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GUILTY BUT INSANE

Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction

SAMANTHA WALTON



OXFORD TEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES

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For my parents, Yvonne and Jeff

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Oxford Textual Perspectives is a new series of informative and provocative studies focused upon texts (conceived of in the broadest sense of that term) and the technologies, cultures, and communities that produce, inform, and receive them. It provides fresh interpretations of fundamental works, images, and artefacts, and of the vital and challenging issues emerging in English literary studies. By engaging with the contexts and materiality of the text, its production, transmission, and reception history, and by frequently testing and exploring the boundaries of the notions of text and meaning themselves, the volumes in the series question conventional frameworks and provide innovative interpretations of both canonical and less well-known works. These books will offer new perspectives, and challenge familiar ones, both on and through texts and textual communities. While they focus on specific authors, periods, and issues, they nonetheless scan wider horizons, addressing themes and provoking questions that have a more general application to literary studies and cultural history as a whole. Each is designed to be as accessible to the non-specialist reader as it is fresh and rewarding for the specialist, combining an informative orientation in a landscape with detailed analysis of the territory and suggestions for further travel.

Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of this book began over five years ago—although really it began over twenty-five years ago, in a house packed full of detective novels, to the unmistakeable melody of the opening sequence of ITV's *Poirot*. My interest in these novels is built on a fascination with the detective narrative and a passion for golden age storytelling. I hope this passion is palpable to the reader, and that I will be forgiven for the unavoidable crime of having given away the endings to so many of the novels that have thrilled and mystified me.

Writing a book of this kind is by nature a solitary activity, but I would certainly not have been able to bring the project to fruition without the kindness and companionship of my friends or the support of colleagues in the Department of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. I am especially grateful to Aileen Christianson for her encouragement and advice, as well as her constructive querying of my research from its earliest stages. Her ruthless proofreading taught me to respect my sentences, and her friendship and humour supported me at those challenging times that beset all large projects of this kind. My special thanks are due to Greg Walker for the close attention he paid to this book, and his invaluable support and kindness in giving me confidence in this work and bringing it to publication. Aiding me in the task of not filling the book with obvious errors was my partner Jow, whose tireless copyediting, intellectual engagement with these ideas, and hilarious sidebar commentary sustained me in the latter stages of preparing the manuscript for publication, and indeed whose patience and willingness to see everything as a detective novel cheered me throughout the longer and more arduous process of writing it. Any flaws in my text that I do not quite manage to sneak past the reader are, of course, my own.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my parents, Yvonne and Jeff, to whose support and love I owe everything.

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'They're a rum lot up there, Champion,' he said. 'Something very queer in that house. We're up against a lunatic of course, one of those "sane" lunatics you can't spot.'

Margery Allingham, *Police at the Funeral*, 1931

Introduction

Death by Adaptation: The Case for Reading Detective Fiction

Golden age detective fiction (c.1920–1940s) continues to captivate the imaginations of readers. Stylish new print runs—such as Harper Collins’ atmospheric treatments of Agatha Christie’s novels and the smart retro illustrations on Vintage’s new Gladys Mitchell series (2009–present)—can be taken as a case in point. Sumptuous period dramas, in particular ITV’s long-running *Hercule Poirot* series (1989–2013) prioritize country house locations, art deco architecture, and vintage clothing. While the attractions of a cloche hat and Eton bob are hard to ignore, the emphasis on style and sentiment in twenty-first century engagements with golden age detective fiction means that the critical and political content and the cultural significance of these works is at risk of being forgotten and overlooked.

It is this book’s purpose to help reclaim the golden age detective novel from death-by-adaptation. These novels are too often seen primarily as puzzles, which happen to be constructed out of the narrative

ingredients available within a particular era. This study makes the case that they only reveal their considerable depth and subtlety when they are interpreted in their historic contexts. The close scrutiny of the intellectual and scientific context of these novels has not always been a priority. Critics have read whodunnits as morality tales, theoretically rich *mise en scènes*, and psychic fantasies. According to this approach, whodunnits emerge by necessity from an historical epoch with its own unique political and social concerns, but only obliquely engage with these concerns, perhaps by toying with unstable identities, or by playful representations of doomed private transgressions against class and gender constructs.

