odd and outside of the norm of acceptable European behaviour. The stereotyping is not unusual in its choices, but the narrative's

evaluations in its othering of the English characters, rather than the French or Italian, is. Insularity and xenophobia tend to be apportioned to dominant male characters, indicting their phallogocentrism as narrow-minded, whereas the English enjoyment of foreign encounters tend to be by women, the Julia Upjohns and the Pamela Lyalls. The frenzied attack of the murder on the Orient Express leads Poirot and Bouc to initially consider the murderer must be either Latin or a woman, since no English male could be constructed as so passionate, and when the French dancer, Mirelle, exercises her 'temperament' by passionately throwing a table and a glass bowl to express her rage, the English ex-major views her 'with cold British disapproval. He felt embarrassed and ill at ease. Poirot, on the other hand, with twinkling eyes was thoroughly enjoying the scene'.²⁷ Poirot it is, too, who comments to the heroine, "'Ah, mais c'est anglais ça," he murmured, "everything in black and white, everything clear cut and well defined. But life, it is not like that, Mademoiselle".²⁸ By choosing to make her authoritative detective Belgian, Christie allows him the authorial distance to comment upon Englishness, particularly dominant masculine insularity, and to find it faintly ridiculous, defensive and narrow-minded, a judgement which the text as a whole will uphold.

The crimes that are committed in these places of leisured play and liminality are purely personal in nature, the murder of a rich woman to steal her fabulous rubies, the murder of a wife and the framing of another woman's husband as the murderer, so that the remaining spouses can set up together with the wife's fortune, or the murder of a callous kidnapper who killed his victim and so blighted numerous lives connected with the victim, Daisy Armstrong. While greed and love fuel the first two, the crime of *Murder on the Orient Express* carries with it a more quasi-social commentary, as the 12 victims of the kidnapper ritually stab him in a parody of the 12 jury members of an English court. Each character, whether vengeful family or police, when they discover that the character known as Ratchett was in fact the kidnapper of Daisy Armstrong, comments that he deserved to die. It is a verdict which Poirot implicitly endorses when, having unmasked the murderers, he allows them to go unpunished. Poirot offers the police investigators two diametrically opposing resolutions to the crime, to arrest half the train or to accept that a form of justice has taken place and allow the murderers to escape arrest (a surprisingly ambivalent reaction to law and order). All this occurs on the train while it is stranded in Yugoslavia, outside of time and normality, the one country that does not place police on the train while it travels through their country.

Poirot, usually so adamantly antagonistic to murder, accepts that the kidnapper, who escaped American law and punishment because of his influential contacts, is finally dealt with justly by this ritualised revenge, and the aspect that allows it to be seen as justified rather than vigilantism is the fact that 12 members of the affected families carry out the deed. Outside of the parameters of normal law and order, the liminal context of the stranded train in Yugoslavia becomes the space in which true British justice can be enacted and ritualised murder countenanced.

In all these European texts the villains are excessively disguised, they are extreme in their masquerades. Since Christie's villains are unsettlingly usually 'one of us', revealed from the midst of the ordinary social characters, they must inevitably be pretending to be something they are not, situated within the cast of innocent suspects. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, however, the upright English major turns out to be a masquerading jewel thief known only as the Marquis, who we have seen improbably wearing a black mask and a white wig stalking through Paris at night, and his accomplice, the victim's maid, turns out to be the equally infamous Kitty Kidd, male impersonator and character actress. All the characters on the Orient Express are unmasked as people different from whom they claim to be, in a 12-fold unmasking that culminates with Daisy Armstrong's grandmother, the renowned American actress Linda Arden. The extremes of masquerade and of performativity experienced on these train journeys through Europe are more flamboyant than most of the texts set in England, which perhaps ties in with the extra licence Christie constructs as Europe's ease with colourful extremes of passion, despite the fact that the villains are predominately English or American. The playground of the rich and famous, the European Mediterranean, allows the English to be 'othered' within a context of transience and liminality, creating excessive performativity in the crimes set amongst jewelled, bright colours and emotions from which the reserved English characters are excluded but through which the observant wisdom of Poirot moves comfortably at home.

The Middle East

Christie has a number of texts set in the Middle East, particularly Iraq (in her time known as Mesopotamia), where she sets both detective fiction and her less well-known adventure thrillers. *Death on the Nile* (1937), *Appointment with Death* (1938) and *Death Comes At the End* (1945) are the detective novels set in Egypt, Amman and Petra; *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *They came to Baghdad* (1951) and *Destination Unknown* (1954),

the texts set in Iraq. Given that Christie's delineation of the countries of the Orient is informed by a detailed knowledge and affection, how is it that a stereotype of Christie's novels exists which argues that they contain a racist, colonialist ideology? Largely, I think, because of a slackness of reading. Christie's novels are full of characters who voice racist, colonial and conservative views and it is perhaps too easy to assume these as the writer's views. Nurse Leatheran, the narrator of *Murder in Mesopotamia*, is a case in point. Engaged to reassure the agitated Mrs Leidner, wife of the leader of the dig near Hassanieh, her first assumption is that the lady's unease is due to being amongst Arab natives, a view that is swiftly rejected by Mr Leidner, "she appreciates their simplicity and their sense of humour".²⁹ Next, she disturbingly dismisses Mrs Mercado, a character she will dislike throughout the novel, as having 'what my mother used to call "a touch of the tar-brush"'.³⁰ These views, however, are faults of her character, a Christie shorthand to alert us to her narrow-mindedness and the unreliability of her views, a point that is reinforced for the reader when she initially dismisses Poirot. 'Of course, I knew he was a foreigner, but I hadn't expected him to be quite as foreign as he was, if you know what I mean. . . He looked like a hairdresser in a comic play!'³¹ Such a character's views are clearly not meant to be taken as authoritative, and all Christie's little Englander racists invariably demonstrate their narrow-minded bigotry by misconstruing Poirot's greatness. The little Englander is denigrated in the East as well as in Europe, and is invariably unreliable as a viewpoint. Christie's representation of the countries of the Near and Middle East, whether Egypt, Syria or Iraq, celebrates their beauty with a quirky specificity that speaks of experience. Even Nurse Leatheran, by the close, expresses a 'homesick feeling' for 'the noise the water-wheel made and the women washing, and that queer haughty look that camels give you'.³² But just because the representations are sympathetic, does not mean that they are not contributing to and reinforcing what Said terms 'Orientalism'. Orientalism constructs binary divisions between East and West, and Christie's construction of Arabic countries comprehensively does do this. But Said also argues Orientalism legitimates European power and domination, constructing the peoples as degenerate, lax and needing colonial control with their countries seen as timeless and backward and here the factor of Christie as a woman traveller comes into the equation, since Mills and Pratt argue that women are less interested in issues of control and mastery. The detective texts where the characters are on holiday, such as *Death on the Nile* or *Death is Announced*, have throw-away brief descriptions of the sights and focus mostly on the tourists.

Rowland argues that Christie's 'examination of colonial relations within Englishness'³³ in *Death on the Nile* has the characters mimic an Oriental context that speaks more to their own fractured sense of identity as English and American consumers at the time of the stock market crash, pointing to the crisis of identity and the 'otherness' of crime within the Anglo-American psyche. Though the characters might cite a passionate response to the landscape, the text ironises the inauthenticity of this, pointing back to the darkness within the Anglo-American psyche itself.

Death on the Nile uses colonialism to explore English and American cultural identities in relation to capitalism. It cites Orientalism as an overtly fictional strategy of self-expression . . . Western identities in crisis are depicted as consuming any notion of a stable self through colonial aesthetics.³⁴

The texts which are set on archaeological digs, *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *They Came to Baghdad* and its companion thriller *Destination Unknown*, have more detailed representations and, like Nurse Leatheran's nostalgia, the depictions have a complex tie of a specificity alongside a bid for authenticity that belies the generalisation of a stereotype.

