

WOMEN WRITING WOMEN : GENDER AND
REPRESENTATION IN BRITISH 'GOLDEN AGE' CRIME
FICTION

Megan Hoffman

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
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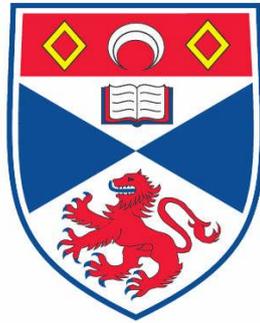
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Women Writing Women: Gender and Representation in
British 'Golden Age' Crime Fiction

Megan Hoffman



This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of PhD

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine representations of women and gender in British ‘Golden Age’ crime fiction by writers including Margery Allingham, Christianna Brand, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh, Dorothy L. Sayers, Josephine Tey and Patricia Wentworth. I argue that portrayals of women in these narratives are ambivalent, both advocating a modern, active model of femininity, while also displaying with their resolutions an emphasis on domesticity and on maintaining a heteronormative order, and that this ambivalence provides a means to deal with anxieties about women’s place in society. This thesis is divided thematically, beginning with a chapter on historical context which provides an overview of the period’s key social tensions. Chapter II explores depictions of women who do not conform to the heteronormative order, such as spinsters, lesbians and ‘fallen’ women. Chapter III looks at the ways in which the courtships and marriages of detective couples attempt to negotiate the ideal of companionate marriage and the pressures of a ‘cult of domesticity’. Chapter IV considers the ways in which depictions of women in schools, universities and the workplace are used to explore the tensions between an expanding role in the public sphere and the demand to inhabit traditionally domestic roles. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the image of female victims’ and female killers’ bodies and the ways in which such depictions can be seen to expose issues of gender, class and identity. Through its examination of a wide variety of texts and writers in the period 1920 to the late 1940s, this thesis investigates the ambivalent nature of modes of femininity depicted in Golden Age crime fiction written by women, and argues that seemingly conservative resolutions are often attempts to provide a ‘modern-yet-safe’ solution to the conflicts raised in the texts

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INTRODUCTION

Crime fiction provides an ideal space in which to explore issues that accompany changing models of femininity. As a genre, certain elements are already required; the potential for deviance through transgressing social codes – the ‘law’ – is essential to the plot of a crime novel. At the same time, the crime genre requires resolution; the break in law and order must be mended by an all-powerful detective figure.¹ While predominantly conservative, this formula allows a ‘safe’ textual space for the exploration of anxieties surrounding constructions of femininity in the period during which British ‘Golden Age’ crime fiction was being written. The first half of the twentieth century saw significant changes in the construction of gender roles in the popular consciousness, social policies regarding women and, consequently, perceptions of femininity, and the inevitable anxieties that accompanied these changes are evident in portrayals of women and femininity in popular culture.² The depiction of a woman in a crime novel, whether she is victim, villain, suspect or detective, is loaded with social and cultural meanings as well as with expectations attached to the genre’s typical characters.³ Though inevitably contained and forced into compliance with social and genre conventions through marriage, death, or occasionally the necessity of playing the detective figure’s regulatory role, female characters are nevertheless used in ways that can be read as questioning and renegotiating social, gender and genre norms.⁴

¹ How these conventions might be complicated when that detective figure is a woman will be discussed to some extent in this thesis and has already been examined at length elsewhere in works such as Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig’s *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (1981).

² Specific issues at stake in these depictions will be examined in depth in Chapter I, ‘Change and Anxiety’.

³ This is certainly not to say that constructions of masculinity were not also under scrutiny in these narratives, but the primary focus of this thesis is on representations of women.

⁴ Other critics have also argued for the importance of reading crime novels in light of the possibilities they reveal within their formulaic conventions rather than the limitations of those conventions. Gill Plain writes of the crime genre that ‘these texts cannot be reduced to the sum of their resolutions; they must also be considered in the light of the conflicts and tensions that they mobilise en route, and, in exploring these tensions, the possibility must be considered that crime, like its counterpart respectability, is seldom quite what it seems’. Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 6.

With its resolution, the Golden Age crime novel contains any deviance that might have emerged within the body of the text; however, it is often the case that the resolution is shaped in a particularly modern fashion.⁵ Alison Light identifies what she calls a ‘conservative modernity’ in women’s middlebrow literature of the period, pointing out that it was the cultural production of ‘a time when older forms of relationship and intimate behaviour were being recast and when even the most traditional of attitudes took new form’.⁶ How, then, does British women’s Golden Age crime fiction negotiate these shifting models through the portrayals of women and the feminine it offers?

This thesis does not attempt to demonstrate either that depictions of women in Golden Age crime fiction written by women are unequivocally empowering, or that their conservatism is inevitably repressive. Rather, I will argue that these depictions are ambivalent, both advocating a modern, active model of femininity that gives agency to female characters, while also displaying with their resolutions an emphasis on domesticity and on maintaining a heteronormative order. This ambivalence provides a means to deal with anxieties about women’s place in society without advocating either a radical feminist dismissal of social conventions or a return to a Victorian ideal of submissive domesticity. The active models of femininity, including deviant femininity, provided in these novels speak to a changing society in which women’s place – in the home, in the workplace, and in education – was continually being questioned, and the exploration that I provide of both conflict and resolution in these texts will add to the existing body of work on both the crime fiction genre and women’s middlebrow fiction in general. This thesis is divided thematically, beginning with a chapter on historical context, which is vital to understanding the concerns explored in these novels. It continues with the examination of

⁵ ‘Modern’ is used here and throughout this work to refer to the culture and social mores contemporary with the narratives that are being examined.

⁶ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 10.

issues such as sexually nonconforming women, the changing – and often conflicted – nature of gender roles in both the domestic and public spheres, and concludes with a discussion of the powerful image of the woman’s body, both dead and living, and the ways in which depictions of this body can be seen to explore and negotiate issues of gender, class and identity.

My work refers to and builds upon the varied criticism on crime fiction that has been produced particularly in the last thirty years, but also reaching further back. Much critical attention has been devoted to crime fiction as a genre, and an important early critical work on the genre is Howard Haycraft’s account of the history of crime fiction, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (1941). *Murder for Pleasure* is significant to this study because it was contemporary to many of the novels and stories I have analysed, so Haycraft’s identification of popular writers, novels and themes in the genre is particularly relevant to my focus on the social and cultural forces that come into play in the production of the novels examined. Haycraft is the first to attempt to identify particular movements or subgenres within the wider context of crime fiction, naming the dates of ‘The Golden Age’ as 1918-1930 and ‘The Moderns’ as 1930 to the crime fiction contemporary to the publication of *Murder for Pleasure*.⁷ Julian Symons’s *Bloody Murder* (1972) is another important early work that attempts to give an historical account of the genre. Symons rather simplistically argues that the reading habits of the public shaped the changing nature of the crime fiction genre in the 1920s; with the increasing number of lending libraries such as Boots and W.H. Smith in Britain, Symons reasons, the preferences of the large number of women who patronised these libraries must have had an effect on the literature that was subsequently produced and consumed: ‘Supply again followed [women’s] demand for books that would reinforce their own view

⁷ Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (London: Peter Davies, 1942), pp. 112-58, 181-206.

of the world and society, long untroubling “library novels”, light romances, detective stories. Many of the detective stories were written by women, and essentially also for women’.⁸ Here and throughout *Bloody Murder*, Symons disregards the potential for exploration and renegotiation of gender and social roles that can be found in detective novels of the period. A more complicated and useful reading of conservatism in women’s middlebrow fiction, including crime fiction, is provided by Alison Light’s more recent *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991).

Light argues that:

by exploring the writings of middle-class women at home in the period... we can go straight to the centre of a contradictory and determining tension in English social life...which I have called a conservative modernity: Janus-faced, it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards; it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before.⁹

Light’s work acknowledges the complex nature of the social influences that shaped middlebrow fiction in the period, understanding conservatism ‘not as a force which is simply “anti-change” so much as a species of restraint or “brake”...holding progress back on the leash of caution but allowing it none the less to advance’.¹⁰ As Light suggests in her chapter on Agatha Christie, and as this thesis will explore in the case of both Christie and other women crime writers of the period, such fiction reworks and renegotiates outdated cultural norms even while providing distinctly conservative resolutions – it ‘offers a modern sense of the unstable limits of respectability’.¹¹

Stephen Knight’s work has also been influential in complicating the traditional view of the Golden Age crime novel as ‘light’ or simplistically conservative. Knight’s *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980) includes a chapter on Agatha Christie’s series

⁸ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), pp. 93-94.

⁹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Light, *Forever England*, p. 17.

¹¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 61.

detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple in which Knight argues that in Christie's fiction the model of the heroic masculine detective is rejected in favour of 'a system of inquiry which is self-consciously female, and also fully rational'.¹² Knight also suggests that Christie is 'a genuine channel for the anxieties and the ultimate self-consolations of her class and sex'.¹³ Knight's analysis of Christie's fiction recognises the gendered implications of the ways in which it manipulates the crime fiction formula. This approach differs from earlier critics such as Symons, who read the aspects of the texts that subvert gendered genre norms as direct products of their creators' and readers' desire for an appealing, 'light' fiction. Knight's chapter on Christie's contribution to Golden Age crime fiction is one of the first critical treatments to recognise the importance of conducting a complex inquiry not only of crime fiction as a bourgeois literature but also of its construction of a gendered methodology of detection.

Published in 1981, not long after Knight's study, Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig's *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* is a thorough study that not only contributed to the growing body of work on gender in crime fiction but was also the first to examine extensively female characters in the genre. *The Lady Investigates* considers not only female protagonists in the works of well-known writers but also the female detectives of many writers who had been critically neglected before its publication, such as Patricia Wentworth and Gladys Mitchell. It also recognises the potential complexity of social and cultural influences on depictions of women. For instance, Cadogan and Craig write of the wives of well-known male detective figures that:

Active feminism [in the 1930s] was considered old hat and soon became a source of irritation to those preoccupied with more pressing issues like the war in Spain and threatening developments in Germany. It had acquired a ridiculous aspect, and so a fashionable author was forced to adopt a bantering tone on the subject, displaying at the same time an awareness of apparently fundamental traits and

¹² Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 119.

¹³ Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 133.

incapacities in each sex. But it was impossible to revert to the prewar system of restrictions in women's lives.¹⁴

Though *The Lady Investigates* acknowledges the social factors that shaped depictions of femininity in Golden Age crime novels and that overt feminism does not always play into representations of femininity, it is a history of women detective figures that includes a list of characters and how they function rather than a close reading of the factors that influenced portrayals of gender in the novels and stories examined. The direction my argument takes aligns this thesis more closely with Merja Makinen's recent work on femininity in the novels of Agatha Christie, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (2006). Unlike many other critical works on the genre that deal with gender, Makinen's work recognises the potential for ambivalence in Christie's representations of femininity. Using an historical approach similar to my own in its examination of the various culturally defined modes of femininity in Christie's novels, Makinen argues that even though 'Christie was writing during a period of intense gender renegotiation in relation to the modern world...a political conservatism did not necessarily rule out a questioning and even subversive attitude to cultural gender expectations'.¹⁵ Makinen also states that one of her aims is to use a wide variety of Christie's fiction in her work in order to give her readings more depth and provide a comprehensive look at the issues with which her work engages, an approach that this thesis also advocates but with a wide variety of writers and texts, as opposed to being a single-author study.

Along similar lines, my work owes a great deal to the valuable contributions on women's middlebrow fiction, including Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (2001) and, as has already been discussed, Alison Light's groundbreaking study *Forever England*. Humble and Light

¹⁴ Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 207.

¹⁵ Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 1.

both include crime fiction in their studies of middlebrow literature, and their focus on how such fiction engages with concerns of the period and the case they make for the importance of studying it has been crucial to crime fiction studies, including my own work. Humble, for example, argues that:

the ‘feminine middlebrow’ in this period was a powerful force in establishing and consolidating, but also in resisting, new class and gender identities...it is its paradoxical allegiance to both domesticity and a radical sophistication that makes this literary form so ideologically flexible.¹⁶

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

While building upon these works and others, this thesis also includes elements that distinguish it from other critical works on crime fiction in general, women’s crime fiction specifically and also women’s middlebrow fiction. I have selected a wide variety of texts produced both by writers who have been the focus of a relatively large amount of critical attention, such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham, as well as those who have received comparatively little, such as Ngaio Marsh, Gladys Mitchell, Patricia Wentworth, Christianna Brand and Josephine Tey.¹⁷ Examining such a diverse range of writers and novels contributes to the recovery of lesser-known writers while also

¹⁶ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.

¹⁷ Of the writers included in this thesis, only Christie and Sayers are included in Howard Haycraft’s identification of the ‘big five’ most significant writers of British detective fiction (1942). Allingham and Marsh are both subjects of short sections in *Murder for Pleasure*, but other women writers such as Wentworth are only briefly commented upon. Mitchell is mentioned as a writer of detective fiction characterised by a ‘lighter tone’. *Murder for Pleasure*, p. 195. Haycraft also names Inspector Lamb as the detective figure connected to Wentworth’s work. However, Lamb is in fact a police officer who often works with the primary detective figure, Miss Silver, of whom Haycraft makes no mention. *Murder for Pleasure*, p. 204.

providing a more nuanced picture of a complicated cultural landscape. Although only some of the crime writers of the period continue to be read and discussed, all of the writers chosen for the purposes of this thesis were widely read at the time of their work's publication.¹⁸ Gladys Mitchell, for example, was named in *The Observer* in 1938 along with Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers as one of the 'Big Three' prominent women writers of detective fiction of her time.¹⁹ In fact, Mitchell's work has remained popular, though not at the same level as Christie's or Sayers's, with numerous reprints since the 1980s, most notably by Virago Press, Vintage Press, Rue Morgue Press and Minnow Press. There was even a Mrs. Bradley television series produced by the BBC in the late 1990s, but, in spite of this public profile, her work has continued to merit no more than a few passing mentions in criticism on crime fiction. Patricia Wentworth, whose elderly woman detective Miss Silver appeared a year before Christie's more famous Miss Marple, is another writer who was popular during the period but whose work faded into obscurity until recent reprints by Hodder & Stoughton, and who has also received very little critical

¹⁸ Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers in particular have been included in virtually every work on the history of crime fiction and significant critical works have been produced on each writer. In addition to Makinen's *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (2006), Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick's *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (1982), Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker's *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (1991), R.A. York's *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion* (2007), as well as several biographies have been written on Christie and her work. Various articles and chapters within well-known critical works on crime fiction and/or women's fiction have also been written on Christie, including Stephen Knight's "'...done from within" – Agatha Christie's World', in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980), Alison Light's 'Agatha Christie and Conservative Modernity' in *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991), and Gill Plain's 'Sacrificial Bodies: The Corporeal Anxieties of Agatha Christie', in *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001). Sayers has also often been the subject of study, with Janice Brown's *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (1998), Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis's *Conundrums for the Long Week-end: England, Dorothy L. Sayers and Lord Peter Wimsey* (2000), and Crystal Downing's *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (2004), as well as Susan J. Leonardi's chapters 'Unnatural by Degrees: Dorothy L. Sayers' Overachieving Murderess' and 'Of Catteries, Colleges, and Whimsical Weddings', in *Dangerous By Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (1989), SueEllen Campbell's 'The Detective Heroine and the Death of Her Hero: Dorothy Sayers to P.D. James', in *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction* (1995), and Gill Plain's 'Safety in Sanctity: Dorothy L. Sayers's Marriage of Convenience', in *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (1996). Susan Rowland includes Christie and Sayers, as well as Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, in her psychoanalytic study of the lives and work of six women crime writers, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (2001). In comparison with Christie and Sayers, Allingham has received relatively little critical attention, but still significantly more than writers such as Brand, Marsh, Mitchell, Tey and Wentworth.

¹⁹ Torquemada, 'These Names Make Clues', *The Observer* (London, UK: 2 October 1938), p. 7, *Proquest Historical Newspapers The Guardian and The Observer (1791-2003)*, Web, 30 October 2011.

attention. By including these writers and others, I look to provide a more expansive picture of the themes that emerge from the work of women Golden Age crime writers in addition to offering innovative readings of both well-known and lesser-known texts that can be built upon by future critics.

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

²⁰ Julian Symons identifies the Golden Age as spanning the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that the end of the Second World War marked the change from 'detective story' to 'crime novel'. *Bloody Murder*, pp. 18-19.

²¹ Knight is more liberal than critics such as Haycraft and Symons in his definition of 'Golden Age'; while acknowledging that the phrase is usually used to describe 'the period between the two world wars', he argues that the period might more accurately be dated from 1908 (with the publication of Gaston Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* in translation, Mary Roberts Rinehart's *The Circular Staircase*, and Carolyn Wells's *The Clue*) until 'well after 1939', as 'many of the classic writers of the so-called "golden age" went on writing in their familiar modes'. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 85-86. Humble argues that 'although the feminine middlebrow as I understand it is clearly a product of the inter-war years, its form, themes and successes were not immediately disrupted by the Second World War. In defining my period as running from the end of the First World War to the mid-1950s, I challenge the prevailing convention that would see the Second World War as effecting a decisive ideological and cultural break, and offer a revision to the way we currently map the changing politics of femininity and the domestic in the twentieth century'. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 3-4.

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

Though this thesis is historical and textual in its approach, with most attention paid to the social and cultural contexts in which the examined texts were produced, I have also used various contemporary theoretical works where appropriate to enhance and add depth to my close readings of the texts. Judith Butler’s work on gendered subjectivity and identity has proven to be particularly useful; Butler argues that the recognition of the performativity of gender can reveal transgressive possibilities:

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

This is particularly appropriate when applied to readings of genre fiction, which is repetitious by nature and which lends itself to gendered readings when conventional plots and characters are reworked in ways that can be seen to renegotiate both cultural and genre constructions of gendered roles and themes. Butler’s work stresses both the instability of gender categories and the coercive force of gender norms, both concepts that are evident in the depictions of subversive or imperfectly performed femininity (and also masculinity) set loose in the body of the text, but compelled into submission in the resolutions of the fiction I examine. This last point also opens up the intriguing possibility that the conclusions reached in this fiction project only the illusion of safety and completion; they can, in fact, be read as always failing to approximate the ideal of order they aspire to. In addition, Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) has informed my readings of not only the transgressive potential of the dead body in Chapter V, but also of the social

²² Stephen Knight, ‘The golden age’, in Martin Priestman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 77.

²³ Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 402.

disturbance of crime itself and the gendered meanings that can be read into the transgressive bodies of both women victims and women killers in the same chapter. Laura Mulvey's discussions of gendered subjectivity and objectivity have also been useful to my readings of the often complicated treatments of the female body in the novels discussed.²⁴

This thesis aims, through its examination of a wide variety of texts and writers in the period of roughly 1920 until the late 1940s, to explore the ambivalent nature of modes of femininity depicted in Golden Age crime fiction, and to show that seemingly conservative resolutions are often attempts to provide a 'modern-yet-safe' solution to the conflicts raised in the texts. Consequently, Chapter I, 'Change and Anxiety', offers an overview of the period's key social tensions with regard to the changing roles of women. This chapter introduces a wide range of concerns, including the perception of a large number of 'superfluous' single women in British society following the First World War; increasing access to education, particularly University education for women; increasing career opportunities outside the home occurring simultaneously with continued, intense pressure to marry and have children; and changing ideologies surrounding marriage and sexual relationships – all issues that are central to the novels examined in the following chapters.

The second chapter, 'Everybody Needs an Outlet', explores depictions of women who do not conform to the heteronormative order, including spinsters, lesbians and 'fallen'

²⁴ Mulvey's work argues for the existence of a 'male gaze' in cinema which objectifies women as the observed as opposed to subjective observers, and this model of spectatorship can also be useful in examining representations of women in fiction. The limitations of Mulvey's conclusions in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) have been much debated, revised and revisited, including by Mulvey herself in 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)' (1981). In this essay, drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of femininity, Mulvey discusses the problems that manifest when the spectator is female, positing that the female spectator must occupy a masculine position in order to access active desire. One of the frequently addressed problems with the structure of Mulvey's original argument is its heteronormative framework, which prohibits space for lesbian desire in its construction of the gaze. A few examples of critics who have responded to Mulvey's ideas include Mary Ann Doane in 'Film and the Masquerade – Theorising the Female Spectator' (1982) and *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (1987), E. Deidre Pribram in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (1988) and Patricia Erens in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism* (1990).

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

Chapter III, 'A Joint Venture?', examines depictions of Sayers's detective couple Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, Allingham's Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton, Marsh's Roderick Alleyn and Agatha Troy and Christie's Tommy and Tuppence Beresford. Vane, Fitton, Troy and Beresford together provide a model of femininity that attempts to reconcile new opportunities for career women with a fulfilling romantic relationship and a domestic life. However, though these couples offer a valuable exploration of the potential of companionate marriage, they often falter when the question of parenthood – accompanied by the expectations surrounding domesticity and women's role in the home – arises. This chapter explores how – and if – the 'gap' that exists

between actively equal partnership and domesticity is negotiated in these novels. This chapter also posits that often within these couples' relationships the 'masochistic' modern male must return to a paradigm of dominant, aggressive masculinity and the modern female must return to a traditionally submissive role in order to establish a successful romantic relationship. The conservative resolutions that follow these reversed positions signify both anxiety about changing gender roles and a desire to explore a possible renegotiation of the roles typically played out in the heterosexual romance plot. In addition, I question the reading of masochistic desire as 'giving in' or a loss of power for women, while recognising the problems inherent in a traditional, masochistic feminine role. Examining these narratives reveals an ambiguous view on the state of modern marriage, reflecting uncertainty but not an absolute retreat to less empowering ideals.

The fourth chapter, 'Ladies of a Modern World', reads Josephine Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946), Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935), Mitchell's *St Peter's Finger* (1938) and *Laurels Are Poison* (1942), and Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) in order to consider depictions of women in schools, universities and the workplace. These settings provide the opportunity to explore the tension between women's expanding place in the public sphere and the pressure to stay in traditionally domestic roles. That some female characters are depicted as flourishing in an academic community of women, or achieving professional success, is positive in presenting the possibility of moving towards an equal place with men in the public sphere of academia or the workplace. Nevertheless, novels depicting educated or working women are not necessarily always supportive of such an agenda – as can be seen in *The Fashion in Shrouds*, they are often fraught with problematic conflict between an active ideal and the domesticity that was still considered to be the ultimate feminine achievement. The novels examined also paint a complex portrait of female friendship and community – on the one hand, communities such as

Sayers's Shrewsbury College or Mitchell's St Peter's Convent are positive depictions of flourishing communities of women who work individually and together for the success of both themselves and their students, and who must cope with outside prejudice. On the other hand, these novels show that even such communities face conflict with the wider patriarchal institutions to which they are connected, and novels such as *Laurels Are Poison* and *Miss Pym Disposes* present a far more ambivalent view of women living and working together, with excessive competition and destructive lesbianism being two possible 'dangers' that may manifest.

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

Throughout these chapters, a picture emerges of narratives that test boundaries and subvert stereotypes while offering 'safe' resolutions. The range of texts examined provides an overview of the ways in which women writers deal with the pressing anxieties that accompanied the rapid social changes of the first half of the twentieth century, revealing ambivalence towards available modes of femininity. The ways in which these images are

investigated and manipulated have implications both for the genre and in the much wider sphere of the dominant culture. An appropriate question to begin with, then, is: what, exactly, is at stake when women write women in Golden Age crime fiction?

CHAPTER I

CHANGE AND ANXIETY: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to examine the issues at stake within depictions of femininity in the texts that will be discussed in the following chapters, it is important to have an understanding of the historical context within which this fiction was produced. The first half of the twentieth century was a period of change for women in British society, and traditional gender categories were beginning to be debated and questioned in very public ways. Following the First World War, the gendered lines drawn between the domestic and public spheres became increasingly blurred as many women found themselves working outside the home for the first time or returning to the workforce after marriage as the demand for workers grew in the absence of conscripted men to fill such roles. Not only did women begin to assume a more prominent role in the male-dominated public sphere, they also gained access to jobs that would previously have been closed to them on the basis of gender, for example, in munitions factories, engineering and in offices and shops.¹ These jobs would generally have been more highly paid than traditional 'women's work' in the textiles industry, domestic service or helping to run family businesses.² Despite this shift in the kind of work women were shown to be capable of, Gail Braybon cautions against the assumption that women's increased presence in the workplace during the First World War fundamentally changed views towards traditional gender roles, writing: 'Women themselves may have gained much from the experience of war work, but men's attitudes to them were another matter'.³ Expectations and prejudices accompanying gendered social

¹ Penny Summerfield, 'Women and War in the Twentieth Century', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), pp. 323-24.

² Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 49.

³ Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, p. 157.

roles did not change quickly, and this tension was played out over time through various issues that will be discussed in this chapter.

By the end of the First World War, proponents of women's rights were optimistic that women would not only be able to hold the ground they had gained in the fight for equality between the sexes, but also to go further. Indeed, in 1918 the vote and the right to stand for Parliament, privileges for which feminists had fought for decades, were given to women who were over 30 or who had graduated from a British university.⁴ However, many historians argue that with this victory came a loss of focus for the feminist movement; suffrage was an issue that had united women of all backgrounds, and its achievement, though limited, meant that the movement lacked a clear direction during the interwar years. Jane Hannan, for instance, remarks of the post-war feminist movement that 'Once the vote was partially granted in 1918...it became less easy to maintain a commitment to a common goal'.⁵ Deirdre Beddoe argues that:

the inter-war feminist movement was characterised by a division between old and new feminists, by increasing fragmentation and by dwindling energies...we can still talk of a fairly active feminist movement in the 1920s though not as dramatic as the pre-war mass movement. It was in the 1930s that the movement really began to dwindle.⁶

The feminist movement's growing lack of cohesion along with the continuing cultural pressure to conform to traditional gender roles did not, however, prevent significant achievements for feminists in the period following the First World War; legislation was passed that opened new career opportunities in male-dominated professions such as the law, allowed women to sue for divorce on the same grounds as men, and finally allowed

⁴ Jane Hannan, 'Women and Politics', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 234.

⁵ Hannan, 'Women and Politics', p. 234.

⁶ Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 140.

all women the right to vote.⁷ In addition, as will be discussed later in this chapter, women gained the right to be awarded degrees at some of the nation's most prestigious universities, and the number of women with careers was growing.

Though it was becoming more accepted for them to assume public roles, women still faced intense pressure to marry, have children, and devote their lives to housekeeping, even though more women were remaining unmarried and those who did marry were having fewer children than ever before.⁸ This combined with a division within the feminist movement as to 'whether their aim should be to seek equality with men or to emphasise women's special needs',⁹ and a growing suspicion of militant feminists as 'unnatural' women,¹⁰ to create significant tension in the ways in which femininity was portrayed in the media and in popular forms of discourse. Such tensions form the cultural backdrop for a period during which crime novels began to reach an unprecedented level of popularity, and women played a substantial role in both their audience and their creation.¹¹ The production and consumption of popular literature was growing as innovations in publishing allowed for the cheap production of novels and the number of lending libraries increased.¹² With fewer children and labour-saving household technology such as the vacuum cleaner, many women had more time than ever before for leisure activities such as reading. Women who worked outside the home were more likely to have extra money to spend on luxuries such as books and clothing. These factors combined to make women an increasingly important demographic for publishers, and Stephen Knight argues that:

⁷ These pieces of legislation were, respectively, the Sex Disqualification Removal Act of 1919, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 and the Representation of the People Act of 1928.

⁸ Jane Lewis notes that the number of women married under the age of 45 who had between zero and two children increased from 44.8 per cent in 1901 to 69.8 per cent in 1941, and that the number of families with five or more children decreased from 27.5 per cent in 1901 to 9.2 per cent in 1941. Jane Lewis, *Women in England, 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsleaf, 1984), p. 5.

⁹ Hannan, 'Women and Politics', p. 234.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 128.

¹¹ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 50.

¹² Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 93.

[A] crucial element in the development of [the detective novel] was the gender of its audience. The magazines that carried short stories, *The Strand*, *Pearson's*, *Windsor* and so on, were designed for men, though they often had sections for the family. But lending libraries which...were the basic medium for dissemination of the new clue-puzzle novels had a 75 per cent female audience. The tendency towards intellect and observation, rather than heroic action, and the marked limitation of strong masculinity in the detective heroes shape a form which is increasingly read, and written, by women.¹³

Certainly, women quickly became a significant force in the publication of crime novels during the post-war period, and there is no question of the popularity of the genre with readers of both sexes; in fact, crime fiction made up 'one-quarter of all fiction published' by 1939.¹⁴ The 'clue-puzzle novels' that Knight refers to were the main form taken by Golden Age crime fiction in Britain, and some of its most popular writers were women. The significance of women writers' engagement with cultural anxieties through depictions of gender in their work is the central question that will be explored in the following chapters.

As will be discussed, crime fiction allows considerable scope for portraying transgressions of gender and social boundaries. This does not necessarily mean that women writers of crime fiction identified themselves unequivocally with feminism – many women were hesitant to associate themselves with the militant feminism of the sort practised by the suffragettes. When it was suggested that she give an address about the feminist movement in 1938, Dorothy L. Sayers remarked that though she believed that every woman should have the right to choose a profession regardless of that profession's gender associations, she 'was not sure [she] wanted to "identify [her]self"...with feminism', referring to 'aggressive feminism' as 'old-fashioned' and likely to 'do more

¹³ Stephen Knight, 'The Golden Age', in Martin Priestman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 81.

¹⁴ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 65.

harm than good'.¹⁵ Such an attitude is very much in line with the uncertain relationship many women of the period had with the 'feminism' of their experience. Within these writers' work, women's changing roles and cultural perceptions of those roles are questioned. From education for women to the 'surplus' of single women, from women in the workplace to lesbianism, Golden Age crime fiction by women engages with contemporary anxieties about women's place in society and changing modes of femininity. As Michael Hayes argues, 'popular fiction is a cultural nexus for a historically determined and evolving relationship whose understanding requires us to reflect on the period, the people and the state of book production as well as the books themselves'.¹⁶ This chapter will provide this reflection, exploring what is at stake in the portrayals of women and women's issues in Golden Age crime fiction.

1. Women's Education

Significant advances were made in women's education in the first half of the twentieth century, continuing the educational reforms that had begun in the nineteenth century. From 1918, the school leaving age for both boys and girls was raised from 12 to 14, while women had been allowed to attend university, and in fact had been able to graduate with degrees from universities in Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Scotland and Wales, since the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ However, it was not until 1920 that they were granted the right to obtain degrees from Oxford, and Cambridge did not fully grant women university membership until 1948,¹⁸ though it did grant 'titular' degrees to women

¹⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?: Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 21.

¹⁶ Michael Hayes, 'Popular Fiction and Middle-Brow Taste', in Clive Bloom (ed.), *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 77.

¹⁷ Felicity Hunt, 'Introduction', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), pp. xvii, xix.

¹⁸ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 46.

beginning in 1921.¹⁹ Of course, the few women attending university were from the middle or upper classes; higher education was, with few exceptions, beyond the means of working-class women, and ‘the great majority of all children, and an even greater majority of girls, received the whole of their education in an elementary school’.²⁰ Nevertheless, a growing number of middle- to upper-class girls were beginning to obtain a secondary education: from 185,000 in 1920 to 500,000 in 1936, though Deirdre Beddoe points out that ‘girls attending recognized secondary schools were far outnumbered by boys’.²¹ Outnumbered as they may have been on all levels, more women were being educated outside the home than ever before, and this was proving to be significant cause for anxiety to a segment of society that had previously been entirely dominated by men. Susan J. Leonardi comments that:

An Oxford degree implies ‘the same education’ and although by World War I most of the women students were taking the same courses and the same examinations as the men, the fact that the women did not actually receive degrees made it possible to continue to believe that women’s education was different, was less rigorous and more suited to female frailty of mind and body.²²

When women were finally given the right to obtain degrees from prestigious universities like Oxford and Cambridge, the indication that they were capable of the same level of education as men could no longer be ignored. Educated women were a threat not only to the long-established ‘sacred’ male traditions of such universities, but to a society in which they were under pressure to conform to a domestic ideal.²³ Leonardi points out that a common argument used against higher education for women was that:

women’s role is to be a wife and mother and she should therefore be educated to that end. To follow the same course of studies as men, to receive the same degrees

¹⁹ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 46.

²⁰ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 34.

²¹ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 40.

²² Susan J. Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (New Brunswick; London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 30.

²³ The cultural phenomenon of the ‘cult of domesticity’ will be discussed later in this chapter.

as men, makes women more like men, and therefore less feminine, less able to play their proper role.²⁴

In spite of such attitudes, some women did go to university, though they faced considerable prejudice. Oxford's women's colleges were encouraged to keep as low a profile as possible; these women likely thought – and were told – that the less they disturbed Oxford's status quo, the more seriously they would be taken.²⁵ This rationale is apparent in Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935) when the Dean of Shrewsbury College, a fictional women's college at Oxford, is reluctant to bring in the police to investigate a series of malicious incidents taking place in the college: 'the less publicity the better'.²⁶ Even when women were noticed simply by virtue of working hard at their studies, they were still criticised:

Women, because they were eager students and grateful for the opportunity to receive an education comparable to that of their brothers, threatened, by their very eagerness and by the greater visibility this eagerness entailed, to seem the majority rather than the minority, that place assigned to them by even the most liberal male advocates of higher education for women. Men feared that women would surpass them academically, that women would change the atmosphere of male Oxford so much that young men would prefer to attend Cambridge.²⁷

Though Leonardi specifically examines women's experiences at Oxford, her analysis of attitudes towards educated women can be expanded to apply to wider societal concerns about the impact of higher education on women. Not only was there anxiety that women would step out of prescribed gender roles, surpass men, and take men's jobs, there was also growing prejudice against homosexuality, and the close friendships formed through studying together and living together at schools and universities were perceived as a threat to the heteronormative agenda of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity being promoted

²⁴ Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees*, p. 28.

²⁵ Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees*, p. 23.

²⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 86.

²⁷ Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees*, p. 25.

at the time.²⁸ Suspicions about lesbianism reveal a broader anxiety about female sexuality, and part of this worry concerns premarital heterosexual activity as well as lesbian relationships, both of which had the potential to destabilise the pro-marriage agenda. Nevertheless, for all the prejudice against them, an increasing number of British women were reaching beyond a primary education, and with this prospect came opportunities in academia and in the workplace that would, before the twentieth century, have been nearly inconceivable.

2. Careers and the Workplace

As has been briefly discussed, the First World War opened up many opportunities for British women in the workplace. Women were needed to replace men in factories and in government jobs, and in fact they were encouraged to do so. Feminists were optimistic that this trend would continue after the war and that the job market would continue to open up to women. However, this turned out not to be the case. As men returned to Britain at the end of the war, the higher public profile and activities of women were found to be threatening to a return to ‘normalcy’ for the nation. Braybon states that:

The 1920s saw much propaganda about the joys of domesticity and the role of the housewife... There was an element of fear behind the propaganda, fear that, having experienced higher wages and different jobs, women would seek to escape from their domestic role.²⁹

Braybon observes a change in the media’s treatment of women workers in 1919: ‘Papers which originally concentrated on lambasting *unemployed* women and asking why they did not take the jobs offered to them started demanding that women still in employment be dismissed to enable ex-soldiers to find work’.³⁰ Beddoe also examines the media’s about-

²⁸ Chapter IV, ‘Ladies of a Modern World’, will examine the ways in which such anxieties are explored with varying conclusions in crime novels such as *Gaudy Night*, Gladys Mitchell’s *St Peter’s Finger* (1938) and *Laurels Are Poison* (1942), and Josephine Tey’s *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946).

²⁹ Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, p. 220.

³⁰ Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, p. 189.

face: 'Wartime advertisements frequently featured illustrations of women war workers or nurses, but in the months following the end of the war advertisements rapidly changed images of women from workers to stay-at-home wives and mothers'.³¹ Women who wanted to keep their wartime jobs were accused of being selfish and unwomanly, and 'by 1920 it was considered wilful and perverse of a woman to wish to earn her own living'.³²

Jane Lewis finds that another argument used against women in the workplace was that:

female economic independence was judged potentially morally corrupting. A government committee investigating the increased cost of living at the end of World War I reported a 93 per cent increase in working class girls' clothing expenditure, and one writer...believed that the increased economic independence of women had resulted in more women applying for separations.³³

Cate Haste also comments on the 'legends' that 'proliferated about new classes of affluent spendthrift women squandering their wages on trivialities in the absence of male financial guidance' even though 'women were invariably taken on at lower wages than the men they replaced, and the cost of living soon caught up with any advance they may have made'.³⁴ The 'moral' implications of single women and childless women occupying jobs that could go to a male breadwinner with a family were stressed in the media, but the reality was that women needed these jobs: 'the Census of 1921 showed that nearly one woman in three had to be self-supporting'.³⁵

Though women were publicly encouraged to step out of the workplace after the First World War, it had, in fact, generally become more acceptable than before the war for them to hold jobs outside the home. Beddoe points out that 'over the whole period between the wars the number of insured women workers increased more rapidly than that of men'.³⁶

³¹ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 12.

³² Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 3.

³³ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 184.

³⁴ Cate Haste, *Rules of Desire: Sex in Britain, World War I to the Present* (London:Chatto & Windus, 1992), p. 42.

³⁵ Felicity Hunt, 'Divided Aims: The Educational Implications of Opposing Ideologies in Girls' Secondary Schooling, 1850-1940', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), p. 18.

³⁶ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 48.

Feminist magazines such as *Time and Tide*, *Woman's Leader*, and *The Vote* projected positive images of career women for their readers to emulate.³⁷ Though the minority in an era when most of the media was exhorting women to embrace a domestic ideal, the fact that publications like these existed and were read indicates the presence of resistance to such a model. In the middle classes, young women were more frequently encouraged to enter into careers, 'partly because of the presumed difficulties of finding a husband, and because of the greater difficulties many fathers experienced in providing for their daughters financially', but it was assumed that most of these women would eventually marry and stay at home.³⁸ Though it was acceptable for women to hold jobs 'appropriate' to their sex, such as office work, teaching, and domestic service, professions like the law were still for the most part closed to them. Sachs and Wilson argue that:

The exclusion of females [from traditionally male professions such as the law] was justified on the basis of maintaining professional standards. Maleness was converted into one of the attributes of professionalism...[The professions'] maleness became part of their character, so that the admission of women was seen as not merely adding to their number or introducing some novelty, but as threatening the very identity of the institutions themselves.³⁹

Sachs and Wilson maintain that after women gained the right to vote, however, 'Members of Parliament were not willing to risk their seats in order to support a male monopoly in which they no longer participated' and, in 1919, the Sex Disqualification Removal Act was passed.⁴⁰ This Act opened up the professions to women with provisions against discrimination on the basis of sex. Of course, women would have to obtain the same level of education as men to become employed in professions like the law, which limited participation to the upper middle- and upper-class women who could afford it and were

³⁷ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 16.

³⁸ Martin Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930-1950', in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990), p. 153.

³⁹ Albie Sachs and Joan Hoff Wilson, *Sexism and the Law: A Study of Male Beliefs and Legal Bias in Britain and the United States* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1978), p. 170.

⁴⁰ Sachs and Wilson, *Sexism and the Law*, pp. 173-74.

determined enough to break into male-dominated professions. Nevertheless, the Sex Disqualification Removal Act represented a step forward for women who wanted careers.

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

Domestic service was believed to be the most suitable employment for working-class women. It was the most 'natural' kind of work and it was claimed that the happiest, best-kept working-class homes were ones in which the wife had at one time been a servant.⁴¹

Braybon names a number of government training schemes aimed at working-class women that were put into place in the 1920s in order to encourage women workers to pursue domestic service:

the Scholarship Scheme, which gave grants for training in non-industrial occupations like teaching, midwifery, nursery nursing and cookery; the Home Crafts Scheme, which organised training for women to go into domestic service; the Home Makers Scheme, which gave women general domestic training; grants were also given to help buy uniforms for domestic service.⁴²

Domestic servants did compose a significant part of the female work force; 'in 1921 service still accounted for 33 per cent of all working women and by 1931 that figure had risen to 35 per cent', but in spite of the large proportion of the female work force engaged in domestic service, the demand for servants still exceeded the supply.⁴³ It was no longer absolutely necessary for a working-class woman to become a domestic servant; once women realised there were jobs available with higher pay, better hours, and the possibility

⁴¹ Frank Gloversmith, *Class, Culture, and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 213.

⁴² Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, pp. 221-22.

⁴³ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 61.

of advancement, they were not necessarily eager to enter into domestic service.⁴⁴ This was recognised even at the time; in *The English Middle Classes*, first published in 1949, Roy Lewis and Angus Maude view the National Institute of Houseworkers, a training program for domestic servants, with some skepticism:

The setting up of the Institute *may* do something to raise the status of domestic service in the eyes of working-class girls...But it cannot be expected that the Institute will have any perceptible direct effect on the main problem. Not many girls who are prepared to undertake six months' training for a skilled craft will consider domestic service as an occupation.⁴⁵

As Jane Lewis points out, the economic gap between the working and middle classes was no longer so pronounced, creating tension in middle-class households that could only afford one or two servants but still insisted on operating by the same strict rules and low wages that had been customary in larger households in the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ This was an issue of both class and gender anxiety: the fact that many women were looking for alternatives to domestic service suggested a change from the old order of larger households with lifelong servants, but it also meant women felt that if they entered the workforce, they were no longer restricted to performing domestic tasks that supposedly came 'naturally' to them like cleaning, cooking, and childcare.

Though it was accepted that many women had to (and wanted to) work for economic reasons, there still existed a high level of disquiet in society about women who chose to work outside the home, and particularly working mothers.⁴⁷ In *Women Workers in the First World War*, Gail Braybon refers to a 1916 entrant in the magazine *Labour Woman's* essay competition who expressed a negative view on working mothers: 'No

⁴⁴ In Agatha Christie's *Murder is Easy* (1939), Miss Waynflote complains about the difficulty of hiring domestic servants who will conform to traditional expectations: 'But nowadays, really, one is thankful to get *anybody*. She was very slipshod in her work and always wanting to go out – well, of course she was young and girls *are* like that nowadays. They don't seem to realize that their time is their employer's'. Agatha Christie, *Murder is Easy* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 53.

⁴⁵ Roy Lewis and Angus Maude, *The English Middle Classes* (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 312.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 115.

⁴⁷ Beddoe states that 'The single most arresting feature of the inter-war years was the strength of the notion that women's place is in the home'. *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 3.

crèches etc. can ever make up to children for the mother's love. Whatever a childless woman may do for the community is nothing to the service rendered by her who gives it healthy and good children'.⁴⁸ Several pieces of legislation were passed during the interwar years that reflected this attitude, making it more difficult for married women to pursue careers. The Marriage Bar case of 1925 '[upheld] a requirement that women and not men teachers resign on marriage as not unreasonable'.⁴⁹ This decision made it more challenging for professional married women to hold jobs, and clearly made the right to enter the workforce into a gender issue. In spite of the progress that had been made towards the acceptance of women in the workplace, 'the rigid separation of spheres between the male world of work and the world of home and family...was substantially reinforced' by the marriage bar.⁵⁰ In 1931, the Anomalies Act was passed, which 'assumed that a married woman who left the labour force for any reason had effectively retired'.⁵¹ If a married woman wanted to work, she had to 'satisfy a Court of Referees that [she] had not withdrawn from employment as a result of marriage and could reasonably expect to obtain insured employment locally in line with [her] previous work experience'.⁵² This obviously made it much more difficult for a woman to obtain a job after her marriage, and if she had to give up a job for a reason such as pregnancy, she would be hard-pressed to find another one. Marriage was still held to be a woman's 'true purpose', and measures such as the Marriage Bar and the Anomalies Act illustrate the patriarchal ideology of separate, gendered spheres that still held sway. Such legislation kept power firmly within the realm of men; young, unmarried women were tolerated in the workplace but the assumption was that they would eventually marry. When women did marry, their job prospects became more precarious, and this injustice was rationalised by the assumption that married women

⁴⁸ Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War*, p. 124.

⁴⁹ Sachs and Wilson, *Sexism and the Law*, p. 227.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 77.

⁵¹ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 190.

⁵² Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 190.

would not need to work since their husbands would provide for them and, in any case, their primary focus would shift to motherhood and housekeeping.