The interwar detective novel should not be humoured or dismissed as a harmless negation of the present moment, detached and escapist. Heightened sensitivity to psychological traits and abnormalities defines golden age writing, but little attention has been given to the complexities and the specificities of madness and psychology as they were understood during the interwar years, and as they were reflected in detective fiction. The novels of Gladys Mitchell are replete with references to the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, while in the late golden age work of Christianna Brand (from 1941 onwards), the threat of madness agitates the psychic landscapes of communities already unsettled by political uncertainty, shifting loyalties, and unstable social hierarchies. More subtle, and less remarked upon, are adaptations to the self-consciously formulaic detective narrative made in response to popular perceptions of insanity, debates about criminal responsibility, and psychiatric discourses. Detective narratives, in significant ways, responded to public debates that highlighted some of the most pressing legal and philosophical concerns of the early twentieth century. Psychiatric and psychological discourses of the pre-war and interwar years provide the context for the statements golden age detection writers make about human psychology, the motivations of criminals, and the divisions their novels make between the normal and the abnormal mind. Major controversies in legal and psychiatric theory and practice in the interwar years are integral to the ways in which writers and readers of detective fiction during the 1920s to 1940s understood guilt, responsibility, and the workings of the mind as they related to the commission, the investigation, and the punishment of crime. Significant resonances with some specific concerns of interwar modernist fiction come into focus for the first time,

enabling wider interdisciplinary discussions about the construction of the mind in the early twentieth century.

The book's title, *Guilty But Insane*, refers to one of the major medico-legal debates of the interwar years, sparked by the 1922 trial of Ronald True. True's case posed the most significant challenge to criminal law in its relation with the psy-disciplines in this era. 'Guilty but insane' as a concept also alludes to broader questions of how to detect and respond to guilt and insanity that animate the era's medicolegal discussions, and much of its detective fiction. At a moment when contemporary culture is again coming to terms with new and challenging theories about the relationship between the mind, identity, and selfhood, this book hopes to offer a timely and challenging discussion of the relationship between popular literature, psychology, and the ways in which fiction has contributed to our understanding of the working of our minds and what it means to be human.

Whodunnit? Authors and Critics Investigated

The aftermath of the Great War saw the decline of the short story of detection and the rise of the mystery novel, and, with it, the rise of a new kind of detective writer. Their works have been known as formal English detective novels, classic crime fictions, whodunnits, murder mysteries, clue puzzles, and the ubiquitous golden age mystery. A division of mass publishing in Britain previously associated with sensational heroism and produced by celebrated male authors such as Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the genre came to be dominated by immensely popular, influential, and irreverent female writers—the 'Queens of Crime', as they were later known.¹

Agatha Christie began to produce a bestseller on a near yearly basis after the publication of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920, while

¹ Sally Munt, *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 7; John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 26; Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 27.

between 1923 and 1939 the poet, scholar, and lay theologian Dorothy L. Sayers won acclaim with eleven novels and three short story collections featuring her charismatic aristocratic sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey. Coincident with the sustained growth of a female readership supplied with books by local libraries and lending services at *Boots the Chemists*,² these novels frequently locate criminal deviance in the English country house, draw attention to clues which have specific relevance to the home, and place familial dysfunction at the heart of the mystery.³

In a trend started by the hard-boiled crime writer Raymond Chandler in his 1950 essay ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, Sayers, Christie, and their peers—most obviously Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh—have been derided for their so-termed feminization of the genre and their light-hearted portrayals of domestic murders. Chandler had particular contempt for admirers of the golden age novel, ‘the flustered old ladies—of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages—who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms and do not care to be reminded that murder is an act of infinite cruelty’.⁴ Chandler’s associations of golden age tropes with pungently aging femininity and a lack of masculine perspicacity are reiterated in Julian Symons’ 1972 study, *Bloody Murder*. Symons asserts that golden age novels were ‘written specifically for maiden aunts’, and located in a ‘fairy tale’ land in which ‘murder was committed again and again without anybody getting hurt’.⁵

Widely held perceptions of the golden age detective novel as bloodless fodder for ‘maiden aunts’ persist in the contemporary ‘cozy’ novels or ‘cozies’ which emulate them.⁶ Twenty-first century series including Kate Collin’s *Flower Shop Mysteries* (2004–present), Betty Hechtman’s

² Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 93.

³ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 109; Munt, *Murder by the Book?* p. 8; Jon Thompson, *Fiction, Crime and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 128–129.

⁴ Raymond Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’ [1950] in *Pearls are a Nuisance* (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 196–197.

⁵ Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 98; p. 104.

⁶ Marilyn Stasio, ‘Murder Least Foul: The Cozy, Soft-Boiled Mystery’. *New York Times*, 18 October 1992: <<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/18/books/crime-mystery-murder-least-foul-the-cozy-soft-boiled-mystery.html>>, accessed 2 December 2013.

Crochet Mysteries (2008–present), and Melinda Well’s *Della Cooks Mysteries* (2008–present) each, to differing degrees, pastiche golden age mystery plots and rural village locations, or at least the social networks that are imagined to flourish there. The success of these proliferating post-golden age mystery series suggests that a subset of crime novels targeted at women assume that the interest of the mystery lies in its capacity to explore and reflect the life that is lived in the context of ‘home’ and the gendered forms of domestic labour women undertake there. In such a context, it is no surprise that the golden age novel continues to be read wholesale as the originator of such trends. It has been classed as a ‘cosy’ form,⁷ generic, homogeneous,⁸ and ideologically committed to containing deviant elements that threaten the bourgeois *status quo*.⁹ Alison Light calls the interwar detective novel ‘a literature of convalescence’ because in the aftermath of the First World War, to a generation experiencing tremendous social upheaval and the psychological repercussions of prolonged and catastrophically deadly conflict, the certainty of a resolution to a problem had therapeutic advantages.¹⁰

In recent years, feminist scholarship by Sally R. Munt, Gill Plain, Susan Rowland, Marian Shaw, and Sabine Vanacker has highlighted instances of gender transgression, deviance, and heterodoxy in golden age writing. Drawing attention to constructions of the body as ‘uncontainable and excessive’,¹¹ in various respects their studies address the cultural anxieties to which golden age detective fiction spoke, and expose the personal and political tensions that underpin these novels. By detecting the feminist content of golden age narratives, bent as they are on the examination of domestic scenarios, social relations, and structures of power within the bourgeois and aristocratic home, feminist studies have led the way for a reevaluation of detective novels of the interwar years. Probing notions of stable identity, gender roles, and

⁷ Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, p. 8.

⁸ Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, p. 7; Shaw and Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple*, p. 10.

⁹ See Knight, *Form and Ideology*, pp. 128–129.

¹⁰ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 65.

¹¹ Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 27.

class positions in pursuit of a malefactor who is emphatically not *other*, but who is part of a social milieu rendered unfamiliar, the golden age novel has undeniable subversive potential, even if it is obligatory that the transgressor will eventually be captured, punished, imprisoned, or executed.

What existing scholarship has yet to address are approaches to the mental state of the criminal in detective fiction. This is a significant ellipsis, and addressing it will provide a fuller account of the ways in which golden age detective fiction responded to contemporary discourses of mental illness, and, in turn, participated in the scientific and medical discussions of its day. Such engagements are implicated in the genre's self-examination during the period, and in particular in the reformulation of the detective figure. Golden age detective fiction is a distinct phase in a larger history of a characteristically self-referential genre, a genre in which the foregrounding, codification, and constant re-examination and re-invention of conventions forms a constitutive meta-convention. Golden age detective fiction emerges and evolves via examination of earlier conventions, and the new detective figures which feature in these novels demonstrate skills, aptitudes, and moral stances which bear the traces of contemporary law, medicine, and psychology.

Contemporary cultural contexts also contributed to the golden age novel's generative process of self-interrogation during this era. Interest in the process of detection as both a pathological and a creative mental state, as well as in the subjective experience of criminal insanity, leads in certain novels to stylistic appropriations from specific modernist writers, including Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Virginia Woolf, whose representations of thought and feeling display the influence of ideas gleaned from modern psychology. Modernist influence is just one of the ways in which attention to the psychological contexts of the golden age detective novel reveals heterogeneous and formally experimental tendencies within the form.