Outside in Bank Street it was sunny and full of swirling dust and the noises were terrific and varied. There was the persistent honking of motor horns, the cries of vendors of various wares. There were hot disputes between small groups of people who seemed ready to murder each other but were really fast friends; men, boys and children were selling every type of tree, sweetmeats, oranges and bananas, bath towels, combs, razor blades and other assorted merchandise carried rapidly through the streets on trays. There was also a perpetual and ever renewed sound of throat clearing and spitting, and above it the thin melancholy wail of men conducting donkeys and horses amongst the stream of motors and pedestrians shouting, '*Balek – Balek!*'

It was eleven o'clock in the morning in the city of Baghdad.³⁵

There is an intimacy and assuredness of voice in relation to the 'hot dispute', which might appear violent to an unknowing eye but is really just a different custom, alongside the complex picture of the variety, summed up in the statement that this is what it is like at eleven in the morning, with the implication that later in the day the street may well change again. The specificity and the awareness of variety and change

believe the blanket monolith of a stereotype in this representation. Here, as elsewhere, Christie inserts Arabic words and phrases. Poirot uses one in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, as he begins his unmasking of the murderer, not simply to add 'local colour' but to add weight and importance to the proceedings: "Bismillahi ar rahman ar rahim. That is the Arab phrase used before setting out on a journey. *Eh bien*, we too start on a journey."³⁶ Jon Thompson commented on Kipling's use of indigenous words, which he termed 'Indian', and argued that for Kipling, 'Despite Indian words and phrases incorporated into the novel, there is little attempt to grasp the cultures that those languages articulate.'³⁷ Not true of Christie, though obviously in the course of her attempts to grasp the cultures, in 'explaining' and articulating the Arabic culture to her Western readers, she does assume a form of textual colonial mastery over the representation. Christie's texts seek to explain cultural differences, thereby actively constructing both stereotypes and binary divisions in relation to the Middle East, but interestingly they refrain from privileging either side of the binary divide. The narrator of *They Came to Baghdad* suggests the differences between the East and the West, as the Marsh Arab and the Englishman, inculcated at an English public school, display their acceptance of each other's diversity.

For a moment he longed intensely to be a man of Eastern and not of Western blood. Not to worry over the chances of success or of failure, not to calculate again and again the hazards, repeatedly asking himself if he had planned wisely and with forethought. To throw responsibility on the All Merciful, the All Wise. Inshallah, I shall succeed!

Even saying the words over to himself he felt the calmness and the fatalism of the country overwhelming him and he welcomed it.³⁸

The view of the Oriental as fatalistic, as opposite to the Western sense of personal responsibility, is clearly a well-worn stereotype and one that also occurs in *Cat Among the Pigeons* between Ali Yusuf and Bob Rawlinson,³⁹ but the delineation of the Marsh Arab, a minor character but accorded the full weight of a name and personality, and the genuine affection between him and Carmichael, alongside Carmichael's openness to experiencing the Eastern viewpoint, all point to a different use and evaluation of the stereotype. When the text calls for a knowledgeable experience of the East, it is usually a masculine authoritativeness that is invoked, but a first engagement with the unknown culture, the more open vulnerability, is usually experienced by the women characters, Nurse Leatheran or Victoria

Jones. Femininity is seen as the more tentative in its ideological grasp. Midway through the novel the protagonist Victoria has a discussion about time, as seen by the East and the West.

‘Time doesn’t mean anything out here. Once one gets that into one’s head, one finds a curious satisfaction in it.’

‘Yes I can imagine that.’

‘Arabs find our Western impatience for doing things quickly extraordinarily hard to understand, and our habit of coming straight to the point in conversation strikes them as extremely ill-mannered. You should always sit round and offer general observations for about an hour – or if you prefer it, you need not speak at all.’

‘Rather odd if we did that in offices in London. One would waste a lot of time.’

‘Yes, but we are back again at the question: What is time? And what is waste?’

Victoria meditated on these points.⁴⁰

Notable in these exchanges, as in the earlier reflections of Carmichael, is the refusal to denigrate the Eastern way of thinking about fate or time, but to accord it the equal but different value to that of the West in a practice that is dialogic and allows other voices and points of view to be heard up to a point. ‘Victoria meditated on these points’ as a closure to the scene acknowledges the diversity and accepts its validity to exist, rather than attempting to appropriate it for a Western evaluation. It is a passage that has echoes in Christie’s *Autobiography*, when she is remembering her time in Iraq. The stereotyped concept of timelessness and of binary divisions are all there but what is done with that concept, the evaluation and the acceptance, is very different from the power structures that Said invokes, and seems much closer to Sara Mills’s qualification of gender differences in women travellers. Characters who are open to the differences and the new experiences in ways that unsettle their insular certainties, whether male or female, are invariable sympathetic.

A further element of the ‘othering’ of femininity comes into play in the Eastern texts. While the European Mediterranean was used to ‘other’ Englishness, the Arabic contextualisation, although it does contain its little Englishers (such as Colonel Carberry in *Death is Announced*) and its comments on Englishness (Bill Coleman’s unease with sentimental gestures in *Murder in Mesopotamia*), has a very different focus. Here, the texts focus on divergent femininities, particularly powerful, tyrannical and malevolent women. Not Englishness, but femininity and power

come under scrutiny in this context of the East during the thirties and the forties, times of re-negotiation of acceptable types of femininity in Britain. Two novels, only two years apart, examine femininity as tyrannical and despotic wresting of power from the phallogocentric norm, *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) and *Appointment With Death* (1938). Two novels slightly further apart, *Death on the Nile* (1937) and *Death Comes At the End* (1945), focus on the disruptive figure of the excessively aggressive and vengeful woman. Rather than a site of excessive, languorous femininity, Christie's East is a context for a predominantly Anglo-American femininity that wrests both power and aggression from phallogocentric dominance.

The first of these, the Iraqi-based *Murder in Mesopotamia*, focuses on the character of the murdered Mrs Leidner, as Poirot asserts the key to the crime lies in her character. Her flamboyantly egotistical character, alternately bullying and charming, is centre-stage as the characters puzzle who would want to murder her. Poirot elucidates that she was a magnetically beautiful woman, fastidious and artistic, intellectual and sympathetic with female independence, 'unencumbered or entrapped by man',⁴¹ unable to accept the feminine role of 'second fiddle' to any man and intensely egotistic,

'a woman who essentially worshipped *herself* and who enjoyed more than anything else the sense of *power*. Wherever she was, she *must* be the centre of the universe. And everyone round her, man or woman, had got to acknowledge her sway. With some people that was easy . . . But there was a second way in which Mrs Leidner exercised her sway – the way of fear.'⁴²

In this novel the despotic and dominating woman is not consciously cruel, as it will be in the depiction of the despotic Mrs Boynton, two years later in *Appointment with Death*, set in Jerusalem and Petra, and the narrator, Nurse Leatherman, acknowledges the attraction of Mrs Leidner. Poirot, in reference to her relationship with a young colleague, voices the 'unnaturalness' and potential crisis of the disrupted gendered power relations; '“You are a *man*. Behave, then, like a *man!* It is against Nature for a man to grovel.”'⁴³ Yet gender divisions are in crisis. The attractive and sympathetic Miss Johnson is 'rather mannish in appearance, with iron-grey hair cropped short . . . wore a tweed coat and skirt made rather like a man's' (*MIM*, p. 24), and (since she has an unspoken passion for Dr Leidner) this is not code for lesbian as it is in some other of Christie's novels. Poirot's sympathy to the nurse who finds her corpse elicits the

comment, 'A woman couldn't have been kinder' (*MIM*, p. 148). The Iraqi setting unsettles European gendered power relations.