Surprisingly, the issue of the marriage bar was a divisive one within the feminist movement. Lewis points out that: ‘Feminists campaigned against the marriage bar on the grounds that marriage *per se* was not incompatible with work...However, mainstream feminists continued to believe that paid employment *was* incompatible with motherhood’.⁵³ This attitude is a reflection of the wider cultural view of women and motherhood that had emerged after the First World War in reaction to the more visible role women had gained in society during the war. Harold L. Smith argues that:

The First World War unleashed a powerful current of cultural conservatism which helped shape the direction of postwar feminism. Alarm over the perceived wartime changes in sex roles strengthened the forces seeking to restore traditional roles...Public concern over the declining rate of population growth also contributed to changes intended to encourage women to become mothers. The increased preoccupation with marriage and motherhood helped ensure that those who wished to make this central to feminism would find a receptive audience, while increasing the resistance to feminists wishing to improve women’s employment opportunities.⁵⁴

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

The growing cultural conservatism after the First World War through the 1930s stressed the ‘need’ for women to remain in the home, but the coming of the Second World War once again emphasised the reality that women were desirable – and competent – contributors to the workplace. In 1941, labour shortages forced the government to

⁵³ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 103.

⁵⁴ Harold L. Smith, ‘British Feminism in the 1920s’, in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990), p. 47.

implement ‘measures under which all women aged 16-49, with the exception of women with children under 14 and those already doing essential war work, were compelled to register’.⁵⁵ Cate Haste points out that ‘By 1943 women made up 57 per-cent of the total workforce. Nine single women out of 10, and 80 per-cent of married women aged 18-40 were in the Services, or working in industry or civil defence’.⁵⁶ As in the First World War, many women were occupying jobs in areas that were traditionally dominated by men. Denise Riley observes that ‘The proportion of women in engineering and allied industries had risen from eighteen per cent in June 1939 to thirty-nine per cent by December 1943’.⁵⁷ Women ‘eventually replaced men in all essential industries – engineering, vehicle building, shipbuilding and aircraft production, in chemical and explosives, on the railways, buses and in the civil service’.⁵⁸ In the late 1930s, Amanda Fitton, the character who marries Margery Allingham’s series detective Albert Campion, is an example of a woman who succeeds in a male-dominated profession – aircraft engineering – before she becomes a mother and leaves her career to become the primary caregiver for her son in the wartime absence of her husband. Even as the Second World War ended and cultural pressure was once again exerted on women to give up their jobs and be housewives, the demands of war had again made clear that women were in the workplace to stay.⁵⁹

3. Marriage and Motherhood

Despite the increasing number of women pursuing careers, marriage continued to be (and was indeed assumed to be) the ultimate goal and principal occupation of most women

⁵⁵ Haste, *Rules of Desire*, p. 100.

⁵⁶ Haste, *Rules of Desire*, pp. 100-101.

⁵⁷ Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 125.

⁵⁸ Haste, *Rules of Desire*, p. 101.

⁵⁹ Gillian Avery observes that ‘the war forced all school-leavers, however privileged, into jobs; after it was over even those who up till 1939 would have stayed at home until they were married thought if not of a career then of a job, and the qualifications needed before one could begin on a professional training, minimal in the 1930s, were to become more and more exacting’. Gillian Avery, *The Best Type of Girl: A History of Girls’ Independent Schools* (London: Deutsch, 1991), pp. 228-29.

throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Lewis states that ‘Marriage...was part of the typical experience of women throughout the period. Between 1871 and 1951 the proportion of adult females who were (or had been) married never fell below 60 per cent’.⁶⁰ Deborah Thom observes that ‘the assumption that girls were primarily future mothers and home-makers and its corollary, that boys were breadwinners and secondarily fathers, continued to dominate discussion until the 1960s’.⁶¹ Though the division of sex roles between the ‘masculine’ public sphere and the ‘feminine’ domestic sphere had not altered a great deal since before the First World War, ideas of what constituted an ideal marriage were changing. The ‘companionate’ marriage, a venture based on affection, sexual compatibility, and partnership, was the new model for couples to aspire to. In Gladys M. Cox’s 1935 health manual *Youth, Sex, and Life*, an ideal still based on separate spheres but also on mutual respect and shared interests is stressed:

As far as possible, both should arrange the work so that they have leisure and energy for companionship and for mutual enjoyment of the pleasures of the home and for interests outside the home. In so far as they can share interests and hobbies, their married life will be the richer.⁶²

Lewis argues that: ‘By the inter-war years married women were no longer regarded primarily as ornamental and sexually innocent creatures; the ideal companionate marriage also involved an expectation of sexual harmony. The sexes no longer led uncommunicative, separate lives’.⁶³ She goes on to point out, however, that ‘none of these changes affected the sexual division of labour within the home’.⁶⁴ D’Cruze also observes the shifting ideal to marriage as a partnership, but she makes clear that such a partnership ‘did not mean any blurring of differential sex roles, nor of the sexual division of household

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 3-4.

⁶¹ Deborah Thom, ‘Better a Teacher Than a Hairdresser?: A Mad Passion for Equality or, Keeping Molly and Betty Down’, in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), p. 130.

⁶² Gladys M. Cox, *Youth, Sex, and Life* (London: Pearson, 1935), p. 207.

⁶³ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 79.

⁶⁴ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 79.

labour – rather a complementarity between husband and wife that could provide the basis for companionship and affection'.⁶⁵ The tension between the public gains made in the fight for gender equality and the more slowly evolving gender roles within marriage relationships was recognised at the time; in Havelock Ellis's *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students*, first published in 1933, such conflict is acknowledged as potentially problematic to a marriage:

But the discontent with marriage which we so often find among wives, even though more or less below the surface, has a real foundation. It is associated with the new and larger claims on life which the women of recent generations have more and more taken, not content like their mothers to accept as natural and inevitable the predominance of men and their own place of subjection. The religious and social aspects of the world have changed for women without in any corresponding degree changing for men...So that when a woman enters marriage she is apt to become aware of a discrepancy which tends to become a mental conflict within herself.⁶⁶

Ellis's observation suggests that inequality inherent in the traditional gender roles assigned to wives and husbands caused tension in the modern marriage relationship, even in those marriages based on ideals of sexual and intellectual compatibility.

Though traditional gender roles were still intact within ideas about the typical marriage, at least some measure of equality was being fought for through legislation; in 1925 the Matrimonial Causes Act passed, which 'enabled wives to sue for divorce on the same basis that husbands could: adultery'.⁶⁷ This act signified the recognition of the importance of sexual compatibility in marriage; a husband's fidelity was now as significant to the success of a marriage as a wife's. The rising number of divorces after the First World War attested to increasing social acceptance of the legal dissolution of an unhappy relationship; divorces increased 'from 3,280...between 1911-1915 to 20,100 between 1931-1935'.⁶⁸ The idea of a companionate marriage gave women at least some

⁶⁵ Shani D'Cruze, 'Women and the Family', in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 75.

⁶⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students* (New York: Emerson Books, 1954), p. 277.

⁶⁷ Smith, 'British Feminism in the 1920s', p. 54.

⁶⁸ Haste, *Rules of Desire*, p. 95.

control over their destinies; being able to choose an emotionally and sexually well-suited partner was an improvement upon marrying solely for economic reasons (this does not mean that no women married for economic security, only that general expectations of the marriage experience had changed). The acknowledgment that women could and should feel sexual desire is extremely significant; Marie Stopes, author of the bestselling 1918 sex manual *Married Love*, writes of marriages in which the woman's sexual needs have not been accounted for:

One result, apparently little suspected, of using the woman as a passive instrument for man's need has been, in effect, to make her that and nothing more. Those men...who complain of the lack of ardour in good wives, are often themselves entirely the cause of it. When a woman is claimed at times when she takes no *natural* pleasure in union, it reduces her vitality, and tends to kill her power of enjoying it when the love season returns.⁶⁹

In *Married Love*, Stopes strongly voices her support for the model of companionate marriage, arguing that both partners must be sexually and emotionally fulfilled in order to live happy lives. The manual is noteworthy because it discusses sex from a woman's perspective, describing how a woman can be sexually satisfied and how a woman's typical monthly cycle relates to her libido. In Stopes's view, a woman is not a 'passive instrument', obliged to be obedient to the man, but a partner worthy of consideration. Stopes also advocates the cultivation of interests outside of marriage for both partners, pointing out that women in particular, as housewives, suffer from a lack of intellectual stimulation: 'Marriage can never reach its full stature until women possess as much intellectual freedom and freedom of opportunity within it as do their partners'.⁷⁰ *Married Love* does, however, indicate that the object of a healthy sex life is not only the satisfaction of the couple, but also procreation, 'the supreme purpose of nature in all her enticing web of complex factors luring the two lovers into each other's arms'.⁷¹ This view is consistent

⁶⁹ Marie Stopes, *Married Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 38.

⁷⁰ Stopes, *Married Love*, p. 96.

⁷¹ Stopes, *Married Love*, p. 78.

with the idealised notion of motherhood that was being promoted at the time. Sex was to be enjoyed not only for its own sake, but also for the possibility of the children that might result from the union.

3.1 Birth Control

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

steady decline in the fertility rate until after World War II...while in the 1870s there were over 295 legitimate live births per 1000 married women aged 15-44, this figure had dropped to 222 by the first decade of the twentieth century and to only 111 by the 1930s.⁷²

In terms of individual families, ‘only 20 per cent of marriages made around 1860 resulted in fewer than three children, but this was the case for 67 per cent of marriages in 1925’.⁷³

These statistics certainly indicate a significant change in sexual practices – the rising use of birth control.⁷⁴ Beddoe states that: ‘The increase of middle-class people using birth control rose from 9 to 40 per cent between 1910 and 1930, whilst figures for the working-class are from 1 to 28 per cent’.⁷⁵ Such high numbers were part of the reason for the government’s agenda to get women to marry and boost the birth rate. Nevertheless, the prospect of being able to control their reproductive lives held undeniable appeal for modern couples. The prospect of having a baby a year was unattractive to most women, not only for the financial burden but for the physical toll that giving birth many times in succession could take. Beddoe points out that ‘not only did pregnancy and childbirth frequently damage women’s health, but the rates of maternal mortality...were

⁷² Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 5.

⁷³ D’Cruze, ‘Women and the Family’, p. 55.

⁷⁴ Kate Fisher notes that: ‘The early twentieth century saw considerable developments in reproductive technology: the invention of caps and diaphragms and their dispersal in a growing number of birth control clinics from the 1920s; the manufacture of spermicidal pessaries; the commercialization of sheaths; and, in the early 1930s, the production of the latex condom. Despite this, the use of non-technological methods [such as withdrawal, abstinence and abortion] persisted’. Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 137.

⁷⁵ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 106.

scandalously high; at a time when mortality generally and infant mortality specifically were falling rapidly, maternal mortality rose'.⁷⁶ Even Marie Stopes, who writes of having children as 'hand[ing] on the torch which lights our consciousness in the sphere of matter', advocates 'allow[ing] at least six months or a year to elapse before beginning the supreme task of [the couple's] lives, the burden of which falls mainly upon the woman'.⁷⁷ Stopes also recommends couples wait 'at least a year' after the birth of the first child before trying to conceive again.⁷⁸ Such regulation of reproduction cannot be achieved without some form of birth control, which Stopes supports in *Married Love* and the 1918 birth control manual *Wise Parenthood*, as well as through the co-founding of the Holloway Clinic in 1921, the first birth control clinic in Britain.

The dark side of the birth control debate is evident in the rising interest in eugenics. As the fertility rate was dropping faster for the upper and middle classes than for the working class, those who were concerned about the repopulation of Britain after the war were dismayed at the perceived consequences if the working class was allowed to populate the nation. D'Cruze points out that 'even Marie Stopes' mission to provide better contraception to the working-class in the 1920s was informed by notions of racial improvement'.⁷⁹ Even before the First World War there had been concern about the lowering birth rate and the role of the working class; Humphries writes that:

In 1907 the Eugenics Education Society was founded, which produced a journal, *Eugenics Review*, from 1908. The Society reflected the general unease over the international decline of Britain, the causes of which were believed to be domestic; hence the stress on teaching working-class women household management and infant care: to enhance national efficiency.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 109.

⁷⁷ Stopes, *Married Love*, pp. 79-80.

⁷⁸ Stopes, *Married Love*, p. 83.

⁷⁹ D'Cruze, 'Women and the Family', p. 73.

⁸⁰ Jane Humphries, 'Women and Paid Work', in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Women's History: Britain 1850-1930* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 123.

After the loss of life during the war, eugenicists were even more anxious about the prospects of the nation's future population; they 'focused on the declining fertility of the middle-class, on working-class infant welfare, and on the persistently high infant mortality rates'.⁸¹ The apprehension was that Britain would lose power as a nation through a depleted and genetically weak population. The emergence of the 'cult of domesticity' (for the upper and middle classes at least) was a way to address this anxiety through encouraging women to have more children.

3.2 The Cult of Domesticity

The years following the First World War brought an intensified focus on marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals for women.⁸² This 'cult of domesticity' stemmed from an agenda held by the government and the media after the war to force women who were occupying 'men's jobs' out of the workplace and to, theoretically, repopulate the nation after the loss of life in the war and in the face of lowering birth rates.⁸³ Beddoe argues that:

In the inter-war years only one desirable image was held up to women by all the mainstream media agencies – that of the housewife and mother. This single role model was presented to women to follow and all other alternative roles were presented as wholly undesirable. Realising this central fact is the key to understanding every other aspect of women's lives in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s.⁸⁴

For politically active feminists, the prevalence of an idealised image of domesticity made it difficult to make progress unless it was by means of advocating measures that would help mothers. The influence of society's preoccupation with marriage and motherhood for women is undeniable, and Pugh suggests that it even helped women gain the right to vote:

⁸¹ D'Cruze, 'Women and the Family', p. 73.

⁸² Gladys M. Cox writes in the 1935 health manual *Youth, Sex, and Life* of the importance of choosing a suitable marriage partner: 'If you secure the right mate for you, marriage and parenthood are the supreme achievements of life and lead to an exquisite and satisfying happiness...for normal people a happy marriage, with children growing up, offers the best that life can give'. *Youth, Sex, and Life*, p. 197.

⁸³ Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism', p. 149.

⁸⁴ Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty*, p. 8.

The steady advance of women into politics under cover of motherhood and domesticity culminated in the politicians' willingness in 1918 to confer the vote, not upon the young war workers, but upon the women over thirty years of age – who were presumed to be largely wives and mothers.⁸⁵

He goes on to say, though, that 'it was not easy, or even natural, to escape from domestic ideology subsequently, even when women had the electoral power to do so'.⁸⁶ Many of the issues feminists focused on during the interwar years involved mothers and children, as this was one arena where feminists were able to exert influence due to the high profile of such concerns in the public eye.

For many women, this idealisation of domesticity brought added pressures. In middle-class households, women were increasingly expected to be directly involved in housekeeping and childrearing. The advent of devices such as the vacuum cleaner made it easier for women to do housework quickly and made it less likely that additional labour from servants would be needed, but this also meant that housewives became more socially isolated.⁸⁷ The popular new discipline of psychology also encouraged women to take a direct role in the raising of their children to ensure that when the children reached adulthood they would be less likely to have mental and emotional issues stemming from mistakes or neglect on the caretaker's part.⁸⁸ John B. Watson's influential childcare manual *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928) warns mothers that 'psychological care [is] just as necessary as physiological care'.⁸⁹ The manual also refers to 'child-

⁸⁵ Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism', p. 155.

⁸⁶ Pugh, 'Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism', p. 155.

⁸⁷ In *Partners in Crime* (1929), Agatha Christie's Tuppence Beresford refers to her boredom with being restricted to the 'women's sphere' of domesticity and the ease with which she accomplishes her household tasks: 'Twenty minutes' work after breakfast every morning keeps the flag going to perfection'. Agatha Christie, *Partners in Crime* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1989), p. 8.

⁸⁸ Lewis observes that: 'The encouragement given to middle-class wives during the inter-war years to devote more time to both housewifery and child care marked a departure from the ambivalent nineteenth-century attitudes regarding the degree of personal involvement in domestic tasks compatible with cultured, ladylike behaviour. The changes brought new stresses, however, particularly in respect to the higher standard of child care that was demanded. Child psychologists, active in the new child study movement, and infant feeding experts both emphasized the importance of elaborate routines and schedules to build the child's character'. *Women in England*, p. 116.

⁸⁹ John B. Watson and Rosalie A.R. Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1928), p. 3.

rearing' as 'the most important of all social obligations', criticising mothers who believe 'that all that children need is food as often as they call for it, warm clothes and a roof over their heads' and praising 'the modern mother who is beginning to find that the rearing of children is the most difficult of all professions, more difficult than engineering, than law, or even than medicine itself'.⁹⁰ Watson's advice draws the distinction between a 'modern', knowledgeable mother who understands the importance of her role in raising a mentally and emotionally healthy child and the old-fashioned sort of mother who only attends to her child's physical needs. This new, modern ideal of motherhood stressed the importance of the mother's constant presence during the child's first few years as absolutely vital; when Watson refers to motherhood as a profession, he means that the woman who decides to be a mother should abandon all thought of a job outside the home – those who do not will inevitably imperil their children's mental well-being.

An interest in child development and the insistence on more regimented childcare were not the only influences that psychological theories had upon marriage. An offshoot of psychology called 'sexology', first introduced in the late nineteenth century, was also behind the new ideal of sexual compatibility within marriage. Sexology also introduced the concept of 'frigidity', which pathologised women who had difficulty or could not become aroused during 'normal' heterosexual sex. In *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life* (1926), psychologist Wilhelm Stekel estimates that fifty per cent of his women patients are frigid.⁹¹ In another treatise on frigidity in women first published in 1936, Edward Hitschmann and Edmund Bergler posit that frigidity is connected to the development of mental illness in women: 'The frigid woman only too easily becomes

⁹⁰ Watson and Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, pp. 7, 11-12.

⁹¹ Wilhelm Stekel, *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life*, trans. James S. Van Teslaar (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 97.

lonely, neglected, betrayed, neurotic, dejected – and ill'.⁹² Sheila Jeffreys maintains that categorising women who did not enjoy heterosexual sex as frigid was a tactic used to promote the cult of domesticity and subdue nonconforming sexuality:

The fear of being labelled 'frigid' was to be used as a weapon, by the sexologists and by their popularisers, to force women to adapt themselves to the demands made by the new role for sexual intercourse. The attack on the resisting women within marriage was combined with a massive renewed onslaught of propaganda against spinsters, feminists, 'man-haters', lesbians; all those categories of women who were seen as rejecting not only sexual intercourse but marriage itself.⁹³

Progressive as the notion that both partners should be sexually satisfied in a relationship may be, in its idealisation of heterosexual, married sex, early sexology presented a very narrow definition of 'normality' and a limited set of options for women's construction of their own sexual identities. Jeffreys argues that sexology 'undermin[ed] feminism and women's independence...The promotion of the ideology of motherhood and marriage together with the stigmatising of lesbianism helped to reinforce women's dependence upon men'.⁹⁴ The cult of domesticity enforced ideas of morality, keeping sexually 'deviant' women who did not fit the domestic, heteronormative ideal on the margins of society.

4. Spinsters

Considering the influence of the cult of domesticity on popular expectations of a woman's role, the increasing numbers of single women, or so-called 'spinsters', was the cause of significant anxiety in society both before and particularly after the First World War. Single women had been especially visible in the earlier, more active feminist campaigns focused on political issues including suffrage; Sheila Jeffreys argues that 'spinsters provided the backbone of the feminist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century' and

⁹² Edward Hirschmann and Edmund Bergler, *Frigidity in Women: Its Characteristics and Treatment*, trans. Polly L. Weil (Washington; New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1948), p. 3.

⁹³ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London: Pandora, 1985), p. 169.

⁹⁴ Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 155.

that ‘much of the impetus of the early women’s movement had come from or been directed towards helping spinsters’.⁹⁵ Even before the enormous loss of young men in the First World War, there was a discrepancy in the proportion of women to men in the population; D’Cruze points out that ‘after 1871, the census showed that there were slightly more women than men in the population. This imbalance increased between 1871 and 1911 and was made still larger by the loss of male lives in the First World War’.⁹⁶ Lewis notes that:

of those women who were single and in their late 20s in 1921, 50 per cent remained unmarried a decade later: this figure is particularly striking when compared with that for men, of whom only 30 per cent failed to marry.⁹⁷

Lewis also points out that ‘in 1939 one woman in six died unmarried, compared with one man in ten’.⁹⁸ One result of the growing number of single women was the greater acceptance of women in the workplace; in many cases, it was not financially feasible for a woman to depend on male relatives for her entire life, so it was up to these women to earn a living on their own. Obviously, the excess of single women who were also often members of the workforce was the cause of some unease in a society that put a high value on marriage and motherhood for women, particularly in the middle and upper classes.

D’Cruze explains that:

The issue [of what to do with ‘surplus’ women] centred on the middle and upper-classes, whose practices of domesticity and the need to prove gentility by female economic dependence were undermined by the necessity of providing for increasing numbers of spinster daughters, sisters, and other relations. The opening up of respectable professional and white-collar work for middle-class and lower middle-class women coincided with this. In terms of the family, it meant that many women did not realise their ‘biological destiny’ as wives and mothers.⁹⁹

For those women who did not marry, a career was a newly viable – and often attractive – option, but the reality of being a working single woman was often challenging. Such women did not conform to the popular, heteronormative, domestic ideal of femininity, and

⁹⁵ Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, pp. 86, 89.

⁹⁶ D’Cruze, ‘Women and the Family’, p. 56.

⁹⁷ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 154.

⁹⁹ D’Cruze, ‘Women and the Family’, p. 56.

consequently they were often viewed with suspicion and derision. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the National Association of Schoolmasters, an all-male organisation of teachers, ‘attacked women teachers specifically as spinsters, revealing their fear that women who were outside marriage were particularly dangerous, undermining men’s traditional superiority in the family as well as in employment’.¹⁰⁰ Sexology also portrayed spinsterhood as a serious problem; spinsters ‘were viewed in much popular sexological literature as being destructive, warped, and damaging to the social fabric’.¹⁰¹ Because they could not be confined to the ‘feminine’ domestic sphere by means of marriage and motherhood, single women who had careers and/or were overt feminists were often seen as ‘unnatural’ and dangerous.¹⁰²

5. Homosexuality

As the number of single women grew, the threat of lesbianism became a major focus for paranoia. Homophobia became rampant during the first half of the twentieth century, and close friendships between women that had been easily accepted in the nineteenth century were no longer considered appropriate.¹⁰³ For example, the intense ‘romantic’ friendships formed between many girls and young women at school were viewed as harmless and natural until the 1920s; Jeffreys remarks:

women’s potential for loving one another, with passion and physical contact, seems to have been damaged profoundly by the stigmatizing of women’s same-sex love. From the 1920s onwards...there was pressure for women to identify themselves as either heterosexual or homosexual.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Alison Oram, ‘Inequalities in the Teaching Profession: the Effect on Teachers and Pupils, 1910-39’, in Felicity Hunt (ed.), *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1987), pp. 117-18.

¹⁰¹ Sheila Jeffreys, ‘Women and Sexuality’, in June Purvis (ed.), *Women’s History: Britain, 1850-1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), p. 205.

¹⁰² Jeffreys, ‘Women and Sexuality’, p. 204.

¹⁰³ Cox warns that ‘both sexes need to be on their guard against allowing friendships with members of their own sex to become too intense, or too passionate’. *Youth, Sex, and Life*, p. 212.

¹⁰⁴ Jeffreys, ‘Women and Sexuality’, p. 206.

Changing attitudes towards relationships between women can at least partly be attributed to the discipline of sexology; according to the views of some sexologists, even physical interaction such as hugs, kisses, and caresses, which were more commonly expressed between women friends than between men, was identified as 'risky' behaviour that could lead to lesbian activity. In *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, psychologist John B. Watson sternly cautions that:

The majority of parents somehow feel safe if their boys run with boys and their girls run with girls. Nothing is further from the truth...Our whole social fabric is woven so as to make all women slightly homosexual. Girls hold hands, kiss, embrace, sleep together, etc.¹⁰⁵

Watson and other psychologists viewed sexuality as being formed by a person's contact and relationships with others rather than being innate, and thus understood homosexuality as being preventable and curable. In 1921, an effort by the government to regulate women's sexuality was made when the criminalisation of lesbianism was debated in Parliament.¹⁰⁶ The legislation was ultimately dismissed in an attempt to keep such shocking subject matter out of the public eye. Another high-profile condemnation of lesbianism came when Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), which sympathetically depicts a lesbian protagonist, was judged in court to be obscene in the year of its publication.¹⁰⁷ All these reactions are attempts to censure, dismiss and hide the open expression of lesbian sexuality in the public sphere in order to prevent 'innocent' women from being exposed to the possibility of lesbianism.

Behind the homophobia that became ingrained in British culture in the first half of the twentieth century was the anxiety that women would reject marriage, motherhood and domesticity as desirable modes of femininity. Leonardi suggests that romantic friendships

¹⁰⁵ Watson and Watson, *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, pp. 178-79.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, *Women in England*, p. 128.

between women students at Oxford '[embodied the] fears of male Oxford' by displaying women's capacity to form a self-sufficient society:

one manifestation of this self-sufficiency, one that was obvious and easy to attack, was the tendency of the women to develop romantic friendships. This tendency threatened not only to disrupt the law and order of society but to proclaim more loudly than anything else the superfluity of men.¹⁰⁸

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why lesbianism was viewed with such determined dismissiveness; during the First World War, women had proven that they were capable of performing work traditionally done by men and that society could indeed function with women occupying prominent public roles. This independence, and the freedoms that came with the vote and increased opportunities in the workplace, proved that women could thrive in the 'masculine' public sphere, threatening the stability of traditional gender roles in a heteronormative social model. Reaction to this threat, combined with the pressure that accompanied the ideology of the 'cult of domesticity', meant that women who resisted traditional femininity were resented, dismissed, and/or suppressed. Yet women who function outside the heteronormative model can be in a unique position to expose the model's problematic nature, a subject to which I turn in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁸ Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees*, p. 38.

CHAPTER II

‘EVERYBODY NEEDS AN OUTLET’:

NONCONFORMING WOMEN IN THE GENRE

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

Women who exhibit excessive or deviant sexuality are often used as victims and villains in Golden Age crime fiction, offering one means of examining attitudes towards nonconforming women in the first half of the twentieth century. The ‘repressed’ spinster, whether lesbian or heterosexual, is a common perpetrator, as her frustrated desires manifest in violence. As discussed in Chapter I, the imbalance of women and men

¹ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 160-61.

following the First World War meant that many women simply did not have the option of marriage, despite the overwhelming pressure to conform to a feminine ideal of wife- and motherhood. Though many young single women are introduced as characters in Golden Age crime fiction, their primary function is frequently to be the female lead in a romantic subplot or the love interest for a male detective figure; therefore, the resolution these young women take part in contributes to the affirmation of heteronormative order. The young couples who unite at the conclusions of many crime narratives are a convention of the genre, contributing to a 'safe' resolution and symbolising the healing of the community that has been disrupted by crime. The exception to this is when the young women in question engage in sexual activity outside of marriage. When this happens, the woman is nearly always punished in some way; in the case of Dorothy L. Sayers's *Strong Poison* (1929), Harriet Vane is almost executed for the murder of her lover, but is rehabilitated by becoming the love interest and future wife of detective figure Lord Peter Wimsey. Harriet is portrayed sympathetically and the public condemnation of her character is depicted as outdated and unfair, but Harriet's ultimate fate as Peter's wife upholds a rigid standard of socially approved femininity. When the single women depicted are middle-aged or older, their portrayals become even more problematic. The sexual potential of such women is viewed with suspicion and disgust; the extremely negative depiction of villains and victims such as Eleanor Prentice and Idris Campanula in Ngaio Marsh's *Overture to Death* (1939) reflects the prejudice shown towards single women when they exhibit excessive sexual desire. Even when single female killers are not directly sexually motivated, the inspiration for their crimes often stems from some form of frustrated desire for revenge against the model of patriarchal family from which they are excluded. Though such women are always suppressed, their existence points to significant unease about the potential threat to prevalent ideals of femininity. The significance of nonconforming female characters does

not lie in their inevitable containment at the narratives' conclusions, but in their disturbing potential for agency and the accompanying questions raised about the transgressive and the normal.

The issue of 'superfluous' women is also dealt with in Golden Age crime fiction through the figure of the single female detective, a well-established character in the genre who often serves ambivalent purposes. On the one hand, she herself crosses boundaries by using the skills usually given a negative connotation – such as nosiness and proclivity to gossip – to destabilise the paradigm of masculine rationality represented by the conventional male detective figure. In the spinster detective, characteristics that are traditionally derided in older single women of limited worldly experience give her superior knowledge and thus power in the domain of patriarchal law, where she would ordinarily be dismissed. On the other hand, these skills also serve the purpose of social regulation – the spinster detective is unable to escape the role of the enforcer of order. Elderly single women have frequently been recognised as being well-suited to the detective profession; Shaw and Vanacker point out that:

The abilities old ladies possess...amount to the essential qualities of the detective: a strong moral sense, a knowledge of human nature, and a capacity for deduction based on carefully observed evidence. It is the 'trivial' lives of old ladies, who have plenty of leisure, the wisdom of experience, long memories, little personal drama in their own lives, and a huge capacity for vicarious living through observation of and gossip about the lives of others, that makes them into potentially excellent detectives.²

The spinster detective's attributes as well as her position within yet outside the family circle make her an ideal amateur detective.³ One of the frequently identified characteristics

² Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 63.

³ Glenwood Irons and Joan Warthling Roberts note: 'The cliché is that the spinster is woolly-headed, has no logical methods of examining things, and worst of all, has no experience with passion or power, both of them in the domain of the young...But the spinster's potential lies more in her formidable intelligence and ability to connect seemingly insignificant details – indeed, in her existence outside the normal society of heterosexual couples – than in the repression which the term often implies'. Glenwood Irons and Joan Warthling Roberts, 'From Spinster to Hipster: The "Suitability" of Miss Marple and Anna Lee', in

of the Golden Age crime novel is that it takes place in an enclosed setting; often underestimated and even laughed at for her perceived naïveté, the elderly spinster detective, with her affinity for gossip and sharp observational skills, as well as her unthreatening persona, is perfectly suited to work ‘undercover’ in such a setting.⁴ The crimes in many novels that feature the spinster detective are committed in domestic settings, and the source of the crime is often shown to originate from within the family.⁵ Kathy Mezei argues that ‘While seemingly regulated or effaced by those with greater economic strength and moral authority in the family and community, the spinster is nevertheless uniquely situated as an instrument of surveillance precisely because of her marginal and indeterminate position’.⁶ The single woman’s liminality – often as aunt, governess, friend of the family – allows her to function both inside and outside the domestic circle, near enough to detect effectively and detached enough to extract the corruption within. This common setting also serves to question the dominance of the traditional patriarchal family, unsettling constructions of normality and safety, as in Patricia Wentworth’s *Grey Mask* (1929), when heroine Margaret Langton’s beloved stepfather Freddy is shown by spinster detective Miss Silver to be the head of a large criminal organisation. Though the conclusions spinster detectives contribute to are conservative in that they affirm a heteronormative model of order, they also re-form the family in a modern way that can be seen to support more active roles for women. Also, through their success as detective figures, spinster detectives serve to destabilise misogynist and ageist assumptions about women’s abilities.

Glenwood Irons (ed.), *Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 65.

⁴ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 77.

⁵ This domestic focus can be found in the plots of much Golden Age crime fiction; for instance, Alison Light notes that in Christie’s narratives, ‘It is within the charmed circle of *insiders* that the criminal must be sought; the cuckoo in the nest, not the alien from outside’. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 94.

⁶ Kathy Mezei, ‘Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.2 (2007), p. 104.

1. Nonconforming Women as Detectives: Miss Climpson

When Dorothy L. Sayers's Miss Climpson first appeared in the novel *Unnatural Death* in 1927, the single female detective was not a new figure in the genre. W.S. Hayward's widow detective Mrs. Paschal in *The Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1861) and Anna Katherine Green's spinster Miss Amelia Butterworth in *That Affair Next Door* (1897) are just two early examples of single female characters who solve crimes.⁷ Miss Climpson, however, is the first of several recurring single female detective figures to appear in the work of women writers of Golden Age crime fiction. Though she does not get top billing in Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey novels, Miss Climpson nevertheless does a good deal of the active detecting when she is called in to assist Wimsey's investigations. Miss Climpson's first appearance in *Unnatural Death* is preceded by an ironic misunderstanding between Wimsey and his ally from Scotland Yard, Detective Inspector Parker; Wimsey takes Parker to meet Miss Climpson, 'a friend' who is 'quite comfortably fixed in a little flat in Pimlico'.⁸ Parker listens sympathetically and unwittingly as Wimsey explains:

Outlet – everybody needs an outlet...and, after all, one can't really blame people if it's just that they need an outlet. I mean, why be bitter? They can't help it. I think it's much kinder to give them an outlet than to make fun of them in books.⁹

Parker assumes that this 'friend' is Wimsey's mistress and that Wimsey is speaking of unsympathetic attitudes towards 'fallen' women. When Wimsey realises Parker's mistake, he chastises him, 'It is not what you think...There, I knew you had a nasty mind'.¹⁰ This misunderstanding is a reversal of the stereotypical assumption that spinsters 'police' others' sexual behaviour through their prudishness because they themselves are repressed

⁷ Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 15-51.

⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 24.

⁹ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 31.

and secretly obsessed with sex.¹¹ It also highlights a parallel between the lives of ‘chaste’ spinsters and those of ‘fallen’ women – for a single woman living alone, the boundary between society’s perceptions of the two types is potentially very thin.

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

All the employees were women – mostly elderly, but a few still young and attractive – and...all these women were of the class unkindly known as ‘superfluous’. There were spinsters with small fixed incomes, or no incomes at all; widows without family; women deserted by peripatetic husbands and living on a restricted alimony, who, previous to their engagement with Miss Climpson, had had no resources but bridge and boarding-house gossip. There were retired and disappointed school-teachers; out-of-work actresses; courageous people who had failed with hat shops and tea parlours; and even a few Bright Young Things, for whom the cocktail party and the nightclub had grown boring.¹²

It is worthwhile to note that this definition of ‘superfluous’ women includes single women of all ages and of varied experiences, not just spinsters of middle age or older who had ‘failed’ to find a husband. ‘Superfluous’ here denotes women who are not defined in relation to the patriarchal family, as wives and mothers, and so are marginalised. The variety of women employed by the Cattery, whether working out of financial necessity or boredom, reveals the need for a widened definition of acceptable roles for women outside the domestic sphere.

The women who work in the Cattery are enthusiastic when they find that they are to be private investigators instead of engaging in what they assumed was tedious typing work:

These women seemed to spend most of their time answering advertisements. Unmarried gentlemen who desired to meet ladies possessed of competences with a

¹¹ Walter Gallichan writes in his 1929 book *The Poison of Prudery* that ‘prudery arises as reinforcement of resistance against the forbidden thoughts, and the resistance may be so heightened that it becomes a pathological symptom’. Walter Gallichan, *The Poison of Prudery* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1929), p. 13, quoted in Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London: Pandora, 1985), p. 191.

¹² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 54.

view to matrimony; sprightly sexagenarians, who wanted housekeepers for remote country districts; ingenious gentlemen with financial schemes, on the look-out for capital...gentlemen such as these were very liable to receive applications from members of Miss Climpson's staff. It may have been coincidence that these gentlemen very often had the misfortune to appear shortly afterwards before the magistrate on charges of fraud, blackmail, or attempted procuration, but it is a fact that Miss Climpson's office boasted a private telephone line to Scotland Yard, and that few of her ladies were quite so unprotected as they appeared.¹³

The women of Miss Climpson's agency work to protect society from the threat of unscrupulous men who would prey on those who are desperate – in particular, on single women eager for employment, as they once were. Far from being dangerous to society, these women expose the menace of corrupt men who take advantage of those who are not allowed positions of power. For Miss Climpson and her fellow employees, suspicious sexual morality is characteristic of the men who target vulnerable single women, not the women themselves.

Since they are in Wimsey's employ, it could be argued that the women of the Cattery lack the authority that the detective figure must have in order credibly to investigate and solve the case. However, in their role as detectives, these women go where the primary detective, Wimsey, cannot. They are able to use the skills and resources available to them as single women – 'bridge and boarding-house gossip', for example – to gather the evidence that is vital to Wimsey's cases. Indeed, Catherine Kenney suggests that Miss Climpson and the women of her typing agency are actually more convincing than Wimsey as detectives, in spite of the fact that he holds the purse strings and thus has authority over them:

Lord Peter himself must wrestle with his amateur status as a crime-solver, but as his employee, Miss Climpson is unassailably professional, a privileged place indeed for a woman of her generation...By working for Wimsey, she and the other 'superfluous women' employed by the Cattery gain access to the hierarchical power structure of society, an access usually barred to their gender.¹⁴

¹³ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁴ Catherine Kenney, 'Detecting a Novel Use for Spinsters in Sayers's Fiction', in Laura L. Doan (ed.), *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 127.

Wimsey is essential to their enterprise because of the financial assets and social clout he throws behind the Cattery through which the women gain detective authority, but his investigations would often not be successful without the women he employs. Susan Rowland points out that because the crimes in Golden Age crime fiction frequently took place in the domestic setting of the home, often specifically ‘feminised practises in addition to legal processes’ are needed to solve the case:

Missing matches, a torn handkerchief, where a lonely female servant goes on her days off, a subtly changed domestic routine, are all characteristic clues to be decoded by a detective alert to gendered spheres of influence. Typically, only those male detectives most rooted in the gendered upper class need feminised subordinates to search for clues in female realms ‘foreign’ to them.¹⁵

Wimsey, most certainly of the upper class, recognises the advantages of employing female workers for tasks specific to detection:

People want questions asked. Whom do they send? A man with large flat feet and a notebook...I send a lady with a long, woolly jumper on knitting-needles and jingly things round her neck. Of course she asks questions – everyone expects it. Nobody is surprised. Nobody is alarmed. And so-called superfluity is agreeably and usefully disposed of.¹⁶

Wimsey’s argument points out the unique position women are in to gain information by manipulating expectations of their behaviour. Where a male police officer or Wimsey himself could not investigate without encountering alarm or reticence, a woman can easily navigate ‘undercover’ because of the assumption that her inquisitiveness is innate and not a professional tool employed to gather information. Therefore, the workers at the Cattery undermine negative stereotypes about women’s capacity for professionalism by using these expectations to achieve their professional ends and prove their usefulness to society.

Miss Climpson herself appears to be the stereotypical elderly spinster: extremely tidy, given to fluttering exclamations; deeply religious; and old-fashioned in her

¹⁵ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, p. 21.

¹⁶ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 32.

appearance. When Wimsey first brings Inspector Parker to meet her, Miss Climpson wears ‘a neat, dark coat and skirt, a high-necked blouse and a long gold chain with a variety of small ornaments dangling from it...and her iron-grey hair was dressed...in the style fashionable in the reign of the late King Edward’.¹⁷ However, some of Miss Climpson’s opinions are not quite as outdated as her appearance; she often draws attention to changing modern gender roles by stressing the limited opportunities that were available to women during her younger years. In *Strong Poison*, for example, Miss Climpson writes a letter to Wimsey containing a passage in which she describes arriving in the town where she will be conducting an investigation:

I had *no* difficulty in getting a comfortable room at the Station Hotel, *late* as it was. In the old days, an *unmarried* woman arriving *alone* at *midnight* with a *suitcase* would hardly have been considered *respectable* – what a wonderful difference one finds today! I am *grateful* to have lived to see such changes, because whatever old-fashioned people may say about the greater *decorum* and *modesty* of women in Queen Victoria’s time, those who can remember the old conditions know how *difficult* and *humiliating* they were!¹⁸

Miss Climpson’s description of the restrictions placed on single women in the past leaves no doubt as to her thoughts on the benefits of more relaxed, modern attitudes towards women’s behaviour. Though Miss Climpson is undeniably respectable in modern terms, the contrast she makes between modern and ‘old-fashioned’ ideas of respectability highlights the extent to which ideals have changed since her own youth. Miss Climpson frequently makes such comparisons by relating her misogynistic, ‘dear’ father’s opinions on ‘proper’ activities for a woman:

A dear old friend of mine used to say that I should make a very good lawyer...but of course, when I was young, girls didn’t have the education or the opportunities they get nowadays...I should have liked a good education, but my dear father didn’t believe in it for women. Very old-fashioned, you young people would think him.¹⁹

¹⁷ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 25.

¹⁸ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 190.

¹⁹ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 29.

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

In *Strong Poison*, Miss Climpson displays her skills to great effect. While in the village of Windle looking for an opportunity to enter the house of an old woman, Mrs. Wrayburn, whose will she must find and read, Miss Climpson uses sketching as an excuse for visiting the Lake District to her curious fellow-boarders: 'As girls we were *all* brought up to dabble a little in water-colours, so that I was able to display quite sufficient *technical knowledge* to satisfy them!'.²⁰ Her 'feminine' accomplishment allows Miss Climpson to stay in the small town without raising any suspicions about her real motives, and the specialised knowledge accumulated in boarding houses – where single women often lived – makes it possible for Miss Climpson to gain access to Mrs. Wrayburn's house. Miss Climpson even forges a friendship with Mrs. Wrayburn's nurse, Miss Booth, based on Miss Booth's interest in spiritualism, with which Miss Climpson is familiar:

If there was one subject in the world about which Miss Climpson might claim to know something, it was spiritualism. It is a flower which flourishes bravely in a boarding-house atmosphere. Time and again, Miss Climpson had listened while the apparatus of planes and controls, correspondences and veridical communications, astral bodies, auras, and ectoplasmic materialisations was displayed before her protesting intelligence...And then there had been that quaint little man from the Psychical Research Society...He had rather liked Miss Climpson, and she had passed several interesting evenings hearing about the tricks of mediums.²¹

The 'tricks' Miss Climpson learned in the boarding house allow her to rig the nurse's séances and provide an excuse – through 'summoning' the disembodied spirit of the dying

²⁰ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 192.

²¹ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 203.

Mrs. Wrayburn – to search for the will. Once the will is found, Miss Climpson secretly steams the envelope open:

It was not a long document, and, in spite of the legal phraseology, its purport was easily gathered...She put it in her petticoat-pocket – for her garments were of a useful and old-fashioned kind – and went to hunt in the pantry. When Miss Booth returned, she was making tea peacefully.²²

Miss Climpson effectively uses the most domestic of spaces – the kitchen – to unlock the legal document that will point to the murderer. Her ‘old-fashioned garments’ prove to be ‘useful’ in their capacity to conceal her detective activities, much like her ‘normal’ spinster occupations, gossip and spiritualism, have done. Miss Climpson may not be a lawyer, but her feminine skills allow her to take the law into her own hands – or into her petticoats – in ways a male detective could not have.

Though Miss Climpson uses her image as a conventional old woman to subvert stereotypes and consistently draws unfavourable comparisons between modern and old-fashioned mores, she also reflects the limits of modern attitudes in her own reactions to other single women. Miss Climpson is not portrayed as a stereotypically prudish spinster when it comes to heterosexual sexuality; when on the jury for Harriet Vane’s murder trial in *Strong Poison*, she does not assume Harriet is guilty simply because Harriet has lived with a lover, unlike the judge, a man ‘so old, he seemed to have outlived time and change and death’, who insinuates that Harriet is ‘a person of unstable moral character’ who has ‘become...corrupted by the unwholesome influences among which she lived’.²³ The judge represents the patriarchal ‘law’ that condemns Harriet before the trial is over – not necessarily for murder – but certainly for choosing to live outside the accepted paradigm of marriage. Miss Climpson, however, presents an alternative to this sort of law; through her unconventional methods she discovers the will that leads to the real murderer’s

²² Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 237.

²³ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, pp. 1-5.

motives and subsequently his capture. The justice Miss Climpson helps procure for Harriet Vane is both legal and moral, as Harriet ‘is discharged without a stain upon her character’.²⁴ Nevertheless, though Miss Climpson is willing to overlook Harriet Vane’s sexual indiscretions as well as, presumably, those of the variety of single women who work in the Cattery, she is somewhat less tolerant when it comes to the possibility of women having romantic relationships with each other. It is made clear that Miss Climpson is ‘a spinster made and not born – a perfectly womanly woman’.²⁵ This description, appearing in *Unnatural Death*, separates Miss Climpson from the novel’s villain, Mary Whittaker, who is associated with ‘dangerous’ lesbian sexuality.²⁶ Miss Climpson plays the detective figure’s regulatory role of upholding order by supporting traditional gender roles within sexual relationships, advising Vera Findlater, who is Mary Whittaker’s lover and her third murder victim, that close friendships between women can be harmful:

Love is always good, when it’s the *right kind*...I cannot help feeling that it is more natural – more proper, in a sense – for a man and woman to be all in all to one another than for two persons of the same sex.²⁷

Miss Climpson’s advice seems to be later proved correct when Vera is killed by the woman she loves, highlighting the perceived destructive power of lesbian sexuality. Though Miss Climpson is a nonconforming woman herself, she still polices social conduct, and in popular ideology of the time ‘natural’ behaviour is equated with what is ‘good’, ‘right’, and ‘proper’.