Attention to psychology in the detective novel also provides a base from which to challenge critical commonplaces denoting golden age novels as comforting reads, by revealing subversive and confrontational content within the form. Golden age authors, I argue, aim not only to comfort their readers, but often to disconcert them; not only

to endorse the social order, but also to critique it. If mental illness is seen to have been fostered by the environment in which the criminal has been nurtured—the bourgeois family, for example—this provides an opportunity to reassess the social structures that make people so unhealthy. If, however, mental ill health—even criminal insanity—is presented not as an acquired condition, but as something inborn, its chance occurrence in otherwise ‘normal’ communities presents problems with defining otherness: the criminal is in the tricky position of being at once both culturally inside and biologically outside of the social group. In the interwar context, this notion of biological otherness had a grim significance. As Dan Stone summarizes, ‘the beginning of the twentieth century undoubtedly saw a rise in pessimistic theories, theories of social decline, of degeneration, of the survival of the unfittest’.¹² Whether authors engage with eugenics theories as represented by the British Eugenics Society, or rather (as is more common) betray the influence of the ‘pervasive form of “popular” or “folk” eugenics’ understood by many and expressed through ‘ideas of good and bad breeding’,¹³ eugenics is part of the context of detective fiction. The ways in which detective novels represent mental illness and work it into their plots are profoundly related to social anxieties and social prejudices. As Richard Solway affirms, ‘eugenics was a biological way of thinking about social, economic, political, and cultural change... it gave scientific credibility... to... prejudices, anxieties, and fears that... were prevalent primarily... among the middle and upper classes’.¹⁴ Individual cases in detective novels and newspaper accounts of trials will provide focus for analyses of the ways in which ideas about the inheritability of mental traits gave credence to social prejudices and anxieties about class, race, and gender at salient points of intersection.

¹² Don Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), p. 7.

¹³ Lucy Bland and Lesley A. Hall, ‘Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole’, in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 213–227; p. 217.

¹⁴ Richard Solway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth Century Britain* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: North Carolina University Press, 1990), p. xviii.

Focus of the Study

The perimeters of the golden age need to be extended into order to avoid misguided characterization of the golden age as ‘homogenous’.¹⁵ Works authored by writers who only dipped briefly into detective writing, such as Miles Franklin and Georgette Heyer, those who published during the Second World War, such as Christianna Brand, and by male authors such as Michael Innes, who have not been considered in many of the most recent discussions of the genre, all contributed to the development of the genre. Although the years between the wars provide a neat demarcation, and the commencement of the Second World War a reason for literary tropes and generic expectations developed during the interwar years to become somewhat less than ‘golden’, many later works test these expectations. Brand and Mitchell produced novels during the 1940s in which the threat and realities of war are barely perceptible (Brand’s 1945 *Green for Danger* being a notable exception) and which evoke, in spite of the global conflict, the fracturing Edwardiana of the classic golden age. According to Chandler, writing in 1950, the golden age, ‘for all practical purposes . . . is still here’.¹⁶

The reasons for this are manifold: the interwar crime novel, even in its earliest forms, always manifested an ambivalent nostalgia for a period and form of life that had already become impossible, and by the 1940s this lifestyle was no more impossible, or less compelling. The persistence of golden age tropes beyond the onset of the Second World War may be criticized as an escapist strategy that comforted readers unwilling to confront the reality of global turmoil (writers have certainly been accused of ignoring the political realities of the 1930s for much the same reason). Understanding how representations of madness and psychology communicate meaning in these texts will expose how such representations constitute not only a direct engagement with contemporary mental health debates, but also an indirect contemplation of wider social evils, from poverty to class prejudice, sexism to fascism. It is highly relevant that a number of the novels under consideration here were published immediately before and in the early years of the Second World War, including Gladys Mitchell’s *St Peter’s*

¹⁵ Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, p. 185.