Christie continues the meditation on women and power and cruelty in *Appointment with Death*, which takes place during a holiday tour of the Middle East; opening in Jerusalem, the murder takes place during a trip to Petra, with the investigation concluding in Amman. This novel is dominated by three women who are engaged with power and who wrest conventional gender relationships from the norm. The attractive protagonist, the newly qualified medical doctor Sarah King, has dislike of being 'mastered' in her personal relationships and breaks off her engagement because of her dislike of playing 'second fiddle' to a man. However, such a feeling is no longer seen as unattractive, and the humour of the depiction allows sympathy.

Sarah was too imperious a temperament herself to brook a calm assertion of autocracy. Like many high-spirited women, Sarah believed herself to admire strength. She had always told herself that she wanted to be mastered. When she met a man capable of mastering her she found that she did not like it at all! (*AWD*, p. 430)

Sara has well-balanced nerves, a cool wit and a resolute will, in contrast to Raymond Boynton's sensitive, diffident, suggestible weakness, and their relationship is now seen as equally complementary, rather than unnatural. One is active, the other passive, and the fact that the gender relations are reversed is endorsed by the magisterial psychologist, Dr Gerard. This reads as less a crisis of gendered power relations and more a simple renegotiation. The more problematic autocratic, despotic aspect of femininity has been split from the independence, and located in the outrageously malevolent character of Mrs Boynton, the ex-wardress and dominatrix, who cruelly enjoys keeping all of her stepchildren under her thumb. Dr Gerrard acknowledges that, here at least, there is a gendered crisis: "'To have too much power is bad for women . . . It is difficult for a woman not to abuse power'" (*AWD*, p. 427). The 'unnaturalness' is reinforced by the grotesque representation, "'What a horror of a woman!" Old, swollen, bloated, sitting there immovable in the midst of them – a distorted old Buddha – a gross-spider in the centre of a web!' (*AWD*, p. 426). As Rowland argues in relation to *Death on the Nile*, the oriental imagery is part of the West's psychic and inauthentic appropriation of its context, rather than any authentic commentary on the East itself. Gerrard, voicing her monstrous image, enacts patriarchal assignment of women usurping power and evokes a sense of gender

crisis, which Christie's text endorses. The grotesque infuses rather than defuses her real power, linking it with ramifications of misrule and transgression. Her grotesque and exaggerated female physical passivity belies the active malevolence and powerful monstrosity of her voice and brain, subverting heterosexual norms and boundaries.

the old woman's eyes were full on him, and he drew in his breath sharply. Small black smouldering eyes they were, but something came from them, a power, a definite force, a wave of evil malignancy.⁴⁴

The exploration of her sadism, delineated as evil by both Sarah King and Dr Gerrard, coming as it does in 1938, can be read as a meditation on how people succumb to the despotic dictatorship of rulers such as Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, but translated into the domestic and feminine sphere of the wicked stepmother.⁴⁵ Mrs Boynton is excessively tyrannical and malevolent, a problematic feminine cruelty for the men of science and detection:

I think she rejoices in the infliction of pain – mental pain, mind you, not physical. That is very much rarer and much more difficult to deal with. She likes to have control of other human beings and she likes to make them suffer.⁴⁶

The gendered characterisation leads even to the unnatural subversion of the maternal, since 'the lust for cruelty' turns ravenously onto her own daughter. The only solution to grotesque and excessive female despotism is murder, a murder that the text needs to work quite hard to argue is not justifiable, since Poirot cannot endorse murder. The final powerful woman is the unmasked murderer, Lady Westholme, an eminent female Member of Parliament whose views are forthright and strident but no worse than self-seeking, the murder a retaliation to Mrs Boynton's cruelty.

Protagonist, murderer and victim, all three generic conventions are inhabited by women who have usurped power, who in their various ways express personal independence, familial tyranny, and public, political feminism, with the central focus on the enigmatic malevolence of the outrageous, grotesque Mrs Boynton. The textual resolution of these powerful femininities, disruptors of its traditional positioning of women, concludes with the deaths of Boynton and Westholme and a coda that situates King as happy, supportive wife rather than independent woman, forcing her into a 'second fiddle' addendum that sits uncomfortably, and disappointingly, with the rest of the novel.

Death on the Nile (1937) is set in Egypt, where the focus of the mystery involves the vengeful stalking of a honeymooning couple, by the third member of a love triangle, Jackie De Bellefort, erstwhile fiancée of the husband and best friend of the wife. Jackie is ostensibly haunting their footsteps during their honeymoon trip as an act of vengeance. A central part of the novel therefore dwells on her character, her motives and her retribution. The denouement reveals that her actions are more calculating and intelligent but, in a very real sense, the conundrum of *Death on the Nile* held always before the reader is the figure of a jilted young woman, unforgiving, vindictive and passionate and the question of just how far her unleashed malevolence will take her. Poirot's comment on the intensity of her love for Simon introduces the notion of excess and the dangerousness of feminine excess, "She cares too much. It is not safe" (*DOTN*, p. 201). Vengeance becomes an obsession that pushes her passed 'pride', 'self-respect' and 'dignity' to behave 'as no decent woman would behave' (*DOTN*, p. 240) and the femininity of this excessive lack of control is stressed when Simon complains, "Why can't Jackie take it like a man...like a good sport?" and Poirot reminds him of the obvious. Feminine jilted vengeance and the lengths to which it will go, once it is unleashed from the civilised and decorous behaviour decreed by patriarchy, becomes the main focus and enquiry of the body of the novel. In a comment reminiscent of Conrad's Kurtz stranded up the Congo, rather than a young socialite on a Nile cruise, Poirot remarks: "You have cut the bonds that moored you to safety, I doubt now that you could turn back if you would" (*DOTN*, p. 260).

The final novel, set in Egypt, is the unexpected *Death Comes At the End*, an historical detective story set in ancient Egypt in 2000 BC. Here the protagonist is Renisenb, a married daughter returning to the patriarchal household of her father after her husband's death. Though intelligent and questioning, she reverts to a feminine passivity not usually found in Christie's contemporary detective fiction, but deemed perhaps appropriately authentic for ancient times. The focus of the conflict in the household, and the centre of the novel's questioning, is Nosfret, the young, beautiful and arrogant concubine whom the patriarch encounters and brings back to his home. Nosfret's arrogance and vindictiveness is as excessive as Jackie's in *Death on the Nile* and Renisenb spends much of the novel trying to uncover the secret of the beautiful and evil woman's intense hatred, 'a black abyss of hate and misery – something quite unknown as yet in her own experience' (*DCATE*, p. 101). Clever, unscrupulous and beautiful, the femme fatale wrecks patriarchal familial life for greed and her power is seen as almost magical in its malevolence.

An excessive and completely unexplained evil which seems, for a large part of the novel, to extend beyond the grave as the uncanny and frightening ghost of Nofret appears to be killing various members of the family who had slighted her. Two people die and a third is poisoned, ‘“Who will be next? Will she spare even the children?”’ (DCATE, p. 198).