However, the novel’s other portrayals of nonconforming women present a more nuanced picture of lesbian sexuality. Mary Whittaker’s aunt, Agatha Dawson, is an elderly woman who lived for years with a former schoolmate, Clara Whittaker. The two women are implied to have had a happy romantic relationship for most of their lives until Clara

²⁴ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 280.

²⁵ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 186.

²⁶ Mary Whittaker and her crimes will be discussed further in Chapter V.

²⁷ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 191.

Whittaker's death. Interestingly, Miss Climpson, who was so disapproving of Vera Findlater's relationship with Mary Whittaker, is far more tolerant of the two older women. Clara Whittaker, a successful horse breeder, has left her money to Agatha Dawson upon her death, and Miss Climpson comments to Wimsey upon Clara's 'Passing over her *own family*, with whom she was *not on very good terms* – owing to the narrow-minded attitude they had taken up about her horse-dealing!!'.²⁸ Miss Climpson adds that Clara's nephew, who is Mary's father,

resented very much not getting the money...as he had kept up the feud in a very *un-Christian* manner, he had really *no right* to complain, especially as Clara had built up her fortune *entirely* by her own exertions. But, of course, he inherited the *bad, old-fashioned* idea that women *ought not* to be their own mistresses, or make money for themselves, or do what they liked with their own!²⁹

Miss Climpson judges Clara Whittaker's will to be absolutely justified in view of her family's unenlightened attitude towards her lifestyle and career. When it comes to matters of a woman's professional accomplishments, Miss Climpson is particularly liberal in her support of a woman's right to be self-supporting, condemning 'old-fashioned' mindsets about women's agency as 'bad'. Miss Climpson's ambivalence towards women's relationships with each other seems to have more to do with the issue of occupation than with anything else; while she describes Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson's relationship as working well because Clara Whittaker was devoted to her profession and Agatha Dawson was the more 'domestic partner', adept at running the household, Miss Climpson is doubtful about the younger women because of their plan to live together on a farm. She asks Vera, 'Won't you find it gets rather dull and lonely – just you two girls together?', and implies that 'outside interests' are needed in order to keep the relationship healthy.³⁰ In keeping with her modern sensibilities, Miss Climpson advocates a relationship that adheres to the ideal of a companionate marriage, irrespective of sexual orientation. Though Miss

²⁸ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 86.

²⁹ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 86.

³⁰ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, pp. 187, 190.

Climpson does explicitly express the wish that Vera will find a nice young man to settle down with, her main objections to the relationship between Vera and Mary are the emotional dependence shown by Vera and the inevitable strain that spending all their time together will have on the two women. While the relationship between Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson worked because both women were occupied with different interests, Miss Climpson perceives that the younger women's relationship will fail because one partner is unhealthily dependent upon the other. Even as Miss Climpson plays the detective's role in upholding heteronormative ideals, she is also not as conservative as she first appears, providing a way of revealing possibilities of agency available to modern women.

2. Nonconforming Women as Detectives: Miss Silver

In 1929, Patricia Wentworth's spinster detective Miss Silver debuted in the novel *Grey Mask*. Like Sayers's Miss Climpson, Miss Silver is a professional detective. Miss Silver differs from Miss Climpson, however, in that she is self-employed; her business does not have a wealthy financial backer but is kept afloat solely through Miss Silver's success. Kathleen Gregory Klein takes a positive view of Miss Silver's independence:

Miss Silver's attitude is strongly at odds with historical capitalistic tendencies to use women as a surplus labor force, taking them up when needed and discarding them when the need had passed. It also contradicts the widespread perception of spinsters as surplus women, half of a couple which never materialized. Valuing herself equally with the male-structured and controlled police force, Miss Silver is clearly a force to be reckoned with.³¹

In maintaining her own private investigative business, Miss Silver has an advantage over Miss Climpson, who must rely on Lord Peter Wimsey; Miss Silver's agency as a detective is self-derived. Shaw and Vanacker argue, however, that Miss Silver lacks the credibility

³¹ Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, 2nd edn. (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), pp. 140-41.

of other single female detectives because of the opacity of her investigative methods and the implausible nature of the novels' plots:

In quite impossible ways Miss Silver appears at the scene of the potential crime, guesses who is the murderer without explanation or rationale, and generally seems to belong more to the crude thriller than to the detective story of logic and deduction...Her spinsterish appearance is inconsistent with her sensational behaviour and also with the far-fetched plots of the novels she features in.³²

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

Miss Silver is similar to other spinster detectives like Miss Climpson and Agatha Christie's Miss Marple in that her life has provided her with skills that particularly suit her to investigative work; not only does she possess all the qualities of an elderly single woman that aid her in detection by allowing her to infiltrate private, domestic spaces without suspicion, but she is also a former governess, a role that gives her authority and often inspires reflexive obedience in those who might be assumed to have greater authority than she. In appearance, Miss Silver is 'a little person with no features, no complexion, and a great deal of tidy mouse-colored hair done in a bun at the back of her head'.³³ This description is elaborated in the next Miss Silver novel, *The Case is Closed* (1937):

³² Shaw and Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, p. 36.

³³ Patricia Wentworth, *Grey Mask* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p. 63.

However she had done her hair, it would have appeared, as she herself appeared, to be out of date. She was very neatly dressed in an unbecoming shade of drab. Her indeterminate features gave no indication of talent or character. Her smooth sallow skin was innocent of powder.³⁴

Like Miss Climpson, Miss Silver's old-fashioned, unassuming appearance is a mask that helps her keep her professional activities unremarked-upon.³⁵ Certainly, a governess would be expected to present a modest and low-profile professional veneer that would mask any hint of sexuality or of personal feelings, and Miss Silver's looks and demeanour are those of the governess she had been before moving on to detection.³⁶ Miss Silver's experiences as a governess aid her directly in her investigative efforts ('Prim and efficient as a governess in her own school-room, Miss Silver took command'), but on first encountering her, her clients tend to be disappointed with her unprepossessing appearance.³⁷ Nevertheless, she quickly relieves them of the suspicion that she might be anything less than competent; when Captain Henry Cunningham first visits Miss Silver's office, he 'wished with all his heart that he hadn't come'.³⁸ Before long, however, 'Henry found himself curiously impressed, he couldn't think why. There was nothing impressive about mouse-colored hair, indeterminate features, and a toneless voice. Yet Miss Silver impressed him'.³⁹ The schoolroom atmosphere Miss Silver's presence evokes can also be soothing and reassuring. When Rachel Treherne of *Lonesome Road* (1939) hesitates to tell Miss Silver about the attempts that have been made on her life,

³⁴ Patricia Wentworth, *The Case is Closed* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005), pp. 145-46.

³⁵ There is, however, an occasional glimpse of a more multifaceted personality behind the professional face; when Miss Silver expresses emotion, she seems like a 'different person' to her clients: 'Miss Silver smiled suddenly. The smile had the most extraordinary effect upon her face; it was just as if an expressionless mask had been lifted and a friendly, pleasant face had looked out behind it'. *Grey Mask*, p. 64.

³⁶ Shaw and Vanacker argue of the spinster detective: 'What better figure to choose to defend the innocent than the admonitory figure of childhood, of fairy-stories and the morality tale: the maiden aunt, the spinster schoolteacher, the wise woman of the village? Relieved of sexuality and undistracted by close emotional bonds, such a figure cannot but see things clearly and act impartially as an agent of moral law'. *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, p. 4.

³⁷ Patricia Wentworth, *Lonesome Road* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2007), p. 275.

³⁸ Wentworth, *The Case is Closed*, p. 146.

³⁹ Wentworth, *The Case is Closed*, pp. 148-49.

[Miss Silver] laid down her knitting...took a bright red exercise-book out of the top right-hand drawer, laid it open before her, dipped a pen, and wrote a careful heading. These actions had a curiously composing effect upon Miss Treherne. The calming influence of routine made itself felt...The book touched the schoolroom note again...By the time Miss Silver looked up she was ready with what she had to say.⁴⁰

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

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

The criminal is first of all 'one of us', someone who for nine-tenths of the novel must carry on seeming successfully to be just that...It is people 'one' knows who are potentially murderous, the most obvious 'types'. And it is not physical disguise so much as psychological disguise which is potentially pathological. The most innocent (the least likely) person may turn out to be the criminal, the obvious deviant and degenerate are frequently red herrings: the criminal classes are not the ones to fear.⁴¹

This analysis is particularly apt when applied to *Grey Mask*; the novel begins with the obvious infiltration of the criminal into the domestic space when Charles Moray returns to his empty family home after a long absence to find it has become a meeting place for a

⁴⁰ Wentworth, *Lonesome Road*, p. 10.

⁴¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 94.

mysterious criminal organisation. The head of the organisation is not seen by his subordinates and goes by the name Grey Mask. Charles and his former fiancée Margaret try to help a young heiress who is a target of Grey Mask (and who turns out to be Margaret's long-lost cousin) and at the climax of the novel discover that Grey Mask, the criminal mastermind, is none other than Margaret's cheerful, bumbling stepfather Freddy. When Freddy reveals his identity, Margaret is stunned:

[Her] hands had fallen on the back of the chair by which she stood. It was a heavy mahogany chair with an old-fashioned horse-hair seat. Her hands closed on the smooth mahogany in the hard grip that felt nothing. The pillars of her house had fallen.⁴²

Margaret's physical reaction to Freddy's betrayal, trying to grip onto a piece of furniture yet 'feeling nothing', reflects the chaos her seemingly stable family life ('the pillars of her house') has been thrown into by Freddy's confession. Freddy tells Margaret,

It will save trouble if you will realise that you are not dealing with an amiable stepfather who has suddenly gone mad, but with a man of intelligence who has built up a most successful business and is prepared to remove anyone who endangers it.⁴³

Freddy's 'psychological disguise' as a kindly, dim father figure allows him to establish 'a most successful' criminal enterprise from inside the domestic circle. The idea of danger coming from within the supposed safety of an enclosed community is a common theme in crime fiction; Kathy Mezei points out that:

The secretive elements that motivate so many detective novels are not merely the usual threat to the status quo and moral order from the outside (urbanization, modernization, the foreigner or stranger), but the uncannier, more disturbing threat from the inside.⁴⁴

Freddy again uses the domestic space to mask his crimes when he encloses Charles and his stepdaughter in the cellar of Margaret's childhood home to die of suffocation. It is Miss Silver who saves Charles and Margaret, as she and Charles's friend Archie go to the airless

⁴² Wentworth, *Grey Mask*, p. 243.

⁴³ Wentworth, *Grey Mask*, p. 245.

⁴⁴ Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech', p. 110.

wine cellar, where ‘Miss Silver proceed[s] to give him expert advice as to lock-breaking’.⁴⁵ Miss Silver’s successful lock-breaking and rescue of Charles and Margaret from the suffocating power of the family home reflects her power as a detective to restore order to the damaged domestic sphere, often through a reconfiguration of the family unit. After deposing the corrupt patriarch, the family is left to be re-formed by the young couple who will inevitably marry.⁴⁶

The couples which find love at the end of many of Wentworth’s Miss Silver novels could be seen to represent the restoration of heteronormative order after the disturbing events of murder or other crimes have upset the moral balance. However, this would be too simplistic a reading of the Miss Silver novels; though they frequently end in marriage, they do not necessarily glorify the concept of the traditional, patriarchal family. Stephen Knight’s observations about Agatha Christie’s resolutions can be applied to many works of Golden Age crime fiction, including the Miss Silver narratives: ‘Many...stories end not with the solution to the problem but a final linking of two lonely lovers...a new family order can rise from the family disturbed by murder; it has a healing, renovating effect’.⁴⁷ In these narratives, the marriage plot does not necessarily reaffirm the strength of traditional family bonds but signals the formation of a new, modern family unit. The newly created family is shown to stem from choice, thereby making room for women’s agency; the original family is either irredeemably broken or an unbearable burden to its members. In *Lonesome Road*, Rachel Treherne is the administrator of her wealthy father’s estate, and as such she is constantly besieged by her avaricious relations. Rachel is more mature than the

⁴⁵ Wentworth, *Grey Mask*, p. 266.

⁴⁶ Cadogan and Craig argue that: ‘Miss Silver...is excused the basic feminine role because she has a part to play in confounding the disruptive elements in society...she is just sufficiently eccentric to appear quaint when she is not being authoritative; in another type of fiction the qualities would have denoted hopeless conservatism or blandness. Miss Silver’s age and disposition exempt her from the need to seek, on her own behalf, a sentimental solution. Patricia Wentworth is careful, however, to place a young romantic couple at the centre of each of her plots; charming girls and upright young men form honourable alliances in story after story’. *The Lady Investigates*, p. 177.

⁴⁷ Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 116.

heroines of the previous Miss Silver novels; she is a single woman in her late thirties, but she does have ‘good carriage, good skin, good eyes, good hair’, and it is made clear that she is unmarried not because she does not have the inclination but because she is ‘much, much too busy’ with tending to the charity she has established in her father’s name.⁴⁸ Though Rachel is supremely capable in her performance of the tasks required by her role, the emotional toll it takes on her casts doubt on her ‘suitability’, as a woman, to handle the demands of managing her father’s fortune. Her family is an enormous drain on her time and energy, and inheriting her father’s position as ‘head of the family’ is shown to be detrimental to Rachel’s personal fulfillment:

Rachel Treherne went to her room with a tired and heavy heart. The thought of going to bed and forgetting all about the family for seven or eight hours was a pleasant one, but on the other side of the night there would be another day, in which she foresaw an interview with Ernest, several interviews with Mabel, a talk with Maurice, a talk with Cherry, a talk with Caroline.⁴⁹

When it becomes clear that one of the family desires Rachel’s death, this disruption to her ‘normal’ family life becomes a catalyst for change. Rachel calls in Miss Silver to investigate and establishes her as a houseguest who is a retired governess. Miss Silver, the governess figure, is once again the outsider who is able to penetrate the corrupt domestic circle. Rachel also meets and falls in love with Gale Brandon, an American who befriends her and then saves her after an assailant tries to push her off a cliff. The destructive power of the family is made explicit in the contrast between Gale and Cosmo Frith, the cousin who is in love with Rachel but who is revealed to be her attempted murderer. Rachel’s marriage to Gale is depicted as a choice that allows her to construct her own alternative to the hereditary family, which is shown to be destructive, threatening, and untrustworthy. But it also lifts the burden of patriarchal inheritance from Rachel’s shoulders, relieving her of the pressure of occupying her father’s role. Miss Silver restores order by providing a

⁴⁸ Wentworth, *Lonesome Road*, pp. 5, 32.

⁴⁹ Wentworth, *Lonesome Road*, p.56.

solution to the case and encouraging the match between Rachel and Gale, and though this resolution is conservative, it is still modern in that it has brought about the abandonment of the patriarchal family in favour of a model based on choice and personal fulfillment.⁵⁰

3. Nonconforming Women as Detectives: Miss Marple

The best-known of the Golden Age spinster detectives, Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple, first appeared in *The Murder at the Vicarage* in 1930 – after both Sayers's Miss Climpson (1927) and Wentworth's Miss Silver (1929). Like Miss Climpson and Miss Silver, Miss Marple is an older unmarried woman and possesses all the skills that particularly suit these women for detection. Miss Marple has lived all her life in St Mary Mead and her lack of experiences outside village life has not impaired her ability to judge human nature, but honed it. Miss Marple takes pleasure in observing human behaviour for the purpose of solving puzzles; in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, she explains:

Living alone, as I do, in a rather out-of-the-way part of the world, one has to have a hobby. There is, of course, woolwork, and Guides, and Welfare, and sketching, but my hobby is – and always has been – Human Nature...And, of course, in a small village, with nothing to distract one, one has such ample opportunity for becoming what I might call proficient in one's study. One begins to class people...just as though they were birds or flowers...And then, too, one tests oneself. One takes a little problem...a quite unimportant mystery but absolutely incomprehensible unless one solves it right...It is so fascinating, you know, to apply one's judgment and find that one is right.⁵¹

Miss Marple equates her aptitude for observation and deduction with the typical hobbies of spinsters, validating those interests that are ordinarily dismissed with her ability to apply her skills to the solving of crimes. The vicar of St Mary Mead observes, 'Not only does [Miss Marple] see and hear practically everything that goes on, but she draws amazingly

⁵⁰ The problematic nature of the marriage plot and how such plots are used in Golden Age crime fiction to renegotiate traditional gender roles recognised in the typical heterosexual romance will be discussed in depth in Chapters III and IV.

⁵¹ Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1986), p. 191.

neat and apposite deductions from the facts that come under her notice'.⁵² Miss Marple's proficiency in detection earns the respect of figures who are traditionally representative of patriarchal authority, such as the vicar and Sir Henry Clithering, Ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard and 'one of the best brains in England'.⁵³ Her unerring powers of observation are contrasted with her appearance as a 'white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner' and her hesitating, self-deprecating way of speaking when she is drawing her razor-sharp conclusions.⁵⁴ Merja Makinen observes that:

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.⁵⁵

Kathy Mezei notes the irony revealed in the disparity between Miss Marple's reluctant style of speaking and what she is actually saying:

Miss Marple disguises her astute observations and gentle but firm interventions in the search for the murderer through a veil of self-deprecating adverbs...The clichés of deferential speech – 'quite', 'so', 'just', and the question 'is it not?' – camouflage the shrewdness of her comments.⁵⁶

Because she is usually addressing the men who are supposedly in authority or younger people who are prepared to ridicule her when she is making her observations – though she is almost invariably correct where others are mistaken – Miss Marple's hesitation, fluttering and dithering exaggerate the stereotypical traits of an elderly woman. This hyperbolic performance ironically subverts ageist dismissals of the older women's agency through the humorous contrast of Miss Marple's accurate deductions with the ignorance of those around her.

⁵² Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 190.

⁵³ Agatha Christie, 'Death by Drowning', *The Thirteen Problems* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988), p. 205.

⁵⁴ Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 14.

⁵⁵ Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 58.

⁵⁶ Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech', pp. 109-10.

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

Talking scandal, as you say – well, it *is* done a good deal. And people are very down on it – especially young people...But what I say is that none of these young people ever stop to *think*. They really don't examine the facts. Surely the whole crux of the matter is this: *How often is tittle-tattle, as you call it, true!*...It's really a matter of practice and experience. An Egyptologist...if you show him one of those curious little beetles, can tell you by the look and the feel of the thing what date BC it is, or if it's a Birmingham imitation. And he can't always give a definite rule for doing so. He just *knows*...What my nephew calls 'superfluous women' have a lot of time on their hands, and their chief interest is usually *people*. And so, you see, they get to be what one might call *experts*.⁵⁷

In this passage, Miss Marple defends a knowledge of human nature gained through a lifetime of gossiping as being akin to the professional knowledge accumulated through a career's worth of practice. In doing so, she validates the activities of 'superfluous women' as being worthwhile, contrary to the ridicule of young people like her nephew who view gossip as a harmful and silly pastime. She also points out that when elderly women gossip they are 'thinking' and 'examining facts', not merely accepting what they are told at face value.

Even though her own behaviour subverts gender stereotypes, Miss Marple is, like other detectives, limited to the detective figure's role as restorer of the status quo after the disruption of murder. In Kathy Mezei's words, she 'outwit[s] established patriarchal authority without unduly threatening it'.⁵⁸ Shaw and Vanacker also maintain that:

Although in becoming a successful sleuth Miss Marple subverts the 'spinster' category by which society seeks to diminish and trivialize her, the role of the

⁵⁷ Agatha Christie, 'A Christmas Tragedy', *The Thirteen Problems* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins), pp. 148-49.

⁵⁸ Mezei, 'Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech', p. 105.

detective she assumes is...to protect and stabilize that society and its structures of patrilineal inheritance and property-ownership which have always borne most heavily against the single woman.⁵⁹

Though it is true that Miss Marple restores order to the society that would constantly underestimate her and devalue the abilities that allow her to play the detective role, it is not a given that society will fall back into the established order after such a significant disturbance. As in Wentworth's Miss Silver novels, the danger is often shown to come from within the family, and after the spinster in her unique position as both insider and outsider resolves the threat, the broken family circle does not form again in the same way. In *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), the patriarch of a well-to-do family in the community is murdered and Miss Marple uncovers the killer. However, these circumstances do not by any means simply reestablish a hypothetical peaceful ideal that existed before the murder. The victim, Colonel Protheroe, is an unpleasant, verbally abusive man who is universally loathed, and his murder does not unduly sadden anyone in the community or even in his immediate family. During the investigation, many of the suspects are shown to be nonconforming women in the sense that they refuse to adapt to the roles assigned to them in the patriarchal family. These women include: Lettice Protheroe, the deceased Colonel's daughter, who is described as 'completely vague' but is actually concealing considerable sharpness behind her mask of ennui; Anne Protheroe, Lettice's stepmother, 'a quiet, self-contained woman whom one would not suspect of any great depths of feeling', who is actually having a passionate affair with a young artist; and Mrs. Lestrangle, a newcomer to St Mary Mead whose very name hints at her status as an outsider and who is described as '[having] all the ease of manner of a well-bred woman, and yet there was something about her that was incongruous and baffling'.⁶⁰ For all these women, traditional heterosexual relationships and the patriarchal family are shown to be

⁵⁹ Shaw and Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, pp. 11, 24, 20.

destructive and emotionally devastating. Lettice Protheroe dislikes her father and hates her stepmother for marrying her father and for having an affair with Lawrence Redding, the artist Lettice herself has fallen in love with; Lettice also breaks the heart of young Dennis, the vicar's nephew. Anne Protheroe is unhappy with her obnoxious husband and is persuaded by her lover to kill him for the inheritance rather than obtain a divorce. Mrs. Lestrangle is revealed to be Lettice's mother, the Colonel's former wife, who has a terminal illness and came to St Mary Mead to see Lettice before she dies, though the Colonel forbids it. In their rebellion against the patriarchal family, these women find agency – though it leads to exile for Lettice and Mrs. Lestrangle and destruction for Anne Protheroe, as she is executed for her husband's murder.

The novel ends with a seemingly reassuring return to order when the vicar's flighty wife, Griselda, tells him that she is going to have a baby and be a 'real "wife and mother" (as they say in books)'.⁶¹ That this ending is an affirmation of the patriarchal family is a questionable point – even as Griselda announces her intention to take part in the 'cult of domesticity' by reading popular guides on 'Household Management' and 'Mother Love', she adds that 'They are all simply screamingly funny – not intentionally, you know'.⁶² In using humour to deflate the notion of 'turning women out a pattern', the ideal of perfectly conforming motherhood forced on women is subverted.⁶³ This is not the only family that is re-formed at the end of the novel, as Lettice and her mother, Mrs. Lestrangle, are reunited and plan to leave St Mary Mead together now that the Colonel is dead and cannot prevent it. Lettice tells the vicar: 'It's queer. She and I belong to each other. Father and I didn't'.⁶⁴ This 'queer' new family, in Lettice's view, is the family that always should have been – the destruction of the patriarch enables the formation of a new family unit that, while

⁶¹ Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 220.

⁶² Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 220.

⁶³ Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 220.

⁶⁴ Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, p. 219.

perhaps differing from conventional definitions of ‘the family’, creates more space for agency because it frees Lettice to live where she ‘belongs’ and allows her to drop the lethargic act she had cultivated to hide her thoughts when she was in her father’s house. Certainly, a kind of order is restored with the formation of new families at the conclusion of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, but it is not the same order that existed in the community at the novel’s beginning. The murder of the patriarch by his wife exposes the potential for anxiety in the private relations of the domestic sphere and clears the way for a more expansive reworking of definitions of the family.

4. Nonconforming Women as Detectives: Mrs. Bradley

Mrs. Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, a thrice-widowed trained psychologist, first appeared in 1929 in *Speedy Death*. Though not a spinster like Miss Climpson, Miss Silver and Miss Marple, Mrs. Bradley is still an elderly, single female detective who subverts expectations associated with her age and sex. In appearance, she is frequently described as avian or reptilian by those who know her:

Mrs. Bradley was dry without being shrivelled, and bird-like without being pretty. She reminded Alistair Bing, who was afraid of her, of the reconstruction of a pterodactyl he had once seen...There was the same inhuman malignancy in her expression as in that of the defunct bird, and, like it, she had a cynical smirk about her mouth even when her face was in repose. She possessed nasty, dry, claw-like hands, and her arms, yellow and curiously repulsive, suggested the plucked wings of a fowl.⁶⁵

Mrs. Bradley is a caricature of elderly women, who are conventionally seen as non-threatening. The ‘bird-like’ nature of her appearance is not small, sweet, and fluttery, however, as an elderly woman described in such terms might be assumed to be. Her voice, though pleasant, further discomfits those around her in spite of its attractive quality:

Strange to say, her voice belied her appearance, for, instead of the birdlike twitter one might have expected to hear issuing from those beaked lips, her utterance was

⁶⁵ Gladys Mitchell, *Speedy Death* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 11.

low, mellifluous, and slightly drawled; unctuous, rich, and reminiscent of dark, smooth treacle.⁶⁶

The disparity between Mrs. Bradley's voice and her appearance is an indication of her 'strangeness'; though a 'dry' old woman, her voice – like 'dark, smooth treacle' – suggests the potential for sensuality. The words she speaks are also jarring to her audience, providing another inconsistency between the expected and the actual; the first time she speaks in *Speedy Death*, the guests at a house party are speculating about why one of their members has not yet emerged from the bathroom for dinner.⁶⁷ When Mrs. Bradley finally speaks, it is to remark – 'graciously and with quiet relish' – 'I remember that a friend of my own fainted in the bath some four years ago...She was drowned'.⁶⁸ To make such a comment with her pleasant voice, and in an attitude with which one might contribute an observation about the weather, again marks Mrs. Bradley as out-of-the-ordinary; her behaviour and her conversation are incongruous with those of a stereotypical elderly widow.

Mrs. Bradley can often be seen as a parody of conventional old ladies; for example, when she knits, as Cadogan and Craig have pointed out, 'There is nothing homely or endearing about Mrs. Bradley's finished woolen articles'.⁶⁹ Her shoddy knitting satirises one of the traditional habits of the elderly woman detective and also pokes fun at conventionally 'feminine' pastimes.⁷⁰ Though Mrs. Bradley shares with other elderly women detectives particular abilities that suit them to play the role (such as the benefit of being able to gossip freely in all social spheres without provoking suspicion), she has another advantage: as a psychologist, she has additional insight into human nature and

⁶⁶ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 13.

⁶⁷ The plot of *Speedy Death* will be discussed further in Chapter V.

⁶⁸ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 13.

⁶⁹ Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 179.

⁷⁰ Knitting, particularly in Miss Silver's case, is often a useful way for other elderly women detectives to stimulate thought (in the manner of Sherlock Holmes's pipe and violin) and to calm those around them with the expected and comforting spectacle of an elderly woman performing a familiar task.

often uses this to unmask the criminal. Though she is not a career detective like Miss Climpson or Miss Silver, her profession qualifies her to observe and make accurate deductions from and about human behaviour. In the pattern of Miss Climpson's patronage by Lord Peter Wimsey, Miss Silver's status as a former governess, and Miss Marple's self-declared standing as an 'expert' in human nature, Mrs. Bradley's professional position also allows her to operate as an alternative to patriarchal law and administer her own forms of justice. She explains her attitude towards detection in *Speedy Death*: 'I accuse no one...I know what I know, and I deduce what I deduce. But accusation – that is not my business. I am a psychologist, not a police-woman'.⁷¹ Though Mrs. Bradley may not always 'accuse' in a public setting, she occasionally metes out her own justice if she thinks that the punishment society will assign to the crime does not fit the individual circumstances of the criminal.⁷² For example, in *Death at the Opera* (1934), Mrs. Bradley discovers that the murderer is a very elderly former actress who has killed a teacher acting in a school play because she wanted to see the part played by someone more talented. Instead of exposing her to the police, Mrs. Bradley writes her a letter admiring a murder committed for artistic scruples alone. Another example occurs in *The Saltmarsh Murders* (1932), when Mrs. Bradley provokes a heart attack in an insane woman rather than have her arrested and put to trial. However, the most subversive instance of Mrs. Bradley's unique administration of justice takes place in the first novel of the series, *Speedy Death* (1929), in which the detective becomes a murderer herself, upsetting traditional notions of the detective figure

⁷¹ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 21.

⁷² This means of rethinking justice and the law is also seen in other crime narratives; for example, as will be discussed in Chapter IV, Miss Pym of Josephine Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946) also decides to 'punish' the 'criminal' on her own, instead of turning her over to be dealt with by the official justice system. Such actions are not, of course, limited to women detectives, or even to 'Golden Age' detectives – from Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in 'The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton' (1904) to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1939), detective figures have been depicted as deeming themselves better equipped to oversee the dispensing of justice than the institutions that have been appointed by society to do so.

as a stabilising force.⁷³ In this way, Mrs. Bradley can still serve the purpose of restoring order, but, in doing so, she often transgresses the law herself, providing resolutions that disturb order even as they establish it.

5. Nonconforming Women as Victims and Villains: *Overture to Death and Murder Is Easy*

The single women detective figures are ambivalent in that they use their surveillance skills to police social order, yet they also destabilise stereotypes by repeatedly showing the value of ‘superfluous’ women. When single women characters are employed as villains and victims, however, these depictions become far more negative. Ngaio Marsh’s novel *Overture to Death* (1939) demonstrates several cultural stereotypes about single women, most notably the repressed spinster, but also the unscrupulous, manipulative, sexually promiscuous divorcée and the ‘wild’ (yet still marriageable because of her youth and lack of sexual experience) young woman, revealing deep-seated cultural anxieties about women’s sexuality. *Overture to Death* takes place in a classic enclosed setting, in this case, a rural village. The pool of suspects is narrowed even more by the discovery that the murder of Miss Campanula, a middle-aged spinster with a forceful personality, was probably committed by one of a small cast of a play acted by local celebrities. The suspects include such types as the local squire, the vicar, the doctor, the mysterious stranger just moved to the village, the young couple, and the (other) spinster. The single women in *Overture to Death* are not portrayed in flattering terms. Idris Campanula and Eleanor Prentice are two prominent spinsters in the village who engage in vicious gossip and compete with each other for domination in the parish’s various societies and charitable groups. Before Miss Campanula’s death, the only front on which she and Miss Prentice are

⁷³ *Speedy Death*’s multiple killers and victims will be discussed in relation to the woman’s body in Chapter V.

united is in their dislike for Mrs. Ross, the new woman in town who is having an affair with the local physician, Dr Templett. A single woman in her late thirties, Mrs. Ross is described as extremely attractive, but, like the spinsters' celibacy, her sexual freedom is not depicted as positive. Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula gossip about her savagely, and she is later revealed to be a professional blackmailer. As an adulteress, she does not conform to the dictates of socially acceptable feminine sexuality, and so she must be contained, in this case through the law when she is arrested. One example of the antipathy that exists towards Mrs. Ross appears when she congratulates Dinah, the rector's daughter, on her appointment as the producer of the play:

But somehow Dinah didn't quite want Mrs. Ross so frankly on her side. She was aware in herself of a strong antagonism to Mrs. Ross and this discovery surprised and confused her, because she believed herself to be a rebel. As a rebel, she should have applauded Selia Ross.⁷⁴

Dinah's desire to be nonconforming is undone by her own potential as a young, marriageable woman: her position as half of the novel's perfunctory young couple prevents her from being actually nonconforming and from accepting Mrs. Ross as an ally. This is not the only instance of antagonism among women in the novel. In fact, there are virtually no meaningful connections between women in *Overture to Death*, even between Miss Prentice and Miss Campanula, who are ostensibly friends:

[Miss Campanula] was supposed to be Eleanor Prentice's great friend. Their alliance was based on mutual antipathies and interests. Each adored scandal and each cloaked her passion in a mantle of conscious rectitude. Neither trusted the other an inch, but there was no doubt that they enjoyed each other's company.⁷⁵

Unlike in other crime novels featuring spinsters using their penchant for gossip as a productive tool, the spinsters in *Overture to Death* use scandal as a destructive force against each other and the people of the community. The depiction of female friendship

⁷⁴ Ngaio Marsh, *Overture to Death* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1962), p. 36.

⁷⁵ Marsh, *Overture to Death*, p. 16.

here is not a positive one – just how negative it is becomes clear when it is revealed that Miss Prentice is Miss Campanula's murderer.

Dr Templett describes Miss Campanula as: 'starved and repressed and hung about with a mass of shibboleths and Victorian conversation...here she's stayed for the last twenty years, living on rich food, good works and local scandal'.⁷⁶ Miss Prentice is depicted in similarly uncomplimentary terms; her nephew Henry complains to his father:

She is an ageing spinster cousin of the worst type...She's an avid woman. She was in love with you until she found it was a hopeless proposition. Now she and...Campanula are rivals for the rector. Dinah says all old maids fall in love with her father. Everybody sees it. It's a recognised phenomenon with women of Eleanor's and Idris Campanula's type.⁷⁷

Laura L. Doan argues that the 'spinster's challenge to domestic hegemony impels the creation of a stereotype to deny the embodied threat',⁷⁸ and both Henry and Dinah have reasons for seeing Miss Campanula and Miss Prentice as threatening: for Henry, Miss Prentice has already tried to take his mother's place by marrying his father, and when she does not succeed settles in as a substitute for the squire's wife, 'the first lady of the district';⁷⁹ for Dinah, both women are vying for her father's attentions and so the position of being her stepmother. Dinah and Henry recall the stereotype of the neurotic, repressed spinster to control and neutralise the danger to their respective family circles, but instead of being proved wrong, their fears about the two spinsters are violently realised.

For both women, repressed desire is seen to exhibit as sexual obsession disguised as religious mania. When Detective-Inspector Fox tells Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn about his conversation with Miss Campanula's maid, he relates, 'Well, Mr. Alleyn, to Mary's way of thinking, Miss C. was a bit queer on the subject of Mr. Copeland. Potty on

⁷⁶ Marsh, *Overture to Death*, p. 81.

⁷⁷ Marsh, *Overture to Death*, pp. 11-12.

⁷⁸ Laura L. Doan, 'Introduction', in Laura L. Doan (ed.), *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 6.

⁷⁹ Marsh, *Overture to Death*, p. 11.

him is the way Mary puts it'.⁸⁰ Miss Campanula's sexual desire is seen as odd because she is an older, unmarried woman in love with a man who does not view her as having sexual potential. Her desire is pathologised as verging on a mental disturbance. Miss Prentice is described as being even more unbalanced than Miss Campanula:

I may as well tell you, Mr. Alleyn, that in Henry's and my opinion Miss Prentice is practically ravers. It's a well-known phenomenon with old maids. She's tried to sublimate her natural appetites and...work them off in religion...And it's been a failure. She's only repressed and repressed.⁸¹

Miss Prentice murders Miss Campanula out of sexual jealousy after she thinks she sees Miss Campanula and the rector in a compromising position. Alleyn comments that Miss Prentice 'fell a prey to whatever furies visit a woman whose ageing heart is set on one man and whose nerves, desires and thoughts have been concentrated on the achievement of her hope'.⁸² Alleyn also notes that she is not 'completely dotty': 'The dottiness has appeared since Saturday night. She's probably extremely neurotic. Unbalanced, hysterical, all that. In law, insanity is very closely defined. Her counsel will probably go for moral depravity, delusion, or hallucination'.⁸³ Both the killer and her victim are seen as unbalanced because of their unbecoming sexual desire, and these psychological issues are almost viewed as natural reactions to being 'sexually repressed'. Alleyn's implication that Miss Prentice's mental problems will not be recognised as 'insanity' in court suggests the familiarity of the stereotype of a 'hysterical', unbalanced spinster. With its normalisation of pathological behaviour stemming from repressed sexuality, its negative view of women's friendships, as well as its unflattering portrayal of the sexually promiscuous Mrs. Ross, *Overture to Death* represents the confirmation of the public's worst fears about unmarried women. With 'rebel' Dinah's marriage to Henry, the novel's remaining single woman is contained, and heteronormative order is firmly established.

⁸⁰ Marsh, *Overture to Death*, p. 144.

⁸¹ Marsh, *Overture to Death*, p. 153.

⁸² Marsh, *Overture to Death*, p. 253.

⁸³ Marsh, *Overture to Death*, p. 251.

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

The stereotype of the spinster detective is evoked from the beginning of the novel, when former policeman Luke Fitzwilliam meets a talkative old lady, Miss Pinkerton, on a train to London. Miss Pinkerton, whose name clearly implies her detective potential, is on her way to Scotland Yard to report her suspicion that several people who have recently died in the village of Wychwood-under-Ashe have actually been murdered. Luke decides to humour Miss Pinkerton when she begins to talk to him, reflecting that 'there was something very cosy and English about old ladies like this old lady...They could be classed with plum pudding on Christmas Day and village cricket and open fireplaces with wood fires'.⁸⁴ Miss Pinkerton's embodiment of the quintessential elderly English lady at first leads Luke to doubt what she is saying even as he listens indulgently: 'I wonder why they get these fancies? Deadly dull lives, I suppose – an unacknowledged craving for

⁸⁴ Agatha Christie, *Murder is Easy* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 14.

drama. Some old ladies, so I've heard, fancy every one is poisoning their food'.⁸⁵ Ironically, it is only after Miss Pinkerton, the obvious spinster detective figure, is run down by a car on her way to Scotland Yard, becoming a victim herself, that Luke changes his mind about her credibility, completely revising his assessment of the opinions of elderly ladies to reflect the typical description of the spinster detective. Luke compares Miss Pinkerton to his Aunt Mildred, another clever, elderly spinster:

What old ladies fancy they see is very often right. My Aunt Mildred was positively uncanny!...Every man should have aunts. They illustrate the triumph of guesswork over logic. It is reserved for aunts to *know* that Mr A. is a rogue because he looks like a dishonest butler they once had. Other people say reasonably enough that a respectable man like Mr A. couldn't be a crook. The old ladies are right every time.⁸⁶

After Miss Pinkerton becomes a possible victim of murder, Luke seems to assume the mantle of detective figure. He goes to Wychwood-under-Ashe to investigate, arranging to stay with a cousin of a friend, Bridget Conway, who is the former secretary and now-fiancée of Lord Whitfield, a newspaper magnate. Like Miss Pinkerton, Bridget complicates the label of 'Englishness' that Luke assigns to her before he has met her. Luke compares Bridget to the ideal of English womanhood he had planned to seek out when he returned to England after his retirement from police work abroad:

He had had an acknowledged picture at the back of his mind during his voyage home to England – a picture of an English girl flushed and sunburnt...It had been a warm gracious vision...Now- he didn't know if he liked Bridget Conway or not – but he knew that that secret picture wavered and broke up – became meaningless and foolish.⁸⁷

A dark-haired, clever career woman, Bridget Conway does not fit the image of Luke's fantasy of pastoral English womanhood; before meeting her, Luke imagines that Bridget is 'a little blonde secretary person – astute enough to have captured a rich man's fancy'.⁸⁸ However, Bridget is not just a gold-digger who uses her sexuality to catch a rich man – she

⁸⁵ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 170.

⁸⁷ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, pp. 29-30.

⁸⁸ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 40.

is extremely good at her job, and she has ‘force, brains’, and ‘a cool clear intelligence’.⁸⁹

Bridget also has a very definite idea about what her marriage to Lord Whitfield will be like:

I’m a young woman with a certain amount of intelligence, very moderate looks, and no money. I intend to earn an honest living. My job as Gordon’s wife will be practically indistinguishable from my job as Gordon’s secretary. After a year I doubt if he’ll remember to kiss me good night. The only difference is in the salary.⁹⁰

Though she and Luke become the novel’s token couple, Bridget’s pragmatism sets her apart from the conventional romantic heroine. Her notion of marriage as simply a continuation of her secretarial career, except with a higher salary, puts the concept of marrying for money into a modern framework.

Even though Bridget is the romantic interest of two men, she is still grouped with the village’s other spinsters, as her sexuality is constantly alluded to as being threatening beyond what might be expected for a young, marriageable woman. Luke repeatedly calls Bridget a ‘witch’, at one point telling her ‘You’ve bewitched me. I’ve a feeling that if you pointed your finger at me and said: “Turn into a frog,” I’d go hopping away with my eyes popping out of my head’.⁹¹ The village of Wychwood-under-Ashe itself is suggestive of stereotypes about spinsters: Luke’s impression of the village is that it is ‘singularly unspoilt by recent developments...It seemed singularly remote, strangely untouched’; and the village is also ‘One of the last places where they had a Witches’ Sabbath – witches were still burnt there in the last century’.⁹² These descriptions of Wychwood-under-Ashe evoke typical images of single women – that they both lack sexual experience and are at the same time dangerous because they do not conform to the paradigm of wife- and motherhood. Even the village’s demographic matches its description; when Luke asks

⁸⁹ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 40.

⁹⁰ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 113.

⁹¹ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 115.

⁹² Christie, *Murder is Easy*, pp. 28, 26.

what sort of people live there, Bridget replies: ‘Relicts, mostly...Clergymen’s daughters and sisters and wives. Doctors’ dittoes. About six women to every man’.⁹³ Miss Honoria Waynflete is one of the village’s typical ‘relicts’; she is ‘completely the country spinster...Her face was pleasant and her eyes, through their pince-nez, decidedly intelligent’.⁹⁴ Though Luke is ostensibly the novel’s detective figure, he learns that Bridget and Miss Waynflete both seem to have been acting in a detective capacity before his arrival in the village. Bridget describes to Luke how Miss Waynflete, who is ‘quite intelligent’, shares her suspicion that Amy Gibbs, a local domestic servant who has recently died from ‘accidentally’ drinking red hat paint, was actually murdered, since the presence of red hat paint in Amy’s room was in itself suspicious: ‘You wouldn’t wear a scarlet hat with carrotty hair. It’s the sort of thing a man wouldn’t realize’.⁹⁵ Bridget’s observation places her in the position of detective figure along with elderly spinsters Miss Pinkerton and Miss Waynflete, while the ‘official’ investigator, Luke, has overlooked a vital clue that is the key to the real murderer’s identity: as Miss Pinkerton relates her misgiving to Luke on the train that someone in the village is a killer, she remarks, ‘And you see, the person in question is just the last person any one *would* suspect!’.⁹⁶ Though Miss Pinkerton refers to the killer as a ‘person’, Luke assumes that the killer must be a man. Realising this, Miss Waynflete encourages this supposition when Luke confides in her. She warns Luke that if he reveals that he is looking into the murders, the killer might then focus on Luke: ‘*he’ll* know. *He’ll* realize that you’re on his track’.⁹⁷ Miss Waynflete’s suggestions eventually point Luke in the direction of Lord Whitfield, whom Miss Waynflete implicates by manipulating the image of the lonely, romantically thwarted

⁹³ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 35.

⁹⁴ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 52.

⁹⁵ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, pp. 65, 66-67.

⁹⁶ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 18.

⁹⁷ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 151.

spinster, claiming she did not voice her suspicions because she ‘was fond of him once’.⁹⁸ She cautions Luke to be careful while he is investigating: ‘Men have courage – one knows that...but they are more easily *deceived* than women’. Bridget, who is beginning to suspect Miss Waynflete, agrees with her.⁹⁹ Luke has, in fact, been deceived by Miss Waynflete, though Bridget has not, designating Bridget, not Luke, as the true detective figure.

From playing supporting roles in Luke’s investigation, Bridget and Miss Waynflete emerge as detective figure and villain in the final confrontation. Miss Waynflete tries to drug Bridget and leads her to a secluded wooded area, intending to kill her and blame it on Lord Whitfield. Bridget, who has ascertained her purpose, pretends to be drugged and tries to persuade Miss Waynflete to admit to the murders, putting the skills she has learned as a professional secretary to use, just as the elderly spinster detectives employ their specialised abilities: ‘She’d done it as a secretary for years. Quietly encouraged her employers to talk about themselves. And this woman wanted badly to talk, to boast about her own cleverness’.¹⁰⁰ It emerges that Miss Waynflete’s motive is not sexual frustration, but frustrated ambition:

Yes, I always had brains, even as a girl! But they wouldn’t let me do anything...I had to stay at home – doing nothing. And then Gordon – just a common boot-maker’s son, but he had ambition, I knew. I knew he would rise in the world. And he jilted me – jilted *me!*¹⁰¹

Instead of being the stereotypical spinster whose crimes are the result of repressed sexuality, Miss Waynflete represents a more realistic danger, standing as a warning against forcing women to assume a passive, domestic role. Miss Waynflete’s transgression is disturbing, as it implies that the true danger of ‘superfluous’ women only emerges when they are not allowed any active role other than that of wife and mother. In spite of the unsettling implications of this suggestion, the novel’s resolution is undeniably

⁹⁸ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, pp. 180-81.