Finger (1938), *When Last I Died* (1941), and *Laurels are Poison* (1942); Christianna Brand's *Heads You Lose* (1941); and Margery Allingham's *Traitor's Purse* (1941). Psychological themes and modes of enquiry are striking in these texts, a trend noticed by Symons, who states that late golden age mystery writers 'were inclined to ask Why rather than How and their Why was often concerned with the psychological make-up and social background of killer and killed'.¹⁷ For Symons, the cause of this increased psychological focus lies in an exhaustion with the interwar form's assumption that human motivation and human affairs were, at basis, reasonable. The coming of war and the rise of 'force' and 'irrational doctrines'¹⁸ in continental Europe overturned the golden age's complacent belief in the ultimate triumph of a reasonable social order. Psychology is treated as a means of understanding such unreason. It also helps explain crimes that are not the product of careful thought, or worked out by a rational individual with a reasonable motivation, but are inspired by beliefs founded on desires that, to the observer, may resemble madness. During the late 1930s, many authors turned their detectives to war work and espionage (e.g. Allingham in *Traitor's Purse*—see Chapter 5—and Christie in her 1941 *N or M?*), pitting them against fascist villains and fifth columnists. Even in novels in which the war is not mentioned, irrationality bleeds into the narrative through representations of insane motivations and mad reasoning (*Heads You Lose*, discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, is a prime example). As novels which feature madness and psychology demonstrate, the notion of 'reason' was itself far from stable during the earlier years of the period, with texts such as Dorothy L. Sayers' *Whose Body?* (1923) interrogating its meaning and offering alternative epistemologies in its stead.

Psychology and Detection

Jon Thompson has noted that 'it is an interesting—and little-remarked-upon—aspect of the formal English novel of detection that insanity nearly always figures as part of its atmosphere or mental

¹⁷ Symons, *Bloody Murder*, pp. 153–154.

¹⁸ Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 148.

landscape'.¹⁹ Insanity is used as a metaphor for impending disorder, to light-heartedly mock unusual behaviour, and is suggested as a motive in many a false solution: a 'homicidal maniac must have done it', is the standard cry. Madness pervades golden age crime fiction, but the ways in which it was understood and accounted for are neither uniform nor disconnected from the medical and psychological theories that were discussed and debated during the period. The human cost of the First World War must be measured by its psychological repercussions, as well as by the devastating slaughter of the conflict itself. From the late 1910s, war neurosis became a public concern, sparking debates about the proper care of the mentally ill, the origins of mental turmoil, and the constitution of the mind itself. Post-World War One insights into the fragility of the mind helped reignite medical and legal debates which had been put on hold at the outbreak of war in 1914, and which had their origins in nineteenth-century adaptive psychology and criminal anthropology. The post-war years were a period in which issues of mental health and criminal responsibility attained a prominent place in public discourse.

From the copious references in their texts, it is apparent that golden age writers were concerned with mental health and followed medical and legal debates in the press. Susan Rowland provides biographical surveys of Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy L. Sayers in *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*,²⁰ in which she highlights the significance of mental illness and psychology in these authors' lives. All experienced 'moments of psychological trauma': either triggered by personal catastrophe—Sayers' unplanned and out-of-marriage pregnancy;²¹ Christie's dramatic disappearance in 1926 and purported amnesia following her discovery of her husband's affair²²—or caused by an underlying mental illness, as suffered by the manic-depressive Allingham, who in 1955 underwent electroconvulsive therapy.²³ Gladys Mitchell was amongst a new generation of women with access to higher education; she trained in teaching and encountered psychoanalysis

¹⁹ Thompson, *Fiction, Crime and Empire*, p. 131.

²⁰ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 1–14.

²¹ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, pp. 7, 8.

²² Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 2; also see Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 106.

²³ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 8.

as part of her education. Christianna Brand worked as a nurse and a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse during the Second World War, and it is no coincidence that depictions of medicine and mental illness are commonplace in her novels.

In spite of the evidence that golden age writers had many encounters with psychological theories and the medical treatment of mental illness, much scholarship on golden age detective fiction focuses upon the non-professional, perceptive, and intuitive pseudo-psychological approaches to detection and criminal motivation in their texts. These approaches are frequently cited as aspects of a 'feminized' approach. Depending on the voiced or implicit ideological affiliations of the scholar, this feminization has been interpreted dismissively,²⁴ as evidence of the radical nature of these texts,²⁵ or as a 'front for a simpler method' more accessible and engaging for the reader.²⁶ Is the psychology used in these texts simply the exercise of intuition, perception, common-sense emotional awareness, or empathy? Or are more rigorous methodologies, more specific conditions, being represented?