Said argued that the Orient was constructed as feminine, as passive, exotic, sexually alluring and submissive, while the West was masculinised as dominant, rational and self-controlled, penetrating and possessing the East as traveller. In Christie, eastern Mediterranean countries become sites in which to explore an outrageously active, powerful and malevolent form of Anglicised or American femininity – an abnormally masculinised femininity, one might argue, which is punished for its excess by being murdered or (implicitly) hung, but that is only half the story. The texts circle around the enigma of women malevolent, vengeful and eminently powerful, but not to imply an ideal, normal British passivity. Rather, the East allows a site to extend the analysis of how texts in the thirties and forties should negotiate issues of power and strength and vengeance in relation to femininity. Sarah King is constructed positively as the heroic figure who rescues her passive partner from his dragon of a mother, Renisenb complicates the image of the femme fatale in investigating Nofret’s unhappiness to show that her vindictiveness stems from her misery in her position as the sexual possession of patriarchy, while Jackie reveals the self-control behind the apparently uncontrolled vengeful woman scorned. In these novels, Christie is invoking and then problematising a whole raft of feminine stereotypes about active women. At the end of the thriller *They Came to Baghdad*, the male love interest enquires of the heroine, ‘Are you the persecuted heroine or the wicked adventuress?’⁴⁷ A question that highlights the outmoded nature of such textual gender conventions in the 1950s, since Victoria is neither, she is the adventurous, intrepid hero. In the detective novels of the Middle East countries, Christie explores images of female excess and the monstrous in relation to power, while complicating and challenging textual feminine conventions such as the passivity of female protagonists and the wickedness of femme fatales.

Jewish and Greek characterisation: Where East meets West

As Gillian Gill effectively argues, Christie’s early novels betray the same unthinking anti-Semitism prevalent in 1920s Britain often, as in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), ‘hard to forgive’ ‘jingoistic, knee-jerk

anti-Semitism',⁴⁸ with Lord Caterham's name-calling of Herman Isaacstein, 'Ikey Hermanstein' and 'Noseystein'. Gill claims that Christie's insensitivity led her American publishers to edit out some of the unpleasant Jewish stereotyping for fear of offending particularly the American markets. This changes in the thirties with Christie's growing awareness of the Nazi's 'final solution' taking place across the European mainland. Her meeting with the cultured German museum curator, Dr Jordan in Baghdad, appalled her when he revealed his Nazi determination to exterminate Jews and forced her to confront her unthinking cultural assumptions. Gill characterises Christie's anti-Semitism as 'stupidly unthinking rather than the deliberately vicious kind'.⁴⁹ She points to *Giant's Bread* for a more thoughtful consideration and 'working through her own ideas on the Jewish question and raising the issue for her readers'.⁵⁰ Gill's view of the novel is correct, it does discuss Jewishness with a deliberate empathy, but her chronology ignores the fact that the novel was published in 1930, two or three years before the meeting with Dr Jordan. Gill therefore reads Christie as reinforcing and allowing cultural prejudices to speak through her, before the need in the thirties to address the issue of anti-Semitism for herself. However, there is a generational difference between Lord Caterham and the younger protagonists of *The Secret of Chimneys*, who ignore his name-calling, refusing to be implicated with it, and who treat Isaacstein with less derision, a generation gap that is also played out in *Giant's Bread*. Young Joe and Vernon react against their parents' and the country society's shunning of the Levinnes because they are Jews and different. "Don't you remember how we said it was all rotten?" went on Joe. "People being so beastly about the Levinnes" (GB, p. 231). Befriending Sebastian, the three become firm friends throughout their lives, the representation of Sebastian constructs him as the most loyal, caring and courageous of any of the three, where the Anglo-Saxon characters, Vernon, Joe and later Nell, are weak and selfish, afraid to face the truths of life and clinging to false, romantic sensibilities. Sebastian is the only one of the four capable of disinterested love and though the text initially introduces this as a Jewish sense of gratitude for befriending a social outcast, it soon rejects this construction for a more universal and high-minded experience:

It was a feeling peculiarly and exclusively Jewish. The undying gratitude of the Jew who never forgets a benefit conferred . . . she had been willing to defy her world . . . He would . . . have gone to the ends of the earth if she had wanted him. (GB, p. 458)

Why had he felt this wasn't love? It was. This passion of pure disinterested pity and tenderness – this deep affection lasting through the years. A thousand times better worthwhile than those stormy or tepid affairs . . . (GB, p. 459)

Where Nell rejects love for wealth and comfort, Joe throws herself away on a series of underdogs and Vernon is too afraid to acknowledge the depth of his love for Jane, Sebastian stands as the one solid beacon of true and honest emotions, a character with 'an unerring sense of values' (GB, p. 241). This devotion and loyalty, though, are not figured as feminising him, because of his astounding worldly success, which links to a particular Semitic stereotype of financial acumen. As with the depiction of the Iraqi and Syrian characters, Christie systematically invokes racial stereotypes and the swelling on physiognomy proves particularly discomfiting and distasteful. Sebastian's father has the 'enormous nose', his mother wears outlandish clothes and 'chains of diamonds' (GB, p. 225), Sebastian possesses a 'yellow Mongolian face' (GB, p. 241) and they all lisp to some degree. The family is hugely wealthy with the father's unerring sense of business, and Sebastian on his father's death became 'master of so many millions that it took one's breath away to think about them' (GB, p. 243). Gill christens this latter aspect of the representation, the 'Rothschild syndrome', and it is true that almost all Christie's Jewish characters, unless they are minor shady underworld crooks as in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, are fabulously wealthy. Large nosed, yellow-skinned, with a lisping speech and an over-concern with money, the caricature comes straight from Dickens's Fagin and beyond, yet Christie's evaluation is once again more positive than the stereotype might lead one to anticipate, she transforms the expected dualistic value structures, particularly in relation to the Anglo-Saxons. As with the Mediterranean characters, the Jewish family points up the failings of the English country house set. Sebastian's mother may be the butt of textual humour, but she has the requisite family devotion that Vernon's selfish mother lacks.

Strangely enough, he found a kind of comfort in her bulky presence. Funny fat old Mrs Levinne with her jet and her diamonds and her greasy black hair managed to be more understanding than his own mother. (GB, p. 292)

It is an uncomfortable representation to read, because of its reinforcement of cultural stereotypes, but the reading should not ignore the

textual evaluation which rates Jewish family devotion above that of the cold, upper-middle-class Anglo-Saxons, who relegate their children to the nursery and nanny. As a representation, it is complex and contradictory, both reinforcing and challenging Semitic stereotypes in a form of internal dissent. The novel's presentation of Sebastian's desire 'to make things pay' elaborates this textual internal dissent. The desire to make money is endorsed as a 'Jewish instinct' (*GB*, p. 332) and when Joe berates his commercialism as '*rotten*', Sebastian rejects her romanticism and argues that alongside the Jewish love of money comes a love of culture and art, which the English expectations overlook:

'Well, we Jews have got taste – we know when a thing is fine and when it isn't. We don't go by the fashion – we back our own judgement, and we're *right!* People always see the money side of it, but the other's there too.' (*GB*, p. 242)

The novel endorses his unerring success as a producer of modernist opera, theatre and music, 'a howling success... simply IT nowadays' (*GB*, p. 454). Sebastian does not choose easy commercial productions, he chooses the difficult works of genius and successfully promotes them to popular audiences. In many ways this is another, more favourable, stereotype of the Jew and one that links to Gill's 'Rothschild syndrome' of fabulous wealth and artistic appreciation, but it is one that Sebastian uses to refute and complicate the stereotype of Jewish love of money above all else. Invariably, Christie represents monolithic racial attributes but the Jewish character, Sebastian, beset by English anti-Semitism and misunderstandings, remains one of the two solely positive characters in the novel (Jane Harding, the other, sacrifices herself for Vernon) and the only one of the three opening friends. Jewish otherness does not preclude positive evaluation. Nor, in relation to Said, does it invoke femininity. If any character is feminised, then it is Vernon Deyre, the English inheritor of the beloved country house Abbots Puissants he cannot afford to live in, afraid to acknowledge his love of music and then his love for Jane, the driven, weak composer whose cowardly psyche resorts to shell-shock to avoid unpalatable truths, and relies on Jane's sacrifice and Sebastian's entrepreneurship to have a modicum of success. Sebastian, with money and his unerring instinct for what is fine in art, and of how to make it succeed, bends the public to his will in staging Radmaager's *Peer Gynt*, Vernon's juvenile *The Princess in the Tower*, and his masterpiece *The Giant* to huge acclaim. Throughout, Sebastian is constructed as strong, reliable and unerring, "worth a dozen of Vernon.