⁹⁹ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 198.

¹⁰⁰ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 206.

¹⁰¹ Christie, *Murder is Easy*, p. 204.

conservative. Though Bridget, the modern career woman, emerges triumphant from her struggle with Miss Waynflete, it is not through her own power; Luke comes to Bridget's rescue as Miss Waynflete is trying to strangle her. Like Harriet Vane in *Strong Poison*, Bridget is saved – both literally and symbolically – in the end by her potential for marriage.

6. *Strong Poison*: The Vilified Victim

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

a stout, prosperous party who keeps a sweet-shop...[who] has no opinion of men in general (she has buried her third)...At first she was ready to vote with the majority, but then she took a dislike to the foreman, who tried to bear her down by his male authority.¹⁰²

These two women do not bow to the pressure of the 'male authority' represented by the judge and the other jurors to deliver a guilty verdict, and they achieve the retrial that saves Harriet's life. Unlike the relationships depicted between the nonconforming women in

¹⁰² Sayers, *Strong Poison*, pp. 41-42.

Overture to Death, those in *Strong Poison* are supportive and united against unfair judgments by a patriarchal culture.

Harriet already has two strikes against her when she is accused of murder: she has lived with a man outside of marriage (refusing marriage when he offers it); and she is a career woman who earns her own living after the deaths of her parents. Both of these elements place her outside the paradigm of the traditional patriarchal family and cause her to be seen as a threat to an ideology of domesticity. Maureen T. Reddy points out that it is ‘Harriet’s unconventionality that makes her the perfect suspect in Boyes’s murder, from the legal system’s standpoint: such an “unwomanly” woman must be capable of the most heinous acts’.¹⁰³ When the judge addresses the jury, it is obvious that he takes Harriet’s sexual deviance into consideration when contemplating her guilt, and that he is suggesting the jury do so as well:

Now you may feel, and quite properly that [Harriet’s living with Boyes] was a very wrong thing to do. You may, after making all allowances for this young woman’s unprotected position, still feel that she was a person of unstable moral character...But, on the other hand...It is one thing for a man or woman to live an immoral life, and quite another thing to commit murder. You may perhaps think that one step into the path of wrongdoing makes the next one easier, but you must not give too much weight to that consideration.¹⁰⁴

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

It would be natural for you to think that this proposal of marriage takes away any suggestion that the prisoner had cause for grievance against Boyes. Anyone would say that, under such circumstances, she could have no motive for wishing to murder this young man, but rather the contrary. Still...the prisoner herself states that this honourable, though belated, proposal was unwelcome to her.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 22.

¹⁰⁴ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 7.

By using phrases such as ‘it would be natural for you to think’ and ‘anyone would say that’, it is insinuated that Harriet’s behaviour deviates from a standard of normality to which the majority of people conform. Her aberrant behaviour in rejecting Boyes’s offer would therefore indicate that she is capable of other transgressions against society, such as murder. Though Harriet is a victim of unfair stereotypes, her rehabilitation is brought about by becoming another stereotype – the heroine of a romance plot. Miss Climpson and Miss Murchison, the spinsters who do the majority of the investigative legwork that saves Harriet, also perform the function of manoeuvring the heteronormative romance plot into place even as they break down assumptions about the morality of sexually active single women by proving that Harriet is not a killer.

During the course of the investigation, Lord Peter Wimsey falls in love with Harriet and vows to marry her once she is cleared of the murder and released. In order for Harriet to become the detective’s legitimate love interest, she must be cleared symbolically of her sexual transgression as well as of committing a crime. This is accomplished partly by establishing equality between Harriet and Peter through a comparison of their sexual experience; when Harriet cautions Peter that she has had a lover and so is not sexually ‘innocent’, Peter counters: ‘So have I, if it comes to that. In fact, several’.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Harriet must also be exonerated legally; at the end of her retrial, the judge announces that ‘the Crown, by unreservedly withdrawing this dreadful charge against you, has demonstrated your innocence in the clearest possible way. After this, nobody will be able to suppose that the slightest imputation rests upon you’.¹⁰⁷ Vilified by society and almost executed for a crime she did not commit because of the suspicion her sexual deviance casts upon her, Harriet is in the end declared innocent by the patriarchal system that accused her after being ‘rescued’ by the detective. Through the depiction of Harriet’s trials and

¹⁰⁶ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 51.

¹⁰⁷ Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 280.

acquittal, *Strong Poison* engages with contemporary debates about women's sexuality, and it questions existing assumptions about sexual morality, providing an alternative to conventional detective narratives that inevitably use marriage, imprisonment, or death to contain the nonconforming woman. Nevertheless, though Harriet refuses Peter's proposal in *Strong Poison*, she does eventually marry him later in the series, which means that the declaration of her innocence of symbolic criminality is as much an affirmation of her potential for marriage as it is an exoneration of nonconforming sexuality in women. However, the path to Harriet and Peter's eventual marriage is not short or uncomplicated. Harriet even becomes an active detective figure herself in both *Have His Carcase* (1932) and *Gaudy Night* (1935), putting her on a more equal footing with her former saviour before they are married. The negotiation of 'modern' marriages that include the potential for equality between partners in depictions of series detective characters and their love interests, including Harriet and Peter, will be explored in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

A JOINT VENTURE?: LOVE, PARTNERSHIP AND MARRIAGE

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

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

Despite such criticisms, the fact remains that many writers – including Sayers – continued to incorporate representations of love and marriage in their novels. Gayle F. Wald points out that, on the basic level of plot, 'Love and the excesses it generates – including jealousy, paranoia, and the desire for revenge – figure frequently in Golden Age detective fiction as the motives behind a crime'.³ Furthermore, love was not only represented as the motive for many a crime; it also became a prominent event in the fictional lives of a number of detective figures, not to mention the 'conventional love-stories' Sayers refers to, in which an obligatory young couple get engaged or married at the end of the novel. That love interests were frequently employed does not mean that crime writers did not

¹ S.S. Van Dine, 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories', in Howard Haycraft (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), pp. 189-90.

² Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Introduction to the Omnibus of Crime', in Howard Haycraft (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1992), p. 103.

³ Gayle F. Wald, 'Strong Poison: Love and the Novelistic in Dorothy Sayers', in Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer (eds.), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory* (Macomb, Ill.: Western Illinois University, 1990), p. 101.

view the creation of a romance plot for their detective characters with some trepidation. Margery Allingham sardonically remarked of the risks of marrying off a male detective figure,

Of all the hazards that threaten the detective of fiction, I doubt if there is one more likely to be lethal than matrimony. Taking a wife is a serious step for any man, but for him it can be lethal.⁴

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

As discussed in Chapter I, marriage and the subsequent lifestyle of domesticity assumed to accompany it remained the expectation for women throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, ideas about roles within marriage were changing. Marie Stopes's *Married Love* makes a case for a model of 'companionate' marriage in

⁴ Quoted in Jessica Mann, *Deadlier Than the Male: Why Are Respectable English Women So Good at Murder?* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), p. 109.

which both partners are sexually, emotionally and intellectually fulfilled.⁵ In his 1935 guide for young couples, *Modern Marriage*, Edward F. Griffith states that definitions of a wife's role were evolving beyond traditional expectations: 'our conception of the purpose and meaning of marriage has changed in a generation...Women in particular have a broader outlook on life. They will no longer consider that their only vocation is sweeping, dusting, cooking, and producing children'.⁶ This changing understanding of both the marriage relationship and gender roles within that relationship was beginning to redefine what constituted a model partnership between spouses. It also created inevitable tension between the traditional domesticity still held as an ideal and the more active roles opening up for women in society.

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

The [war's] effect on gender roles was decisive: the traditional masculine values of honour, martial prowess, and emotional restraint were severely compromised by the futility of the mass-slaughter and the trauma that followed, while the delicate flower of English womanhood was transformed by the heavy labour of jobs in munitions factories and stints as ambulance drivers. The result was the formation, in the years immediately following the war, of new codes of masculinity, and a concomitant shift in the qualities associated with the feminine. The new man of this moment rejected the old masculine values of gravitas and heroism in favour of frivolity and an effete and brittle manner. The new woman took on the practicality and emotional control once the province of the male: she was competent, assured, and unemotional. These figures are significant new social stereotypes, repeatedly

⁵ Stopes writes of the necessity of developing a more equal ideal of marriage, 'While modern marriage is tending to give ever more and more freedom to each of the partners, there is at the same time a unity of work and interest growing up which brings them together on a higher plane than the purely domestic one which was so confining to the women and so dull to the men. Each year one sees a widening of the independence and the range of the pursuits of women: but still, far too often, marriage puts an end to woman's intellectual life. Marriage can never reach its full stature until women possess as much intellectual freedom and freedom of opportunity within it as do their partners'. Marie Stopes, *Married Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 95-96.

⁶ Edward F. Griffith, *Modern Marriage* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1955), pp. 1-2.

lamented, celebrated, and anatomized in the pages of the press over the course of more than a decade, and peopling most forms of contemporary fiction.⁷

These changing modes of masculinity and femininity are evident in detective pairings such as Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, and Allingham's Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton, as the deceptively inane detectives are matched with sensible, industrious women. The new gender stereotypes apparent in these portrayals clash with conventional gender roles within the romance plot to create a certain anxiety that belies the seemingly progressive marriages that result when these modern men and women come together. These characters' relationships are often fraught with sexual tension and personal conflict until they are reconciled in marriage, and the resulting marriage frequently requires that the modern 'masculine' woman and 'feminine' man must return to their traditional gender roles in order for the marriage to take place. This reversal does not happen easily; in fact, the couple's struggle is often marked by physical and/or emotional violence. Humble points out that ambivalence about what constitutes an ideal romantic relationship was not uncommon in women's middlebrow fiction of the period, and that a text can often embrace the idea of companionate marriage while seeming to 'espous[e]...retrogressive positions about gender roles within marriage' such as implicit approval of male against female domestic violence.⁸ This seeming incongruity represents conflicting ideologies in popular thought about roles within the marriage relationship; on the one hand, the new ideal of companionate marriage implies a co-operative relationship of equals, but on the other, psychologists continually argued for the 'normalcy' of unequal power relations between couples. Havelock Ellis, for instance, writes in 'Love and Pain' (1913) that to 'exert power, as psychologists will recognize, is one of our most primary impulses, and it always

⁷ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 197.

⁸ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 219-20.

tends to be manifested in the attitude of a man toward the woman he loves'.⁹ Significantly, Wilhelm Stekel asserts in his *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life* (1926) that this power structure is also sought out by women in their relationships:

The woman always seeks the man to whom she must resign herself. She wants to be coerced into love...All conflicts between man and woman, the whole unfortunate 'struggle between the sexes', rises out of this longing for a strong-willed man; it flows out of the longing for conquest, for the thrill of self-subjection or defeat.¹⁰

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

In this chapter, I shall explore the idea that the modern male must return to the paradigm of dominant, aggressive masculinity and that the modern female must return to the traditionally submissive role in order to establish a successful romantic relationship. Such resolutions are undeniably conservative, but the fact that these positions are depicted as reversed in the first place signifies unease about modern gender roles. The anxiety associated with the post-war male's assumption of more 'feminine' characteristics is expressed, but is resolved by his return to dominant masculinity.¹¹ In addition, though

⁹ Havelock Ellis, 'Love and Pain', in Sheila Jeffreys (ed.), *The Sexuality Debates* (New York; London: Routledge and Keegan Paul Ltd., 1987), p. 511.

¹⁰ Wilhelm Stekel, *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life*, trans. James S. Van Teslaar (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 247.

¹¹ Elaine Showalter writes that male hysteria brought on by the trauma of the First World War destabilised constructions of masculinity: 'For most [men]...the anguish of shell shock included...intense anxieties about masculinity, fears of acting effeminate, even a refusal to continue the bluff of male behavior. If it was the essence of manliness not to complain, then shell shock was the bodily language of masculine complaint, a disguised male protest, not only against the war, but against the concept of manliness itself. Epidemic female hysteria in late Victorian England had been a form of protest against a patriarchal society that enforced confinement to a narrowly defined femininity; epidemic male hysteria in World War I was a protest against the politicians, generals, and psychiatrists'. Elaine Showalter, 'Rivers and Sassoon: The Inscription of Male Gender Identities', in Margaret Randolph Highonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel and Margaret Collins

taking a traditional, masochistic feminine role could (and indeed should) be seen as a step backwards for women, to read masochistic desire as simply ‘giving in’ or a loss of power is problematic. Though Marianne Noble is specifically referring to nineteenth-century novels in *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, her analysis of the need to recognise masochism as a legitimate means of expressing sexuality for women can also be applied to novels of the twentieth century: ‘masochism [is] a limited and limiting – but effective – means of imagining physical pleasure without damaging culturally sanctioned ideals of female identity’.¹² While restrictive in their suggestions that the wish to be dominated is innate in women and is often necessary for them to be sexually fulfilled, the work of sexologists such as Stekel recognises that women’s ability to experience and express desire is a positive and valid component of a sexual relationship. Though the modern woman’s reversion to a more conventional role can be read as a conservative failure to establish a new type of marriage, the relationships formed even after the switch back to traditional gender roles are not always negative; these relationships still aspire to the ideal of companionate marriage. The narratives explored in this chapter are shown to be ambivalent about modern marriage, reflecting uncertainty and conflict, but they do not represent a complete retreat to less empowering ideals.

The changing face of femininity is particularly evident in depictions of the life and detection partners chosen by popular series detectives such as Allingham’s Albert Campion, Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey, and Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn. In Amanda Fitton, Harriet Vane and Agatha Troy, a model of femininity is provided that attempts to reconcile the new opportunities for career women with a fulfilling romantic relationship and a domestic life. However, though these couples, as well as Agatha Christie’s Tommy

Weisz (eds.), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 64.

¹² Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 25.

and Tuppence Beresford, provide a valuable exploration of the potential of companionate marriage, they often falter when the question of parenthood – accompanied by the expectations surrounding domesticity and women’s role in the home – arises. As Craig and Cadogan point out, the women partners ‘embodied conflicting images, suggesting female independence of thought at one level but, at another, being nudged beyond supportive roles to the point of subservience’.¹³ Paradoxically, each ‘is treated seriously as an active partner, even if this attitude is contradicted by narrative implications elsewhere in the stories’.¹⁴ Consequently, this chapter will also explore how – and, indeed, if – the ‘gap’ that exists between actively equal partnership and domesticity is negotiated in these novels. The ways in which marriage was being reconceptualised undeniably gave women a chance for greater agency that older, Victorian and Edwardian ideals of proper wifely behaviour did not permit, but how far did this agency extend?

The marriage plot conveniently plays into crime fiction’s tendency to offer essentially conservative resolutions, but the marriage of a series detective means that the depiction of the couple in question will continue at greater length than many literary portrayals of romantic relationships. The courtship period provides a space in which gender roles can be renegotiated, and when a series detective and his love interest marry, the series continues, depicting the evolving relationship and examining what it means to have a ‘modern’ marriage. Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments on what she calls ‘writing beyond the ending’ – when tactics are used to subvert or criticise the closure embodied by the traditional romance plot:

the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative... Writing beyond the ending... produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive

¹³ Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 91.

¹⁴ Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 207.

patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised.¹⁵

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

1. 'Treat 'em rough?': Courtship in *Artists in Crime* and *Death in a White Tie*

The depiction of the courtship leading to a marriage and also the 'honeymoon' period directly following the nuptials provides a significant opportunity for the negotiation of new rules for conducting a marital relationship. There is often a considerable amount of tension inherent in this phase, as the couple acts out and sometimes attempts to rewrite the gendered scripts that accompany a heterosexual courtship. These concerns are evident in the courtship between Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn and Agatha Troy, which is played out over the course of two novels, *Artists in Crime* (1938) and *Death in a White Tie* (1938). The opening scene of *Artists in Crime* in which the couple first meet is deliberately unromantic; Alleyn watches Troy at work on a painting, but his attention is initially drawn not by his own attraction to her person but by Troy's frustrated exclamation, 'Damn, damn, damn! Oh *blast!*'.¹⁶ A 'startled' Alleyn beholds:

a woman [who] seemed to be dabbing at something. She stood up and he saw that she wore a pair of exceedingly grubby flannel trousers, and a short grey overall. In her hand was a long brush. Her face was disfigured by a smudge of green paint,

¹⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 5.

¹⁶ Ngaio Marsh, *Artists in Crime* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1984), p. 11.

and her short hair stood up in a worried shock, as though she had run her hands through it.¹⁷

Though Troy becomes the unsuspecting object of Alleyn's gaze, her prosaic expression of annoyance is what first grabs his attention; she is not introduced as a passive object for the male spectator; rather, it is her voice which first commands his attention.¹⁸ In this case, Troy, though in the 'feminine', objective position of being observed, is an active observer herself; she is deeply involved in her own work, which depends upon taking in and interpreting details as much as Alleyn's does. Alleyn does not gain Troy's notice until he points out an element she needs to complete her painting, to which she remarks, 'Well, I must say you're very observant for a layman'. Troy's condescending comment firmly places her in the more powerful role of professional observer and – to her mind – Alleyn as an amateur. Their conversation continues:

'It's synthetic.'
 'You mean you've trained your eye?'
 'I've had to try to do so, certainly.'
 'Why?'
 'Part of my job. Let me take that box for you.'
 'Oh – thank you. Mind the lid – it's a bit pointy. Pity to spoil those lovely trousers. Will you take the sketch?'
 'Do you want a hand down?' offered Alleyn.
 'I can manage, thank you,' she said gruffly, and clambered down to the deck.¹⁹

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

¹⁷ Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 11.

¹⁸ In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), Laura Mulvey discusses the concept of a 'Male Gaze' which places women as objective observed as opposed to subjective observers. In the case of Alleyn and Troy, this convention is complicated when the role of observer is linked to their respective professions.

¹⁹ Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 32.

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

The play with gender roles continues throughout the first scene and, indeed, throughout the novel. Troy's gender ambiguity is also emphasised later in the novel, again in a situation that subverts the trajectory of a stereotypical sentimental courtship. During an emotional moment, Troy begins to cry: 'She looked like a boy with her head turned shamefacedly away. She groped in her trousers pocket and pulled out a handkerchief disgracefully stained with paint. "Oh blast!" she said, and pitched it into the waste-paper basket'.²⁰ Alleyn then offers her his own handkerchief. In this scene, instead of placing herself in the position of helpless female allowing Alleyn to comfort her and letting him see the emotion on her face, Troy turns away from him, highlighting her masculine characteristics in the process. This time, however, Troy's more masculine role is seen as a

²⁰ Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 181.

source of embarrassment. Her appearance as a ‘shamefaced boy’ shows the limits of modern, active femininity – though it has characteristics of traditional masculinity, it is childish rather than mature. Troy’s handkerchief, with its marks caused by her work, is ‘disgracefully’ stained and ends up as refuse. Far from being a tender scene in which the man comforts the woman and the future couple is brought closer together, it is a moment that highlights the discomfort of modern femininity pushed into the confines of a traditional romance plot.

In one respect, Troy and Alleyn end the case on an equal footing, as they guess the identity of the killer at approximately the same time. However, Troy’s professional powers of observation are downplayed – while Alleyn’s knowledge is shown to come from his professional skills as a detective, Troy’s is gained by a vaguely defined ‘woman’s instinct’. When she tells Alleyn that she thinks she knows who the killer is, he reacts with surprise:

‘You *know*?’

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

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

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

‘I’ll tell you who it is...I can see that this time the woman’s instinct was not at fault.’²¹

Troy is allowed to intrude upon Alleyn’s professional prerogative by correctly naming the killer, but she does not have the authority to do so by the use of her own intelligence or any sort of detective skills. Though they both have the correct answer, Alleyn is given the right to confirm Troy’s and to judge whether the means by which she has come to the same conclusion is worthy. Both agree that ‘woman’s instinct’ is not a valid investigative method – it ‘depends on the woman’ from which it comes, implying that only a woman who has masculine approval is capable of using ‘woman’s instinct’ as a creditable means

²¹ Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 243.

of gathering information.²² This scene stands in contrast to the beginning of *Artists in Crime*, in which Troy's eye is recognised as having more authority than Alleyn's. However, Alleyn does eventually acknowledge that her skills as an artist place her in a more equal position to him than she would otherwise be. Indeed, in *Death in a White Tie*, the novel in which the couple continue their courtship, Alleyn asks Troy what her observations are of a party after which a man is murdered. Troy begins to tell him and then pauses: 'And then later on – but look here...I'm simply maundering'. Alleyn responds: 'God bless your good painter's eyes, you're not. Go on'.²³ Troy's response to Alleyn is much more deferential than her casual attitude to his visual skills at their first meeting. Once again, Alleyn is given the authority to validate Troy's participation in an investigation, but his praise of her analysis is based on her competence at her work, suggesting the idea that profession can transcend gender.²⁴ Both Alleyn's and Troy's capacity for observation would suggest that their relationship has significant potential for equality, but as Alleyn is repeatedly cast in the more dominant role, the balance of power becomes weighted in his favour. However, Alleyn's position of authority is one with which he is profoundly uneasy. His discomfort with occupying the masculine role of authority figure becomes evident throughout his and Troy's hesitant courtship.

Far from being a source of confidence and self-esteem, Alleyn's profession causes him considerable self-loathing. When he is required to search Troy's bedroom as part of his investigation into the murder of an artist's model, Alleyn is reluctant to perform this intrusion on her privacy, even though his position as detective requires it. Searching Troy's

²² In Agatha Christie's work, 'woman's instinct' is shown to be a valued method of detection in spite of its derision by those who do not find it credible. Hercule Poirot recognises the value of women's powers of observation and explains 'woman's instinct' in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926): 'Women observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing that they are doing so. Their subconscious mind adds these little things together – and they call the result intuition'. Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 195.

²³ Ngaio Marsh, *Death in a White Tie* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1986), p. 75.

²⁴ As will be discussed in Chapter IV, Dorothy L. Sayers similarly espoused the idea that gender should be irrelevant when it comes to an individual's capacity to do a job.

bedroom brings together Alleyn's discomfort with the sordid aspects of his profession and his reluctance to make any sexual advances to Troy. As he searches, Alleyn berates himself for his choice of career: "An odious trade," he mutter[s] to himself. "A filthy degrading job".²⁵ When it comes to the symbolic violation of Troy's sexualised personal space, Alleyn's self-loathing echoes the modern, reluctant masculinity Humble refers to as characteristic of the post-World War I male. Alleyn's squeamishness also denies the position of power that accompanies his profession, as well as the desire for dominance that popular psychology insists is 'natural' to a man in his relationships with women.

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

Presently Alleyn put down the reports and looked across at his friend. He thought: 'How often we have sat like this, Fox and I, working like a couple of obscure clerks...I shall go home later on, a solitary fellow, to my own hole.' And into his thoughts came the image of a woman who sat in a tall blue chair by his fire, but that was too domestic a picture. Rather, she would sit on the hearth-rug. Her hands would be stained with charcoal and they would sweep beautiful lines across a white surface. When he came in she would look up from her drawing and Troy's eyes would smile or scowl.²⁶

Alleyn's fantasy of domesticity is ambivalent; it combines a stereotypically domestic hearthside setting with a woman who is performing an activity that distinguishes her in the public sphere. Alleyn has this daydream when working with Fox, his friend and partner, with whom he feels 'that pleasant feeling of unexpressed intimacy that comes to two people working in silence at the same job'.²⁷ That his imagined scenario happens when he is working with Fox suggests that his ideal relationship with Troy might not be so different

²⁵ Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 161.

²⁶ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 179.

²⁷ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 179.

from what he has with Fox. Though Fox is referred to as Alleyn's 'friend', Alleyn is also his professional superior. For Alleyn to fantasise about a relationship with Troy that would be akin to his and Fox's is to suggest that he desires a romantic relationship that is companionate but still places one partner – Alleyn – in the more dominant role. Alleyn's fantasy-Troy is not completely subservient, even if she is in the extremely domesticated position of sitting near the hearth waiting for her man to return from his work. In this fantasy, Alleyn rejects the image of Troy sitting in a chair by the fire as 'too domestic', suggesting that sitting on the floor is not as submissive as it might seem – the position is more unconventional than domestic. Furthermore, Troy is occupied not with typical household tasks but with her own work. In addition, though Alleyn is thinking of a scene that involves him observing Troy while she sits below him, which would suggest that he is in a position of power, he is also fantasising about being the object of Troy's gaze. It has been established that Troy's professional gaze is one of authority, and to have her immediately turn this look onto Alleyn when he enters the room means that he is dreaming of being in the stereotypically feminine position of being looked at. Though it is his own fantasy, Alleyn does not even know whether 'Troy's eyes [will] smile or scowl', implying that Alleyn is picturing himself in the passive situation of not being able to control how he is perceived. The mixture of traditional and modern gender roles expressed in Alleyn's fantasy represents an attempt to negotiate changing models of masculinity and femininity and how they might play into a modern heterosexual romantic relationship.

In the final chapter of *Artists in Crime*, expectations of a conventionally romantic conclusion are overturned. The chapter's title, 'Epilogue in a Garden', evokes the ending to a traditional romance in which the hero and heroine confess their tender feelings for each other in a stereotypically romantic setting. As the scene begins, 'Troy sat on a rug in the central grass plot of Lady Alleyn's rose garden. Alleyn stood and looked down at

her'.²⁸ With Alleyn cast in the powerful, masculine position of observer and Troy as the submissive female sitting below him, the stage seems to be set for them to assume their traditional gender roles and come together for a predictable happy ending. However, instead of a romantic scene, Alleyn performs the Golden Age detective's explication followed by a self-loathing retreat from declaring his romantic feelings:

I think that if we met again in a different way you might have loved me. But because of all that has happened your thoughts of me are spoiled. There's an association of cold and rather horrible officiousness. Well, perhaps it's not quite as bad as all that, but my job has come between us.²⁹

Alleyn is reluctant to take advantage of Troy's emotional vulnerability, acknowledging her uncertainty regarding her feelings for him and his unwillingness to force the point.³⁰ That Alleyn is so overtly uncomfortable with a 'natural', aggressive form of masculinity is suggestive; by not declaring himself to Troy more forcefully, Alleyn has failed to perform the actions of the stereotypical romantic hero. Their inability to come to a romantic understanding at the end of *Artists in Crime* sets Alleyn and Troy apart from other, more transient couples in the typical Golden Age crime novel; the uncertainty of their story highlights their discomfort with conforming to the traditional romance plot that will inevitably shape the trajectory of their relationship.

Death in a White Tie, the novel in which Alleyn and Troy reconcile their feelings for each other, contains a complicated depiction of marriage and romantic relationships and the social sphere in which they take place. Central to this portrayal is the very evident conflict between the traditional and the modern. The novel's setting is the fading upper-crust world of debutante balls, in which 'coming out' becomes a metaphor not only for

²⁸ Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 250.

²⁹ Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, p. 256.

³⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers's *Strong Poison* (1930) ends in a way that similarly rejects the trajectory of a conventional romance plot; Harriet Vane turns down Lord Peter Wimsey's proposal of marriage after he has saved her from being convicted for murder, refusing the 'damsel-in-distress' role in which the woman is saved by the man and subsequently becomes his wife. Like Alleyn, Peter does not press his suit after Harriet's rejection of his proposal, giving Harriet the power to summon him when she wants to see him.

young girls making their debuts into upper-class society, but for secrets and scandals that are revealed after being contained by the complicit silence of Victorian social codes. Indeed, the phrase's meaning is interrogated on the first page of the novel when Lady Alleyn informs her son that she will be helping to 'bring out' his niece, her granddaughter, during the upcoming season:

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

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

'Out into the world. Out of retirement. Out into the season. Out. Dear me,' she added confusedly, 'how absurd a word becomes if one says it repeatedly. Out.'³¹

Alleyn's failure to grasp immediately that his mother is speaking of the London season lends a humorous note that further underscores the interrogation of 'coming out' – as a man from an aristocratic family, he should know what the phrase refers to, so his indifference marks the questioning of the tradition's meaning. Lady Alleyn's repetitive use of 'out' and her remark on the 'absurdity' of a repeated word immediately suggests that the meaning (or lack thereof) of the 'coming out' ritual might be called into question.

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

[having] an odd trick of using Victorian colloquialisms; legacies, he would explain, from his distinguished father...He kept up little Victorian politenesses, always leaving cards after a ball and often sending flowers to the hostesses who dined him. His clothes were famous – a rather high, close-buttoned jacket and narrowish trousers by day, a soft wide hat and a cloak in the evening.³²

Bunchy represents the safe, idealised world of the upper classes – a patriarchal world, it is suggested, as he learns these habits from 'his distinguished father'. Even his surname Gossell suggests an affinity to tradition, ritual and trustworthiness. Bunchy's anachronistic

³¹ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 9.

³² Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 20.

manners and dress are recognised by those around him as being out of date, but he is acknowledged to be eminently likeable. That he is representative of paternalistic Victorian social codes is further demonstrated by his role as a ‘fairy godfather’ figure to the debutantes, always the first to converse or dance with those who are struggling and helping them to progress more smoothly onto the social scene. Indeed, it is Bunchy who uncovers the identity of Lady Evelyn Carrados’s blackmailer first and subsequently becomes a victim of murder. As he is rushing out of the ballroom to contact Alleyn with the details of his discovery, Bunchy considers for the first time the reality of the London season in the modern world:

It took him some time to get round the ballroom and as he edged past dancing couples and over the feet of sitting chaperons he suddenly felt as if an intruder had thrust open all the windows of this neat little world and let in a flood of uncompromising light. In this cruel light he saw the people he liked best and they were changed and belittled...And he wondered if the Victorian and Edwardian eras had been no more than freakish incidents in the history of society and if their proprieties had been as artificial as the paint on a modern woman’s lips.³³

Bunchy’s bitter reflections on what he sees as the sordid nature of the modern world and his nostalgia for the ‘proprieties’ of the past signify the passing away of traditional social structures and the formation of modern ideals – a change which does not happen easily and which is marked by the violence of Bunchy’s murder. Bunchy’s death is almost universally mourned among the members of his social circle; this grief can be read as not only for the man but also for the era he embodied, echoing a nostalgia for order and innocence common after the trauma of the First World War.

The plot of *Death in a White Tie* concerns a blackmailer who is worrying several members of the aristocracy, including Lady Alleyn’s friend, Evelyn Carrados, whose daughter, Bridget, is a debutante. Inspector Alleyn discovers that Lady Carrados is being blackmailed because she was not actually married to Bridget’s father, Paddy O’Brien, who

³³ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 51.

died before their daughter was born. After O'Brien's death, Lady Carrados marries a much older man, who proves to be verbally and physically abusive to her and her daughter. Lady Carrados's situation is an example of the novel's critical examination of marriage; with O'Brien, she has an emotionally and physically satisfying relationship outside marriage, but when she marries Sir Herbert Carrados for security and social position, the relationship is abusive and destructive. Lady Carrados is so anxious for the secret of her daughter's illegitimacy not to become public that she is driven to paying off the blackmailer. She agonises over what will happen if her daughter finds out that her parents were not married and the anticipated shame such a revelation will cost her and her family. However, when Alleyn persuades Lady Carrados to tell the truth, his response to her statement is admiration for her courage in defying convention and staying with the man she loved. At first glance, Alleyn's nonjudgmental reaction seems to suggest a progressive response to attitudes towards female sexuality outside marriage, but a closer examination of the situation, as well as of the other instances of female sexuality depicted in the novel, reveals a more ambivalent – and problematic – stance.

Evelyn Carrados is a solidly sympathetic character; she is seen as a kind-hearted woman who pays a high price for marrying for security. Her nickname, given to her by Paddy O'Brien, is 'Donna', after a painting of the Virgin Mary by the Renaissance painter Raphael.³⁴ In the scene in which Alleyn learns the truth about her relationship with O'Brien, Lady Carrados

was not in bed. She was in her boudoir erect in a tall blue chair and wearing the look that had prompted Paddy O'Brien to compare her with a Madonna...[Alleyn] thought: 'She is an English lady and these are an English lady's hands, thin, unsensual, on the end of delicate thin arms'.³⁵

³⁴ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 13.

³⁵ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 139.

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

In contrast to the sympathy with which Lady Carrados's affair is depicted, Mrs. Halcut-Hackett, an unscrupulous, abusive professional chaperon to debutantes, is not shown the same leniency. As a social-climbing American and former actress aspiring to belong to English upper-class society, Mrs. Halcut-Hackett does not possess the 'naturally' refined, dispassionate air of an English lady that lends Lady Carrados inherent respectability. When Bunchy is speaking to Mrs. Halcut-Hackett early on in the novel, he reflects that her social manner is 'An imitation, but what a good imitation...Her American voice, which he remembered thinking charming in her theatrical days, was now much

disciplined and none the better for it'.³⁶ Mrs. Halcut-Hackett's original class, nationality and profession mark her as an outsider to the social class in which she is now trying to gain status, and even though she is established enough that she is in a position to help young women 'come out', she is still negatively judged because she accepts money for doing so. Though she has advanced to a respectable social position, Mrs. Halcut-Hackett is set apart because of her insistence upon operating as a professional. She is also the married party in her affair with Captain Withers, a suspect in Bunchy's murder, marking another transgression and another difference from Lady Carrados, who has had a relationship in which the man was the adulterer. As a woman who is seeking sexual fulfilment outside her marriage, Mrs. Halcut-Hackett strays outside the bounds of social acceptability; she also offends by being a desiring middle-aged woman. In comparison with Lady Carrados, another middle-aged woman who has broken social restrictions upon female sexuality, Mrs. Halcut-Hackett is subject to much stronger implicit criticism. In addition to the issue of stereotypes associated with nationality and social class, one of the key differences between the two is that Lady Carrados's transgression occurs in the past, when she is young, and is therefore pardonable. Lady Carrados is a desexualised older woman, while Mrs. Halcut-Hackett actively exhibits sexual desire. While he is interviewing Mrs. Halcut-Hackett in connection with the crimes, Alleyn observes, 'She wetted her lips. Again he saw that look of subservience and thought of all traits in an ageing woman this was the unloveliest and most pitiable'.³⁷ Alleyn is repulsed by his perception of possible sexual excitement in Mrs. Halcut-Hackett's response to his show of authority:

Alleyn had interviewed a great number of Mrs. Halcut-Hacketts in his day. He knew very well that with such women he carried a weapon that he was loath to use, but which nevertheless fought for him. This was the weapon of his sex. He saw with violent distaste that some taint of pleasure threaded her fear of him. And the inexorable logic of thought presented him to himself, side by side with her lover.³⁸

³⁶ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 33.

³⁷ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 171.

³⁸ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 170.

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

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

'I believe no woman ever falls passionately in love with a man unless he has just the least touch of the boulder somewhere in his composition...I mean in a very rarified sense. A touch of arrogance...If you're too delicately considerate of a woman's feelings she may begin by being grateful, but the chances are she'll end by despising you.'

Alleyn made a wry face. 'Treat 'em rough?'

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

Their conversation continues:

'You're an opinionated little party, mama...Do you suggest that I go to Miss Agatha Troy, haul her about her studio by her hair, tuck her under my arrogant masculine arm, and lug her off to the nearest registry office?'

'Church, if you please. The Church knows what I'm talking about. Look at the marriage service. A direct and embarrassing expression of the savagery inherent in our ideas of mating.'³⁹

³⁹ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 185.

Lady Alleyn's advice states that a traditional model of masculine dominance and feminine submission is innate and necessary to most successful sexual relationships, while at the same time admitting that it has negative aspects. Lady Alleyn does not advocate male against female violence, but she does suggest that female sexuality in the form of masochism must be considered a valid means of expressing desire, as it is one of the very few means recognised as being acceptable within culturally sanctioned forms of femininity. Marianne Noble argues:

The dominant language that eroticizes women's suffering and their submission to male dominance has itself frequently been an important means of exploring and expressing desire. The desires and fantasies that the dominant language enables a woman to articulate are indeed ideologically overdetermined, but they are also real.⁴⁰

Lady Alleyn uses popular romance novels and the cinema as well as the form of the traditional marriage ceremony to point out how culturally ingrained the language of masculine dominance and feminine submission is. She also qualifies these examples by criticising such novels as 'abominably written', the attractive actor as having 'the brains of a mosquito' and the marriage service as 'an embarrassing expression of savagery', indicating that although she acknowledges that masochistic fantasies should not be discounted as a legitimate means of expressing desire, they should not necessarily be seen as positive and do not comfortably mesh with feminist ideals.

Alleyn's 'wry', facetious responses to his mother's views on gender roles within romantic relationships indicate that he is uncomfortable with the inference that he should be more forceful with Troy. However, he wastes little time in attempting to renegotiate their relationship. Not long after the conversation between mother and son, Alleyn invites

⁴⁰ Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*, p. 8.

Troy to his flat for tea. When they begin to talk about the case, he sees that she is uneasy and asks, ‘Why does [my job] revolt you so much?’⁴¹ Troy responds:

It’s nothing reasonable – nothing I can attempt to justify. It’s simply that I’ve got an absolute horror of capital punishment...It’s just one of those nightmare things. Like claustrophobia. I used to adore the Ingoldsby Legends when I was a child. One day I came across the one about my Lord Tomnoddy and the hanging. It made the most dreadful impression on me. I dreamt about it...I used to turn the pages of the book, knowing that I would come to it, dreading it, and yet – I had to read it. I even made a drawing of it.⁴²

Troy’s repulsed yet fascinated reaction to the hanging in the story mirrors her interaction with Alleyn – she finds him repellent because of his profession and yet is sexually attracted to him. Troy’s confession marks a turning point in her relationship with Alleyn, in which she assumes a masochistic feminine role. Alleyn subsequently finally feels free to take on the dominant role in the relationship as he embraces Troy for the first time, ignoring her protests:

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

‘Yes.’

‘Please.’

He stooped, took her face between his hands, and kissed her hard on the mouth. He felt her come to life beneath his lips. Then he let her go.

‘And don’t think I shall ask you to forgive me,’ he said. ‘You’ve no right to let this go by. You’re too damn particular by half, my girl. I’m your man and you know it.’⁴³

Troy’s ambiguous repetition of ‘please’ could mean both a refusal of and a plea for Alleyn’s sexual attentions. His forceful embrace of Troy and aggressive assertion of his place in her life could not contrast more strongly with the awkward advances he had previously made to her. However, when Troy admits that she is undeniably sexually attracted to him but is shaken by what has taken place, Alleyn is overcome with remorse and returns to his usual deference, stammering ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry’.⁴⁴ Troy tells him,

⁴¹ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 232.

⁴² Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 232.

⁴³ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, pp. 232-33.

⁴⁴ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 233.

'I've been very weak...You looked so worn and troubled and it was so easy just to do this'.⁴⁵ As she tells it, Troy's submission is an act of agency; it is Alleyn's downtrodden appearance, not his forceful masculinity, that makes Troy respond to his sexual advance. When Troy leaves, Alleyn ironically acknowledges his failure to perform according to the established framework of gender roles in heterosexuality by calling himself '[y]our most devoted turkey-cock'.⁴⁶ With this image, Alleyn explicitly recognises his ineptitude in presenting the exaggerated masculinity required by the role of the 'leading man'. As Judith Butler writes,

Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of 'man' and 'woman.' These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate.⁴⁷

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

Death in a White Tie ends with Troy admiring Alleyn's professional skills: 'How extraordinarily trained your eye must be! To notice the grains of plate-powder in the tooling of a cigarette-case; could anything be more admirable? What else did you notice?'.⁴⁸ Although as a painter her eye is as qualified as his, in praising his talent for his once-despised profession, Troy finally invites Alleyn to view her as the object of desire

⁴⁵ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 233.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.1 (1993), p. 26.

⁴⁸ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 253.

she has refused to be from the beginning of their relationship. Alleyn enthusiastically complies:

I notice that although your eyes are grey there are little flecks of green in them and that the iris is ringed with black. I notice that when you smile your face goes crooked. I notice that the third finger of your left hand has a little spot of vermillion on the inside where a ring should hide it; and from that, Miss Troy, I deduce that you are a painter in oils and are not so proud as you should be of your lovely fingers.⁴⁹

In scrutinising Troy, Alleyn dismisses the marks of her profession and views her body for its sexual potential as opposed to its abilities. Just as a ring would hide the spot of paint on Troy's finger, marriage will relegate her profession to a secondary priority. Linking his observation of Troy with the professional observation that led to the identity of the murderer means that Alleyn has reconciled his professional authority with his new-found masculine authority, but the fact remains that he is only able to do this once Troy has given him permission to objectify her. Their courtship seems to conclude with a traditional 'happy ending', but their struggles to reach that culmination mark a real uncertainty and ambivalence about the shape of a successful modern romantic relationship.

2. Partner, Interrupted: Representing Companionate Relationships in the Work of Margery Allingham and Dorothy L. Sayers

The problematic nature of gender roles in heterosexual romantic relationships is also explored in the work of other prominent detective writers. Margery Allingham's Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton, as well as Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, build relationships based on a model of companionate marriage in which the couple collaborates both in love and detection, but in each case the male detective figure assumes the role of the dominant partner and the women are relegated to the position of glorified sidekick. In a positive interpretation of this kind of relationship, Susan Rowland

⁴⁹ Marsh, *Death in a White Tie*, p. 253.

points out that female detective partners such as Harriet Vane, Agatha Troy and Amanda Fitton have ‘a subordinate but contributing intellectual role far surpassing that of Dr Watson’.⁵⁰ The couple who might be an exception to this trend are Agatha Christie’s Tommy and Tuppence Beresford; as Craig and Cadogan write, ‘[o]f all the husband-and-wife detection teams, Tommy and Tuppence come nearest to representing an equal partnership’.⁵¹ However, even this couple are faced with a hiatus from detection when confronted with the matter of parenthood. In all of these cases, motherhood, not wifehood, becomes the deciding factor in relegating women to a passive role in the background and creating a ‘domestic gap’ in the narratives of their relationships with their partners.

Margery Allingham’s Albert Campion and Amanda Fitton first meet in *Sweet Danger* (1933) when Campion is called in to work on an improbable case during which he discovers that Amanda’s brother Hal is the long-lost ruler of a small European country. In *Sweet Danger*, the gender roles assigned to Campion and Amanda are extremely flexible, and the artificiality of traditional gender categories is constantly being pointed out. For example, when Campion and his associates first come to rent a room in the Fittons’ house, Amanda shows them around in the feminine ‘costume’ of ‘a white print dress with little green flowers on it...There was something artificially formal in her whole appearance. Her hair had been dressed rather high on her head and certainly in no modern fashion’.⁵² When they tell her they will rent rooms, Amanda admits, ‘I thought we’d better smarten up a bit. That’s why I’ve got this frock on’.⁵³ Amanda’s idea of ‘smartening up’ is associated with old-fashioned clothing and hairstyle, linking her ‘smartened up’ appearance with a recognisably obsolete model of hyperfemininity. The word ‘costume’ is used repeatedly to describe Amanda’s clothing, here and in a later scene during which she wears a

⁵⁰ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 21-22.

⁵¹ Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 81.

⁵² Margery Allingham, *Sweet Danger* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 62-63.

⁵³ Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 65.

‘costume...consist[ing] of a bathing dress and a pair of ragged flannel trousers lifted from Hal’s cupboard’.⁵⁴ Here, with her bathing dress and her brother’s well-worn trousers, Amanda has irreverently put together particularly feminine and masculine pieces of clothing. The mischievous mixing of strange combinations of clothing and the frequent association of Amanda’s outfits with ‘costume’ reveals an artificiality in visual gender categories that allows her to test the boundaries of modern femininity. Amanda’s choice of work also bends traditional gender categories; she is a competent mechanic who later becomes a professional engineer. This play with gendered activities and appearance is not restricted to Amanda; one scene in *Sweet Danger* includes Champion making a particularly memorable entrance dressed in clothing that belongs to Amanda’s elderly aunt, having just engaged in a shooting skirmish with an intruder.⁵⁵ The gender flexibility allowed to both Champion and Amanda suggests the possibility of them forming a modern relationship in which prescribed gender roles do not restrict either party’s ability to exercise agency.⁵⁶

From the beginning, Amanda and Champion’s partnership is surprisingly equal, but the balance of power is usually weighted in Champion’s favour. In *Sweet Danger*, Champion refers to Amanda as his ‘lieut’ (lieutenant) for the first time, coining a nickname that will last throughout their relationship.⁵⁷ Despite Champion’s efforts to allow her to assist him while keeping her in her (feminine) place, Amanda spiritedly refuses to be left out of the action when Champion tries to exclude her from facing dangerous situations. In one instance, Amanda protests, ‘You’ll never do it all alone without me...I think you’ve bitten

⁵⁴ Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 178.