This is an issue that has divided critics. In *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Knight cites an incident in Agatha Christie's 1923 murder mystery *The Murder on the Links*, in which her iconic Belgian detective Hercule Poirot exposes the psychological focus of his method as exercised upon the alluring killer Marthe Dubreuil. Poirot explains that the 'cold and calculating' Dubreuil's 'clever brain takes in the simplicity'²⁷ of the crime and perpetrates it with ease. This account is convincing and reasonable, but is also, as Knight asserts, somewhat superficial: Poirot is doing 'no more than comprehending people in a general, untested way', and he 'never shows any fuller grasp of psychological process'.²⁸ To an extent, Knight is quite right—Christie's detective does not explicitly employ specialist psychological terminology or method in his investigations. Nonetheless, Christie's texts rely upon their readership's 'common sense' understandings and assumptions about psychology and states of mind, which in spite of

²⁴ See Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder'.

²⁵ Munt, *Murder by the Book?*, pp. 8–9.

²⁶ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 91.

²⁷ Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p. 213.

²⁸ Knight, *Crime Fiction*, p. 111.

their surface simplicity, are profoundly shaped by the cultural dissemination of contemporary discourses of mental health. For example, Knight does not note the importance of heredity in Poirot's investigation of Dubreuil. The fact that she was the daughter of a notorious killer alerts Poirot to the fact that she is 'of the same... type as her mother',²⁹ which makes her particularly likely to have committed the crime. These simple statements are as fit for interrogation as any other unspoken and ostensibly neutral and transparent feature of the novel's social reality that disguise relations of power: the expectation of primogeniture, the legal power of the father, and the compromised agency of women, for example. Judgements about individual psychology based on parentage not only form part of the conceptual milieu of the period as Christie is representing it, but instruct the deductions of detective and reader alike.

Why this is, and what kind of psychology is being practised when this is the case, opens up the possibility that intuitive psychologizing is never merely a simple, common-sense calculation. Characters, detectives, readers, and authors do not respond to one another naturally, intuitively, or free from the influence of specialist methodologies and theories of mind. Dubreuil's inheritance—a perverse reversal of the financial inheritance of her fiancé, and just as crucial to the plot—alerts the reader to a mental constitution and moral nature that is out-of-the-ordinary in a way that is not pre-theoretical, but neither is it straightforwardly derived from a comprehensive psychological theory.

Crime fiction is a genre as concerned with the mystery of individuals as the mystery of the crime scene; therefore, knowledge gleaned from an array of psychological discourses is frequently called upon to account for individual behaviour, overlapping, inconsistent, and occasionally contradictory though this common stock of knowledge certainly was. Rather than bringing the reader closer to a true account, Alison Light has argued that such psychologizing can hint at the indeterminate and unknown true self of the individual under scrutiny. Light states that Christie's:

whodunits...compulsively reiterate the same question, one which has the character of both fascination and fear: is this person what

²⁹ Agatha Christie, *The Murder on the Links* [1923] (London: Pan, 1973), p. 213.

they seem? asks character after character of one another. What lies behind the calm façade which is their outward appearance?³⁰

Character, to Light, is always ambivalent in Christie, a fact that makes her mysterious plots possible, and which allows the mystery plot to function at the level of theme. The reader's tendency is towards empathy and identification with characters, but the mystery novel spurns this in favour of an iteration of social unease, a game of charades played again and again. Light proposes that Christie's fiction entails 'the evacuating of notions of character'.³¹ Painful existential anxieties such as 'the obsession with unstable identities, the ultimate unknowability of others' which 'torment the writers of high culture' are dealt with comically, whilst maintaining the tension of 'ambivalence upon which the plot depends'.³² Light is quite right to note that, although the murderer is eventually revealed, and with them what lies behind the calm façade, the fictions are never completely reassuring.