You've got brains, initiative, strength of character" (GB, p. 347), and he ends by wresting Joe back from her deathbed to marry him. His powerful character, contained emotion and his ability to succeed and wield power within the public sphere situate him as masculinised to Vernon's feminine. Again, Christie, while utilising the traditional binary constructions of English and Other, of masculine and feminine, shifts the apportioning of those binaries, to construct the English male as feminised and the Jewish as masculine, without evoking thereby, a sense of crisis and threat to the Anglophone culture. Sebastian's kindness and disinterestedness support, rather than threaten, English cultural standards.

Where Christie's Jewish characters are invariable Russian Jews and fabulously wealthy, so also are her Greek characters, wealthy and usually from Smyrna. These crossings of East and West are presented without comment and Christie seems to have had little problem with characters redolent of hybridity. For every Shaitana (*Cards on the Table*, 1936), the negative character whose nationality is unplaceable – 'Whether Mr Shaitana was an Argentine, or a Portugese, or a Greek, or some other nationality rightly despised by the insular Briton, nobody knew' (*CT*, p. 10).⁵¹ – there is the positive characterisation of Mr Robinson (*Cat Among the Pigeons*, 1959; *At Bertram's Hotel*, 1965; *Passenger to Frankfurt*, 1970; *Postern of Fate*, 1973), an international financial Arranger, 'on the side of the angels' (*CAP*, p. 341), who consistently supports the stability of the British government.

Christie's Greek characterisations have a lot in common with her Jewish ones. Usually, they are Greeks from Smyrna, the chief trading port of Asia Minor. In *Dumb Witness* (1937), Christie invokes racial stereotypes in order to fool the reader, as Gill argued in relation to her Jewish figures, they act as 'red herrings who tempt the reader to indulge in prejudice instead of following the trail of evidence'.⁵² Dr Tanois's charming exterior appears to hide a more sinister demeanour. He is described as having "a nose for money allright! Trust a Greek for that" (*DW*, p. 22, repeated on pp. 86 and 129 by differing characters) after his wife's money and she is represented as terrified of him, "It's been so awful – for years now . . . It's been like a long nightmare" (*DW*, p. 222) as she accuses him of being the murderer. The prejudiced Miss Lawson twice mistakenly describes him as a 'Turk', explaining that 'Turks are frightfully cruel' (*DW*, p. 220). Christie is deliberately referring to a view of the Greek husband as autocratic and violent, linking to what Barbara Fisher, in an examination of a different thirties and forties writer's invocation of the stereotype of the Turk, in *The House as a*

Symbol: Joyce Cary and 'The Turkish House' describes as signifying 'cruel, rigorous, tyrannical, behaving as a barbarian or savage; one who treats his wife badly'⁵³ alongside exoticised sexual relations. At the beginning of Christie's career she reinforced such views in throw-away lines such as when Poirot, in *Murder on the Links* (1923), teases Hastings's susceptibility to women with the comment, "'Decidedly you have the heart of a Turk, Hastings! You should establish a harem!'" (*MOL*, p. 105). But, as Gill implies, in *Dumb Witness* seventeen years later, such a red herring will only mislead the reader as Poirot uncovers the truth that Tanois is a kind and loving husband trying to protect both his delusional wife and his two children.

However, while Greek stereotypes are invoked to prove a misapprehension in *Dumb Witness*, they are granted more validity in *The Crooked House* (1949). This novel focuses on the Leonides dynasty and the murder of the grandfather, Aristide, whose vibrant, dominant personality made 'everyone else look rather dim beside him' (*CH*, p. 7). Aristide, like Sebastian and his father, has an inexorable flair for money and, having given most of it away to his children, goes on to make an even bigger fortune. And like Sebastian he will not promote his daughter-in-laws' plays, despite the family connection and his immense wealth, because they would be financially unviable. A 'twister' who knows how to get around the law, he is described as being 'crooked' without being a 'crook' (*CH*, p. 14). An ugly 'gnome' with a magnetic personality, he ruled the family like an autocrat but adored and was adored by all his children. As always, the text invokes to dismiss Aunt Edith's prejudiced view of him as a 'dago', an 'ugly, common little foreigner' (*CH*, p. 25) and places the English fox-hunting country house forbears of the grandmother as 'ruthless' and 'arrogant' (*CH*, p. 22) and 'authoritarian' (p. 158) where Aristide is only 'unscrupulous' and 'kindly'. The threat comes not from the alien Greek but from the English aristocracy and, particularly in this novel the genetic miscegenation that marries the unscrupulous Greek traits with the ruthless English ones, to create the murderer. But another of the offspring of this 'miscegenation' inherits all the good characteristics, 'brains, judgement, courage, a fair and unbiased mind and generosity' (*CH*, p. 114) and is described as 'a chip of the old block' as Aristide's beneficiary and the love interest in the novel. Sophia and Aristide, the characters who most embody the 'Greek' characteristics of the Leonides family, are by far the most attractive and sympathetic characters in the novel. Sharing many of the same racial configurations as Christie's Jewish characters, the Greek and Jewish characters predominantly are used to trick the reader that succumbs to stereotyped

prejudice and to interrogate the failings of the English upper classes who look down on them. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, the Greek M. Papopolous and his daughter are othered for their being Jewish rather than just Greek, but Pappopolous is allowed a pride in his origins and honours his debt to Poirot.

So Christie's detective novels have a complex relationship to the practice of 'othering' foreign, Mediterranean cultures of the West and the East. She does create binary divides between national cultures, reinforce national stereotypes, and she uses the foreign countries as sites to re-define Englishness, at times specifically English femininity. But the texts are also more dialogic and open than one might traditionally expect, given these practices. In the western Mediterranean countries, the authorial point of view is European, rather than English, while in the eastern Mediterranean countries divergent cultural mores are allowed an equally valid authority. English prejudices against the Jew and the Greek are unpacked to backfire against the Anglo-Saxon depictions. Christie's texts invoke and reinforce English stereotypes of other nationalities and races but, writing as a woman in the 1920s through to the 1950s, her representation of other countries and gender are complex, ambivalent and complicated because of the interaction of two forms of 'othering'. Christie's texts, to cite Sara Mills, like those of other women travellers, exhibit 'contradictory elements which may act as a critique of some of the components of other colonial writings'.⁵⁴