⁵⁵ Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, pp. 185-86.

⁵⁶ The whimsical tone of the novel allows this flexibility; Geraldine Perriam posits that *Sweet Danger* is essentially set up like a fairy tale, but a fairy tale in which ‘the author allows the hero to “get his girl” as convention demands’ while also providing ‘greater possibilities for both hero and heroine by allowing them to act outside narrow gender stereotypes, both by their actions and by their contrast with other characters’. Geraldine Perriam, ‘Sex, *Sweet Danger* and the Fairy Tale’, *Clues* 23.1(2004), p. 46. The nature of the gender-bending roles assumed by Amanda and Champion also evokes a pantomime in which the character of the principal boy is played by a female actor in drag and the character of the dame is played by a male actor in drag.

⁵⁷ Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 81.

off more than you can chew'.⁵⁸ Her refusal to accept his authority as a detective and a man prompts Campion to comment ironically:

I was going to take you into partnership as soon as you were over school age...but I'm hanged if I shall now...You ought to look on me with reverence. You ought to see me as the hand of fate, a deity moving in a mysterious way.⁵⁹

A similar scene occurs in *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938), in which Campion remarks, 'I don't like this show, Amanda. I'd feel much happier if you were out of it. You don't mind, do you?'.⁶⁰ Amanda responds by laughing: 'I'm the only disinterested intelligence in the whole outfit. My motive is nice clean curiosity. I'm valuable'.⁶¹ Amanda never doubts her own ability to be an active partner in the relationship; her irreverent response to Campion's attempts to push her into a more passive role questions the conventionally masculine, self-sufficient stereotype of the sole detective figure. Instead of attempting to assert any kind of authority over Amanda in these situations, Campion accepts her right to be present and active after his initial half-hearted protests. In *Sweet Danger*, he even gives her his gun – a phallic symbol of detective authority – and does not question her ability to use it, implicitly acknowledging her agency:

Mr. Campion took his revolver from his coat pocket and handed it to her...She rose cautiously to her feet, slipped the gun in her jacket pocket, and turned towards the house. Then, looking back suddenly, she stopped and kissed him unromantically on the nose.⁶²

Nicola Humble argues that beneath the 'comradely' relationship between the two is a 'strong emotional subtext' which is 'unspoken' and that this 'reticence' is a modern way of conveying 'emotional and...romantic authenticity'.⁶³ Their interaction with each other is characterised by nonflirtatious banter and easy companionship that suggests something like a homosocial bond, separating them from overwrought romantic clichés and therefore

⁵⁸ Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 197.

⁵⁹ Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 197.

⁶⁰ Margery Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 214.

⁶¹ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 214.

⁶² Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 207.

⁶³ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 210.

from the stereotypical gendered responses of a traditional romance. At the end of *Sweet Danger*, Amanda proposes to Champion a combination of partnership and romantic relationship in conspicuously unromantic language: ‘Don’t be frightened...I’m not proposing marriage to you. But I thought you might consider me as a partner in the business later on...I don’t want to go to finishing school, you know’.⁶⁴ Amanda’s rejection of ‘cake love’, or overly emotive romantic love, at the end of *The Fashion in Shrouds* is also typical of her pragmatic approach to their relationship: ‘Cake makes some people sick...I’ll tell you what we’ll do, we’ll pop this to-morrow and buy some apples’. Relieved, Champion replies, ‘Do you know, Amanda, I’m not sure that “Comfort” isn’t your middle name’.⁶⁵ Champion and Amanda’s seemingly unfussy, non-sexually charged dealings with each other represent one way of negotiating a modern relationship that is not dependent upon the gender-coded script of a conventional romance. However, the companionate nature of their relationship is contingent upon the absence of sexual desire evident in their dealings with each other. Like Alleyn and Troy, Champion and Amanda must revert to enacting conventional gender roles before they are allowed to marry, and this occurs when they abandon their ‘comfortably’ desexualised ideal.

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

Every time he set eyes on [Amanda] she became dearer and dearer to him...She looked very young and very intelligent, but not, he thought with sudden satisfaction, clever. A dear girl. *The girl*, in fact. His sense of possession was tremendous. It was the possessiveness of the child, of the savage, of the dog, unreasonable and unanswerable.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Allingham, *Sweet Danger*, p. 250.

⁶⁵ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 288.

⁶⁶ Margery Allingham, *Traitor’s Purse* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1989), p. 47.

Losing his memory has given Campion the licence to assume an aggressive, sexually dominant masculinity in his attitude to Amanda; the comparison of his feelings to those of a ‘child, savage, or dog’ implies that this type of masculinity is innate and has nothing to do with ‘reason’. It is implied that Campion has simply realised how much Amanda means to him, but his memory loss has proven to be an easy way out of negotiating a modern relationship that relies on equal partnership. Gill Plain has noted that in Dorothy L. Sayers’s work, the Second World War had the effect of influencing a return to the safety of traditional gender roles, ‘so that otherness and other debates [could] be put aside in order to concentrate on the priority of conflict’.⁶⁷ Certainly, the wartime setting and anxious tone of *Traitor’s Purse* significantly differs from earlier novels in the Campion series such as the fantasy-adventure *Sweet Danger*, with its whimsical plot that allows gender flexibility for both Campion and Amanda. The flexible gender roles they have assumed throughout their courtship fail to carry over into the reality of their wartime marriage, and Campion and Amanda must fall back on the paradigm of dominant masculinity and submissive femininity in order to reach the culmination of the romance plot. The subdued sexual tension that characterised their relationship before *Traitor’s Purse* is now supplanted by Campion’s clichéd sexual jealousy, which makes him act on his feelings for Amanda, who is herself acting completely against her clearly-stated distaste for ‘cake love’ by becoming besotted with Lee Aubrey, the man who turns out to be the villain of the story. This trite love triangle suggests the need to resort to the model of a conventional romance and its accompanying gender stereotypes to bring about Campion and Amanda’s reconciliation at the end of the novel.

⁶⁷ Gill Plain, *Women’s Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 57.

After their marriage, Campion leaves to fight in the Second World War and the next time he and Amanda see each other is three years later, at the end of *Coroner's Pidgin* (1945). That they meet at the end of the novel is significant; Campion is on leave and spends the entire novel trying to solve a case quickly so that he can return to Amanda, who plays no role in the investigation. When Campion finally reaches home, the first person he sees is not Amanda but his three-year-old son, whom he has never met. Amanda's first line in the novel is also its last, when she says 'Hullo...Meet my war-work'.⁶⁸ As an engineer, Amanda could have been making a direct contribution to the war, but motherhood has relegated her to a passive, domestic role both in the conflict and in her previous detecting partnership with Campion. By referring to her son as 'work', Amanda does make a gesture towards positing motherhood as an active and valid profession, but since she is not present in the narrative while she is mothering this encouraging thought is somewhat negated.⁶⁹ Campion and Amanda's relationship, which began with the promise of equal partnership symbolised by their ambivalent gender roles, has settled into the comfortable resolution of a traditional marriage, with husband and wife occupied in separate, gendered spheres as Campion continues in his detective role and Amanda is consigned to the absolute periphery of his investigation's narrative.

⁶⁸ Margery Allingham, *Coroner's Pidgin* (William Heinemann Ltd, 1945), p. 227.

⁶⁹ Amanda's reference to her son as 'war-work' is supported by the social climate with regard to mothers in post-war Britain. Denise Riley writes of British pronatalism in the 1930s and 1940s that 'The temporary coincidence of verbal object – the mother – in the diction of population policies, of social-democratic "progressiveness", and of women's labour organisations brought about an emphasis on the mother as real worker in the home, equal or indeed greater in 'value' than the waged woman worker. In all this, the mother who did go out to work, and who consequently had especial needs, became an impossibility, regarded by no-one'. Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 152. This ideology of motherhood can clearly be seen in the portrayal of Amanda's resignation from her engineering job and absence from her position as detective partner to her husband in favour of motherhood, and also in Christie's Tuppence Beresford, who ceases her detective work when she becomes pregnant and resumes after her children are grown and have left home. The difference between the two is that in Amanda's case the detective narratives featuring her husband continue in her absence and in Tuppence's case the narratives cease for the duration of her domestic obligations and resume when she is 'free' to take up detection as a profession again. With Sayers's Harriet Vane, who is depicted as having divided her attention between work and family, the issue is for the most part avoided since Harriet's work as a novelist does not require her to physically leave the home.

Dorothy L. Sayers's Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey have a relationship with a similar trajectory. Like Amanda Fitton and Albert Campion, their courtship involves a detective collaboration that leads to a romantic partnership. Of all the detective couples, Harriet and Peter are perhaps the most explicitly concerned with issues of equality and individualism within a romantic pairing. The way these concerns are dealt with in the context of this particular couple has been criticised for being overly idealised, particularly with relation to the well-known proposal scene at the end of *Gaudy Night* (1935) in which Peter asks Harriet to marry him and she responds affirmatively with the Latin words used to confer Oxford degrees.⁷⁰ Nicola Humble calls this scene 'unintentionally farcical' but admits 'it is a fantasy...of a union of equals, of a great woman finding one of the few available great men to match her'.⁷¹ Carolyn Heilbrun praises the scene for its rewriting of a conventionally hackneyed romantic ending:

As Sayers portrayed love in the engagement of Harriet and Peter, she did not do so through any capitulation of Harriet's such as popular fiction and great literature have long offered us. Rather, Peter gains her consent in the words of the great, long-male, ceremony of the granting of degrees.⁷²

Nevertheless, Harriet and Peter's relationship is one with an obviously dominant partner – Peter. From his dramatic role in gaining Harriet's acquittal for murder in *Strong Poison* (1929) to his explication at the end of *Gaudy Night* when he pieces together the information Harriet has gathered, Peter is always shown to be the more powerful detective figure.⁷³ This does not mean, however, that the gender positions they occupy remain stable throughout their relationship. One way in which conventional gender positions in Harriet and Peter's relationship are subverted is through the power of the gaze, which is reversed in *Gaudy Night* to put Peter in the role of desired object. Several critics have pointed out

⁷⁰ Peter asks, 'Placetne, magistra?' and Harriet answers, 'Placet'. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 557.

⁷¹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 221-22.

⁷² Carolyn Heilbrun, *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women: Feminist Essays on Literature* (London: Women's Press, 1991), p. 256.

⁷³ *Strong Poison* is discussed in detail in Chapter II, and the explicit conflict between marriage and career in *Gaudy Night* is examined in Chapter IV.

that in *Gaudy Night* the moment of Harriet's realisation that she is sexually attracted to Peter comes when she is avidly studying his facial features while he is reading and unaware of her visual examination.⁷⁴ Peter also becomes the object of Harriet's gaze in *Have His Carcase* (1932) when the two are swimming. At this moment, Harriet reflects that '[Peter] strips better than I should have expected...Better shoulders than I realized, and, thank Heaven, calves to his legs'.⁷⁵ Harriet's candid appraisal of Peter's physical assets puts her in the conventionally masculine subject position and places Peter in the feminine position, as his body is regarded for its sexual potential.

Gill Plain argues that Harriet moves

from her 'feminine' position of absolute helplessness in *Strong Poison* to a relatively masculine position of centrality in *Gaudy Night*. The result is the existence within the text of a counter-current running against the surface conformity of the romance plot.⁷⁶

Plain also cautions against viewing the marriage between the two as strictly conventional:

even the conformity of the Wimsey/Vane marriage is not straightforward. *Gaudy Night* posits a conflict between 'traditional' woman's devotion to her man and a non-gender-specific devotion to the intellect, and Harriet Vane's love story occupies an uneasy space between the two.⁷⁷

Harriet and Peter's marriage is, in some ways, a bow to the conventions of traditional romance plots, but it also reads as a sincere exploration of a modern companionate marriage and an attempt to negotiate a model for a relationship that is satisfying for both parties, but particularly for the woman. *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) does not begin with a wedding but with a gossipy series of letters written by various characters, including Lord Peter Wimsey's mother, the Dowager Duchess of Denver. In her diary, the Dowager

⁷⁴ Crystal Downing writes about this scene with relation to Mulvey's idea of the gaze in *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (2004), and both she and Carolyn Heilbrun (1991) point out that in *Gaudy Night* Peter is not only the eroticised object of Harriet's female gaze but also that of the women of Shrewsbury College. Harriet's observation of other women's appraisal of Peter makes Harriet recognise Peter's sexual potential.

⁷⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Have His Carcase* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 104.

⁷⁶ Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, p. 58.

⁷⁷ Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, p. 58.

Duchess describes Harriet's first visit to the London house where she and Peter will live after their honeymoon:

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

The Dowager Duchess acknowledges the power of a popular domestic ideal, but is firm about Harriet not needing to fulfil that ideal. In addition, the Dowager Duchess takes it for granted that Peter is the one who must not only provide but also 'make' a home for Harriet, casting Peter in the stereotypically feminine role of being in charge of the domestic space. However, Harriet and Peter's situation is exceptional – Peter's class status enables the couple to hire servants to fulfil the domestic tasks that Harriet might otherwise be expected to perform. Nevertheless, Peter is also depicted as supportive of Harriet's work, which indicates the possibility of a companionate relationship in which each member of the couple encourages the other in their individual interests.

Busman's Honeymoon is significant in that it goes beyond the traditional denouement of a romance plot, the wedding, in the way described by DuPlessis, and attempts to depict realistically the tensions involved in negotiating gender roles within a modern marriage. Harriet and Peter are both sexually and emotionally satisfied with each other, but they are still tentatively trying to work out the evolving nature of their relationship. When their 'busman's honeymoon' commences with the discovery of the murdered body of their new house's previous owner, Mr. Noakes, Harriet and Peter are initially shown to be equally matched in detective skill. As they attempt to reconstruct what the murder weapon may have been, both make valuable contributions to the

⁷⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 16.

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

⁷⁹ Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, p. 152.

⁸⁰ Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, p. 136.

⁸¹ Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, p. 142.

⁸² Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, p. 393.

⁸³ Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, p. 451.

not as wife and partner, but as mother to Peter in order to preserve the ideal of marriage as partnership.

Harriet's relegation to the domestic periphery is apparent when she appears very briefly after giving birth to her first child in the short story 'The Haunted Policeman' (1939), in which she is rendered passive by her physical state and Peter solves a case alone. In the case of Harriet and Peter, the 'domestic gap' evident in many detective and romantic partnerships where the woman is sidelined by motherhood is not as evident, as *Busman's Honeymoon* is the final novel in the Wimsey series. However, one notable glimpse of life after parenthood for the couple appears in the short story 'Talboys' (1942). The story involves Harriet and Peter's small son Bredon who is unjustly accused of stealing peaches from a neighbour's tree. The case itself is benignly domestic in nature – there is no danger and the 'crime' is hardly legally punishable. This renders Harriet's presence in the story safe within the context of her role; she can potentially be both domestic and active in detection. However, this is not how the story plays out. Peter again assumes the role of sole detective figure, but this time he has a new partner: his son, Bredon. Peter is working to absolve Bredon of stealing the peaches, a scenario that mirrors the plot of *Strong Poison*, in which Peter's investigation saves Harriet from the conviction for murder. While Peter is off detecting, Harriet is preoccupied with other things:

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

Continuing the trend that begins in *Busman's Honeymoon*, Harriet no longer functions in the role of partner, but that of mother. One positive aspect of this scenario is that Harriet has been able to negotiate a role within which she can still actively pursue her profession,

⁸⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Talboys', *Lord Peter: The Complete Lord Peter Wimsey Stories* (New York: Perennial, 2001), pp. 462-63.

‘three months behind on her contract’ or not. ‘Talboys’ attempts realistically to present a solution to the problem of reconciling an emotionally satisfying career and family life, but this combination fails when it comes to depicting marriage as an equal partnership. The end of the story involves Peter and Bredon teaming up in mischief to place a snake in the bed of an irritating houseguest, and they exclude Harriet from their plan. The father and son partnership replaces that of husband and wife, placing a patriarchal and hierarchical model of detective partnership over the establishment of a professional and personal collaboration of male and female equals.

3. ‘Happily Ever Afterwards’: Agatha Christie’s Tommy and Tuppence

The couple that perhaps comes closest to achieving an equal partnership in both their detective and personal lives is Agatha Christie’s Tommy and Tuppence Beresford. Some critics have dismissed the Tommy and Tuppence stories as ‘obvious’⁸⁵ and ‘undoubtedly weaker than the Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple stories’.⁸⁶ Jessica Mann even specifically refers to Tuppence as ‘embarrassingly fatuous’.⁸⁷ The narratives featuring Tommy and Tuppence are undoubtedly whimsical – the infantilised names and role-playing that characterise Tommy and Tuppence and the far-fetched plots of many of the stories are more suggestive of popular adventure stories than crime novels. However, these elements also enable the relationship between Tommy and Tuppence to match a companionate ideal in a way that many other detective marriages do not. Fortunately, other critics have seen the stories’ potential for depicting a companionate relationship in which the woman initiates the action as much as or even more than the man. For instance, Merja Makinen points out that ‘Tuppence is...independent and self-reliant and the relationship between her

⁸⁵ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 93.

⁸⁶ T.J. Binyon, *Murder Will Out: The Detective in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 68.

⁸⁷ Mann, *Deadlier Than the Male*, p. 105.

and Tommy is overtly constructed as one of equality',⁸⁸ and Craig and Cadogan write that 'Tuppence's fluffiness...turns out to be deceptive. She frequently ferrets out the clue in whatever case she and Tommy are investigating'.⁸⁹ Indeed, within their companionate marriage, Tuppence is the partner who spiritedly keeps up the momentum in both their professional and personal lives, constantly pushing Tommy into modernity. When they bump into each other as old acquaintances at the beginning of *The Secret Adversary* (1922), Tuppence insists that since they are both hard up for money they should each pay for their own tea: 'My dear child...there is nothing I do not know about the cost of living...we will each of us pay for our own. That's that!'.⁹⁰ Tuppence's no-nonsense refusal to accept the social convention of a man paying for her tea, and her reference to Tommy as 'my dear child', place Tuppence in an active role – even a leadership role – from the beginning. While they are having tea, Tuppence is the one who comes up with the framework for the money-making scheme she terms their 'joint venture'.⁹¹ When they are warned by their new employer to take care with the case they are hired to investigate, Tommy responds, 'I'll look after her, sir', while Tuppence, 'resenting the manly assertion', retorts: 'And *I'll* look after you'.⁹² Fortunately, Tommy as well as Tuppence is shown to defend the terms of gender equality within the relationship. In *N or M?* (1941), after they have been married for years, Tommy firmly asserts their partnership; when told 'I suppose even you couldn't persuade your wife to keep out of danger', Tommy responds:

'I don't know that I really would want to do that...Tuppence and I, you see, aren't on those terms. We go into things – together!' In his mind was that phrase, uttered years ago, at the close of an earlier war. A *joint venture*...That was what his life with Tuppence had been and would always be – a Joint Venture.⁹³

⁸⁸ Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke: New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 29-30.

⁸⁹ Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 80.

⁹⁰ Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), p. 14.

⁹¹ Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, p. 23.

⁹² Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, p. 62.

⁹³ Agatha Christie, *N or M?* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981), pp. 43-44.

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

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

⁹⁴ Agatha Christie, *Partners in Crime* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1989), p. 15.

⁹⁵ Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 34.

expectations of society in general and serves to call attention to the inherent sexism', as it plays on assumptions about gendered roles in the workplace in order to deceive suspects and clients.⁹⁶

Throughout the novels and stories involving Tommy and Tuppence, Tuppence functions to constantly question traditional gender roles. At the beginning of *Partners in Crime*, she demonstrates the unrealistic nature of the conventional romance plot's 'fairy tale ending': 'So Tommy and Tuppence were married...and lived happily ever afterwards. It is extraordinary...how different everything always is from what you think it is going to be'.⁹⁷ Tuppence's frustration stems from the fact that she is bored with housework and 'wants something to do so badly': 'Twenty minutes' work after breakfast every morning keeps the flag going to perfection'.⁹⁸ Tuppence's longing for activity and her honest assessment of the amount of time and effort it takes to fulfil her domestic role in a modern household of two people highlights the need for a reassessment of roles assigned in traditional gendered spheres.⁹⁹ In *N or M?*, an exasperated Tuppence again rails against enforced inaction, this time not only because of sexism but also because of ageism. She calls herself 'a poor, pushing, tiresome, middle-aged woman who won't sit at home quietly and knit as she ought to do', and asks Tommy, 'Are we past doing things? *Are* we? Or is it only that every one keeps insinuating that we are'.¹⁰⁰ Tuppence's questioning of social norms highlights the injustice of arbitrary limitations based on negative stereotypes of gender and age. Her responses to what could be seen as the restrictive roles of marriage and motherhood also represent an attempt to redefine these institutions as including the potential for agency. When she and Tommy agree to marry, Tuppence enthusiastically

⁹⁶ Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 31.

⁹⁷ Christie, *Partners in Crime*, p. 7.

⁹⁸ Christie, *Partners in Crime*, p. 8.

⁹⁹ As discussed in Chapter I, modern labour-saving household technology, as well as the decreasing size of the typical household, made it easier for middle-class women to do household chores without outside help or servants, but it also meant that housewives were increasingly socially isolated.

¹⁰⁰ Christie, *N or M?*, pp. 6-7.

says, 'What fun it will be...Marriage is called all sorts of things, a haven, a refuge, and a crowning glory, and a state of bondage, and lots more. But do you know what I think it is?...A sport!'.¹⁰¹ Tuppence dismisses the idealising, solemn or derogatory language commonly associated with marriage in favour of a playful, modern term that suggests action and even sexuality, thereby redefining marriage as an activity voluntarily engaged in for pleasure and excitement. When Tuppence tells Tommy that they must give up the detective business, it is not because she is overcome with caution after a narrow escape from death, as he assumes. Instead, she lets him know that they face a new challenge: parenthood. Tuppence says, 'I've got something better to do...Something ever so much more exciting...I'm talking...of Our Baby. Wives don't whisper nowadays. They shout. OUR BABY! Tommy, isn't everything marvellous?'.¹⁰² Tuppence's retirement from detection is not a rejection of an active mode of femininity; she constructs her impending motherhood as moving on to yet another stimulating new endeavour.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the fact remains that the couple is not depicted in print again until *N or M?*, in which their children are grown. Tommy and Tuppence's narrative is disrupted, as is their business partnership, when they separate into gendered public and private spheres for the duration of the time their children are living at home, but they significantly leave detection together just as they enter back into it together. Neither is ever the sole detective figure; their partnership in both life and detection stands as the most ideally equal among Golden Age detective couples. The domestic gap common to all these narratives is problematic in terms of depicting marriage as an equal partnership, but Tommy and Tuppence come closest to reaching the ideal of a modern, more equal relationship between the sexes. These narratives' ambivalent portrayal of gender roles should not necessarily be taken as a

¹⁰¹ Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, p. 400.

¹⁰² Christie, *Partners in Crime*, p. 224.

¹⁰³ Susan Rowland writes that 'Tuppence's vigorous personality allows the novel to represent pregnancy as a continuum of self-fulfilling adventures within traditional feminine domesticity'. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, p. 158.

failure, but rather as a by-product of attempts to negotiate changing ideals of love, marriage and domesticity and the gender constructions that accompany them. Available models of femininity allow for a certain amount of gender flexibility, but the conservative resolutions of the romance plot and the crime genre, as well as modern views on the duties of motherhood, demand that women partners must spend at least the duration of their active motherhood restricted to a domestic ideal. Chapter IV will discuss the ways in which these limitations inform constructions of femininity in the public sphere of the workplace.

CHAPTER IV

LADIES OF A MODERN WORLD: EDUCATION AND WORK

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

Despite such conflict, crime novels often explore the positive implications to be found for women in the workplace. Adopting the profession of detection allows women such as Sayers's Miss Climpson and Wentworth's Miss Silver a way to use their talents to

earn a living and complicate the label of 'superfluous' women that has been assigned to them. Being a professional detective also makes it possible for a married woman like Tuppence Beresford to work on an equal footing with her male counterpart, Tommy, as well as avoid (albeit temporarily) falling into the narrow purview of stereotypical domesticity. Though detection is an obvious profession for women characters in crime fiction, it is by no means the only option offered. Women feature as advertising executives, archaeologists, cleaners, engineers, fashion designers, fashion models, nurses, professors, saleswomen, secretaries, teachers and writers, to name but a few. These varied occupations reflect both typical and atypical jobs for women, but what many depictions of working women have in common is the expression not only of the need but of the desire to work. The individualistic ideal of making a living at and achieving success in a job suited to one's own talents is one that manifests in many depictions of working women in Golden Age crime novels. The most obvious expression of such an idea can be found in the novels and essays of Dorothy L. Sayers, who often explicitly engages with the 'problem' of women in the workplace. In her essay 'Are Women Human?' (1938), Sayers states that entering into debates about traditional gender divisions in employment and whether or not women should be allowed to join professions conventionally occupied by men is 'meaningless'.¹ Rather, Sayers argues, every person should have the opportunity to engage in whatever work suits their individual talents and tastes, no matter what that work might be:

If [men] are going to adopt the very sound principle that the job should be done by the person who does it best, then that rule must be applied universally...Once lay down the rule that the job comes first and you throw that job open to every individual, man or woman, fat or thin, tall or short, ugly or beautiful, who is able to do that job better than the rest of the world.²

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?', *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), pp. 21-22.

² Sayers, 'Are Women Human?', pp. 33-34.

The ideal of a non-gender-specific basis for professional achievement is evident not only in Sayers's work but also that of Margery Allingham, whose Amanda Fitton is the only woman in her workplace and is 'a pretty good engineer'.³ Characters such as Miss Climpson, Miss Silver, Sayers's crime writer Harriet Vane and Allingham's Amanda all represent the possibility of successful women working in male-dominated professions. Nevertheless, the fates of some of these women and the attitudes shown towards working women are often contradictory. The expectation that women will fall into the 'natural' occupation of marriage and childbearing eventually eclipses their desire for a career, and the resulting conservative resolutions provide a 'safe' ideal that encompasses both possibilities for women in the public sphere and the inevitable move into domestic roles.⁴

As discussed in the previous chapter, Amanda Fitton gives up her skilled work with aeroplanes during the Second World War to focus on what she defines as another type of 'war work' – raising her son. Though not pushed as entirely out of the workplace as Amanda, in the short story 'Talboys' Harriet Vane's attention to her work is shown to be compromised by her duties as a mother. In a particularly disturbing scene that will be examined later in this chapter, Val, Albert Campion's couturier sister who features as a suspect in Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938), cheerfully surrenders all of her considerable professional accomplishments and potential in order to become a submissive wife to a man who earlier in the novel has been pursuing her friend. In the case of Wentworth's Miss Silver novels, though Miss Silver herself is in business as a private detective who seems to be at no loss for word-of-mouth clients, the plot inevitably includes an unhappy young working woman character for whom work is represented as not only a necessity but a source of exhaustion or a state of purgatory before the 'real' satisfaction of

³ Margery Allingham, *The Fashion In Shrouds* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 70.

⁴ Ross McKibbin writes that 'one factor' in 'the isolation of the middle-class housewife within a highly routine-bound domesticity...was the near-universal withdrawal of middle-class women from the labour market – willingly or unwillingly – on marriage or at first pregnancy'. Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 82.

marriage.⁵ That some women characters are allowed to achieve professional success is positive in presenting the possibility of moving towards an equal place with men in the public sphere of the workplace, but these examples demonstrate that novels depicting working women are sometimes not straightforwardly supportive of such an agenda – they are often fraught with problematic conflict between an active ideal of women pursuing careers that suit their talents and interests and the domesticity that was still considered to be the ultimate feminine achievement.

Of course, working women are not always simply the products of a spontaneous choice and pursuit of a profession; increased access to education plays a significant role in shaping women's public presence, and schools and universities are often used as settings in Golden Age crime novels. Not only are such places ideal as the 'closed' space with a limited list of suspects essential to many plots, but they also provide the opportunity to explore and develop ideas about women's education through depictions of women students, women teachers and the schools themselves. As many of these representations reflect, obtaining an education, particularly a university education, was by no means uncomplicated for women in the first half of the twentieth century. June Purvis points out that 'the struggle of women to win access to degree examinations, and to be awarded a degree, on equal terms with men, was a painstakingly slow process'.⁶ Women were not allowed to obtain degrees from Oxford University until 1920, and at Cambridge University, though they had been 'allowed...to sit the degree examinations' since 1881, they were not eligible to be full members of the university (and thus obtain degrees that

⁵ Hat saleswoman Margaret Langton in Wentworth's *Grey Mask* (1929) is depicted as underpaid, malnourished and still pining after a long-ago broken engagement with the man with whom she reunites at the end of the novel, while exhausted and grieving fashion model Marion Grey of *The Case is Closed* (1937) enters into her career only out of financial necessity when her husband is falsely accused of murder and imprisoned. *Lonesome Road's* (1939) Rachel Treherne inherits the job of managing her dead father's fortune and charitable interests but is regretfully too busy for romantic interests until she meets a man who encourages her to divide the money among relatives, reduce her workload and have a family.

⁶ Jane Purvis, *A History of Women's Education in England* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 116.

gave them the same status as male graduates) until 1948. Though other universities besides these two most prestigious ones began to award women degrees in the late nineteenth century, Purvis cautions that ‘this does not mean, of course, that women were fully accepted on equal terms with men nor fully integrated into the university structure’.⁷ Throughout the interwar period and beyond, women remained underrepresented at universities; in fact, ‘the relative number of women at university was actually lower in 1950 than in 1920’.⁸ Susan Leonardi outlines a debate during the early years of considering degrees for women in which learning was thought by some to be ‘dangerous’ for women because it might ‘make them dissatisfied with their limited role [of wife- and motherhood] or unfit...for that role altogether’, not to mention that giving women the same education as men could be seen as ‘question[ing] [men’s] monopoly on production, threaten[ing] to undermine their support system, and, worst of all, cast[ing] doubt on their necessity’.⁹ Leonardi argues that ‘the discourse of the debate makes clear that some such fear, some such sense of the danger of women rising up and taking over, is never far from the surface’.¹⁰ The communal nature of many women’s educational facilities is a convenient point at which much anxiety about educating women is directed. Nina Auerbach, for example, writes of the ‘recurrent literary image’ of women’s communities as:

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

⁷ Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England*, p. 116.

⁸ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 262.

⁹ Susan J. Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 2.

¹⁰ Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees*, p. 2.

¹¹ Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 5.

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

1. 'In Her Own Place': Successful Communities of Women in *Gaudy Night* and *St Peter's Finger*

Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night* is a novel that deals explicitly with fears about communities of women; however, instead of confirming stereotypes about the psychological 'damage' inherent in living in such a community, *Gaudy Night* uses the assumption of a repressed, 'unnatural' educated woman as the inevitable unhinged villain to manipulate expectations and, in doing so, expose and dismantle the stereotype.¹² As the

¹² Nina Auerbach writes, 'The stereotype of the "crazy spinster" is both the serpent in the garden and the pivot of the mystery, and Sayers depends on her readers' complicity in it to befog the clues that are even more transparently laid out than the clues in the other Wimsey books are; in this case, unravelling the very easy mystery requires not so much chess-game ingenuity as it does a freedom from sexual myths that few novelists can expect to find in their readers'. Nina Auerbach, 'Dorothy Sayers and the Amazons', *Feminist Studies* 3.1/2 (1975), p. 57.

novel begins, crime novelist and Oxford graduate Harriet Vane is traveling with some trepidation to her old Oxford college, Shrewsbury, where she will attend a ‘gaudy’ and be reunited after many years with her former lecturers and fellow students. Harriet feels compelled to revisit Shrewsbury College after receiving a letter from an ill friend who wants to see her, though she feels defensive about others’ perceptions of her since she was scandalously – though unjustly – accused of murdering her lover. Before Harriet arrives, she worries about the potential reactions to her colourful past but derives comfort and self-assurance from reflecting on her status as an Oxford graduate:

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

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

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

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

Composing the sonnet represents a different kind of creativity from the crime novels and occasional detection through which Harriet makes her living. Finding a balance between

¹³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 269.

satisfying work and a fulfilling personal life is central to the novel, and Harriet's sonnet, which pays tribute to her love of the university, is her first step towards reconciling these aspects. Peter later finds and finishes the sonnet, mirroring the way he will later perform the traditional detective's explication at the end of the novel after Harriet's investigative legwork. These collaborations between Harriet and Peter inextricably weave together intellect, detection and romantic love, and provide an idealistic attempt to present their relationship as a marriage of equals. As several critics have pointed out, the relationship is only equal to a certain degree; Peter is and continues to be the dominant partner, retaining the detective's authority to put together the pieces of information Harriet has uncovered in her investigation.¹⁵ To Harriet, though, the possibilities for partnership with Peter that emerge when they are both at Oxford convince her of the potential for an acceptably companionate relationship between them. When Peter mistakenly walks off with Harriet's academic gown, she thinks to herself, "Oh well, it doesn't matter. We're much of a height and mine's pretty wide on the shoulders, so it's exactly the same thing." And then it struck her as strange that it should be the same thing'.¹⁶ Harriet's reflection on her and Peter's accidental exchange of gowns signifies her new-found perspective; the university represents a common ground between them into which traditional gender roles within heterosexual romantic relationships do not come into play, and this is the factor that enables their agreement to marry – an agreement forged in the words of the conferral of Oxford degrees. Though the university system and marriage can be seen as representing patriarchal institutions, Harriet suggests the possibility of redefining an active and fulfilling role for women within the rigid structures of both.

¹⁵ Cadogan and Craig write that '[Harriet is] successful [in her investigation], but only up to a point; having created her detective-hero, Dorothy Sayers is obliged to reserve the moment of triumph for him'. Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 192. Maureen T. Reddy points out that 'even in *Gaudy Night*, which centres on Harriet's experiences, it is Peter who finally solves the mystery'. Maureen T. Reddy, *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel* (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 23.

¹⁶ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 343.

As an Oxford graduate who has achieved considerable professional success, Harriet is used to illustrate that although education is important, what one does with that education is also significant; as the Dean points out, ‘After all, it’s the work you are doing that really counts, isn’t it?’¹⁷ Early on in the novel, Harriet explains why she is able to continue to write crime novels after nearly being hanged for a murder she did not commit:

I know what you’re thinking – that anybody with proper sensitive feelings would rather scrub floors for a living. But I should scrub floors very badly, and I write detective stories rather well. I don’t see why proper feeling should prevent me from doing my proper job.¹⁸

Harriet champions the idea that people should engage in the professions that suit them, regardless of how those professions have traditionally been gendered; as she tells the young daughter of disapproving scout and (as yet undiscovered) poison pen letter writer Annie, ‘lots of girls do boys’ jobs nowadays’.¹⁹ This is a position that is held not only by Harriet but by the other women of Shrewsbury as well; Miss Lydgate, Harriet’s former English tutor, tells her, ‘I think it’s so nice that our students go out and do such varied and interesting things, provided they do them well. And I must say, most of our students do do exceedingly good work along their own lines’.²⁰ Though education for women is undoubtedly cast in a positive light in *Gaudy Night*, the notion that a job needs to be suited to the person performing it is also central to the novel. For women, however, this ideal is often shown to be complicated by marriage. Harriet’s struggle with this particular combination is not the only situation in *Gaudy Night* through which these issues are explored. One of the first people Harriet meets at the gaudy is former History student Phoebe Tucker, who has married an archaeologist. Phoebe and her husband work side by side and travel to sites together while their three children stay with ‘delighted

¹⁷ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 35.

¹⁹ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 272.

²⁰ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 46-47.

grandparents'.²¹ Phoebe's situation is particularly fortunate; she is relieved of the domestic duties that might otherwise prevent her from experiencing a fulfilling work life, yet she inhabits the unrealistic position of combining her 'natural' function as wife and mother with an enjoyable career outside the home. Though Phoebe is presented as not having lost herself in the duties of marriage and motherhood, the truth is that this has been possible because one of the factors in her happy marriage is a mutual enjoyment of her husband's work.

The relationship between Phoebe and her husband illustrates the ideal of companionate marriage; however, here, as in other examples of companionate marriage, including Harriet and Peter's, the balance of power between the two is skewed towards the husband. Phoebe has the inclination and the knowledge to be able to derive a satisfying job for herself from assisting her husband, but not all of Harriet's fellow students have been so fortunate. Another old acquaintance Harriet meets at the gaudy is Catherine Bendick, who is 'two years older than [Harriet], but...look[s] twenty'.²² During her time at Shrewsbury, Catherine had been 'very brilliant, very smart, very lively and the outstanding scholar of her year', but is now a 'drab', broken-down farmer's wife.²³ Harriet is shocked by the change in Catherine and, after hearing about the difficulties of Catherine's life on the farm, asks her why she did not 'take on some kind of writing or intellectual job and get someone else to do the manual work'.²⁴ Catherine responds, 'That's all very well...But one's rather apt to marry into somebody else's job'.²⁵ When Harriet leaves Catherine, she has 'a depressed feeling that she had seen a Derby winner making shift with a coal-cart'.²⁶ Harriet's idealistic insistence that a job should fit the person doing it is complicated by the

²¹ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 16.

²² Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 54.

²³ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 52.

²⁴ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 53.

²⁵ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 55.

²⁶ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 56.

real pressures on women to conform to traditional gender roles within marriage. Catherine's situation is presented in stark contrast to Phoebe's as a cautionary tale not only of what can happen when one takes on an unsuitable job, but also of the consequences of marrying an intellectually incompatible partner. A happy marriage is presented as one that fits the companionate ideal, but this does not mean that both partners occupy equal positions in the relationship. Rather, it is contingent upon whether a woman's professional interests mesh with those of her husband.²⁷ Though Harriet points out that Catherine could have chosen a more appropriate field, Catherine's response indicates that cultural expectations mean that this is not always a feasible option. Harriet's relationship with Peter, and Phoebe's with her husband, work as examples of companionate marriage because the women happen to do work that complements their husbands', but these successful marriages depend upon the women being fulfilled by a subordinate role in both the relationship and their husbands' occupations.

Central to *Gaudy Night* is the question of a woman's place – in education, in the workplace, and in family life – and how such roles are being renegotiated. *Gaudy Night* is an unusual crime novel in that the plot does not include a murder; the 'crime' involves vandalism and poison pen letters to various members of the college. The perpetrator is widely suspected to be one of Shrewsbury's female academics; the Dean's secretary, Mrs. Goodwin, remarks, 'The poor creature who does these things must be quite demented. Of

²⁷ Such power dynamics in a companionate marriage were praised in marriage guides at the time; in Theodoor H. van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, first published in 1928, the writer quotes the thoughts of 'Gina Lombroso, daughter and secretary of the famous anthropologist, Cesare Lombroso, wife of the historian, Guglielmo Ferrero, mother of two children, and herself a doctor (both of philology and medicine)' on her own experience of marriage: 'A man should make it his business to let his wife participate in his work, should take an interest in her difficulties, should guide her activities, reassure her timidities and doubts...there is no "man's job" in which a woman cannot help him, to some extent, materially or mentally; there is no terrifying anxiety and perplexity (of hers) which he could not dispel in a word. Let him give her a share in his work, let him take the trouble to understand and guide her, and she will believe that she is loved and appreciated, and she will be happy, whatever sacrifices may be demanded of her in return'. Theodoor H. van de Velde and Margaret Smyth, *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Heinemann Medical Books, 1965), p. 5.

course these disorders do tend to occur in celibate, or chiefly celibate communities. It is a kind of compensation, I suppose, for the lack of other excitements'.²⁸ The novel uses the assumption that women living in all-female communities are likely to have psychological issues stemming from sexual repression to obscure the identity of the true perpetrator and to make a point about the inaccuracy of widely accepted stereotypes.²⁹ In fact, the letter writer and vandal is Annie Wilson, a widow with two daughters who works as a scout at Shrewsbury and has a vendetta against Miss de Vine, a visiting scholar, because Miss de Vine had in the past exposed an act of academic misconduct perpetrated by Annie's historian husband, who committed suicide after being discovered. Annie herself actively attempts to throw suspicion on Miss de Vine in an early conversation with Harriet, when she alludes to the 'queerness' of 'clever ladies' before hinting that all the incidents had occurred 'since a certain person came into the college'.³⁰ Annie frequently and vehemently expresses the opinion that a woman's place is in the home, and as a result of her widowhood, she is viewed with sympathy from the beginning of the novel. Because of her conservative views and status as a widow and mother Annie is seen as a 'natural', 'feminine' woman and so is overlooked and unsuspected. Yet when Peter's nephew Saint-George stumbles upon her lurking around the college, Annie, who is dressed in black with her face hidden to conceal her identity, tells him, 'Go away. We murder beautiful boys like you and eat their hearts out'.³¹ Later, Harriet describes the perpetrator as having a 'grip

²⁸ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 238.

²⁹ Popular suspicion about the potential for sexual deviance resulting from living in same-sex communities is rooted in psychological theories such as Sigmund Freud's in his 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), in which he names three types of 'inversion', including 'contingent inversion': 'In that case, under certain external conditions – of which inaccessibility of any normal sexual object and imitation are the chief – they are capable of taking as their sexual object someone of their own sex'. Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 137. Though in *Gaudy Night* such stereotypes are dismissed, Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* directly engages with the 'dangers' of deviant sexuality assumed to originate from a same-sex community's isolation.

³⁰ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, pp. 42-43.

³¹ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 247.

like steel' and 'a most unfeminine vocabulary'.³² Marya McFadden argues, 'While Annie ideologically professes to be motivated by the desire to return women to their "proper place" in the home, ironically she herself is appropriating the masculine prerogative of aggression in her tactics'.³³ As the perpetrator, Annie creates an image that fits the stereotype of an 'unnatural' woman that she thinks will immediately draw suspicion to members of the college in order to implicate Miss de Vine. Thus, when her identity is revealed, both the stereotypes of the feminine, domestic mother figure and of the unstable, sexually repressed single career woman are destabilised by being proven false.

Annie is contrasted with the target of her wrath, Miss de Vine, who is the epitome of professionalism. Detached and rational, Miss de Vine puts intellectual values before emotion; when Annie asks if Miss de Vine considers 'breaking and killing' her husband to be 'a woman's job', Miss de Vine tells her, 'Most unhappily...it was my job'.³⁴ Miss de Vine will not shirk her professional responsibility to report a colleague's misconduct simply because he is a man who supports a family, but that does not mean that she did not find it unpleasant. Annie angrily responds,

A woman's job is to look after a husband and children. I wish I had killed you. I wish I could kill you all. I wish I could burn down this place and all the places like it – where you teach women to take men's jobs and rob them first and kill them afterwards.³⁵

The words Annie uses to describe her feelings are violent and active, images which clash with the ideal of loving domesticity enshrined in her perception of 'a woman's job'. Making her marriage, and later the memory of her marriage, her job is what has made

³² Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 514.

³³ Marya McFadden, 'Queerness at Shrewsbury: Homoerotic Desire in *Gaudy Night*, *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.2 (2000), p. 369.

³⁴ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 539.

³⁵ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 539.

Annie unstable, which contrasts with the stereotype of the repressed career woman who develops psychological issues as a result of choosing a career over domesticity.³⁶

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

The one thing which frustrated the whole attack from the first to last was the remarkable solidarity and public spirit displayed by your college as a body. I should think that was the last obstacle that [the perpetrator] expected to encounter in a community of women.³⁷

Peter's admiration of the community's loyalty and efficiency explicitly calls attention to the way it has challenged the expectation that professional women will be ruthless and unstable. Susan J. Leonardi writes that:

although the idealized academic haven of *Gaudy Night's* opening is continually attacked and modified by the novel's subsequent events, the community emerges sound and whole as one place in which stern adherence to intellectual integrity and insistence on the importance of one's work does not imply neglect of human needs and lack of compassion.³⁸

The women of Shrewsbury draw together and support each other in an atmosphere of paranoia and fear, dealing with the attacks with self-reliance and discretion. *Gaudy Night's* resolution points to the importance of individuality rather than being locked into rigid codes that only allow women (and men) to have one kind of 'proper' role.

