

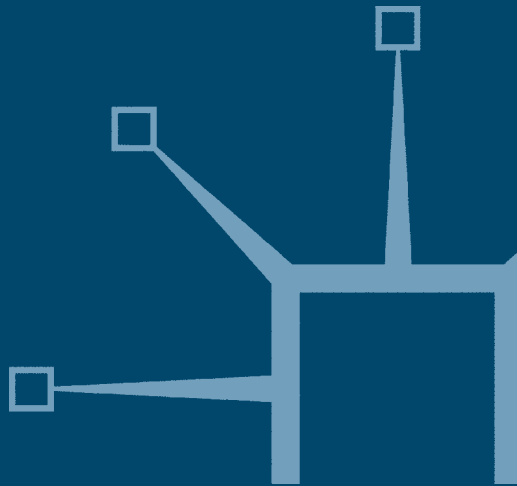
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# Agatha Christie

Investigating Femininity

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Merja Makinen



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# Agatha Christie

## Investigating Femininity

Merja Makinen

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

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# List of Abbreviations

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

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

# Introduction

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

# 1

## Preliminary Proceedings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the softest and least bohemian shingle of 1935 was a species of radical change<sup>9</sup> to the way women lived their lives. As a number of Christie critics have argued, Christie's novels, in the domestic minutiae of their settings, chart exactly these social changes, beginning in the 1920s and ending in the 1970s. Bargainnier, for example, suggests,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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