Notes

1 Preliminary proceedings

1. Jane McDerimid, 'Women and Education', *Women's History: Britain, 1850–1945*, ed. June Purvis (London: UCL, 1995), pp. 107–30 (p. 107).
2. Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 134.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Jane Humphries, 'Women and Paid Work', *Women's History*, ed. Purvis, pp. 15–105 (p. 89).
5. Penny Tinkler, 'Women and Popular Literature', *Women's History*, ed. Purvis, pp. 131–56.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
8. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 9–10.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Earl F. Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder: The Detective Fiction of Agatha Christie* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Press, 1980), p. 37.
11. Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 34.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
13. Patricia Marks, *Bicycles, Bangs and Bloomers: The New Woman and the Popular Press* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1990), p. 184.
14. *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 335.
15. Jared Cade, *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* (London: Peter Own, 1998).
16. Lyn Pyket, *Engendering Fictions* (London: Arnold, 1995), p. 15.
17. Jane Elderidge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (London: Virago, 1994), p. 4.
18. *Agatha Christie's Miss Marple: The Life and Times of Miss Jane Marple*, first published in the US by Dodd Mead, 1985 (London: HarperCollins, 1997).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
21. Anne Hart, *Agatha Christie's Poirot: The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot* (London: Pavilion Books, 1990).
22. Andrew Eames, *The 8.55 to Baghdad* (London: Bantam, 2004).
23. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
24. Dawn Sova, *Agatha Christie A to Z* (New York: Checkmark, 1996).
25. Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1971).
26. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
27. First published in *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, ed. H.R.F. Keating (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1977), republished in Julian Symons, *Criminal Practices* (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 51–62.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
31. Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agtha Christie*, first published by Collins in 1980 (London: Fontana, 1990).
32. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
35. Symons, p. 50.
36. Barnard, p. 28.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Stephen Knight's *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980).
44. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
48. Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Press, 1982).
49. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
52. David I. Grossvogel, 'Death Deferred: The Long Splendid Afterlife and Mysterious Workings of Agatha Christie' in *Essays on Detective Fiction*, ed. Bernard Benstock (London: Macmillan, 1983).
53. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan's, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
54. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
56. Cora Kaplan, 'An Unsuitable Genre for a Feminist', *Women's Review*, 8.6.1986, pp. 18–19.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
60. Michelle Slung, 'Let's Hear it for Agatha Christie: A Feminist Appreciation', in *The Sleuth and the Scholar: Origins, Evolution, and Current Trends in Detective Fiction*, eds Barbara Rader and Howard Zetler (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1988), pp. 63–8.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
62. Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple's influential, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction' in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi*, ed. Helen Carr (London: Pandora, 1988), pp. 39–57.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

64. Marty S. Knepper, 'Agatha Christie', in *Great Women Mystery Writers*, ed. Kathleen G Klein (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1994), pp. 58–65, p. 60.
65. Jerome H. Delamere and Ruth Prigozy eds., *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1997), see Robert Merrill, 'Christie's Narrative Games', pp. 87–102; Robin Woods, '“It was the Mark of Cain”: Agatha Christie and the Murder of the Mystery', pp. 103–10; Ina Rae Hark, 'Impossible Murderers: Agatha Christie and the Community of Readers', pp. 111–18.
66. Martin Priestman's *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (London: Macmillan, 1990).
67. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
69. *Ibid.*, pp. 167–8.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
71. Anna-Marie Taylor's 'Home is Where the Hearth Is: The Englishness of Agatha Christie's Marple Novels', in *Watching the Detectives: Essays on Crime Fiction*, eds Ian Bell and Graham Daldry (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 134–51.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
73. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–4.
74. Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries* (London: Robson, 1990).
75. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
78. 'Agatha Christie and Conservative Modernity', chapter two of *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).
79. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
85. Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London: Routledge, 1991).
86. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
90. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
91. *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
93. *Ibid.*
94. Odette L'Henry Evans, 'Croquet and Serial Killers: Feminism and Agatha Christie' in *It's My Party*, ed. Gina Wisker (London: Pluto, 1994), pp. 174–80.
95. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
96. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
98. *Ibid.*

99. Mary Anne Ackershoek's 'The Daughters of His Manhood: Christie and the Golden Age of Detective Fiction', in Delamater and Prigozy, pp. 119–28.
100. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Ibid.*, 121.
103. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
104. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
105. *Ibid.*
106. Gill Plain's *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 2001), 'Sacrificial Bodies: The Corporeal Anxieties of Agatha Christie', pp. 29–56.
107. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
108. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
109. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
110. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
112. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
113. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
114. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
115. Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Writing* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 157.
116. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
118. *Ibid.*
119. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
120. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
121. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
122. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
123. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
124. Harold Bloom ed., *Agatha Christie: Modern Critical Views* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002).
125. Stephen Knight's *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000* (London: Palgrave, 2004).
126. Bloom, pp. 79–84.
127. Knight, pp. 89–93.
128. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
129. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
130. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

2 Detecting deviancy

1. Merja Makinen, *Feminist Popular Fiction*, London Palgrave, 2001, Chapter 4: Detective Fiction.
2. Published by Collins in 1977 (Fontana/Collins, 1978), where she explains that *The Leavenworth Case* had fascinated her since she was eight, p. 216.
3. First published 1963 (Fontana, 1966/85), p. 106 where Poirot praises *The Leavenworth Case* for its melodramatic atmosphere and the psychological veracity of its murderer.
4. Published in 1941, by Collins (Signet, 2000).

5. Christie dedicated the 1969 *Hallowe'en Party* to Wodehouse.
6. Alison Light, p. 69.
7. Charles Osborne, 'Appearance and Disappearance', in *Modern Critical Views: Agatha Christie*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002), pp. 101–46 (p. 117).
8. Julian Symons, 'Foreword: A Portrait of Agatha Christie', in *Modern Critical Views*, ed. Bloom, pp. 73–8 (p. 78).
9. Robert Barnard, p. 11.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
11. Rowland, p. 42.
12. Maida and Spornick, p. 140.
13. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, p. 81.
14. Light, p. 73.
15. *The Secret Adversary*, first published in 1922 by the Bodley Head (London: HarperCollins, 2001).
16. *Partners in Crime*, first published in 1929 by Bodley Head (London: HarperCollins, 2001).
17. *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, first published in Collins, 1968 (London: HarperCollins, 2001).
18. *Postern of Fate*, first published by Collins in 1973 (London: HarperCollins, 2001).
19. *Murder is Easy*, first published by Collins in 1939 (London: HarperCollins, 1993).
20. Jay Dixon, *The Romance Fiction of Mills and Boon 1909–1990s* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p. 83.
21. *Manchester Guardian*, 21.12.1928; reprinted in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, ed. Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1988), pp. 57–60.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
25. Kora Caplan, 'An Unsuitable Genre for a Feminist', *Women's Review*, 8 (June 1986), pp. 18–19.
26. Light, p. 10.
27. Earl Bargainnier reads Tommy as solving 7, Tuppence 5, and 2 together, but examining the denouement of each case produces the equal 7 solutions each for the two in their 'joint venture'.
28. *NorM?*, p. 46.
29. See *NorM?*, p. 209; the same scenario also occurs in *Postern of Fate*, pp. 319–21.
30. Rowland, p. 158.
31. Gill, p. 73.
32. 'Intertextuality in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: The Bible, Malory, and *Jane Eyre*', in *I'm Telling You Stories!: Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, ed. Helena Grice and Tim Woods (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 15–28 (p. 21).
33. Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality' in *New Casebooks: Angela Carter*, ed. Alison Easton (London: Macmillan, 2000) pp. 20–36 (p. 24).
34. Julia Kristeva, 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident', in *Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 292–300 (p. 295).