Like *Gaudy Night*, Gladys Mitchell's *St Peter's Finger* (1938) takes place in a community of women within a larger, male-dominated institution. While *Gaudy Night* is set in a women's college at a prestigious university, *St Peter's Finger* takes place in a

³⁶ Susan J. Leonardi writes, 'Repressed passion may twist and warp a personality, but it is love, making another person one's job, that is truly dangerous, as Miss de Vine opines early in the novel. An educated woman, then, is less likely to be guilty of villainy of this devouring sort, "unnatural" though she may be'. *Dangerous By Degrees*, p. 92.

³⁷ Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p. 522.

³⁸ Leonardi, *Dangerous By Degrees*, p. 95.

Roman Catholic convent and school for girls. As the novel begins, the detective figure, psychologist Mrs. Bradley, is called upon to visit the convent and investigate the suspicious death of one of the school's young pupils. The girl, Ursula Doyle, is thought to have drowned herself, but Mrs. Bradley suspects that there is more to the death than is immediately apparent, and the nuns of St Peter's are eager to prove that Ursula did not commit the mortal sin of suicide. The press coverage of the incident has been 'highly-coloured' and scathing, exploiting commonly held negative opinions of convents and nuns.³⁹ Such media attention is also identified as something to be feared by the communities of women in *Gaudy Night* and *Miss Pym Disposes*. That this factor is specifically mentioned in all three novels is significant, though their treatment of the prospect is different. *Gaudy Night* and *Miss Pym Disposes* both regard publicity as something to be avoided at all costs, as it would inevitably involve reinforcing negative stereotypes of communities of women. When no attempt at a cover-up is made, as in *St Peter's Finger*, the exploitative media coverage would seem to confirm society's fears. The local people who live in the village near St Peter's take a dim view of the convent and its inhabitants, some even going so far as to vandalise the convent buildings after Ursula's mysterious death. Just before she makes her way to the convent, Mrs. Bradley meets an elderly villager who stops to gossip and calls convents 'death-traps', saying that nuns 'lure little children to their doom'.⁴⁰ His impression of the girl's death is that the supposedly cruel and avaricious nuns killed the child so that her cousin Ulrica, who is planning to become a nun, will inherit their wealthy grandfather's fortune and give it to the Catholic Church upon taking her vows. The only positive impression of nuns comes from Mrs. Bradley's French maid, Celestine, who tells her, 'Was I not taught by the good nuns everything that I know? More, too, which, alas! I have forgotten. Madame should

³⁹ Gladys Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger* (London: Sphere Books, Ltd., 1989), p. 15.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 20.

recuperate, after the long American tour, at a convent. It is incredible, the care that is given'.⁴¹ Celestine, who has actually spent time in a convent, has a more realistic idea of the positive potential of such communities, in contrast to widely held prejudices against Roman Catholic nuns in particular and self-sufficient communities of single women in general.⁴² Mrs. Bradley herself is aware of the misogyny and religious prejudice that fuels reactions to convents: 'People nearly always exaggerate when they write or talk about convents. I don't think we have the right to assume what has not been proved'.⁴³ Mrs. Bradley's level response to the publicity surrounding Ursula Doyle's suspicious death highlights common fears and assumptions, but in fact the nuns at St Peter's are shown to be gentle and nurturing with their pupils; Mrs. Bradley is told at the beginning of her investigations at the convent that 'as a special treat' the girls are sometimes taken to 'see the Mother Superior, who [gives] them sweets, and whom they [are] accustomed to address as Grandma'.⁴⁴ This and other frequent examples of the warmly familial atmosphere of the convent are at odds with the common assumption that nuns are frustrated single women whose rigid adherence to the harsher aspects of religious dogma leads them to mistreat the children in their care.

Though the nuns are separated from the outside world in their convent, they are by no means portrayed as lacking in secular understanding. Indeed, far from being a sequestered space for girls and women who commit themselves without having had life experiences, the convent of St Peter's is home to a surprisingly diverse combination of

⁴¹ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 18.

⁴² Tom Buchanan writes that 'estimated numbers of Catholics in England and Wales...rose from 1,890,018 in 1918 to 2,392,983 in 1945' and that most of this increase in population was due to Irish immigration. Tom Buchanan, 'Great Britain', in Tom Buchanan and Martin Conway (eds.), *Political Catholicism in Europe: 1918-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 249-50. The association of Catholicism with Irish immigrants, who were also primarily working class, would have been troubling within the context of the period's predominant conservative, middle-class hegemony of 'Englishness'. In addition to this, the stereotypes that existed about communities of women, including the idea that isolation from men led to lesbianism and mental disorders stemming from repressed sexuality, would also have been connected with convents.

⁴³ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 122.

talented and knowledgeable women from all walks of life. The Mother Superior is the 'daughter of a royal house', who is 'an intelligent and widely experienced woman' and 'had lived a brilliant, worldly life before her acceptance of the veil'.⁴⁵ One of the nuns, Sister St Bartholomew, is the former Rosa Cardosa, a famous actress who, as one of the other nuns explains to Mrs. Bradley, joined the convent after a fire burned down the theatre in which she had a financial stake. No matter what has brought the various women to the convent, they are given the freedom to exercise their unique skills in its context. Sister St Bartholomew has become legendary among the schoolgirls for her gruesome and highly entertaining accounts of the martyrdoms of various saints, which

were given by the old ex-actress with a lack of reticence which amounted to the Rabelaisian, and had stiffened the hair of many generations of girls, who, with the sadistic tendency of extreme youth, on the whole enjoyed them very much, but were not always edified by them in exactly the way that their mentors and preceptors might have wished.⁴⁶

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

⁴⁵ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 27.

group, creating a diverse community in which the members support each other and individuality is respected.

Ulrica Doyle, Ursula Doyle's cousin and her murderer, is piously religious and wishes to join the convent at the conclusion of her schooling, but the nuns (correctly) regard Ulrica's religious fanaticism as potentially unhealthy. Ulrica orchestrates her cousin's death so that their grandfather's fortune, which his favourite grandchild Ursula was set to inherit, will instead go to Ulrica and subsequently be passed on to the Church as a dowry. It is significant that Ulrica is the murderer; Mrs. Bradley's chauffeur, George, suggests Ulrica is 'ethereal', while the nuns, in contrast, are 'practical': '[Ulrica] seemed to me not of this world, madam. She reminds me of what I used to think nuns were like before we knew those here'.⁴⁷ Ulrica's invention of herself into the stereotypical image of a nun and her obsessive adherence to the wider institution of the Church alienates her from the community she so wishes to join – she commits the mortal sin of murder for the Church's financial gain instead of finding value in cultivating her own talents and using them to create a place for herself within the community. Rather than reporting Ulrica to the authorities for Ursula's murder, Mrs. Bradley ensures that the girl is sent to her grandfather in New York so that she can do no harm to her other cousin, Mary Maslin, who is also a student at the convent.⁴⁸ Ulrica's punishment is not to be handed over to the law but to be exiled from the community. The nuns of St Peter's are devoted to the Church, but their practical application of their faith is based not on the Church's inflexible rules but on their own experiences in the world outside the convent, which have produced in them both a shrewd knowledge of human nature and a compassionate interpretation of their religion, traits which the fanatical Ulrica is lacking. Like the community of women shown in *Gaudy*

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *St Peter's Finger*, p. 268.

⁴⁸ As in *Gaudy Night* and *Miss Pym Disposes*, the female perpetrator's punishment is dealt from within the community of women, indicating a rejection of the wider patriarchal authority of the law and the institutions of which the communities are a part.

Night, the convent of St Peter's is composed of a group of talented and intelligent women who are shown to confound popular negative stereotypes. The nuns represent a community in which individual proclivities are celebrated and seamlessly contribute to the community's function, and their convent presents an alternative to a heteronormative model of family and community that is subversive of both religious and secular patriarchal authority.

2. Quite Normal?: Stereotypes and Sexuality in *Miss Pym Disposes* and *Laurels Are Poison*

Josephine Tey's *Miss Pym Disposes* (1946) is set in an idyllic manor house in the English countryside that has been converted into Leys Physical Training College, a highly regarded educational facility for women who want to work as physical education teachers or in the medical field. Miss Lucy Pym, who becomes the detective figure, is summoned by the headmistress, an old schoolmate, to give a lecture on psychology. Though she is not formally trained in the subject, Miss Pym, a former schoolteacher, has recently written a popular psychological text after 'spen[d]ing all her spare time reading books on psychology' and disagreeing with them all.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, though Miss Pym's book is a bestseller, for practical purposes she is not shown to be particularly skillful in her new subject. She is repeatedly chagrined to realise that when she applies her psychological knowledge she misreads people and situations. For example, in her own mind, Miss Pym labels teacher Miss Lux as lonely and unattractive, but Miss Pym's opinion changes radically when she finds that for years Miss Lux has been romantically pursued by a famous, handsome stage actor: 'She had been all wrong about Miss Lux. As a psychologist

⁴⁹ Josephine Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), p. 13.

she began to suspect she was a very good teacher of French'.⁵⁰ In fact, Miss Pym is characterised much more as a schoolteacher than as a psychologist, and, as a detective figure, she is unusual in that instead of bringing an outside perspective to an insular community, her previous life experiences mean that she becomes assimilated into that community to the extent that her perspective is limited.⁵¹ Beau Nash, the Head Senior at Leys, drops a hint to Miss Pym that tensions are running high in the isolated community:

This place is rather like a convent. We are all so hard-worked that we have no time to think of an outside world...and everything is very grim and claustrophobic...and we are all feeling like death, and our last scrap of sense and proportion is gone. And then *you* come, a piece of the outside, a civilised being – .⁵²

Though Nash is 'half laughing, half serious', her entreaty confirms reservations about the insularity of Leys – her comparison of the college to 'a convent' points directly to anxiety about stereotypes associated with isolated communities of women, and her use of the word 'civilised' to describe the position of outsider implies that the women of Leys are the opposite. This again speaks to common suspicions about women living in communities: that they are in danger of excessive emotion, rampant sexuality and otherwise crossing boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour that the presence of men would inhibit.⁵³ Before long, however, Miss Pym is so integrated into the community that she no longer occupies the objective role of outsider, and this has ambiguous consequences when it comes to her role as detective.

Miss Pym's experiences both in an English girls' school and as a schoolteacher obscure and complicate any psychological insight that might warn her of potential trouble at Leys. As the novel begins, Miss Pym visits Leys out of a sense of obligation to

⁵⁰ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 167

⁵¹ In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet Vane's emotional investment in Shrewsbury College is also presented as the reason why she is unable to deduce the villain's identity without Lord Peter Wimsey's outside help.

⁵² Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 21.

⁵³ Cora Kaplan argues that *Miss Pym Disposes* 'uses the setting [of an all-women institution] to celebrate normative heterosexuality, and implies that even the most humble professional occupations for women involve a period of single sex education which breeds unhealthy and dangerous emotions'. Cora Kaplan, 'An Unsuitable Genre for a Feminist?', *Women's Review* 8 (1986), p. 18.

Henrietta Hodge, the former Head Girl at Miss Pym's old school whom she looked up to as a child. The relationship has not altered much since their schooldays, with Henrietta in the dominant role and Miss Pym submissive and grateful. Miss Pym's appearance, constantly described as youthful, 'very childlike' and 'oddly small-girlish', as well as her penchant for sweets and puddings, are infantilising details that invite comparisons to a schoolgirl rather than an outside authority figure.⁵⁴ Just before she is set to leave the school after her lecture, Miss Pym is asked to stay on to fill in for another teacher who is going away to a conference in London, and this shifts her even more from the position of outsider to that of insider. Miss Pym happily considers her prolonged stay at Leys:

Nice children, thought Miss Pym. Nice, clean, healthy children. It was really very pleasant here. That smudge on the horizon was the smoke of Larborough. There would be another smudge like that over London. It was much better to sit here where the air was bright with sun and heavy with roses, and be given friendly smiles by friendly young creatures.⁵⁵

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

Desterro is attractive, sophisticated and intelligent, and is only attending the school for dance training. She criticises the other students' enthusiasm for games, telling Miss Pym, 'to run about after a little ball is supremely ridiculous'.⁵⁶ Desterro's exoticism and urbanity set her apart from the other students; indeed, her 'otherness' gives her insight into the workings of the students and the college that Miss Pym lacks. When Desterro asks Miss Pym why she does not find the students at Leys interesting from a psychological

⁵⁴ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, pp. 12, 25.

⁵⁵ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 32.

⁵⁶ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 33.

perspective, Miss Pym tells Desterro that she considers them to be ‘too normal and too nice. Too much of a type’.⁵⁷ Desterro responds with ‘amusement’:

I am trying to think of someone – some Senior – who is normal. It is not easy... You know how they live here. How they work. It would be difficult to go through their years of training here and be quite normal in their last term.⁵⁸

Miss Pym’s judgement of the ‘healthiness’ of the young women at Leys is suggested to be superficial, and reflects a relatively new attitude about women and physical activity that evolved with the introduction of physical education into the curriculums of girls’ schools. Martha Vicinus writes that ‘By the end of the nineteenth century the most important single method for binding girls into a band of loyal students was sports...[Sports] channelled the emotionalism and “herd instinct” of girls into a “healthier” esprit de corps’.⁵⁹ Desterro’s assessment of the students, however, echoes a popular wariness of physically active women that outweighs the ‘healthiness’ of their activity. The competitiveness of the students who are working to be at the top of the class and be placed first on the list to be recommended for desirable jobs is one of the factors that becomes threatening in *Miss Pym Disposes*. Ross McKibbin writes that:

It has been argued that the ‘femininity’ of successful sporting women could be questioned... Middle- and upper-class girls, though encouraged to play sport, in playing it were subject to tighter constrictions than men. It was then in the nature of things that sociability and harmony were thought more desirable for women even than for men; and competition less.⁶⁰

Leys’s atmosphere could be seen to foster deviance because the femininity of its students has become compromised by their competitiveness. As will be shown, the murder that takes place is due to one student killing another so that the woman she loves can become the recipient of a prestigious job opportunity. Lesbianism and its violent manifestation can

⁵⁷ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 36.

⁵⁸ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 36.

⁵⁹ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p. 183.

⁶⁰ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 383.

here be read as resulting from the loss of femininity that occurs when women are encouraged to be over-competitive.

Desterro is not only an outsider at Leys because of her nationality and sophistication; she is also set apart by her confident heterosexuality. She enrolls in the school for a change of scene after an unsuccessful romantic relationship, not, like the other young women, out of necessity to train for a career. When Miss Pym assumes that she will teach dance after leaving Leys, Desterro quickly corrects her, saying ‘Oh no; I shall get married’.⁶¹ In fact, Desterro even has a candidate waiting in the wings in the form of an attractive English cousin. Desterro’s established heterosexuality and acceptance of marriage as a career separates her from the other students, whom she describes as ‘naïve’:

They are like little boys of nine...Or little girls of eleven. They have ‘raves’...They swoon if Madame Lefevre [the college’s dance instructor] says a kind word to them. I swoon, too, but it is from surprise. They save up their money to buy flowers for Fröken [a teacher at Leys], who thinks of nothing but a Naval Officer in Sweden.⁶²

Desterro dismisses the other students’ possible homosexual feelings towards teachers or each other as a childish – and genderless – emotion that is clearly separate from ‘adult’ passions such as her own or that of Fröken for her Naval Officer. The ‘raves’ Desterro mentions were, as Martha Vicinus points out, a familiar feature of the experiences of young women at school: ‘The adolescent crush was so common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it was known by many different slang words besides “crush”: “rave,” “spoon,” “pash” (for passion), “smash,” “gonage” (for gone on), or “flame”’.⁶³ Instead of judging the ‘raves’ of the other girls as a legitimate expression of sexuality, Desterro’s infantilisation of their lesbianism dismissively treats it as something common to all schoolgirls, that they will ‘grow out of’, and thus nonthreatening. This reflects popular psychological thought; in Freud’s well-known case study ‘Dora: An Analysis of a Case of

⁶¹ Tay, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 33.

⁶² Tay, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 34.

⁶³ Martha Vicinus, ‘Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships’, *Signs* 9.4 (1984), p. 604.

Hysteria' (1905), he posits that 'A romantic and sentimental friendship with one of her school-friends, accompanied by vows, kisses, promises of eternal correspondence, and all the sensibility of jealousy, is the common precursor of a girl's first serious passion for a man'.⁶⁴ A few decades later, in 1938, Havelock Ellis writes:

It remains true that a certain liability to more or less romantic homosexual affection is found among boys, while girls, much more frequently, cherish enthusiastic devotions for other girls somewhat older than themselves, and very often for their teachers. Even, however, when these emotions are reciprocated, and even when they lead to definite sexual manifestations and gratification, they must not too hastily be taken to indicate either a vice calling for severe punishment or a disease demanding treatment. In the great majority of these cases we are simply concerned with an inevitable youthful phase.⁶⁵

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

Miss Pym Disposes is unusual in that no crime occurs until nearly the end of the novel, when a calculated attack that appears to be an accident fatally injures unpopular student Barbara Rouse, who has been assigned a teaching position at a prestigious school that many feel should have been given to another student, Mary Innes. Though Miss Pym refuses to believe that the friendship between Mary Innes and Beau Nash is anything but 'normal', their obviously strong emotional attachment and its results represent the 'dangerous' sexuality stereotypically perceived to be inherent in such relationships. When

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'A Case of Hysteria', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 60.

⁶⁵ Havelock Ellis, *Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students*, 2nd edn. (New York: Emerson Books, 1954), p. 235.

Innes is overlooked for the coveted job placement, Nash takes the situation into her own hands, tampering with the gym equipment she knows Rouse will be the next to use. The obvious depth of feeling between Innes and Nash becomes clear when Miss Pym, having found incriminating evidence near the scene of the crime, accuses Innes of the crime and Innes does not deny it.

Miss Pym is uncertain about turning the brilliant student in to the authorities, and Innes tries to convince her not to: ‘I *would* atone, you know. It wouldn’t be any half-hearted affair. It would be my life for – hers. I would do it gladly.’⁶⁶ Innes’s hesitation over the word ‘hers’ indicates that it is not Rouse’s life she would be exchanging hers for, but Nash’s. The self-inflicted punishment that Innes proposes is to spend her life assisting her father, a country doctor, in his small practice instead of becoming a physical education teacher as she had dreamed:

I decided that I would work alongside my father...My one ambition since I was a little girl has been to get away from living in a little market town; coming to Leys was my passport to freedom...believe me, Miss Pym, it would be a penance.⁶⁷

Innes’s decision to take the blame reveals her love for Nash, but it also has a more negative connotation. Leys, its community of educated women and the career that education would have led to as a teacher in another community of women, is Innes’s longed-for ‘passport to freedom’. Education offers Innes the means to escape the ‘little market town’ and its social conventions that would restrict her to a role in the traditional family and prevent her from forming the bonds with other women – whether as lover, friend, student or teacher – that would have fulfilled her. Working alongside her father places Innes firmly within the patriarchal family, where her deviant sexuality, which has unintentionally led to the ‘unnatural’ act of murder, is contained. Innes’s atonement is not only an act of love but also an act of guilt for her relationship with Nash and the crime to

⁶⁶ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 221.

⁶⁷ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 221.

which it has led. Her wish to cover up Nash's impulsive attack on Rouse also indicates the influence of class upon the possibility of desire – Innes comes from a respectable, hardworking middle-class family and Nash is a spoiled young woman from a privileged family who 'could not visualise the possibility of frustration'.⁶⁸ Both women exhibit competitiveness and ambition, along with deviant sexuality, but Innes's middle-class upbringing means that she recognises boundaries that Nash does not. Innes entirely takes on the responsibility of keeping the secret herself, discerning that Nash has little concern for the possible consequences of her actions. Innes's return to the small village and family medical practice she had wished to escape provides a means of preserving respectability by keeping deviant sexuality out of the public eye.

Miss Pym's struggle over whether or not to turn Innes in is a result of both her own indoctrination in the culture of all-female educational institutions and her sensitivity to the condemnation it would bring to both Innes and the school if the law were brought in to punish the killer.⁶⁹ In her obsessive fretting about what to do with the information she holds, Miss Pym reasons:

It wouldn't be God who would dispose this, in spite of all the comforting tags. It would be the Law. Something written with ink in a statute book. And once that was invoked God Himself could not save a score of innocent persons being crushed under the juggernaut wheels of its progress. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, said the old Mosaic law. And it sounded simple. It sounded just. One saw it against a desert background, as if it involved two people only. It was quite different when one put it in modern words and called it 'being hanged by the neck until you are dead'.⁷⁰

In Miss Pym's thought process, the law is an uncontrollable, outside force that does not take individual circumstances into account. The biblical imagery in Miss Pym's reflection makes the law seem an archaic, patriarchal means of achieving justice. Instead of exposing

⁶⁸ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 234.

⁶⁹ This is similar to the reasoning behind the refusal to turn the perpetrators over to the police in both *Gaudy Night* and *St Peter's Finger* – the price of leaving the punishment to be dealt by patriarchal culture is judged to be too high.

⁷⁰ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 211.

Innes to the inevitable fate that would befall her if tried for murder, Miss Pym decides to dispense a different form of justice herself, keeping the crime and its punishment within the boundaries of Leys. This does not mean that the decision comes easily. Miss Pym particularly wavers when discussing the problem in carefully vague terms with Desterro's fiancée Rick, who advises her to do the 'right' thing no matter what the consequences: 'Unless you are clever enough to "see before and after" like the Deity it's best to stick to rules...Do the obvious right thing, Miss Pym, and let God dispose'.⁷¹ As a man and as Desterro's fiancée, Rick represents the world outside of Leys and its values. Miss Pym struggles between Rick's suggestion, with the patriarchal weight of the law behind it, and the loyalty, self-sufficiency and individualism that is influenced by her experiences as a student and a teacher in a community of women. Like her friend Henrietta, who believes in carefully considering each student's strengths and weaknesses before recommending her for a specific job, Miss Pym reflects on factors such as Innes's emotional sensitivity, her academic talent, the feelings of her proud and hardworking parents, and the potential impact of negative publicity on Leys before agreeing to a punishment for the alleged crime. For Miss Pym, the uniform sentence that would be dealt by the law seems disturbingly inappropriate to the particular circumstances, so her educational training comes into play and Miss Pym responds to the situation as though she is a teacher who has discovered a student misbehaving. Instead of reporting what she has found even to her friend the headmistress, who will be obliged to pass on responsibility to outside forces, Miss Pym acts with the authority of a teacher and permits the student to choose her own penance. By applying the workings of a women's school to a crime that would ordinarily lead to punishment by death, a humane, sensitive and 'modern' alternative to the indiscriminating, archaic 'juggernaut wheels' of the law is presented. In contrast to Nash's

⁷¹ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 198.

suggestion at the beginning of the novel that Leys is ‘uncivilised’, Miss Pym’s decision to keep the punishment for the murder within the community instead of letting the murderer be executed exposes the dominant culture as crude and uncivilised in its rigid rules about capital punishment.

In spite of Miss Pym’s demonstration of agency in reevaluating the fairness of the official justice system, the resolution of the novel is undeniably conservative. Aside from Innes’s return to the patriarchal family, it is made very clear that Nash and Innes will go their separate ways after graduating. Learning that the two women’s plans to go to Norway together have been abandoned, Miss Pym reflects, ‘It was evident that this relationship was not what it had been...But there was one relationship that showed satisfactory progress’.⁷² Innes’s confession and voluntary exile means that the lesbian relationship and its ‘unnatural’ results will fade away and never be made public. Had the true story of Rouse’s murder come to light, though the repercussions would have been fatal, the intense relationship between Innes and Nash would have had to be publicly acknowledged. The ‘satisfactory’ relationship Miss Pym is considering is that of the firmly heterosexual Theresa Desterro and her cousin/lover. Desterro happily tells Miss Pym, ‘I am going to stay in England and marry Rick’.⁷³ Even this resolution, though predictable, is cautiously conservative; Desterro’s exoticism is contained by marriage to her cousin, who, despite looking like a ‘gigolo’, is in fact a prudent English businessman – the opposite, one assumes, of the ‘unsuitable’ object of her former affections: ‘Looks were what [Rick] had inherited from some Latin ancestor; but manner, breeding, and character seemed to be ordinary public school. He was considerably older than Desterro...and looked a pleasant and responsible person’.⁷⁴ Even while being the most obvious representative of heterosexuality at Leys, Desterro is still dangerous because of the exaggerated sexuality

⁷² Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 230.

⁷³ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 231.

⁷⁴ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 152.

associated with her foreignness, which must be rendered safe by her absorption by marriage into British social and sexual mores.

Ultimately, *Miss Pym Disposes* presents a more troubling, ambiguous portrayal of an educational community run by and for women than the stereotype-flouting *Gaudy Night* or *St Peter's Finger*. Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple write that it 'would be possible to argue that both the closed communities of women and lesbianism are presented as "unhealthy" breeding grounds for criminal acts'. However, they go on to suggest that taking this line 'neglects both the sympathetic portrayal of women's relationships and the interesting handling of lesbianism'.⁷⁵ Certainly, with its portrayal of friendly, confident, beautiful 'goddess' Beau Nash as lesbian and murderess, *Miss Pym Disposes* seems to confirm the worst suspicions about the effects of the insularity of a group of women living and working together, not to mention that the competitiveness fostered in the school could be seen as rendering the women 'unfeminine' and thus more capable of deviance.⁷⁶ However, the depictions of Innes's self-sacrificing cover-up for Nash's crime and Miss Pym's titular decision to take justice into her own hands point to a more ambivalent reading of the novel's presentation of a community of women, suggesting both the depth of love possible in a relationship between women and that the school is actually more 'civilised' than the harsh and archaic dominant culture.

Gladys Mitchell's *Laurels Are Poison* (1942) is another novel that takes place in a teachers' training college for women and ambivalently deals with questions of individualism, professionalism and sexuality. *Laurels Are Poison* begins when Mrs. Bradley is called in to investigate the disappearance of one of Cartaret Training College's teachers, Miss Murchan, who is discovered to be missing after the previous term's College

⁷⁵ Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction', in Helen Carr (ed.), *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (London: Pandora, 1989), pp. 52-53.

⁷⁶ Tey, *Miss Pym Disposes*, p. 20.

Dance. In order to carry out the investigation, Mrs. Bradley poses undercover as Warden of one of Cartaret's residence halls. While in a post at another school, Miss Murchan was involved in an accident in which a child was killed, and Mrs. Bradley suspects that this incident is related to the teacher's disappearance. Meanwhile, as the students begin their traditional 'rags', or pranks, at the beginning of term, a more malicious series of rags, which Mrs. Bradley quickly ascertains has nothing to do with the students' harmless mischief, begins to take place at the college. The perpetrator of these incidents is in fact Miss Murchan, who is hoping to frighten Mrs. Bradley away and has been secretly living in the school storeroom, hiding from her half-sister, Miss Paynter-Tree. Miss Paynter-Tree is posing as a student at the school hoping to get revenge on Miss Murchan for the death of the child, who was Miss Paynter-Tree's illegitimate daughter. As Mrs. Bradley finds out, both women were in love with the child's father, and Miss Murchan killed the girl out of jealousy towards Miss Paynter-Tree. The nature of Miss Murchan's disappearance, and, later, the malicious and sometimes dangerous rags she perpetrates, set the stage for the novel's often ironic and self-conscious representations of gender and sexual deviance.⁷⁷ Cartaret Training College serves as a space in which play with gender and sexual norms is riotous and uncontained; 'Bacchinal' imagery is used to describe Miss Murchan's hair just before she disappears after dancing with one of her female students, and this suggestion of uninhibited revelry and hint of sexual deviance carries on throughout the novel.⁷⁸ Mrs. Bradley, as both detective and authority figure at the school, will restore the order of heterosexuality and normative gender roles.

⁷⁷ Nancy Spain's *Poison for Teacher* (1949) is another example of a crime novel that uses a girls' school (suggestively called Radcliff Hall) as a setting for its self-conscious play with gender norms. With its irreverent representation of the workings and politics of a girls' school, its elaborately staged murders (one of which actually occurs in a rehearsal for a play), and its unlikely detective duo of a former actress and a former dancer, *Poison for Teacher* is deliberately camp, a strategy which enables its casual depiction of gender transgression as well as both heterosexual and homosexual desire.

⁷⁸ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 25.

Both sets of rags that are going on at the school become sites for gender deviance, with Mrs. Bradley as the only person able to see accurately through the various performances taking place. Miss Murchan's rags are generally of a particularly malicious character, including putting holes in disinfectant tins so that the liquid runs out over the boxroom floor, slashing the clothing of two poor students who cannot afford to buy more, and cutting off the hair of an ill student while she is sleeping. When Mrs. Bradley and Deborah, a young teacher whom she has taken into her confidence about the investigation, go to the boxroom to assess the damage done by the disinfectant, Mrs. Bradley comments that it was 'quite deliberately done...No fumbling...just a neatly-drilled hole expressive of a determined and bold personality'. In reply, Deborah suggests the act is, 'Expressive of a man, not a woman', but Mrs. Bradley is noncommittal: 'I don't know. Some of the games-playing young are surely capable of a smack like that on a tin'.⁷⁹ When Deborah is speaking with another teacher, Miss Topas, about the incidents, they agree that from a psychological point of view the pranks sound like 'a boy's or man's trick' – 'that stabbing business...Connects up with Jack the Ripper, of course. You could connect the hair-cutting in the same way...and that coat-slashing, too'.⁸⁰ Though Deborah and Miss Topas are using popular psychological theories of criminality to attempt to identify the perpetrator, Mrs. Bradley, the psychologist by profession, is shown not to be limited by such assumptions about 'typical' gendered crime.⁸¹

Significantly, the students' rags, as well as Miss Murchan's, employ gender play. The very first rag that occurs at the beginning of term sets the tone for those that will follow: a group of young men construct a bonfire out of a pile of chamber pots outside the college and proceed to dance riotously around it, again evoking the Bacchinal imagery that

⁷⁹ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 67.

⁸⁰ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 88.

⁸¹ Mrs. Bradley's response that the holes could have been drilled by a member of 'the games-playing young' suggests the existence of an ambiguously-gendered model of femininity that is specific to the modern, active young woman.

indicates an occasion of deviance. Mrs. Bradley, upon observing this, ‘scan[s] the dancing figures for a full minute. Then she dart[s] towards the bonfire, seize[s] one of the dervishes by the seat of his trousers, and haul[s] him forcibly out of the circle’.⁸² The voice that emerges from the prankster begging Mrs. Bradley not to report her is that of a woman. Like her ability to see through Miss Murchan’s deliberately misleading, masculine-gendered pranks, Mrs. Bradley can also discern physical attempts to obfuscate gender.

Along with such rags, the relationships between the students at Cartaret contribute to the play with gender and sexual norms which characterises the novel. The three Cartaret students most prominent in *Laurels Are Poison* are Kitty, Alice and Laura, who upon meeting each other for the first time quickly establish themselves as the ‘Three Musketeers’. They do so in a parody of the language used in a traditional wedding ceremony: ‘Wilt thou, Alice, take this Thingummy as thy wedded what-do-you-call-it?’.⁸³ Following on from their declaration of themselves as the Three Musketeers, the young women often refer to each other by male names and pronouns, playing at flexible gender roles and using the paradigm of male friendship to suggest that relationships between women can include the same sort of camaraderie. The three eventually become deputy detectives to Mrs. Bradley as Deborah is increasingly sidelined by a traditional marriage plot. Alice, the most timid and conventional of the Three Musketeers, immediately develops a crush on Deborah, which is casually accepted by her two comrades. At the school dance just before the novel’s climax, Laura encourages Deborah to ‘take young Alice’ as her partner for the last waltz, ‘and make her happy for life’.⁸⁴ In spite of her obvious crush on Deborah, Alice is the most conservative of her friends; when the other two are speculating on Deborah’s engagement and whether she will continue to work after her marriage, Alice remarks, ‘I shall get married myself, later on...I came from the lower

⁸² Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 39.

⁸³ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 24.

⁸⁴ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 226.

classes where marriage is the rule, not the exception, and I'm not ashamed of it'.⁸⁵ Alice, expressing the same thoughts as Theresa Desterro in *Miss Pym Disposes*, apparently separates the immature, 'schoolgirl' lesbian desire for an attractive teacher from an inevitable future of marriage. Alice's commentary also acknowledges the issue from the perspective of class; Alice desires to be accepted in her social sphere, and she understands that to do so she must conform to conventional models of femininity. However much she and her friends might play at deviant gender roles, and however real her own feelings for Deborah might be, Alice implies that desire and duty are not connected – eventually social conventions will become undeniable and she will have to 'grow out of it'.

Alice's schoolgirl crush on Deborah is portrayed benevolently, but a negative perception of suspected lesbianism in adult women is made apparent when Mrs. Bradley asks the Principal to send Deborah's friend Miss Topas to take over her place as Warden. The Principal objects on the grounds that the two women 'get on much too well', insisting that she does not 'approve of these violent friendships on the Staff'.⁸⁶ Deborah thus becomes a focus for the stereotypes and taboos surrounding lesbian desire in a women's educational institution, and her potentially dangerous 'condition' is policed by Mrs. Bradley, who 'rescues' Deborah from this threat. While Deborah begins as a young woman on the cusp of a successful career and as an active detective sidekick to Mrs. Bradley, she is gradually deprived of agency in both areas. Shortly after the malicious rags begin – and after the Principal declares her disapproval of violent friendships – Mrs. Bradley sends both Deborah and Miss Topas away to her nephew's house in the country for the weekend. This weekend is meant to keep the two women out of danger, both literally and figuratively, as Mrs. Bradley has also invited Miss Topas's 'young man' and

⁸⁵ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 179.

⁸⁶ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 57.

another of her own nephews, Jonathan, as a potential romantic interest for Deborah.⁸⁷ With the introduction of male love interests for both women, their friendship is rendered unthreatening – it is no longer the ‘violent’ friendship of two women who are inappropriately attached to each other. The introduction of Jonathan becomes the factor that not only renders Deborah’s sexuality safe, but also takes away her agency in both an investigative and professional sense.

The relationship between Deborah and Jonathan is fraught with the disturbing threat of actual physical and emotional violence from its beginning, providing an ironic contrast with the assumption of lesbian desire as ‘violent’. When the couple first meet, they are immediately attracted to each other, though the cook comments that the relationship could move a bit more quickly: ‘Made for each other, they be. But [Deborah], her hangs back. Shy, I reckon, poor maid. Mester Jonathan ded ought to make a bold bed there, and breng her to et violent...Her’d gev en, easy enough, ef he act forceful’.⁸⁸ The cook’s opinion that Deborah will become more enthusiastic about – or at least accepting of – the relationship were Jonathan to force himself upon her sexually is one unfortunately shared by Mrs. Bradley and even, as it transpires, Miss Topas.⁸⁹ The attempts to enforce Deborah’s heterosexuality foreshadow Adrienne Rich’s assertion that ‘for women heterosexuality might not be a “preference” at all but something that has to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force’.⁹⁰ Miss Topas, who is linked to Deborah’s transgressive desires, takes part in attempting to trap her friend into a

⁸⁷ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 76.

⁸⁸ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 77.

⁸⁹ A controlled amount of violence in heterosexual romantic relationships was acknowledged as normal and even desirable by psychologists at the time; in *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life* (1926), Wilhelm Stekel comments, ‘With many women the rape fantasy plays a great rôle. They permit themselves easily to be overpowered, because this is the only way in which they can attain orgasm at all. Sometimes they must fight with the aggressor before intercourse’. Wilhelm Stekel, *Frigidity in Woman in Relation to Her Love Life*, Trans. James S. Van Teslaar (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 157.

⁹⁰ Adrienne Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, in Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (eds.), *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews, and Criticism* (New York; London: Norton, 1993), p. 216.

marriage about which Deborah is obviously uneasy. One evening, Miss Topas invites Deborah to her rooms for a drink, neglecting to inform her friend that Jonathan is also invited. Jonathan wastes no time in putting sexual pressure on Deborah:

Before Deborah could avoid it, he had taken her into his arms, and...kissed her with an enthusiasm which caused Miss Topas...to observe that her sitting-room was not a film studio. She then...seized Deborah (who seemed uncertain whether to launch an attack upon the intrepid wooer or whether to cry) and embraced her more gently and a good deal less disturbingly than she had been embraced by the ardent young man. This action decided Deborah. She made a dash for the door, tore out, and they could hear her running up the stairs.⁹¹

Instead of welcoming Jonathan's embrace, it is clear that Deborah would have tried to 'avoid it' if she could; neither 'launching an attack' nor crying seems like an eager or positive response to an unexpected kiss from a man to whom she is supposedly sexually attracted. Miss Topas's remark that 'her sitting-room [is] not a film studio' indicates that the performance of heterosexual desire that occurs has a quality that verges on flamboyant artificiality. The conventional marriage plot that is forcing Deborah into a passive role is made conspicuous by its hyperbolic trappings, revealing its contrived nature and creating an image of violence that is particularly jarring, as it exposes unequal power relations between the sexes. It is the embrace of Miss Topas, Deborah's friend and professional equal, that removes Deborah from her paralysed indecision and provides the impetus for her to make a move and escape the uncomfortable situation. Miss Topas subsequently encourages Jonathan to 'be a little more gentle', while he protests that he is 'obeying [Mrs. Bradley's] orders'.⁹² Miss Topas then persuades Deborah to come back downstairs and locks her in the room with Jonathan, 'taking no chances of her match-making going astray'. Like Mrs. Bradley hiring Deborah and then relegating her to the role of Jonathan's wife, Miss Topas's behaviour forces Deborah into a passive, feminine role within a conventional heterosexual marriage plot.

⁹¹ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 138.

⁹² Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, pp. 138-39.

This is not the only occasion when Miss Topas (and other women) deprive Deborah of agency. During the College Dance at the climax of the novel when Mrs. Bradley sets a trap in the hope of catching Miss Murchan, Jonathan is about to slip away to assist his aunt when Deborah finds him and insists upon coming with him. Jonathan assents but sends her back to retrieve their scarves, and escapes in the meantime. When Deborah realises what Jonathan has done, she attempts to follow him into danger but is restrained by her women friends, including Miss Topas, who tells Deborah, 'You may queer the pitch. There's a peculiar do on tonight'.⁹³ Miss Topas's comment ironically reiterates Deborah's potential for deviance; it is feared that her presence at the apprehension of Miss Murchan will jeopardise Mrs. Bradley's attempt to restore order. Miss Topas and the other women act as complicit enforcers of heterosexual norms. At this point, instead of playing the role of detective's assistant or even sharing that role with Jonathan in a detecting partnership, Deborah has been completely sidelined. This is reinforced when Mrs. Bradley is preparing to perform the traditional detective's explication at the end of the novel; she maternally tells Deborah to 'relax, child, or, better still, go to bed. I want to talk to Jonathan'.⁹⁴ Jonathan has supplanted Deborah in the role for which she was hired, that of sounding board, confidante and assistant detective to Mrs. Bradley. Deborah is reduced to being told to go to bed like a child and pleading to be let in on the detective's privileged knowledge with the promise that she will only be a passive listener. Deborah's infantilisation is complete when she nods off at the end of Mrs. Bradley's explication and Jonathan lifts her up and carries her off to bed with the words, 'The baby appears to be asleep'.⁹⁵ Not only has Deborah's relationship with Jonathan deprived her of any role she may have had as an assistant detective, it has also put an abrupt end to a promising career. When they are discussing their future wedding, Deborah

⁹³ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 225.

⁹⁴ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 232.

⁹⁵ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, p. 236.

tells Jonathan, 'I must stay on here until the end of the summer term. I've got to get these girls through their examinations'. Jonathan replies, 'Oh, no, you haven't. We're being married some time within the next six weeks. It's simply up to you to say when'.⁹⁶ Jonathan ignores the responsibility Deborah feels towards her career and towards the students with whom she has built close relationships. Though Deborah is given the illusion of a choice about when to have the wedding, it is clear that any agency she might have had has disappeared along with her life as a single woman.

Conservative as the resolution of *Laurels Are Poison* may seem – at least with regards to attitudes towards marriage, careers for women and lesbian sexuality – the novel's treatment of these issues in fact reflects a considerably more ambiguous conclusion. The mischievous treatment of gender and sexual deviance as played out in Cartaret's Bacchinal atmosphere hyperbolises and thus highlights the artificiality of gender boundaries. Deborah's sexuality becomes a focus for the restoration of order; not only Mrs. Bradley but also Deborah's women friends, including her potential romantic interests Miss Topas and Alice, are complicit in policing Deborah's sexuality and forcing her into proximity with Jonathan. Deborah's fate casts doubt on the assumption that lesbian desire is part of an immature 'phase'; her resistance to heterosexuality characterises Deborah's active position as working woman and assistant detective figure, but her yielding to Jonathan and marriage mark her loss of agency and infantilisation. Deborah's fear of Jonathan and the abusive and violent element of their relationship problematises and calls into question the desirability of the conventional marriage plot and its accompanying heterosexual power relations.

⁹⁶ Mitchell, *Laurels Are Poison*, pp. 231-32.

3. 'A Most "Natural" Reaction': Personal and Professional Conflict in *The Fashion in Shrouds* and *Death in High Heels*

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

When the last Roland Papendeik died, after receiving a knighthood for a royal wedding dress – having thus scaled the heights of his ambition as a great *couturier* – the ancient firm declined and might well have faded into one of the amusing legends Fashion leaves behind her had it not been for a certain phoenix quality possessed by Lady Papendeik. At the moment when descent became apparent and dissolution likely Lady Papendeik discovered Val, and from the day that the Valentine cape in Lincoln-green face-cloth flickered across the salon and won the hearts of twenty-five professional buyers and subsequently five hundred private purchasers Val climbed steadily, and behind her rose up the firm of Papendeik again like a great silk tent.⁹⁷

The firm is revived by Lady Papendeik's (or Tante Marthe, as she is called) forward-thinking vision; had she adhered to the old-fashioned formula for success that her husband followed, it is implied that the company would have folded. Tante Marthe's discovery and employment of the young, talented Val points the business in a decidedly modern direction. Val's career begins its rise when she designs a garment that can be marketed and purchased on a large scale, unlike the one-off royal wedding dress that made Roland Papendeik famous. Val's professional success makes her a representation of other female couturiers who came to dominate fashion in the early twentieth century, including Jeanne Lanvin, Elsa Schiaparelli, Nina Ricci and Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, whose 'little black dress', much like Val's 'Valentine cape', made her name.⁹⁸ These women were at the centre of the changing fashion industry, which since the nineteenth century had been

⁹⁷ Margery Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 5.

⁹⁸ Axel Madsen writes in his biography of Coco Chanel (1990) that 'Between 1920 and 1940, the most influential couture houses had been in the hands of women'. Axel Madsen, *Coco Chanel: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 276. The fictional Val would have belonged to this powerful group of businesswomen.

steadily moving towards a more modern model that involved the production of luxury goods on a wide scale as opposed to couturiers solely taking on individual commissions for the wealthy. As the head designer of a successful firm, Val is, in her own honest estimation, ‘one of the most important business women in Europe’.⁹⁹ The house of Papendeik is a firm run from top to bottom by women who are taken seriously as workers; Val explains to her brother Albert Campion that Tante Marthe requires that the contingent of women who do the work of putting together and sewing all the garments be called ‘seamstresses’ and not ‘work-women’, indicating respect towards and acceptance of the women as professionals.¹⁰⁰ The women employed to model the clothing in Papendeik’s showroom are also held to a high level of professional conduct. When a model leaks an important new design to a rival firm that produces the dress before Val has a chance to show it, the model is reprimanded and dismissed. The success of the house of Papendeik, contingent upon the skills of women and associated with modernity, is representative of the widening potential for women in the public sphere.

Another thoroughly modern professional woman depicted in *The Fashion in Shrouds* is Lady Amanda Fitton. When she meets Campion after several years apart, Amanda has determinedly worked her way to a successful career as an aeroplane engineer. Campion expresses frank surprise that she has been able to obtain such a job, as ‘[He] thought aeroplane works were holies of holies’.¹⁰¹ Amanda explains,

So they are...It took me three and a half years to do it, but I’m a pretty good engineer, you know. I went straight into the shops when I got some money. I hadn’t a sufficiently decent education to take an ordinary degree, so I had to go the back way. My title helped, though.¹⁰²

Though Amanda frankly admits that her title has opened professional doors, she has also worked hard to break into a male-dominated profession as a woman lacking even the usual

⁹⁹ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 9.

¹⁰¹ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 70.

¹⁰² Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 70.

education required by such a career. When Campion asks her what her brother thinks of her career, Amanda responds, ‘The little earl?...He’s still at Oxford. He seemed to be dying of old age last time I saw him. He’s given me up for the time being’.¹⁰³ Like Val, Amanda is a woman who represents the modern world; she has carved a place for herself in a difficult profession and she is dismissive of her younger brother, who embodies outdated values and does not know how to relate to her as a professional woman.

Yet another professional woman who plays a significant role in the novel is Georgia Wells, a famous stage actress who is one of Val’s clients. Georgia and Val are superficially friendly towards one another, but their relationship is competitive and fraught with passive-aggressive barbs on both sides. When Campion asks Val if she likes Georgia, Val responds, ‘Georgia’s our most important client, “the best-dressed actress in the world gowned by the most famous *couturier*.” We’re a mutual benefit society’.¹⁰⁴ Val adds, ‘I like her really. She’s fundamentally sadistic and not nearly so brilliant as she sounds, but...I like her. I do like her’.¹⁰⁵ Val’s first, diplomatic answer to Campion’s question is carefully professional, but her unconvincing repetition of ‘I like her’, interspersed with criticism of Georgia’s personality, implies that Val does not, in fact, ‘like her’, though she will not let her personal feelings interfere with business. Open friendship between Val and Georgia is suggested to be impossible because they are romantic rivals for the attentions of Alan Dell, owner of the Alandel aeroplane company and Amanda’s boss.¹⁰⁶ Though Georgia is married when Alan first catches her eye, she pursues him anyway and he succumbs, dazzled by one of her acclaimed stage performances. For both Val and Georgia,

¹⁰³ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁴ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) of romantic rivalry as being an all-too-common way of representing women’s relationships to each other in literature: ‘All these relationships between women...are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends...almost without exception they are shown in their relationships to men’. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (San Diego; New York: Harcourt, 1989), p. 82.

their careers are what make them ‘modern’ women, but their relationships with men, which are characterised by an essential ‘femininity’, are not able to coexist with those careers. Val and Georgia are described as:

two fine ladies of a fine modern world, in which their status had been raised until they stood as equals with their former protectors. Their several responsibilities were far heavier than most men’s and their abilities greater. Their freedom was limitless. There they were at two o’clock in the morning, driving back in their fine carriage to lonely little houses, bought, made lovely and maintained by the proceeds of their own labours. They were both mistress and master, little Liliths, fragile but powerful in their way, since the livelihood of a great number of their fellow beings depended directly upon them, and yet, since they had not relinquished their femininity, within them, touching the very core and fountain of their strength, was the dreadful primitive weakness of the female of any species.¹⁰⁷

Though Val’s and Georgia’s formidable accomplishments are recognised and even acknowledged as superior to ‘most men’s’, it is implied that the lack of traditional domesticity in their lives renders them incomplete – their houses, though ‘lovely’ and owned independently, are ‘lonely’. Gill Plain writes of *The Fashion in Shrouds*, ‘On the very point of public achievement, archetypal ideological forces such as romance and motherhood are mobilised as strategies of containment – suggesting that the public woman is ultimately misguided, and is channelling her energies in an “unnatural” direction’.¹⁰⁸ Val’s attraction to Alan is noted by Tante Marthe, who observes to Campion, ‘Val is in love with that man...He is very masculine. I hope it is not merely a most natural reaction. We are too many women here’.¹⁰⁹ The success of their well-run business aside, Tante Marthe implies that their workplace, which represents the most significant part of Val’s life, is ‘unnatural’ because it is dominated by women.¹¹⁰ Femininity is constantly referred to in the novel as an essential ‘weakness’ that prevents women from functioning as fully

¹⁰⁷ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 210.

¹⁰⁸ Gill Plain, “‘A Good Cry or a Nice Rape?’: Margery Allingham’s Gender Agenda’, *Critical Survey* 15.2 (2003), p. 63.

¹⁰⁹ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 18.

¹¹⁰ Val’s place of business, like the convent, the schools and the college discussed earlier in this chapter, is looked upon as incomplete and possibly harmful because of its femaleness. These spaces, in spite of their efficiency and successful operation, are always set apart by their feminine ‘otherness’.

and easily in the public sphere as men, since it taints their relations with other people, particularly with members of the opposite sex, though – in a typical double bind – if a woman does not indulge this ‘weakness’, it is implied that she is unnatural. Even Val has been taken in by this idea, as she explains to Campion:

You’re a sensible, reasonable, masculine soul. If you fell in love and something went wrong you’d think it all out like a little gent and think it all quietly away, taking the conventional view and the intelligent path and saving yourself no end of bother because your head plus your training is much stronger than all your emotions put together. You’re a civilized masculine product. But when it happens to me, when it happens to Georgia, our entire world slides round. We can’t be conventional or take the intelligent path except by a superhuman mental effort. Our feeling is twice as strong as our heads and we haven’t been trained for thousands of years. We’re feminine, you fool!¹¹¹

According to Val, the disadvantage to being a modern woman is that, besides dealing with the problem of their ‘naturally’ more violent emotions overpowering their intellects, they also lack the ‘thousands of years of training’ that men have had in how to repress their emotions in a socially acceptable manner.¹¹²

The novel’s characterisation of femininity as weakness is not, however, as straightforward as it may seem. Val’s femininity is often pointed out through the gaze of her brother Albert Campion, which is, as it becomes clear, a skewed one. At the beginning of the novel, when Val and he are staring into a mirror and noting their similarities and differences, Campion tells her, ‘I think you’re better than I am in one or two ways, but I’m always glad to note that you have sufficient feminine weaknesses to make you thoroughly inferior on the whole’. When Val asks what these might be, Campion ‘beam[s] at her. In spite of her astonishing success she could always be relied upon to make him feel comfortingly superior’.¹¹³ This ‘comforting superiority’ is not a feeling that lasts for Campion. Gill Plain notes that throughout *The Fashion in Shrouds*, ‘Campion...consigns

¹¹¹ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 132.

¹¹² As in *Miss Pym Disposes*, women are suggested to be inherently ‘uncivilised’ without the tempering influence of men.

¹¹³ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 7.

women to a number of familiar stereotypes of femininity. He sees his sister as someone over whom he has an inherent biological superiority, someone irrational, and alien to the symbolic order which it is his duty to uphold'.¹¹⁴ Plain points out as an example of this attitude that 'he assumes that Val, traumatised by her failed love affair, would counteract her jealousy by committing murder, an assumption based on the patriarchal premise that women prize love higher than law'.¹¹⁵ This major misapprehension on Champion's part is preceded by many minor incidents during which his assumed superiority to Val is questioned. When he rather cruelly teases her about her feelings for Alan Dell, Val defends her entitlement to be sexually interested in a man. Champion uneasily reflects,

There was dignity in the protest. It brought him down to earth and reminded him effectively that she was, after all, a distinguished and important woman with every right to her own private life. He changed the conversation, feeling, as he sometimes did, that she was older than he was, for all her femininity.¹¹⁶

On another occasion, Val's canny reading of Alan's infatuation with Georgia surprises Champion with its honest shrewdness: '[Val's] insight was always astonishing him. It was misleading, he reminded himself hastily; a sort of inspired guesswork or, rather, an intermittent contact with the truth'.¹¹⁷ Champion's moments of amazement and hasty self-justification when Val reads or reacts to a situation intelligently belie his confidence in his masculine superiority. After all, if Val can handle emotional circumstances with poise and reason, then the constructions of both violently emotional femininity and rational, cerebral masculinity are destabilised.

However, although the novel's characterisations of femininity and masculinity are shown to be uneasy at best, the depiction of the relationship between Val and Alan is uncompromising and promotes a version of femininity in which modern accomplishments are not able to coexist with traditional values. When Alan finally gets over his infatuation

¹¹⁴ Plain, 'A Good Cry or a Nice Rape?', p. 64.

¹¹⁵ Plain, 'A Good Cry or a Nice Rape?', p. 64.

¹¹⁶ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 8.

¹¹⁷ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 62.

with Georgia and realises that Val is the woman he really wants, his declaration is unabashedly couched in language that refers to an old-fashioned model of active masculinity and passive femininity:

I love you, Val. Will you marry me and give up to me your independence, the enthusiasm which you give your career, your time and your thought? That's my proposition. It's not a very good one, is it?...In return...I should assume full responsibility for you. I would pay your bills to any amount which my income might afford. I would make all decisions which were not directly in your province, although on the other hand I would like to feel that I might discuss anything with you if I wanted to; but only because I wanted to, mind you; not as your right. And until I died you would be the only woman. You would be my care, my mate as in plumber, my possession if you like...It means the other half of my life to me, but the whole of yours to you. Will you do it?¹¹⁸

Val responds in the affirmative to this dreary proposal, 'so quickly that she startle[s] herself'. Alan's proposal is a blatant request for Val to trade career for marriage with no prospect of her retaining an equal part in the relationship financially, intellectually or emotionally. Val surrenders her modern career 'in fashion' to take up a position that is by Alan's traditional definition of the marriage relationship 'out of fashion'.¹¹⁹

Despite the conservative ending to the marriage plot between Val and Alan, *The Fashion in Shrouds* does not seem unrestrainedly to advocate such a fate for all women. Tante Marthe and her business presumably continue even after Papendeik's head designer

¹¹⁸ Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, p. 262.

¹¹⁹ Interestingly, Agatha Christie's *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) includes a subplot that shares many characteristics with the Val/Alan marriage plot of *The Fashion in Shrouds*. *Evil Under the Sun* introduces an accomplished woman fashion designer named Rosamund Darnley who, while obviously enjoying her professional success, sinks into an immediate depression when an old flame and his wife come to stay at the resort where she is spending a holiday. Rosamund's love interest, Captain Kenneth Marshall, is trapped in an incompatible, loveless marriage until his wife is conveniently murdered, clearing the way for a renewed romance with Rosamund. When Rosamund and Ken unite at the end of the novel, he tells her, 'You're going to give up that damned dress-making business of yours and we're going to live in the country'. Rosamund's first response to Ken's belittling dismissal of her successful career is considerably more spirited than Val's passive acceptance of Dell's forceful proposal: 'Don't you know that I make a very handsome income out of my business? Don't you realize that it's my business – that I created it and worked it up, and that I'm proud of it! And you've got the damned nerve to come along and say, "Give it all up, dear"'. Unfortunately, Rosamund quickly succumbs to convention, telling Ken sentimentally, 'Oh, my dear, I've wanted to live in the country with you all my life. Now – it's going to come true...'. Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 319-20. Rosamund's passionate defense of her professional achievements is eclipsed by the supposedly more powerful pull of retiring domesticity, which, since she has 'wanted it all her life', is presented as the more inherently natural – and stereotypically 'feminine' – choice.

is lost to traditional domesticity. Georgia is a serial monogamist, constantly seducing or even marrying men and then leaving them when she becomes bored, which does not seem to have harmed her career as a famous actress, in spite of the stereotypical 'femininity' that characterises her relationships with men. Amanda ends the novel by rescuing Campion from the murderer in a reversal of conventional masculine heroic stereotypes and then getting engaged to him in a scene that rejects emotionally overwrought 'cake love' in favour of a more down-to-earth, companionate modern relationship. Traditional domesticity in the form of motherhood will later put an end to her career, but at this point Amanda comfortably embraces the idea of a marriage of equals, in which both partners are allowed to have professional as well as personal lives. Similarly, Val's retreat into the position of wife as defined by Alan does not diminish the fact that she has been a brilliant businesswoman. In addition, as has been demonstrated in the discussion of Campion's uneasy perceptions of Val and of himself in relation to Val, the definitions of masculinity and femininity that are produced in the novel are not entirely stable.

Another perspective on the conflict between traditional and modern gender roles in a female-dominated workplace is offered in Christianna Brand's *Death in High Heels* (1941). Like Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds*, *Death in High Heels* is set in the fashion industry, an 'acceptable' profession for women. *Death in High Heels* differs, though, in that the novel's murder makes workplace rivalries between women the primary suspected motives. Though men occupy the highest managerial positions at London couturier Christophe et Cie, the many women who are employed there in various roles are a diverse and particularly modern group. Of the three women who make up the shop's sales staff, Victoria is happily married and is the primary breadwinner of her household, Irene is a widow who enters the workforce upon her husband's death and works her way up to the position of head saleswoman, and Rachel is a single mother in the middle of a

divorce. In addition to these three, two women occupy slightly higher managerial roles. Miss Doon (whose first name is never revealed) is the novel's murder victim; beautiful, sexually promiscuous and willing to use these qualities to her own professional advantage, she is viewed ambivalently by her co-workers. On the one hand, they enjoy her sexual frankness and laugh at her sometimes-cruel jokes, but on the other, Irene in particular resents Doon's easy move up the professional ladder. The other office manager, Gregory, is disliked by her co-workers because of her abrasive, 'masculine' personality and social awkwardness. She is also envied due to her professional success, and because she is named as the recipient of a coveted management job at the company's branch in Deauville. Another of the company's employees is the charwoman Mrs. Harris (often referred to as Mrs. 'Arris by the younger women in mockery of her Cockney accent). Mrs. Harris is a comic figure to the younger employees at Christophe et Cie due to her age and social class, but she is not entirely a one-dimensional caricature of a working-class woman – in one pivotal scene, she takes advantage of the impression that she is hard of hearing in order to gain access to private conversations and acquire information. Mrs. Harris's explanation of why she does this is unusually humanising for a depiction of a member of the working class:

‘Mrs. 'Arris,’ the young ladies says, very soft-like, to see if I'm listening, and if I don't answer, they thinks I don't 'ear and goes on with what they 'as to say. I don't mean no 'arm...it's a bit lonely in the shop sometimes, 'aving the people all talking between theirselves, and keeping you out as you might say.¹²⁰

Though Mrs. Harris is the object of much mockery in the workplace, her manipulation of the assumption that she is invisible gives her the power of privileged knowledge. Mrs. Harris's assessment of her position in the office is also telling; she realises that her class and age place her as an outsider, and admits that she notices this and feels hurt by it. The charwoman's statement makes her relatable and provides a voice to a segment of the

¹²⁰ Christianna Brand, *Death in High Heels* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1996), p. 191.

workforce that is seldom given a multi-faceted representation.¹²¹ The variety of women workers depicted in *Death in High Heels* illustrates a realistic view of the modern workplace's diversity, but the novel's constructions of working women are complicated by conventional definitions of femininity.

Doon's death by poisoning is shocking to her co-workers, but it is acknowledged that her 'goings on' have offended some.¹²² In spite of Doon's many sexual exploits, which have on occasion pitted her as a romantic rival against her co-workers, motives of professional rivalry are given the stronger weight in the investigation of her murder. Victoria and Rachel discuss their suspicion that Irene might have killed Doon in order to be promoted to the Deauville job, since Gregory cannot be spared from the London shop in the absence of a manager as experienced as Doon: 'But, my dear, nobody would kill anyone for such a round-about reason as that; it's fantastic!'.¹²³ Implausible as such a motive might be, it is generally agreed to be the most likely scenario until Detective Charlesworth has a revelation that Doon's murder might instead be the result of a personal rivalry with Gregory over the affections of Mr. Bevan, the manager of the entire shop.¹²⁴ Adding to the confusion is the revelation that in fact two poisonings were attempted on the day of the murder. Irene confesses to Rachel and Victoria that she believes herself to be Doon's murderer, since she sprinkled oxalic acid on the lunch she expected Gregory to eat: 'I meant to make [Gregory] ill...I wanted to go to Deauville so much, and I thought if she

¹²¹ Nicola Beauman comments on the lack of depictions of working-class women in middlebrow fiction of the period: 'the lives of the upper middle-class women who were described in fiction were not the same as those of... "unrecorded women"'. Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914-39* (London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 102.

¹²² Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 22.

¹²³ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 84.

¹²⁴ As in *The Fashion in Shrouds*, a romantic rivalry between women who had formerly been friends and co-workers is suspected to be the motive to murder, once again demonstrating the difficulty of portraying women working harmoniously together without violent consequences. The difference between the two novels is that the suspicion that Val tried to poison Georgia turns out to be incorrect, while Gregory really did poison her rival. Nevertheless, both Val and Gregory are forced out of the workplace, Val through succumbing to her 'essential femininity' and marrying, and Gregory through being caught in her desperate attempt to conform to a conventionally feminine role.

were ill, only a little bit ill, just for a few days, Bevan would have to send me'.¹²⁵ Irene is in an agony of guilt because she believes that she has mistakenly killed Doon while trying to poison Gregory, but her attempt at murder turns out to have been half-hearted – so little of the poison is put in Gregory's food that nothing happens. In the meantime, Gregory has put a far larger, lethal dose of poison in Doon's food. Professional rivalry is depicted as being a far less potent catalyst for agency than personal rivalry – Irene's desire for advancement in the workplace falls short of Gregory's desire for Bevan and marriage.

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

if ever there was a craggy virgin it was Gregory. The moment I set eyes on her I knew what her trouble was, and I actually had her round to a few parties and tried to get her off...but nothing doing.¹²⁶

Gregory is disliked by her female co-workers because in addition to her awkwardness with men she does not engage in social niceties in the workplace, and her inability to conform to socially accepted feminine codes makes it difficult for her to communicate with other women even though it is implied as marking the reason for her professional success. Gregory admits that she has 'a brain like a man's...I was just born like that; but I really do reason things out more than most women'.¹²⁷ It is also pointed out several times that Gregory's unfeminine physical appearance sets her apart; her hands are 'regrettably like a man's' and her face is 'clumsily' made up.¹²⁸ In spite of the fact that she is the highest-ranking woman at Christophe et Cie, both Gregory and others view her achievement in the workplace as secondary to her lack of conventional femininity. When Charlesworth visits Gregory's house to question her, Gregory is 'sitting darning a pair of stockings...with a

¹²⁵ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 201.

¹²⁶ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 11.

¹²⁷ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 196.

¹²⁸ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, pp. 196, 215.

vase of roses, arranged without skill or imagination, by her side'.¹²⁹ This description of Gregory's activity and surroundings indicates an inept attempt at domesticity, and her thwarted desires in that direction are made explicit when Charlesworth asks her for her opinion, as she is 'a very intelligent girl'.¹³⁰ Gregory is 'flattered and delighted. To be considered intelligent and level-headed was second only to being considered attractive and marriageable'.¹³¹ It is during this visit that Charlesworth begins to get a 'feeling' that Gregory might be the most likely suspect in Doon's murder; both Gregory and Doon were sexually interested in Bevan, but only Gregory would have been devastated by being sent away to take the job in Deauville, which Gregory should have viewed as a positive career move:

Firstly, she would get her rival out of the way, and secondly, she would make it impossible for Bevan to send her abroad; it was essential for him, wasn't it, to have one or other of them at Christophe's? That masculine brain of hers worked very coolly and quickly.¹³²

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

¹²⁹ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 193.

¹³⁰ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 195.

¹³¹ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 196.

¹³² Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 217.

Ultimately, *Death in High Heels* presents very mixed conclusions about the potential for women in the workplace. Gregory's 'masculine' brain allows her to rise through the ranks at the shop, but her obsession with conforming to a conventional feminine model proves to be her downfall. When Victoria, the only married working woman on Christophe et Cie's staff, falls under suspicion for Doon's murder, her unemployed artist husband immediately finds a teaching position so that she will no longer need to suffer the stress of appearing in public at her job, even though Victoria has always proven to be the more reliable breadwinner of the two.¹³³ On the other hand, Irene, who so desires the position in Deauville that she attempts to poison Gregory, achieves her ambition in the end. Irene's reward shows that women can be allowed to achieve professional success, but that they must still be sufficiently 'feminine' in order to do so. Irene's desire for the Deauville job is not so great that she actually commits murder, and the intensity of her guilt when she thinks she has killed, in addition to her colleagues' later, loyal urgings to take the promotion when she thinks she is undeserving, prove that she is 'feminine' enough to be worthy of the promotion when she receives it. In addition, Irene's status as a widow with no romantic ties allows her to be a successful professional woman who has still shown herself to be capable of heterosexual, domestic femininity, while rescuing her from the chaos of excessive sexual desire, which has destroyed the careers of both the promiscuous Doon and the lovelorn Gregory. Once again, as in *The Fashion in Shrouds* and *Laurels Are Poison*, heterosexual romantic relationships are in the end shown to be incompatible with professional success.

The ambivalence towards women's roles in *Death in High Heels* echoes that of every other novel discussed in this chapter; however, just because shop manager Gregory commits murder out of a pathological obsession with a feminine, domestic ideal, or

¹³³ Brand, *Death in High Heels*, p. 173.

Victoria, Val and Deborah give up their careers and reinforce traditional gender roles within heterosexual relationships, it does not mean that these novels are unequivocally conservative. Indeed, they depict active women in the public sphere who are eventually restricted by conventional notions of femininity, heterosexuality and the patriarchal family. This trajectory simultaneously enables the exploration of changing gender roles and the containment of cultural anxieties emerging from such renegotiations. It is shown that women can be successful in traditionally masculine spaces, but when some end up in 'safe', conventional roles, fears about the consequences of women's potentially expanding influence in the public sphere are addressed and eased. While the novels often offer conservative resolutions, the many depictions of successful women can be read as undermining essentialist assumptions about women's abilities. Similarly ambiguous resolutions come into play in the varied depictions of women's bodies – both dead and alive – in Golden Age crime fiction, to which the fifth and final chapter will turn.

CHAPTER V

SENSATIONAL BODIES: BODIES OF WOMEN VILLAINS AND VICTIMS IN GOLDEN AGE CRIME FICTION

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

The murder victim’s body is perhaps the most obvious example of disturbance of order in crime fiction, but a closer examination reveals that the bodies of women who commit crimes are also of interest when exploring transgressive possibilities. The novels in this chapter have been selected because they all portray both female killers and female victims, as I wish to suggest the value of examining depictions of the killer’s body in

¹ The significance of the body in crime fiction as a site of potentially fruitful examination has been recognised by critics such as Gill Plain, who writes that ‘the wider assumptions that shape our knowledge and understanding of the genre are based not on textual observation, but on a series of distorted generalisations. The familiar landscape of genre fiction needs to be remapped, and one of the many possible routes to this remapping is through an analysis of the body’. Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 30.

² Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 74.

addition to the victim's body. To this end, I shall explore the treatment of women victims and killers in novels including Agatha Christie's *Peril at End House* (1932), *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933), *Dumb Witness* (1937), *The Body in the Library* (1942) and *Evil Under the Sun* (1941), Gladys Mitchell's *Speedy Death* (1929), and Dorothy L. Sayers's *Unnatural Death* (1927). In each of these works, questions of identity, gender and class arise not only from the female victims of murder, but also, provocatively, from their killers.

The identity of the female murder victim and the structure of the crime and its subsequent investigation provide a lens through which representations of women, the feminine and deviance can be questioned and examined. Linden Peach writes that:

It goes without saying that the victim of serious crime has always had an important, symbolic role in the definition of sexual and cultural norms. More often than not, the victim is a woman, and frequently a woman who has met her fate because she has transgressed ideological and socio-geographical boundaries.³

Peach goes on to point out, 'That the victim of serious crime is likely to be a woman is true across a range of writing about crime...Very often, the female victims are "criminalised" and punished for their independence and assertiveness'.⁴ This holds true in a number of crime novels in which women are the victims of murder. In novels such as *The Body in the Library* and *Speedy Death*, the body becomes a site of transgression when the identity of the victim is not what it seems to be and consequently the original assumptions that accompany the victim's class and/or gender status are rendered uncertain. In these cases and in others, the body ceases to represent an individual and becomes a site for the examination of social and cultural meanings through the ambiguity that the body evokes. Several critics have referred to the body in crime narratives in terms of a page on which to be written; Gill Plain argues that:

³ Linden Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction: Criminal Deceptions* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 64.

⁴ Peach, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction*, p. 70.

Murder literally is ‘written on the body’ and bodies are never neutral. They inevitably bear the inscriptions of their cultural production – socially determined markers of gender, race, sexuality and class that profoundly influence the ways in which they are read by witnesses, police, detectives and readers.⁵

Kathleen Gregory Klein, by contrast, makes the formal point regarding gender in relation to genre that the victim ‘is, despite biology, always female’ because the existence of binaries in which one side is privileged, such as male/female and active/passive, also holds true for the binaries of killer/victim and detective/victim, with the killer and the detective always occupying the dominant or active role in the binary. Klein argues that ‘the detective – and before him the criminal – writes his story on the ever available body of the victim’.⁶

The uncertainty inherent in the constant switching of identities and even, in some cases, of the bodies themselves makes for an uncanny and disturbing portrayal of death and the body that erases individuality. Christie’s Hercule Poirot repeatedly notices the ‘sameness’ of bodies; in *Evil Under the Sun*, Poirot points to people sunbathing on a beach, saying, ‘Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just – bodies!’.⁷ Poirot’s statement foreshadows the later switch of a living woman with another, dead one, which he reveals at the novel’s conclusion. This recognition of the sameness of bodies often works, as in the switching of the two young women’s bodies in *The Body in the Library*, to call into question certain stereotypes about female sexual morality and also social class. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva uses the corpse, which she names as ‘the utmost of abjection’, as a crucial example of the abject, a liminal, in-between state that she describes as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders,

⁵ Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, pp. 12-13.

⁶ Kathleen Gregory Klein, ‘Habeas Corpus: Feminism and Detective Fiction’, in Glenwood Irons (ed.), *Feminism in Women’s Detective Fiction* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 173.

⁷ Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 13.

positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.⁸ The constant switching of murdered bodies and of bodies' identities and the gender and class issues the discovery of these substitutions brings to light goes even further than the representation of a murder to highlight the disruption of social order that those bodies represent. The abject body of the murder victim represents not only the boundary between life and death made uncomfortably visible but it is also the tangible evidence of transgression of the law. Kristeva claims that 'Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility'.⁹ The bodies of the women murder victims, as well as the bodies of women killers, represent a site of transgression of both law in the legal sense and the law of social order.

1. 'Not an Ordinary Murderess': The Body of the Killer in *Lord Edgware Dies*, *Unnatural Death*, *Dumb Witness* and *Peril at End House*

The depictions of women killers in the work of Christie and Sayers are significant in their contravention of social and cultural boundaries. In killers such as Mary Whittaker of *Unnatural Death*, Bella Tanios of *Dumb Witness* and Jane Wilkinson of *Lord Edgware Dies*, issues of class and gender take centre stage in representations of killers whose bodies themselves are essential to their crimes. Each of these women use forms of masquerade to aid them in committing murder, whether this be using an alternate identity, as Mary Whittaker does in *Unnatural Death*, or the cultural expectations of accepted forms of femininity, as used by Bella Tanios in *Dumb Witness* with her performance as traditional wife and mother, or even, as in the case of Nick Buckley in *Murder at End House*, the masquerade of passive female victimhood. As with his observation in *Evil Under the Sun*

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

about the similarity of sunbathing bodies, Poirot also on several occasions specifically suggests the interchangeability of women. At the end of *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), when he is explaining the timetable of the murder he has just solved, Poirot reveals that the woman thought to be the victim who was seen at a certain time was in fact her killer: 'Les femmes, they look so much alike nowadays that one identifies them more by their clothing than by their faces'.¹⁰ The killer's body, like the victim's, becomes an ambiguous site of confused identities and transgressive potential. The ways in which the killers manipulate available modes of femininity within their various identities can be read as representing possibilities of resistance to social restrictions on feminine behaviour.

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

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

Carlotta's appearance foreshadows the corpse she will later be, and this mutability echoes the uncanny universality of the female dead body. She is already binarised, compared to a negative of a photograph. Carlotta's ability to slip across boundaries, to disappear into

¹⁰ Agatha Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 225.

¹¹ Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1986), p. 19.

different identities, is what attracts Jane Wilkinson to her when she sees Carlotta impersonating her onstage in a one-woman show and is therefore what ultimately seals Carlotta's fate.

Hastings describes Carlotta as 'a thoroughly nice girl' and says at the beginning of the investigation that he cannot believe that she could be a suspect in Lord Edgware's murder, even though he belatedly remembers that Carlotta's stereotypical Jewish love of money might tempt her to be 'led astray' were she to be paid to commit a crime. Carlotta is one example of a disguised body. Her ethnic background as well as her speculated-upon sexual relationships become factors in suspecting Carlotta of the crime after she is dead – her morality is questioned when the gold box planted by Jane Wilkinson, from which her fatal dose of veronal was taken, is thought to have been a gift from a male admirer imagined to have ties to both her death and Lord Edgware's murder. Yet Carlotta's fate arouses sympathy when it is found that she has been supporting an ill younger sister, and this evidence of 'good girl' behaviour helps Poirot to catch her killer when a potentially incriminating letter written by Carlotta is found to have been tampered with by Jane. Carlotta's reputation is at last redeemed when she is absolved of Lord Edgware's murder, her own assumed suicide, and her supposed engagement in sexual behaviour outside marriage.¹² Significantly, Jane, Carlotta's double and her killer, also turns out to be her 'lover'. Not only does Jane plant the gold box which Poirot assumes must have come from

¹² However, Carlotta is still the victim of an ethnic stereotype: her death is suggested to be the direct result of a congenital Jewish weakness for money. Indeed, anti-Semitism is evident in many Golden Age crime narratives; see e.g. Malcolm J. Turnbull, *Victims or Villains?: Jewish Images in Classic English Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1998). Focusing on Christie specifically, Merja Makinen notes that her representations of Jewish characters are often extremely ambivalent, reflecting both sympathy and the most basic of stereotypes. Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 175-78. Makinen also points out that Christie often uses racial stereotypes as red herrings, as I examine later in this chapter with relation to Bella Tanios's Greek husband Jacob in *Dumb Witness*. *Investigating Femininity*, p. 179. Nevertheless, as in the case of Carlotta, some of these xenophobic assumptions are shown to be true even as they are ostensibly called into question. Jacob Tanios turns out to be innocent of murder, but he is guilty of financial imprudence and a domineering attitude toward his wife, both of which are implied to be connected to his foreignness.

a male lover, but she also tears a strategic corner from Carlotta's letter to her sister, turning the pronoun 'she' into 'he' and thereby implicating an unknown man in Lord Edgware's murder. Jane's planting of evidence becomes a form of gender-bending masquerade, another disguise that ties her to her victim, Carlotta, whose body Jane has already used as a disguise.

As a killer, Jane is described by a friend, fellow actor Bryan Martin, as 'not an ordinary murderess. She – she has no sense of right or wrong. Honestly she's not responsible'.¹³ Hastings also remarks upon Jane's 'completely natural' attitude after murdering her husband, calling her a 'very lovely and very conscienceless lady'.¹⁴ However, Jane's naïveté and childlike irresponsibility are shown to be somewhat calculated – remorseless she may be, but she certainly recognises her own culpability for the crimes she has committed and even displays pride in her own agency. Merja Makinen argues that:

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...Christie insists on 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'.¹⁵

Jane's beauty and her insouciance towards her own role in the murders lead men around her such as Hastings and Bryan Martin to view her as a stereotypically childish, attractive young woman whose 'natural' addiction to getting her own way renders her 'irresponsible' for her actions.¹⁶ In fact, Jane is a supremely competent professional actress who is clever

¹³ Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 45.

¹⁴ Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 189.

¹⁵ Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 118.

¹⁶ Interestingly, it is a woman, Lord Edgware's housekeeper, who insists upon Jane's guilt throughout the entire novel and recognises the transgressive potential of Jane's body. Miss Carroll, who is a witness to Jane's entrance into the house on the night of Lord Edgware's murder, is adamant that that there was no mistaking the woman as Jane, even though Poirot proves that Miss Carroll could only have seen the woman from the back: 'Back of her head, her voice, her walk! It's all the same thing. Absolutely unmistakable! I tell

enough to use negative assumptions about her intelligence and competence to her own advantage. Also, there is evidence suggesting that the murder that marks the beginning of Jane's crime spree might have been the result of more than simply her selfish desire to marry a duke and raise her social status. Lord Edgware is presented as a thoroughly unpleasant character; it is implied that he has sadistic tastes and unspecified, disagreeable sexual habits, and his death is not viewed particularly sympathetically by those who knew him, even by his own daughter. It is never acknowledged that Jane's crime, and her subsequent efforts to cover it up, may have been as much an act of revenge by an abused wife as it was a conscienceless means of clearing the way for a second marriage.

The novel's final chapter, 'A Human Document', is mostly composed of a letter written by Jane in which she explains the crimes in her own words. It is to be given to Poirot in the hope that he will have it published after her execution. Jane writes, 'I've always noticed that if you speak the truth in a rather silly way nobody believes you. I've often done it over contracts. And it's also a good thing to seem stupider than you are'.¹⁷ Jane's recognition of female stereotypes leads her to exaggerate her 'natural' irresponsibility, drawing suspicion away from herself by taking advantage of such assumptions. The casual professionalism evident in her negotiation of contracts similarly indicates that she is far from unintelligent. Jane is presented as the epitome of vanity, but she is in fact revelling in the roles she plays and in her own potential for deviance. In her letter, Jane writes, 'It's funny, but I haven't lost my looks a bit...They don't hang you in public any more, do they? I think that's a pity'.¹⁸ The letter's postscript, and the final sentence of the novel, asks: 'Do you think they will put me in Madame Tussauds?'.¹⁹ Jane

you I *know* it was Jane Wilkinson – a thoroughly bad woman if ever there was one'. *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 58.

¹⁷ Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 190.

¹⁸ Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*, p. 192.

¹⁹ Jane is referring to the famous London wax museum, in which wax figures of criminals are displayed in addition to statues of other well-known people.

is actively seeking notoriety – she wants her own dead body, and its uncanny replica, to be seen and acknowledged and her story to be told.²⁰ Jane's desire to be hanged in public, though thwarted, represents her fantasy of her body living on as a site of disturbance – of 'death infecting life'.²¹ That her letter makes up the chapter entitled 'A Human Document' is telling – Jane's letter represents her own body, and her desire for it to be published signifies a disturbing investment in abjection. Though the novel does include a tidy explication along with the stereotypical engagement of a young couple, both symbolic of restored order, the final chapter asks a question more than it provides an answer – it is a transgressive voice from beyond the grave, asking for her body and her story to be acknowledged by those who are living.

Dorothy L. Sayers's *Unnatural Death* is another novel in which the killer's body is as provocative – or more so – as the bodies of her female victims. Mary Whittaker is, like Jane Wilkinson, a professional woman, a nurse who has given up her hospital job in order to care for her dying aunt. The doctor who treated her aunt describes Miss Whittaker to Lord Peter Wimsey as 'a very nice, well-educated, capable girl...Self-reliant, cool, all that sort of thing. Quite the modern type'.²² When the aunt finally dies, the attending doctor is uneasy about the cause of death, and with good reason: Mary has hastened her aunt's death by injecting her with a syringe full of air designed to stop her heart in order to secure her aunt's money before a change in the law makes it impossible for Mary to inherit. Wimsey takes the case and is soon drawn in by Mary's undeniable worthiness as an adversary. As a

²⁰ Ernst Jentsch, whose 1906 essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' was a source for Freud's influential 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', identifies the wax figure as an example of an uncanny object that can evoke discomfort in the observer: 'The unpleasant impression is well known that readily arises in many people when they visit collections of wax figures, panopticons and panoramas. In semi-darkness it is often especially difficult to distinguish a life-size wax or similar figure from a human person. For many sensitive souls, such a figure also has the ability to retain its unpleasantness after the individual has taken a decision as to whether it is animate or not...The fact that such wax figures often present anatomical details may contribute to the increased effect of one's feeling, but this is definitely not the most important thing: a real anatomically prepared body does not need in the least to look so objectionable as the corresponding model in wax'. Ernst Jensch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki* 2.1 (1996), p. 12.

²¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

²² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p. 7.

criminal, she is elusive, intelligent and skilled at disguise. On one occasion when Wimsey's valet, Bunter, is given the task of tailing Miss Whittaker, she realises she is being followed and goes into a Ladies Retiring Room, where she changes clothes and walks away under Bunter's unsuspecting nose. Wimsey comments, 'What a woman!'.²³ His somewhat condescending admiration continues even when it is clear that Mary Whittaker's intelligence and subtlety make her extremely competent as a killer: 'Hang it all – here are all we people with our brilliant brains and our professional reputations – and this half-trained girl out of a hospital can beat the lot of us. How was it done?'.²⁴ Inspector Parker responds that the method used for the murders is 'probably something so simple and obvious that it's never occurred to us...The sort of principle you learn when you're in the fourth form and never apply to anything'. Their disparagement of Mary's education, compared with their own 'brilliant brains and professional reputations', negates her intelligence and her agency as a killer, despite the fact that she has utilised a practically undetectable method that was undoubtedly picked up during her time as a very competent working nurse.²⁵ Mary is, as her aunt's doctor acknowledges, 'well-educated, cool, self-reliant, capable and modern'. The very modern phenomenon of the professional woman has flummoxed the accomplished detectives, and their disparagement of her intelligence marks a disproportionate response to a woman who is in fact a clever killer.

Mary Whittaker's affinity for disguise begins with a simple change of name when she assumes the moniker 'Miss Grant' as she goes to consult a lawyer, Mr. Trigg, about the implications of her aunt dying without having made a will. Mr. Trigg is initially drawn to the appearance of the 'tall and handsome...attractive girl', but soon after the meeting a

²³ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 124.

²⁴ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 286.

²⁵ Mary Whittaker's second and third victims, Bertha Gotobed and Vera Findlater, are killed through the same means as her aunt, by injection with a syringe full of air. In the case of Bertha Gotobed, the police-surgeon 'is quite convinced that the death was perfectly natural...there is [not] the slightest reason to suspect foul play'. *Unnatural Death*, p. 61.

strange event alarms him. When Mary thinks that the lawyer's attraction has made him seek her out to an uncomfortable (and unprofessional) degree, she disguises herself as a fatally injured battered wife with her face wrapped in bandages and she lures the lawyer to an empty house, where she drugs him and almost certainly plans to kill him before his taxi driver comes to the rescue. Mr. Trigg realises something is amiss when he sees that the mysterious woman, like 'Miss Grant', has an unusual scar running across the back of her hand. The tell-tale scar is the betraying marker that designates Mary's body as transgressive. Mary's choice of disguise as a battered wife is significant; Mr. Trigg unwittingly represents the patriarchal force of the law that is compelling Mary to commit violence to avoid being cut out by the changing inheritance policies. Mary, as the abused wife, lures Mr. Trigg to the abandoned house under the pretext that she needs a will made in order to disinherit her abusive husband. Mary's disguise as a woman who has been injured through her participation in the heteronormative order makes her attack on Mr. Trigg an ironic reversal of the circumstances of a stereotypical female victim. The attempted murder of a man who has been pressing his unwanted attentions on Mary represents the revenge of a woman who is violently trying to escape enforced heteronormativity.²⁶

Mary Whittaker's other alternate identity is 'Mrs. Forrest', a vaguely disreputable divorcée who is described as 'Tall, overdressed...Heavily peroxidized...powder too white for the fashion and mouth heavily obscured with sealing-wax red; eyebrows painted black to startle, not deceive'.²⁷ Mrs. Forrest's theatrically sexualised appearance is the polar opposite of the respectable and tidy Mary Whittaker, and it seems increasingly likely that Mrs. Forrest is the identity into which Mary plans to disappear – after her aunt's death, she destroys all existing photographs of herself as Mary Whittaker. Though Mrs. Forrest is

²⁶ It is indicated in the novel that Mary is a lesbian; for further discussion of nonconforming women in *Unnatural Death*, see Chapter II, 'Everybody Needs an Outlet'.

²⁷ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 73.

placed under suspicion early in the investigation, Wimsey remains in the dark as to her actual identity until nearly the end of the novel, even after his various encounters with a woman whose heavily made-up appearance could easily indicate a disguise. Referring to Mary Whittaker and Mrs. Forrest, he says to Parker, ‘Nobody’s life is safe for a second while either of them is at large’.²⁸ Mrs. Forrest’s flamboyantly disreputable appearance is another over-the-top disguise, like the battered wife costume, that appropriates the mode of femininity it represents and uses it to make a point about such stereotypes. When Wimsey begins to progress alarmingly in his investigation, Mary Whittaker decides that she must eliminate him. To this end, as ‘Mrs. Forrest’, she invites Wimsey to her flat and goes through the motions of seducing him. Sensing that something is amiss, Wimsey reflects on her lack of attraction for him:

For all her make-up and her somewhat outspoken costume, she struck him as spinsterish – even epicene. That was the thing which had puzzled him during their previous interview...Wimsey had felt her as something essentially sexless, even then. And he felt it even more strongly now.²⁹

Though he cannot distinguish Mary from Mrs. Forrest, Wimsey is able to read her desire as a performance; Mary’s sexual non-conformity is made legible through her excessive display of highly sexualised heterosexual femininity. This scene suggests the view that sexuality is natural or inherent – Mary cannot disguise her lesbianism, even though she acts out a carefully staged show of heterosexual desire. Mary’s disgust at seducing Wimsey is evident, but her lack of enthusiasm for Wimsey’s embraces during her attempt at seduction also reflects the attitude of any woman faced with using her body to manipulate a figure in a position of power, regardless of sexuality. Mary’s body, instead of being sexualised by her seductive appearance and performance, becomes ‘sexless’,

²⁸ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 255.

²⁹ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 182.

creating a rift that highlights the disturbing nature not of her own capacity for violence, but of the sexual masquerade of the femininity she feels forced to inhabit.

Mary Whittaker's third murder is that of her friend (and implied lover) Miss Findlater, who was vacillating about supplying Mary with an essential alibi. Mary plants at the scene of the murder an American crime magazine called *The Black Mask*, on which the words 'The Black' have been underlined. By this red herring, Mary attempts to throw the investigators off the scent, pointing them towards a murderer of another sex and ethnicity – after all, a sensational crime magazine is 'hardly a lady's choice' and the underlined words must have been a desperate attempt by the 'captured women' to indicate that their kidnappers are not of Caucasian descent.³⁰ Mary herself is nowhere to be found, and the 'abominable' thought that 'an English girl' should have been kidnapped by a black man is distracting enough to throw the media into a frenzy and draw attention from the fact that the elusive Mary Whittaker has already been implicated in two previous murders. By using the multiple masquerades of sex, ethnicity, and the fantasy of rape, Mary anticipates the media reaction and manipulates negative stereotypes to great effect, making her escape and almost avoiding capture.

Mary is finally apprehended not as herself but as 'Mrs. Forrest', and the capture is not accomplished without confusion. Mary's frequent switching of identities takes a comic turn when Wimsey's assistant Miss Climpson, entering 'Mrs. Forrest's' apartment building, is mistaken by the police surveilling the building for Mary Whittaker in disguise.³¹ This moment is significant, echoing the interchangeability of women's bodies and identities that is repeated throughout the crime fiction of the period. In this case, the woman detective becomes a potential victim when she goes to confront – and is mistaken for – the killer, who is herself in disguise. In addition, the confusion between the women

³⁰ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 248.

³¹ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 292.

seems to indicate that, irrespective of age, spinsters specifically are distinguished by an identifiable look that categorises them as a type and makes them transposable – Mary Whittaker is significantly younger than Miss Climpson, yet Miss Climpson is still misidentified as Mary. It takes the male detectives, Wimsey and Parker, the enforcers of patriarchal law and order, to stop the murder of Miss Climpson by breaking into the private space of ‘Mrs. Forrest’s’ bedroom, where Miss Climpson is initially observed not as herself but as ‘The body of a woman [lying] limply on the bed’.³² The scene of the potential crime is almost intimate, with the nameless victim passively positioned on the bed and the killer readying her syringe in the dressing room beyond; when Wimsey and Parker stop the transgressive act of murder, they restore heteronormative order by recognising and assigning distinct identities to the killer and her potential victim.

The novel concludes with Mary Whittaker’s suicide. She strangles herself with a sheet in a parody of the execution that would have awaited her, again subverting the patriarchal law that has thwarted her from the beginning and caused her to become a killer in the first place. Unlike Jane Wilkinson, Mary Whittaker’s final act of agency is to choose not to tell her own story in the very public theatres of courtroom and media, therefore slipping free of her identity and becoming only a symbol of ‘an evil woman’, as Parker calls her when staring down at her dead body. Her corpse is grotesque, the ‘face swollen’ with a ‘deep, red ring about the throat’, and it makes Wimsey feel ‘cold and sick’.³³ The unsettling potential of an ‘evil woman’ is embodied in Mary’s corpse, which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’.³⁴ The body represents a criminal woman who has subverted stereotypes of oppressed femininity by using them to mask her transgression and who has subverted the law by performing her own execution while in prison, appropriating the law even at the cost of her own destruction.

³² Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 294.

³³ Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, p. 299.

³⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

Besides those killers who use physical forms of masquerade to transgress social boundaries, there are also those who use less obvious but no less effective means of accomplishing the same end, as with Mary Whittaker's use of commonly held prejudices about sex and ethnicity as a form of disguise. Bella Tanios in Christie's *Dumb Witness*, Nick Buckley in Christie's *Peril at End House*, and others use cultural expectations of accepted feminine roles as a form of masquerade in order to confuse and mislead investigators who seek to restore order. Bella, as the first example, hides behind the image of a mousy, doting mother who is dominated by her gregarious Greek husband. Bella plots to kill her wealthy spinster aunt, Miss Arundell, so that she and her children can inherit part of Miss Arundell's fortune and escape their impoverished lifestyle. In many ways, Bella is presented as a figure of pity and ridicule – she is looked upon kindly by all but thought to be hopelessly dull and ineffectual. For example, Bella loves clothes and eagerly looks to her stylish cousin Theresa's wardrobe for inspiration but always seems to strike the wrong note with her cheap copies of Theresa's chic garments. Theresa is ostensibly the 'bad girl' and Bella the 'good girl': Theresa spends money indiscriminately, is 'Ultra modern...and terribly made-up', while Bella is 'quite a nice woman – but absolutely stupid and completely under her husband's thumb'.³⁵ Bella and Theresa are, in fact, quite literally presented as mirror images of each other in the novel. Miss Lawson, Miss Arundell's companion, witnesses through her looking glass a woman she is sure is Theresa setting up an early attempt on Miss Arundell's life; Miss Lawson is so positive about the identification because even though the night was dark, she could see that the woman was wearing a brooch with the initials 'T.A.', for Theresa Arundell.³⁶ In fact, since the initials were seen through the mirror, they are actually the letters A.T., for Arabella Tanios. Even Theresa's marriage at the end of the novel is the mirror image of Bella's – when Theresa

³⁵ Agatha Christie, *Dumb Witness* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1988), p. 97.

³⁶ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 194.

marries her beloved, clever Dr Donaldson, she is absolved of her wild, modern youth and slips comfortably into the role of traditional wife, ‘amazingly happy and absolutely wrapped up in her husband’s career’.³⁷ This should not, however, certainly be seen as a setback for the independent modern woman, but perhaps as an attempt to renegotiate the marriage relationship for the modern couple, as discussed in Chapter III. While still in the subordinate role in the relationship, Theresa is happy in having married a man she loves, while meek, motherly Bella, seemingly the opposite of modern, stylish and rebellious Theresa, is the one who secretly despises her doctor husband and is miserable enough in her marriage to try to cast suspicion on her husband for a murder that she herself commits.³⁸

Bella’s power as a killer lies in her ability to manipulate assumptions about herself – as a mother and a seemingly traditional wife who takes a subordinate role to her husband, she is dismissed by others as lacking the necessary agency and motive to commit murder. Theresa remarks to her brother Charles, ‘I don’t see that money would be any good to Bella. She goes about looking like a rag-bag and her tastes are purely domestic’.³⁹ Miss Lawson more charitably assumes that Bella deserves Miss Arundell’s money, but comments to Poirot, ‘[Miss Arundell] didn’t want to leave any money *outright* to Bella because she was afraid that man would get hold of it...the poor girl is *quite* under his thumb...I dare say she’d *murder* someone if he told her to!’.⁴⁰ Those who know Bella read her as completely incapable of acting independently of her husband, and, in addition, view him suspiciously as a boisterous foreigner. In one sense, this stereotype holds true; the fact is that Dr Tanios is not entirely innocent in spite of not having committed an actual crime.

³⁷ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 250.

³⁸ Merja Makinen argues 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’. *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 160.

³⁹ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 129.

It transpires that he took control of all Bella's assets upon their marriage and speculated them away. As a result of the passive role she is forced to take in the marriage, Bella grows increasingly resentful of her husband and finally commits murder so that she can attain the financial means to survive independently. The depth of her antipathy is evident when she even tries to use the suspicion directed against him as a foreigner to implicate him in her aunt's death. Bella shrewdly goes on the attack when Poirot tells her that Miss Arundell wrote him a letter shortly before her death expressing the suspicion that someone was trying to kill her:

if anything was said in that letter against my husband, it was entirely untrue!...Aunt Emily was prejudiced against my husband because he was not an Englishman, and she may therefore have believed things that Theresa said about him. But they are *not true*.⁴¹

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

Bella's manipulative behaviour and bid for freedom from her marriage are ultimately read correctly by Poirot, who calls Bella's trap of a string across the top of Miss Arundell's staircase 'a homely simple method – "the kind that mother makes"'.⁴² Poirot is finally able to reconcile Bella's seemingly passive, traditional domesticity with her role as killer. He explains,

I realized at once, not that [Bella] feared her husband, but that she disliked him...Here was...a thwarted [woman]. A plain girl, leading a dull existence...finally accepting a man she did not care for rather than be left an old maid...There was only one thing that illuminated her drab life, the expectation of her Aunt Emily's death. Then she would have money, independence, the means to educate her children as she wished – and remember education meant a lot to her – she was a Professor's daughter!⁴³

⁴¹ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 139.

⁴² Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 214.

⁴³ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 245.

Bella's transgression lies in her representation of the absolute failure of a traditionally subordinate, domestic role for women. While determined to do everything 'correctly' – marrying to avoid becoming an 'old maid', giving control of her assets to her husband, striving to give her children the best in life according to the values she has inherited – Bella has been thwarted at every turn and made into a killer by these seemingly ordinary, yet destructive, circumstances. Bella's suicide by an overdose of sleeping draught is encouraged by Poirot, who tells her, 'It is the children you must think of, madame, not yourself. You love your children'.⁴⁴ Instead of being subject to a public trial and execution, Bella is forced by her role as a mother into disposing of her offending body in a private, domestic manner. At one point, before anyone knows who murdered Miss Arundell, Charles asks Poirot, 'Doesn't [Bella] strike you as the type of woman who is marked out by fate to be a victim?'.⁴⁵ Bella, the killer, is in fact a victim herself – a victim of the cultural expectations of a woman's role that she is clever enough to manipulate as a form of masquerade, but is ultimately unable to escape.

Christie's *Peril at End House* is another novel in which a woman killer assumes an ingenious disguise – in this case, that of potential murder victim. Magdala (Nick) Buckley is a young, modern woman whose flippancy in the seeming face of death often enrages Poirot. Nick artfully arranges a meeting with the detective when she realises he is staying nearby and misleads him into thinking that someone is making attempts on her life in order to draw attention away from the fact that she herself is actually plotting a murder. Nick pointedly laughs at both Poirot and his assistant Hastings when they come to warn her of the purported danger, asking, 'Who is the dog...? Dr Watson, I presume'. When Hastings 'coldly' gives his name, Nick responds 'Battle of – 1066...Who said I wasn't educated?'.⁴⁶ Nick's modern, mocking dismissal of Hastings recognises him as a relic of traditional

⁴⁴ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 226.

⁴⁵ Christie, *Dumb Witness*, p. 158.

⁴⁶ Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1980), p. 27.

‘Englishness’ – the loyal Watson figure with the name of a quintessentially English battle. Nick’s brash, modern femininity challenges the entrenched, English masculinity Hastings represents. To Poirot, she says,

Do you think someone really wants to do away with me?...But, of course, that sort of thing doesn’t really happen...I expect Monsieur Poirot is like a surgeon who’s invented an operation or a doctor who’s found an obscure disease and wants everyone to have it.⁴⁷

Nick places Poirot in terms of his relationship to bodies, comparing him to a doctor or surgeon, and her dismissal of him is an attempt to take her own body out of the equation and imply that she is not so easy to categorise.

Nick, whose masculine nickname is indicative of her potential for gender ambiguity, takes full advantage of the assumption that the killer would be a man and the victim a woman, disguising herself as the inevitable woman victim when she is in fact the killer. Poirot refers to the potential killer as a ‘clever man’, and Nick’s constructed identity as a flighty young flapper who is barely serious enough to recognise herself as a would-be murder victim is an extremely effective smokescreen.⁴⁸ Nick manipulates the stereotype with great success, time and again sidestepping Poirot by emphasising the fact that she is not a ‘clever man’ and so cannot be the killer. Poirot dismisses Nick’s modern femininity: ‘The young girls – they are not properly trained nowadays. The order, the method, it is left out of their bringing up. She is charming, Mademoiselle Nick, but she is a feather-head. Decidedly she is a feather-head’.⁴⁹ Nick’s lack of ‘proper training’ means that she transgresses gendered boundaries that would otherwise restrain her. Poirot’s mistake is in assuming that Nick’s lack of ‘order’ and ‘method’ means that she is incapable of reasoned behaviour. Nick’s manipulation of this stereotype to mask a capacity for carefully

⁴⁷ Christie, *Peril at End House*, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁸ Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 113.

premeditated murder is indicative of the chaos that might ensue when modern women reject traditional roles.

Nick's stylish, boyish, modern femininity is contrasted with her unassuming cousin (and victim) Maggie's traditional femininity, and the second mode of femininity is represented far more positively than the first. Maggie is certainly viewed more favourably by the staid Hastings, who describes her as having an 'appearance of calm good sense...A quiet girl, pretty in the old-fashioned sense – certainly not smart'.⁵⁰ Nick sees Maggie rather differently, remarking disparagingly, 'Maggie's got no kind of brains. Good works is about all she's fit for. That and never seeing the point of jokes'.⁵¹ However, it is Maggie, not the flashy Nick, who has attracted the attention of, and become secretly engaged to, the famous pilot Captain Seton, whose death in an attempt to fly around the world sets Nick's plans for murder into motion. Hastings, who reads about Captain Seton's flight in the newspaper, comments admiringly, 'Must be a fine fellow. That sort of thing makes one feel it's a good thing to be an Englishman after all'.⁵² Maggie's old-fashioned femininity and Captain Seton's stereotypically English bravery make a pairing that seems ideal, except for the fact that they both die just before they are to be married. Nick, who knows about Maggie's secret engagement, quickly takes action when Captain Seton is killed, stealing his love letters to Maggie and killing Maggie herself so that she can inherit Captain Seton's large fortune instead of Maggie. Magdala Buckley is both Nick and Maggie's full name, and Nick reasons that she can pass herself off as the 'Magdala Buckley' designated in Seton's will. When Maggie's body is found, it is at first assumed that it is Nick's, since Maggie had been wearing Nick's distinctive shawl. Since Nick has taken care to represent herself as the potential victim, Maggie's body is dismissed and her murder plays a secondary role to the assumption that she was killed by mistake and that

⁵⁰ Christie, *Peril at End House*, pp. 62-63.

⁵¹ Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 56.

⁵² Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 9.

someone is still out to murder Nick. Nick has made her victim and herself interchangeable; not only by the convenience of the shared name, but also by setting Maggie up to be killed in her shawl so that it will look like the women were confused with each other. Nick, the killer, immerses herself in the role of victim so thoroughly that the true victim slips out of mind.

In spite of Nick's careful attempt to draw attention away from Maggie's death – 'burying' her cousin in the disguise of a simple mistake – both the morally good, old-fashioned Maggie and the wicked, modern Nick, who overdoses on cocaine to avoid being arrested, are obliterated at the novel's conclusion. 'Magdala Buckley' is no more, but a compromise is presented in the form of the novel's conventional marriage plot between Nick's friend Frederica Rice and Jim Lazarus. Frederica, or 'Freddie', is a recovering drug addict who is separated from her similarly addicted, mentally unstable husband, and Jim Lazarus is an art dealer and 'a Jew...but a frightfully decent one'.⁵³ The convenient suicide of Freddie's husband at the end of the novel clears the way for a marriage between Freddie and Jim. Freddie's masculine-sounding nickname, like Nick's, designates her as a modern woman, and her failed marriage and struggle with addiction make her something more than the traditional ingénue. The marriage plot in *Peril at End House*, with an experienced, modern woman's second marriage to a Jewish man, sets up a very different representation of 'happily ever after' than if Maggie Buckley and Captain Seton had survived to become the novel's model couple; though the conventional marriage plot neatly restores order, it is perhaps not the order that might have been expected. As discussed in Chapter III, the modern couple provides a way to stretch the possibilities of a conventional ending, while allowing the genre's conservative framework to remain in place.

⁵³ Christie, *Peril at End House*, p. 33.

Meanwhile, though the symbolic restoration of order is denied to the traditional couple in favour of a more modern manifestation, the transgressive, modern woman also becomes completely erased. Nick symbolises modern, active femininity that has superseded passive, traditional femininity, but the novel's conclusion is ambiguous, as neither of these models is allowed to supplant the other. Nick's assumed overdose of cocaine at the conclusion of the novel does not even take place onstage – Poirot only projects that it will happen. Her body is only hypothetical, and does not intrude upon the narrative's resolution. Nick's insistent attempts to position herself as victim instead of killer have succeeded in the end, for as with the body of her victim, whose identity is so confused and downplayed that her body is mistaken for Nick's, Nick's own body becomes immaterial in the end.

2. 'Erased From the Page': The Body of the Victim in *Speedy Death*, *The Body in the Library* and *Evil Under the Sun*

Gladys Mitchell's *Speedy Death* is a novel peppered with women's bodies, dead and alive, real and fake. The novel opens with the discovery of a profoundly disturbing female body. Everard Mountjoy is a professional explorer and scientist who is presumed to be male but is, to the surprise of everyone at the house party during which the murder occurs, discovered to be a woman when her dead, naked body is found drowned in a bathtub. It is at first assumed that Mountjoy has disappeared under sinister circumstances and left the unknown woman's body to be found, until it gradually becomes clear that 'Mountjoy was the lady, and the lady was Mountjoy'.⁵⁴ When party guest Mr. Carstairs is relating the circumstances of Mountjoy's death to the detective Mrs. Bradley, he muses,

First, there is the queer fact that, although a man, known to the scientists of two continents as Everard Mountjoy, went into that bathroom, we found drowned in

⁵⁴ Gladys Mitchell, *Speedy Death* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), p. 20.

that same bathroom an unknown woman, and no trace of our friend except his dressing-gown.⁵⁵

That Mountjoy is ‘known to the scientists of two continents’ makes the deception particularly bewildering. Mountjoy has been passing himself off as a man not only to his friends but also to his fellow – probably mostly male – scientists, who would presumably have the most rational and penetrating ways of seeing. The guests’ perplexity is a comic moment that explicitly draws attention to the dead body’s loss of identity; it is increasingly clear that the body must be Mountjoy’s, but Mountjoy is repeatedly referred to as having ‘disappeared’ instead of having died. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan call *Speedy Death* a novel ‘which turns on an issue of transvestism never quite presented with sufficient aplomb’, presumably a reference to the fact that Mountjoy’s female identity is never revealed or even speculated upon at length.⁵⁶ Significantly, the story behind Mountjoy’s gender masquerade remains unknown and is only given the most superficial consideration. As becomes clear, Mountjoy’s murder has neutralised the threat of ‘his’ female body before it becomes manifest.

Even before his body is found, Mountjoy’s occupation attracts assumptions that are shown to be false, calling attention to his potential ambiguity. On their way to the house party which is disrupted by the discovery of Mountjoy’s body, Dorothy Clark tells her fiancé Bertie Philipson that she thinks Mountjoy must be ‘A large, hairy, loud-voiced, primitive sort of creature, with a red tie and a black beard’.⁵⁷ Dorothy’s assumptions invoke a popular image of what an explorer should look like, but Mountjoy does not conform to this stereotype; he is in fact

⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 180.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 9.

a little, slim, clean-shaven, shy sort of fellow, with hardly a word to say...He doesn't golf or motor or walk or ride or swim or tennis or anything. And the only person who seems to be able to get two words out of him is...Eleanor.⁵⁸

Though Mountjoy's nonconformity to gendered stereotypes draws little more than a raised eyebrow, it is his relationship with Eleanor Bing that is his ultimate undoing. Eleanor is a repressed, old-fashioned young woman whose interactions with men are usually erratic and 'highly improbable'; she either reacts with cold, stereotypically Victorian disapproval or with socially inappropriate sexual advances.⁵⁹ Her attraction to Mountjoy falls in the latter category, and Eleanor's pursuit of him results in a secret engagement between the two. When Eleanor discovers that her fiancé is a woman, she reacts by murdering Mountjoy. Judith Butler argues that:

gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated.⁶⁰

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

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 412.

When Mountjoy's body is found, it is agreed that Eleanor should not be told the truth about Mountjoy's sex in order to spare her embarrassment: 'Rather bad luck to find out that the chap you are engaged to is a woman, what?'.⁶¹ Mountjoy and Eleanor's relationship becomes something else that is meant to remain 'unknown'; indeed, their engagement 'was supposed to be a secret' in the first place.⁶² When Mrs. Bradley discusses Mountjoy's murder with the Chief Constable, she asks him if he has heard of sexual perversion. He replies, 'Not a pleasant subject'. Mrs. Bradley 'assures' him, 'I do not propose to discuss it...but I do suggest to you that Mountjoy may have formed a very real...attachment to Eleanor Bing'.⁶³ The hint that Mountjoy might have been attracted to Eleanor is all that is needed to suggest a possible motive for his murder. However, in murdering Mountjoy, Eleanor herself deviates from a model of gender compliance. Before Eleanor's guilt is discovered, Carstairs insists that the murder must have been a man's crime, since it required 'nerve' and because the killer entered the bathroom via a perilous climb from balcony to window.⁶⁴ The particularly active nature of the crime means that the killer is automatically assumed to be a man. Ironically, Eleanor's identity is masked by gender non-compliance, just as her victim's is by his own gender transgression. The inspector in charge of investigating Mountjoy's death says about Eleanor,

there's some young women that are past all bearing, and...would be better out of the way; and Miss Eleanor Bing is one of them. Now I wonder who the man is that she's shielding. If we could find him we might be laying our hands on the Mountjoy murderer.⁶⁵

The police suspect Eleanor of having some knowledge of the crime, but assume that she must be protecting a man who has killed Mountjoy, either out of sexual jealousy or paternalistic protectiveness towards Eleanor, when in fact, Eleanor herself is 'the man' in

⁶¹ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 15.

⁶² Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 18.

⁶³ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 105.

⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 66.

⁶⁵ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 95.

question. Eleanor's cold and prudish manner provokes the surprisingly vitriolic comment that she is 'past all bearing, and...would be better out of the way'. In fact, Eleanor's crime, and her subsequent attempts to murder romantic rivals when another young man catches her eye, do condemn her to be got 'out of the way'. Eleanor's excessive sexuality marks her as deviant, and, in order for the narrative to reach a resolution, Eleanor must be obliterated. Though Eleanor turns out to be Mountjoy's killer, she herself becomes the novel's second murder victim.

Eleanor's violence is diagnosed as 'repression' and 'neurasthenia', but it can also be read as a pathological manifestation of excessive desire to conform to a heterosexual model.⁶⁶ She kills Mountjoy out of fury on discovering that her fiancée is a woman, and she attempts to kill other women when she perceives that they are desired by a man to whom she is attracted. Mountjoy's obvious gender transgression fades into the background and even ceases to be discussed as Eleanor continues on her (hetero)sexually motivated crime spree. When Eleanor is finally caught in the act of trying to murder a young woman guest, she 'fought and struggled, while from the lips which were accustomed to employ the most trite and correct of expressions there poured forth a stream of the most foul and abominable filth which ever disgraced the name of language'.⁶⁷ Eleanor's veneer of propriety is stripped off in the heat of committing a crime, and she is finally acting out her true motivations. However, Eleanor is effectively silenced in her moment of agency – as she rants, Bertie 'trie[s] to place a hand over her foaming mouth'.⁶⁸ The morning after this episode, Eleanor is permanently silenced when her dead body is found submerged in the

⁶⁶ Jane M. Ussher defines neurasthenia as 'a collection of varying symptoms, many of them similar to those of hysteria, including headaches, masturbation, vertigo, insomnia, and depression. Neurasthenia generally affected single women...Women who had ambitions and desires, conscious and unconscious...became victims of the collection of symptoms labelled neurasthenia'. Jane M. Ussher, *The Psychology of the Female Body* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 5.

⁶⁷ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 135.

⁶⁸ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 135.

bathtub in the same way Mountjoy's was.⁶⁹ Eleanor is found to have been killed with an overdose of hyoscin, a drug often used for calming nymphomaniacs.⁷⁰ The novel's first murder victim is punished for his failure to conform to heteronormative standards, but its second victim is condemned for her pathologically excessive heterosexual desire. In an ironic twist, Eleanor's killer turns out to be the novel's detective figure, Mrs. Bradley. Though Mrs. Bradley is guilty of murdering Eleanor, she is found innocent due to a lack of evidence when the case goes to trial. After her acquittal, Mrs. Bradley remarks to her son and lawyer Ferdinand Lestrangle, 'I did not, in the everyday, newspaper, pot-house sense of the word murder Eleanor Bing. I merely erased her, as it were, from an otherwise fair page of the Bing family chronicle'.⁷¹ The nonchalance displayed towards Eleanor's death is similar to the virtual dismissal of the unpleasant victim Rouse in *Miss Pym Disposes*, and Mrs. Bradley's justification of the murder echoes Miss Pym's consideration for the feelings of Innes's family as a major factor in not turning the suspected student over to the authorities. Craig and Cadogan suggest that Mrs. Bradley's murder of Eleanor is used 'to ridicule the thriller-writers' tendency to avoid moral complications by making their villains always perfectly villainous'.⁷² Certainly, Mrs. Bradley's shockingly callous description of her crime is ironic, and the suggestion that respectability must be protected at all costs is called into question in her performance of the detective's explication at the novel's conclusion, which customarily symbolises the restoration of order. Like Bella Tanios, who is encouraged to commit suicide, Eleanor is 'erased' in a way that enables the family to continue to function without being tainted by scandal. Eleanor is not only dead, she has been got 'out of the way', as she has done to Mountjoy, and both dead women's identities are suppressed so that respectability might be preserved.

⁶⁹ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 139.

⁷⁰ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 160.

⁷¹ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 183.

⁷² Craig and Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 179.

Eleanor's 'real' voice is presented – and again silenced – in the form of the discovery of her diary after her death. The diary is presented in the narrative as Carstairs reads it. Eleanor writes that she feels 'curiously attracted' to Mountjoy and that she has 'strange desires' for him. She has repeatedly written his name, at times with the prefix 'Mrs.' attached.⁷³ Eleanor's sexual desire is signified by her preoccupation with Mountjoy's name, which is itself an innuendo promising sexual fulfilment. She wants Mountjoy to be 'manly and sunburnt', but he uncomfortably resists her.⁷⁴ Eleanor's desire for Mountjoy to be 'manly' and to expose his body to the heat of both the sun and her sexual cravings is thwarted by Mountjoy's own need to keep the secret of his female body. The diaries' entries grow increasingly explicit, until 'At the last entry [Carstairs] blinked, and closed the book with a snap. There was a fire burning in the room. He walked over to it, and consigned Eleanor's diary to the flames'.⁷⁵ As when she is caught in the act of attempted murder, Eleanor's voice is silenced when it expresses 'excessive' and 'improper' emotion. The final entry in Eleanor's diary, presumably her most sexually explicit, is never revealed. Like Mountjoy's real identity, Eleanor's repressed self as exposed in her diary is expunged, just as Mrs. Bradley has 'erased her from the family chronicle'.

As is explicitly seen with Mountjoy's body in *Speedy Death*, the physical body of a woman murder victim can be particularly transgressive in its intrusion into the fragile social fabric of an enclosed community, and the woman in question loses her individual identity, becoming a symbolic body. The erasure of women murder victims' identities is perhaps most overt in novels such as Christie's *The Body in the Library* and *Evil Under the Sun*, in which one body is shown to be interchangeable with another. When describing the kind of crime novel she wished to write in the foreword to *The Body in the Library*,

⁷³ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 164.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 165.

⁷⁵ Mitchell, *Speedy Death*, p. 165.

Christie says that she ‘laid down for [her]self certain conditions. The library in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body’.⁷⁶ The opening scene of *The Body in the Library* seems to contain the perfect example of the abject body’s effect. The library, like its owners Colonel and Mrs. Bantry, is decidedly orderly, correct and, with its status as both a repository of knowledge and a place of repose, symbolic of a privileged class of society: ‘The whole room was dim and mellow and casual. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition’.⁷⁷ The murdered body found ‘sprawled across the old bearskin hearthrug’ is in every sense disturbing – she is unknown to the house’s owners, she is gaudily dressed and made up, and her body has all the danger associated with that of a modern, attractive young woman.⁷⁸ The body is discovered on an ordinary morning as the servants are going about the business of opening up the house for the day and Mrs. Bantry is peacefully dreaming of a flower show. The jarring quality of the body when it is discovered – ‘a cheap, tawdry, flamboyant figure – most incongruous in the solid old-fashioned comfort of Colonel Bantry’s library’ – with all its symbolic disturbance, is distinctly abject. Its intrusion into the everyday lives of unknown people, into the order of the library, and into an apparently different social stratum is disruptive in the extreme – ‘new and crude and melodramatic’.⁷⁹ The nature of the body in the library is calculated to be an unignorable fissure in the social fabric and to promote gossip, which is an ideal way to set up assumptions surrounding class and gendered sexual morality that will inevitably be torn down.

After the discovery of the body in her library, Mrs. Bantry telephones her friend, Miss Marple, to come and have a look. Mrs. Bantry describes the young woman as ‘a

⁷⁶ Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 7.

⁷⁷ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 21.

⁷⁸ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 21.

⁷⁹ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 21.

beautiful blonde – like [in] books’.⁸⁰ Mrs. Bantry is somewhat enjoying the excitement, even though ‘it’s very sad and all that, but then I don’t know the girl – and...she doesn’t look *real* at all’.⁸¹ The body is disturbing and intrusive, but there is no sense of grief because the young woman does not look ‘real’ – she has no personality to be related to. The body’s failure to look real is a direct result of its hyperbolically gendered characteristics, drawing attention to the performance of gender in the same way Judith Butler posits that the drag act does.⁸² When Miss Marple arrives, she accompanies Mrs. Bantry into the library, where they see:

The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening-dress of white spangled satin. The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on the distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash.⁸³

The young woman’s body is not only gaudily made up, but also horrifying in its flamboyance. Far from sexualising the young woman, the makeup emphasises the shocking physicality of her dead body. The revealing evening dress covers a ‘thin’ body; the powder accentuates the discoloration of her oxygen-deprived skin; and her lipstick creates a ‘gash’ in the blue face. Rather than drawing sympathy, the glaring fact of her death only distances the body from those who view it; Mrs. Bantry says to Miss Marple, ‘You see what I mean? It just isn’t *true!*’.⁸⁴ After the body is examined, it is at first thought to be the blonde lover of Basil Blake, a man viewed mistrustfully in the village because he is ‘in film’ and throws raucous parties. Blake and his friends keep up a facade of modern insouciance; he is described as having ‘that silly slighting way of talking that these boys have nowadays – sneering at people sticking up for their school or the Empire or that sort

⁸⁰ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 18.

⁸¹ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 19.

⁸² Butler writes that ‘In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency’. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1999), p. 175.

⁸³ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁴ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 22.

of thing'.⁸⁵ Blake and his live-in lover seem to eschew respectability and are assumed to be unconventional enough to be involved in a murder. As they have intruded on the quiet and traditional St Mary Mead, so they might have brought the consequences of their coarse modernity into the Bantrys' stolid country-house library. Blake's mistress is platinum blonde and stylish; Miss Marple points out, 'I've never seen her close to...I never really saw her *face*. And all these girls with their make-up and their hair and their nails look so alike'.⁸⁶ Miss Marple names modernity as a threat to individuality – since 'all these girls...look so alike' – and it is becoming clear that the problem of the body's identity is not one that will be easily solved. The body in the library is not Basil Blake's lover, and Miss Marple clears his name when she reveals that, avant-garde as he may seem, Blake is really a respectable Englishman in disguise. It transpires that Blake was injured rescuing people from a burning building while working as an ARP warden during the Second World War and that he and his so-called mistress are actually married.⁸⁷ These two pieces of information go far in swaying public opinion about the now-upstanding young man, and, as it turns out, Blake himself is a victim of the body's disturbing force. The body was originally placed in his home, and Blake, panicking and drunk, in turn moved it to Colonel and Mrs. Bantry's library. Though he and his wife enjoy shocking their neighbours with their modern ways, they are essentially taking part in one of the novel's many masquerades, and they are ultimately participants in the traditional English social system that is disrupted by a young woman's body.

After its initial misidentification as that of Basil Blake's 'mistress', the body in the library is identified as that of Ruby Keene, a young professional dancer at a nearby hotel. Ruby Keene is only the young woman's stage name – her real name is Rosy Legge. Both names evoke certain assumptions about her character – 'Ruby Keene' is 'a decided little

⁸⁵ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 27.

⁸⁶ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 29.

⁸⁷ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 252.

gold-digger', a young woman who so charms the wealthy, disabled Conway Jefferson that he decides to adopt her and name her in his will as the sole inheritor of his fortune over his only surviving family, a son- and daughter-in-law.⁸⁸ Ruby's other name, Rosy Legge, reflects the suspicions that surround her sexual morality – it is assumed that since she is unscrupulous enough to manipulate a lonely old man for her own material gain, she must also be experienced in seduction. The police suspect an unidentified, jealous lover of Ruby's murder, but Jefferson insists that if Ruby had had a boyfriend, she would have told him. The policeman in charge of the case, Superintendent Harper, cynically thinks, 'Yes, I dare say that's what *she* told you!'.⁸⁹ Ruby's appearance, class and ambition are all against her, and a picture emerges of a stereotypical female victim – one who 'asked for it'. As the investigation continues along in this vein, Miss Marple begins to sense that something is not right about the body in the library; the dress that the young woman is wearing, seemingly chosen for a romantic tryst, has obviously been worn too often before. Miss Marple reasons that a 'well bred girl' would change into 'sensible' clothing, not an evening gown, for an outdoor assignation, while Ruby 'belonged to the class that wear their best clothes however unsuitable to the occasion'.⁹⁰ Miss Marple believes that Ruby would have worn her best gown if she were meeting a hypothetical, murderous lover, so there must be another explanation behind the body's appearance. This dubious assumption, with its overt class stereotyping, turns out to be correct, and, with the appearance of yet another young woman's body, an explanation begins to emerge that complicates the theory that Ruby is just another woman victim whose loose morals and unseemly ambition got her what she deserved.

The novel's second body, presumed to be that of schoolgirl Pamela Reeves, is found charred beyond recognition in a burnt-out car. Pamela's family is middle-class and

⁸⁸ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 181.

⁸⁹ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 99.

⁹⁰ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 204.

respectable, ‘Not the kind of people you associated with tragedy’.⁹¹ While he thinks of Ruby as conniving and ambitious, Superintendent Harper, who is also investigating the murder of Pamela Reeves, sees Pamela as ‘a nice kid’ and ‘admits privately’ that ‘Ruby Keene...might have asked for what was coming to her, but Pamela Reeves was quite another story’.⁹² Along with Pamela’s middle-class upbringing and stable family life comes the assumption that she must have been naïve, innocent and unworldly; Pamela’s mother describes her as ‘just a child’ and ‘very young for her age’, giving an impression of desexualised innocence, far removed from the descriptions of the manipulative, seductive Ruby Keene.⁹³ However, it turns out that Pamela is in fact an ‘awfully good’ actress and on the day of both murders convincingly lied about her whereabouts because she thought she was meeting up with a talent scout to take a screen test. The ‘talent scout’ is actually Jefferson’s unscrupulous son-in-law, who, along with his secret wife, Ruby’s cousin Josie, plots to get Ruby out of the way so that she will not be able to inherit Jefferson’s fortune. The two murder Pamela and Ruby at different times on the same night in a complicated plan to give both killers an alibi. As part of Pamela’s ‘screen test’, they dress her in Ruby’s clothing, dye her hair and make her up so that her body will be able to stand in for Ruby’s. Pamela Reeve, the ‘nice kid’, turns out to have been just as fatally ambitious as her counterpart Ruby. The middle-class girl and the working-class girl both have desires and aspirations, and the revelation that one has ‘played the role’ of the other is particularly telling. The loss of identity that accompanies the dead woman’s body works in multiple ways here; the body in the library is that of a young woman who has been punished for overreaching the expectations set in place for her, and she is both Ruby Keene and Pamela Reeve. The anxiety expressed by Miss Marple – ‘they all look so alike’ – indicates that the body in the library can be identified with the modern young woman, ambitious, intrusive

⁹¹ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 161.

⁹² Christie, *The Body in the Library*, pp. 165-66.

⁹³ Christie, *The Body in the Library*, p. 163.

and dangerous, who is flouting tradition and established order. She is an abject figure, ‘flamboyant’, ‘crude’ and – in her cross-class manifestation – impossible to categorise.

Another novel which plays with questions of identity through the switching of women’s bodies is Christie’s *Evil Under the Sun* (1941). The narrative begins with Poirot on holiday at a quaint seaside resort on an island off the coast of Devon, not ‘the sort of place you’d get a body’.⁹⁴ As he chats to his fellow guests, Poirot remarks with disgust upon the homogeneous look of the people sunbathing on the beach: “‘Today everything is *standardized!*’” He waved a hand towards the recumbent figures. “That reminds me very much of the Morgue in Paris...Bodies – arranged on slabs – like butcher’s meat!”⁹⁵ Like Miss Marple’s comment that the modern fashions in cosmetics and hairstyling result in young women looking disconcertingly alike, Poirot’s criticisms pinpoint a problem he also identifies as specifically ‘modern’ – the absence of distinction between physical bodies.⁹⁶ The lack of substantial clothing required in the modern fashion for sunbathing publicly exposes more of the body, particularly the female body, than had ever been socially acceptable before.⁹⁷ Yet this exposure does not make women recognisable; rather, they are objectified, exposed to the gazes of those around them, and individual personalities become secondary to the visual effect of the sameness of the bodies in rows. This effect is what is used to conceal the method of the novel’s crime, the murder of beautiful, wealthy former actress Arlena Stuart by Christine and Patrick Redfern. When ‘Arlena’s’ body is

⁹⁴ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 20.

⁹⁵ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 14.

⁹⁶ In *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion* (2007), R.A. York argues along similar lines that ‘the evil of the bodies exposed in sun-bathing...is really the lack of distinctiveness of the body, and so the possibility of viewing persons as lacking in personality’. R.A. York, *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 19.

⁹⁷ Alan A. Jackson writes that ‘Until the early 1930s...most of the bourgeois resorts continued to offer bathing machines’, which sheltered women from the eyes of men while they were bathing. However, what was seen and known of the female body was beginning to change radically, and ‘by 1930...most holidaymakers under middle age were starting to indulge in new rituals at the seaside, exposing faces and bodies to the full glare of the sun for as long as possible, in search of the tan which they were assured would give them additional physical attraction and health. Equally important, it provided tangible evidence on their return that the holiday had been successful. With the sun cult came more attractive and briefer bathing costumes (often never wetted by the sea) as well as special accessories and fashions’. Alan A. Jackson, *The Middle Classes, 1900-1950* (Nairn: David St. John Thomas, 1991), pp. 309-10.

found, it is face down on the beach, in the attitude of a sunbather, recalling Poirot's ominous comment that the bodies on the beach look like they are lying on slabs in a morgue. Conveniently, Patrick Redfern is the only one to look closely at it and declare that Arlena has been murdered and that he will stay with the body while help is summoned. As it turns out, 'Arlena's' body is not Arlena at all – it is Christine Redfern in an auburn wig and faux-tanning lotion. When Arlena, who is hiding so that her presumed sexual assignation with Patrick is not discovered, emerges from her hiding place, Patrick strangles her and her body replaces Christine's as the corpse that the police examine when they arrive. Christine and Patrick Redfern are a pair of criminals who have murdered women before – Patrick starts a relationship with a wealthy woman, and, with his wife's help, cons the woman out of her money and kills her. It dawns on Poirot that this is how Arlena's murder must have been committed – after all, 'One moderately well-made young woman is very like another. Two brown legs, two brown arms, a little piece of bathing suit in between – just a body lying out in the sun'.⁹⁸ The two women's physical interchangeability is combined with confusion about who is occupying the role of the victim. Though Arlena is the one who has been murdered, Christine is the woman who draws the most sympathy from those around her, since she seems to be the sweet-natured, long-suffering wife who is faithfully waiting for her husband to recover from his romantic fling with the scheming Arlena. After she is murdered, Arlena is described as 'the kind of woman to whom such a thing might happen'.⁹⁹ She is also called 'a bad lot through and through' and 'undeserving of sympathy'.¹⁰⁰ Arlena seems to fulfil the expectation that a woman murder victim must have violated standards of 'proper' feminine behaviour in order to have come to such an end. Christine is seen as the real victim because of her decorous, quiet conjugal faithfulness in the face of her husband's indiscretion. However, the shocking switch at the

⁹⁸ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 297.

⁹⁹ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 153.

¹⁰⁰ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, pp. 172-73.

end of the novel, when Christine's role as accomplice and her masquerade as victimised wife are uncovered, calls into question standards of feminine behaviour and reveals their possible instability.

Ironically, Christine Redfern and Arlena Stuart are both described in great detail when they first appear. Christine is 'an ash blonde and her skin was of that dead fairness that goes with that colouring. Her legs and arms were very white'.¹⁰¹ A further element of Christine Redfern's deception is that she plays the role of the delicate, fragile woman who is not physically active, when in fact she is a former school games mistress.¹⁰² Arlena, on the other hand, has 'rich flaming auburn' hair, and 'every inch of her exposed body was tanned a beautiful even shade of bronze'.¹⁰³ The differences between the two women are carefully pointed out, and Christine's mousiness is repeatedly contrasted with Arlena's vibrance as it becomes clear that Arlena is having a poorly-concealed affair with Christine's husband. Arlena is described as having 'IT' – a quality that makes everyone look at her.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, because she is sexually promiscuous, vain and enjoys attention from men, Arlena is negated; Poirot himself dismisses her while trying to comfort Christine Redfern: 'The Arlena Stuarts...of this world – do not count...To count – really and truly to count – a woman must have goodness or brains'.¹⁰⁵ Not only does she not 'count' because of her lack of both goodness and brains, Arlena is also dehumanised – Poirot thinks to himself that her face is 'like a sleek happy cat – it was animal, not human'.¹⁰⁶ Arlena's life is deprived of value and even humanity because of her sexual appetite, her competitiveness with other women, and her lack of intelligence. The interchangeability of Arlena's body with another woman's marks her out as the typical

¹⁰¹ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 17.

¹⁰² Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 301.

¹⁰³ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁶ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 71.

woman murder victim, but, in its conclusion, the novel complicates this assumption.

Arlena is:

first, last and all the time...an eternal and predestined *victim*. Because she was beautiful, because she had glamour, because men turned their heads to look at her, it was assumed that she was the type of woman who wrecked lives and destroyed souls. But [Poirot] saw her very differently. It was not she who fatally attracted men – it was men who fatally attracted her.¹⁰⁷

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

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

¹⁰⁷ Christie, *Evil Under the Sun*, p. 298.

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

the body provides a point of mediation between what is perceived as purely internal and accessible only to the subject and what is external and publicly observable, a point from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and other, and all the other binary pairs associated with the mind/body opposition.¹⁰⁸

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

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 20-21.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of women's bodies in the previous chapter provides a way to look at the construction of strategies in Golden Age crime narratives for dealing with the conflicting social and cultural forces that influenced depictions of gender in popular culture. The bodies of both killers and victims represent the disturbances of gender and social codes that become evident in a crime narrative's conflict. Like the 'burial' of the bodies, the narratives' conclusions bring closure, but the transgressive possibilities the bodies evoke demonstrate the influence of anxieties about gender and class being played out on a wider scale in British society. This is not to say that the anxieties shaping such representations in the narratives examined in this thesis remained static throughout the period; though I have addressed this issue to some extent in Chapter I, it is worth acknowledging that the concerns of the 1920s certainly do not remain the same throughout the 1930s and 40s, and, consequently, the tones and themes of the texts I examine can often be seen to reflect specific preoccupations. Radically changing ideals of femininity in the 1920s influenced the active, and sometimes transgressive, roles adopted by women in crime narratives; this can explicitly be seen in boyish young flapper Nick Buckley's murder of her traditionally feminine cousin Maggie in Agatha Christie's *Peril at End House*. In the 1930s, economic depression, accompanied by rising unemployment as well as concern about the spread of fascism in Europe, the abdication in 1936 of King Edward VIII, and the looming threat of war are all factors that influence a more serious, reflective and, in the late 1930s, even nationalistic tone in many of the narratives that I examine. The representations of women in these novels and short stories reveal such anxieties; this is, perhaps not coincidentally, the decade in which many popular series detectives, including Dorothy L. Sayers's Wimsey, Margery Allingham's Campion and Ngaio Marsh's Alleyn first meet and court

their wives. However, these attempts to negotiate companionate relationships in which women can have active careers while still conforming to a domestic ideal are, as has been discussed, often deeply ambivalent, reflecting the struggle to reconcile these frequently conflicting roles. The influence of the Second World War is apparent in the trajectories of many of the series I examine; Christie's *N or M?* and Allingham's *Traitor's Purse*, both published in 1941, directly engage their protagonists in tense adventures which have resolutions with national and even global impact. The conflicts in these novels represent a recognition of the war's predominance in the public consciousness, providing significantly wider implications than the investigation of one – or even several – murders. The war's influence upon the possibilities (or lack thereof) of agency for working women is also evident, as a post-war focus on domesticity can be seen in portrayals such as that of Allingham's Amanda Fitton, who retreats from the workplace to raise her son in the wartime absence of her husband.

The diversity of the writers I have chosen to investigate is another factor to be considered along with the complex variety of forces that shaped the representation of women in the 1920s through the 1940s. Though the writers are all connected by genre, differences in style divide them; Christie's early adventure-romances such as *The Secret Adversary* (1922) or *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), for example, would seem, at first glance, to share little in common with some of Sayers's or Josephine Tey's later, more novelistic efforts. Such differences can, again, sometimes be attributed to shifting cultural concerns within the period. Some critics have argued that in the 1920s the evolution of the clue-puzzle narrative arose out of the need of those who had lived through the trauma of the First World War for what Alison Light calls a 'literature of convalescence', which

engaged the mind while lacking overt violence or requiring an emotional response.¹ In *Forever England*, Light writes that in Christie's work 'nothing is sacred. Crime makes not for tragedy, nor even for the shudders of melodrama, but oddly and startlingly, for a laugh'.² Indeed, the worlds created in Golden Age crime fiction are often distorted mirror images of reality in which conventions, mores and 'the sacred' are rendered meaningless. For example, Poirot's comment that Bella Tanios's method of murdering her elderly aunt is 'the kind that mother makes' evokes a startlingly transgressive image that jars with the domestic ideal of the increasingly conservative social atmosphere of the 1930s. Even detective figures, supposed restorers of order, do not always embody a secure sense of morality: on more than one occasion, Gladys Mitchell's Mrs. Bradley herself condones – and even uses – murder as a viable means of achieving resolution. Such instances of irony exploit the instability of Golden Age crime fiction's engagement with conflict and resolution, a tension which allows for order to be restored, but only up to a point, and sometimes in a way that reveals the unreliability of conventional endings. Irony and humour are also used to create a space in which the boundaries of convention can be stretched; as mentioned in Chapter III, Christie's detective couple Tommy and Tuppence achieve a companionate ideal precisely because of the narratives' parodic tone and over-the-top spy thriller plots, which enables them to undermine heteronormative and ageist assumptions.

The structure of the crime narrative allows for women's deviance and/or agency to be explored and then safely contained, as order is restored at the narrative's conclusion. But by providing such portrayals in the first place, these narratives suggest alternatives to – or more nuanced interpretations of – the modes of femininity available during the period in which they were published. Nevertheless, the limitations of my own project must be

¹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 70-71.

² Light, *Forever England*, pp. 67-68.

recognised; this is not to say, for example, that similar issues do not arise in the way women are represented by men in Golden Age crime fiction, or in the ways in which gender has been represented, played with and negotiated in crime fiction that has been written before and since the period I examine. The significance of my analysis lies in the breadth of its examination of gender in women's Golden Age crime fiction. It both builds upon and adds to existing criticism on more widely examined texts as well as opening up new lines of inquiry in its readings of texts that have been previously overlooked. By moving beyond the detective to consider killers, victims and romantic interests, a clearer picture emerges of the issues that arise when women write women.

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