35. Parker Pyne sets up a detective agency to satisfy his clients desires, to solve their unhappiness. See the short story collection, *Parker Pyne Investigates* (London: Collins, 1934); reprinted in *The Complete Parker Pine* (London: HarperCollins, 2004).
36. Harley Quinn has little physical presence but guides Mr Saterthwaite to correct conclusions. See *The Mysterious Mr Quinn* (London: Collins, 1930).
37. Light, p. 78.
38. Maida and Spornick, p. 88.
39. *Elephants Can Remember*, initially published in 1972 by Collins (London: HarperCollins, 2002).
40. In the collection *Poirot Investigates* (London: John Lane, 1924), first published in the *Sketch*, 28.3.1923.
41. Barnard, p. 98.
42. Hart, p. 151.
43. Bargainnier, p. 45. Cited from Celia Fremlin, 'The Christie that Everybody Knew', *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, ed. H.R.F. Keating (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1977), pp. 115–16.
44. Bargainnier, p. 46.
45. Maida and Spornick, p. 90.
46. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, initially published in 1920 by Bodley Head (London: Fontana, 1989).
47. *Appointment with Death*, initially published in 1938 by Collins (London: HarperCollins, 2001).
48. *Murder on the Orient Express*, initially published by Collins in 1934 (London: HarperCollins, 1994).
49. Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Ballantine, 1978). First published in 1944.
50. *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), *Towards Zero* (1944) and *Cards on the Table* (1936) with Poirot, Race and Mrs Oliver.
51. *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945), *Death on the Nile* with Poirot (1937) and with Poirot, Battle and Mrs Oliver in *Cards on the Table*.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
53. 'My mind is in some disorder – which is not well . . . Now all is arranged and classified. One must never permit confusion.', p. 84.
54. Lady Detectives of the intuitive kind appeared in the 1860s and were still going strong in the first decade of the twentieth century. Lady Molly was the famous creation of Baroness Orczy, in 1910.
55. See Makinen, M., *Feminist Popular Fiction*, pp. 2–3, 95–9.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
57. *Dumb Witness*, first published by Collins in 1937 (London: HarperCollins, 1994).
58. 'The Cornish Mystery' in *Hercule Poirot: The Complete Short Stories* (London: HarperCollins, 1999) pp. 270–81.
59. Barnard, pp. 45–6.
60. *Death Comes at the End*, first published in 1945 by Collins (London: HarperCollins, 2001).
61. W. Muschg, 'Freud Ecrivain' in *La Psychoanalyse* 5, ed. J. Schotte (1959), pp. 69–124. cited in and translated by l'Henry Evans, p. 175.
62. Rowland, p. 93.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
64. Initially published in 1930, republished in the collection, *Absent in Spring and Other Novels*, Mary Westmacott (New York: St Martins Minotaur, 2001).
65. See, Eric Leed's *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in WWI*, 1979.
66. Lyn Pykett, p. 49.
67. 'Appearances and Disappearances', pp. 142–4. See also Gill, p. 110 for a more sympathetic view.
68. Gill, p. 112–15.
69. *Lorde Edward Dies* (London: Collins, 1933).
70. *Hickory Dickory Dock* (London: Collins, 1955).
71. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
73. Light, p. 73.
74. *Murder in Mesopotamia*, first published by Collins in 1936, this edition in *Poirot in the Orient* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).
75. 'The Case of the Discontented Soldier' (1934), *Cards on the Table* (1936), *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), *The Pale Horse* (1961), *The Third Girl* (1966), *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), *Elephants Can Remember* (1972).
76. *Third Girl*, first published by Collins in 1956 (London: HarperCollins, 2002).
77. *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, first published by Collins in 1952 (London: HarperCollins, 2002).
78. *Cards on the Table*, initially published by Collins in 1936 (London: HarperCollins, 1993).
79. *Hallowe'en Party*, initially published by Collins in 1969 (London: HarperCollins, 1994).
80. *Cards on the Table*, p. 15; *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, p. 52; *Dead Man's Folly*, p. 259.
81. Ian Ousby, *The Crime and Mystery Book: A Reader's Companion* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p. 64.
82. Plain, pp. 47, 55.
83. Brittain and Holtby, pp. 47–50.
84. Bargainnier, p. 66.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
89. Shaw and Vanacker, p. 63.
90. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
91. Rowland, p. 21.
92. Shaw and Vanacker, p. 38.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 38, Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975).
94. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
95. May Sinclair, *Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (London: Collins, 1922); Radclyffe Hall, *The Unlit Lamp* (London: Cassell, 1924); Winfred Holtby, *The Crowded Street* (London: Lane, 1924); Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowses* (London: Chatto, 1928).
96. Shaw and Vanacker, p. 41.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 43; Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (London: Pandora, 1985).

98. Plain, p. 46, Heather Ingman, *Women's Fiction Between the Wars* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1998), p. 9.
99. Shaw and Vanacker, p. 43.
100. Rowland, pp. 160–1.
101. Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (London: Virago, 1994).
102. Shaw and Vanaker, p. 43.
103. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
104. Rowland, p. 162.
105. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
106. In *Classic Mysteries: Poirot Miss Marple*, Puzzler Collection/HarperCollins, 1996, unpaginated.
107. *Murder At the Vicarage* (London: Fontana, 1961/82).
108. Shaw and Vanaker, p. 4.

3 Available femininities

1. Gill, p. 7.
2. Light, p. 10.
3. Plain, p. 47.
4. Sue Ellen Campbell, 'The Detective heroine and the Death of her Hero', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 29 (3), 1983, 497–510.
5. Gayle F. Wald, 'Strong Poison: Love and the Novelistic in Dorothy L. Sayers', in *The Cunning Craft*, eds, Ronald Walker and June Frazer (Illinois: Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 98–108.
6. Munt, p. 10.
7. Valerie Pitt, 'Dorothy Sayers: The Masks of Lord Peter Wimsey', in *Twentieth Century Suspense*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 103.
8. Makinen, *Feminist Popular Fiction*, pp. 101–02.
9. *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), p. 4. Bird and Walker, *Killing Women: Rewriting Detective Fiction* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1991).
10. Walton and Jones, p. 93.
11. Bargainnier, p. 103.
12. First published by Bodley Head in 1924; quotations from the London: FontanaCollins, 1989 edition.
13. Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby (1932), p. 142.
14. 'Appearance and Disappearance', in Bloom 2002, pp. 101–46 (p. 124).
15. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 1979).
16. Jay Dixon, pp. 66–7.
17. Graves Robert and Hodge Alan, *The Long Week-End*, first published in 1940 (London: Four Square, 1961), p. 39.
18. Plain, p. 37.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
20. Graves and Hodge, p. 35.
21. Plain, p. 43.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

23. Graves and Hodge, pp. 39–40.
24. Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Arnold, 1978), Clive Bloom (ed.), *Spy Thrillers: From Buchan to Le Carre* (London: Macmillan, 1990) and *Twentieth Century Suspense: The Thriller Comes of Age* (London: Macmillan, 1990).
25. Shaw and Vanacker, p. 64.
26. Taylor, p. 144.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
28. Rowland, p. 164.
29. The title of *Giant's Bread*, the Westmacott novel of a modernist musician, argues it is experiential loss and pain that feeds the artistic impulse, the bones of human's the giant grinds to make his bread, in 'Jack and the bean stalk'. Henrietta, at the end of the *Hollow*, echoes this conception.
30. *Testament of a Generation*, p. 65.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
33. Christie was educated at home, while her brother went to school, and then at a couple of French finishing schools.
34. The short stories, 'How does your garden grow?' (1939), 'The Nemean Lion' and 'The Capture of Cerebus' from the *Labours of Hercules* (1947), and 'The Mystery of the Spanish Chest' (1960) *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955), *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), *Third Girl* (1966) and *Elephants Can Remember* (1972).
35. Taylor, p. 144.
36. Mary Anne Ackershoek, p. 123.
37. Bargainnier, p. 194.
38. In private conversation at the Solon *Who Dunit?: Identifications and Representations of Behaving Badly*, Conference, Nottingham Trent University, at the Galleries of Justice, 11–13.9.2002.
39. *Nemesis*, London, Fontana, 1984, p. 66.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
41. Rowland, p. 162.
42. Hugh Stevens and Caroline Howlett (eds), *Modernist Sexualities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) Introduction, p. 2.
43. See Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', in Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 24–9.
44. Brittain and Holtby, pp. 139–44.
45. Dorothy Hughes, 'The Christie Nobody Knew', in Bloom, pp. 19–26.
46. Anne Cranny Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 183.
47. 'Semi-Detached Marriage', Brittain and Holtby, pp. 130–2 (p. 131).
48. See Toril Moi's much anthologised discussion of Kristeva in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985).

4 Women behaving badly

1. *The Gentle Art of Murder* has a section in the chapter on 'Characters', 'murderers', pp. 119–30.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
5. *Reflecting on Miss Marple* starts with an 'Important Note' that states, 'Agatha Christie Ltd. Expressly forbids the use of any material in a publication that would reveal the identity of the murderers in the Christie novels and, furthermore, makes it clear that such identification would invite legal action on their part. In the interests, solely, of pragmatism therefore, we have made every effort to avoid 'naming names' even though we feel sure that the vast majority of readers of this book will be more than familiar with the Christie novels.' p. vi.
6. Latest novel, *Labyrinth* (London: Orion, 2005).
7. Angela Carter, *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* (London: Virago, 1986) p. x.
8. (Carter, 1993: x).
9. Anne Cranny Francis, p. 160.
10. Gill, p. 145.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
12. l'Henry Evans, p. 176.
13. London, HarperCollins, 1993, p. 10.
14. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 123.
15. 'nymphomania . . . was not a word that Miss Marple would have used – her own phrase would have been "always too fond of men"'. *ABH*, p. 31.
16. Bargainnier, p. 123 claims she 'over-used' this device.
17. Gill, p. 34.
18. *Lord Edgware Dies* (London: Collins, 1933).
19. The Mystery Of Hunter's Lodge' first published in 1923, republished in *Hercule Poirot: The Complete Short Stories* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 130–40.
20. *The Hollow*, London, HarperCollins, 2002, p. 374.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
22. *Labours of Hercules*, first published in 1939–47, as a collection in 1949 (London: Pan, 1982), p. 62.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
24. Bargainnier, p. 120.
25. The other story is 'The Horses of Diomedes'.

5 Representing women of violence, Agatha Christie and her contemporary culture

1. *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1978), p. 454.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 453.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 452.
5. *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography*, p. 523.
6. *They do it with Mirrors* first published in 1952 by Collins, in *Miss Marple Omnibus II* (London: Collins, 1997), p. 651.
7. Introduction to *Women Who Kill*, p. xi.

8. 'Women and Crime: Questions for Criminology', in *Gender, Crime and Justice*, eds Carlen, Pat and Worrall, Anne (Buckingham: Open University, 1987), pp. 16–27 (p. 18).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
10. *Dead Women Walking* (Aldershot: Ashcroft, 2000) p. 209.
11. *No Angels*, pp. 29–43.
12. 'Rendering them harmless: The professional portrayal of women charged with serious offences', in *Gender, Crime and Justice*, pp. 81–94 (p. 84).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
16. Introduction, *No Angels*, pp. xi–xvi (pp. xv–xvi).
17. See for instance Keith Jenkins, 'What is History' or Haden White, *Metahistory*
18. Cited in Frances Heidensohn, *Women and Crime*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1996) p. 112.
19. (London: George Allen, 1956)
20. *Daughters of Cain*, p. 43.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
37. On the 28th February 1936, the list of the adverts were Lea and Perrins sauce; Palm toffee for children; an antidote for catarrh with the slogan, 'poisoned while she slept' under the picture of a sleeping child; Amman shampoo with a Jessie Matthews lookalike; Singer Sewing Machine; a book of 'Hygiene'; Bile Beans, 'Slim while you sleep'; Jacob's cream crackers; Evan Williams Shampoo; Potter and Moore's powder cream, 'as used by film stars'; Harris sausages; a full-page for Bear Brand stockings; Stork margarine; Palmolive soap; Vick's vapour rub; Lux washing powder; Skipper's tinned fish; Aluminium cleaner; a catarrh inhaler. Plus one advert addressed to men on the business page.
38. 25th June, 1926, p. 2.
39. 28th February, 1936, p. 5 and 30th June, 1936, p. 2.
40. 12th December, 1922, p. 2.
41. 23rd June 1955, front page.
42. 21 July 1955, p. 4 and back page.
43. 1st August 1953, back page.

44. 22nd June 1955, p. 5 with a by line by Howard Johnson.
45. 15th December 1954, p. 7, a 'Behind the Headlines' article by John Thompson.
46. *Daily Sketch*, 6.9.1922, p. 5.
47. *Daily Sketch*, 1.8.1953, front page.
48. *Daily Sketch*, 11.2.1936, p. 7.
49. *Daily Sketch*, 3.1.1936, p. 2.
50. *Daily Sketch*, 5.12.1934, p. 2.
51. *Daily Sketch*, 8.7.1955, p. 4.
52. *Daily Sketch*, 11.7.1955, front page.
53. *Daily Sketch*, 26.9.1922, p. 19.
54. *Daily Sketch*, 11.2.1936, p. 7.
55. *Daily Sketch*, 17.1.1936, p. 5
56. *Daily Sketch*, 23.1.1936, p. 15.
57. *Daily Sketch*, 31.1.1936, p. 5.
58. *Daily Sketch*, 6.2.1936, pp. 5, 24.
59. *Daily Sketch*, 28.2.1936, front page.
60. *Daily Mirror*, 28.2.1936, front page.
61. *Daily Sketch*, 1.8.1953, p. 3.
62. *Daily Sketch*, 21.6.1955, p. 8.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*, front page.
65. Hilary Allen, p. 92.
66. *Ibid.*
67. Light, p. 83.
68. Bargainnier, p. 129.

6 An examination of otherness, as the West encounters the East

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6. Sara Mills, p. 63.
7. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 89–90.
8. Gillian Gill, p. 89.
9. *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* (London: Fontana, 1978), p. 92.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 390.
12. *Cat Among the Pigeons*, first published in 1959 (HarperCollins, 2002), p. 274.
13. *An Autobiography*, p. 377.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 390–1.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 385.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 409.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 471.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 547–8.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 473.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (London: Fontana, 1958), p. 69.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
23. *Murder on the Orient Express* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 16.
24. *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, pp. 59–60.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
26. *Murder on the Orient Express*, p. 16.
27. *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, pp. 163–4.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
29. *Murder on the Orient Express* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 12.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
33. Rowland, p. 71.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
35. *They Came to Baghdad* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 8. The intimacy of the representations on Baghdad in *They Came to Baghdad* is accorded in its dedication: 'To all my friends in Baghdad'.
36. *Murder in Mesopotamia*, p. 161.
37. Thompson, p. 90.
38. *They Came to Baghdad*, p. 62.
39. *Cat Among the Pigeons*, p. 39.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 263–4.
41. *Murder in Mesopotamia*, p. 163.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
44. *Appointment with Death*, in *Poirot in the Orient*, p. 434.
45. 'We see it all around us today – in political creeds, in the conduct of nations. . . They are opening the door, these apostles of violence, they are letting up the old savagery, the old delight in cruelty *for its own sake*.' AWD, p. 446.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 446.
47. *They Came to Baghdad*, p. 298.
48. Gill, p. 89.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
50. *Ibid.*
51. The ironic comment that quietly states that it is the insularity of the little Englander that allows them to find such a reaction 'right' should not be overlooked.
52. Gill, p. 91.
53. Barbara Fisher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), p. 8.
54. Sara Mills, p. 63.

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