Susan Rowland proposes a Lacanian reading of detective novels, interpreting the works of Christie, Marsh, Sayers, and Allingham according to the contestation between the disruptive potential of desire, the transgression of social norms, and the ultimate impossibility of closure in a genre that seeks fantastically to overcome death. While her own psychoanalytically informed readings can be very revealing, Rowland does suggest that contemporary psychological discourses were of limited relevance in the actual authorship of golden age crime novels. While Rowland asserts that Allingham would 'dip into Jungian theory to portray irrational, dysfunctional families',³³ she would not delve any deeper, nor use theoretical structures to actually inform the construction of the plot. A rejection of psychoanalysis as an explanation in detective fiction is central to Rowland's thesis. Citing Sayers' clear antagonism towards Freud in her novel *Gaudy Night*, Rowland concludes that '[w]hat golden age crime fiction does is to question the legitimacy of psychoanalysis functioning as a cultural authority claiming to explain all crime and

³⁰ Light, *Forever England*, p. 88.

³¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 66.

³² Light, *Forever England*, p. 88.

³³ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 92.

deviance'.³⁴ Psychoanalysis, to Rowland, is the subject of critique in golden age detective fiction because of its social implications and its controversial accounts of sexual difference. It is also a threat to the open-ended, indeterminate, and unreassuring narratives that she sees as constituting the transgressive potential of the female-penned whodunnit. As Rowland's study does not cover the works of Gladys Mitchell, it is not concerned with those novels of Mitchell's that claim to use psychoanalysis as a detection method and as a means of explaining crime and deviance. In other works under consideration (as, for example, in Michael Innes's *Death at the President's Lodging* and Christie's *The ABC Murders*), psychoanalysis is one of a range of psychological disciplines that compete to explain criminality. As shall be seen, psychology in its many forms is often accepted as a legitimate cultural authority, but Rowland's uncertainty about the credibility of psychoanalysis in detective novels is often borne out. Psychoanalysis is not treated as the sole means of understanding and accounting for character and motivation during the period: other psychological theories inform narratives, and it is this study's objective to bring them to light and to discuss their effects on the plotting and the meaning of crime novels.

Detection and the Law

At the intersection of psychological discourse and the popular literary imagination, psychologically inflected detective fiction not only conveyed a version of psychological discourse to a wider public, but profoundly reworked the foundations of the genre as the ritual unveiling of deviancy and the restoration of the rational institutions of society. This much can be seen in the persistent interrogation of the law and the legal categories into which criminals fall once exposed by the detective. The replacement of the ingenious, hyper-rational murderer with a multitude of psychologically disturbed villains, many of whom were of ambiguous and controversial legal status in regard to criminal responsibility, is accompanied in many novels by the refashioning of the detective as a figure with a superior and extra-legal moral

³⁴ Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 97.

and psychological perspective. In Gladys Mitchell's psychoanalytic detective, who offers murderers the chance of redemption through her expert guidance, and in Christianna Brand's portrayal of bereaved characters who conspire to conceal the offender from formal legal justice, can be seen the development of a critical ethical perspective which both exemplifies crime writers' engagements with the most pressing moral issues of the time, and demonstrates their awareness of the ideological implications of their texts.

Influential in this history are the true crime narratives and the sensational murder trials reported in gory and exacting detail in newspapers such as *The Times*, which was a reliable source of court proceedings and a tool for the dissemination of information to both authors and their readership. Arthur Conan Doyle has been credited for his attempts to present 'realistic' portrayals of crime scenes, and for the impact his *Sherlock Holmes* tales had upon nascent forensic technology and the arts of detection as practised by the police.³⁵ In contrast, little attention has been paid to the co-identities of inter-war detection writers as both authors and readers of crime narratives. However, such unusual murder cases as that of Dr Crippen (1910), Ronald True (1922), Patrick Mahon (1924), and Dr Lockhart (1939) are treated in detailed and thoughtful ways in certain novels, offering critiques of public representations of killers and court processes. News reports describing epileptic and unconscious killings also shaped detection narratives (as Chapter 4 asserts), with novels playing upon the fears of the concealed nature of self and the threats of madness and deviance implicit in such accounts.

In *The Pursuit of Crime*, Dennis Porter discusses the conservatism of golden age writers. A crime 'implies the violation of a community code of conduct and demands a response in terms of the code', and therefore the impetus to discover the murderer attests to an ideological investment in 'the given order and the implied value system that helps sustain it'.³⁶ The desire to discover and contain the murderer, to Porter, anticipates the legal processes of the actual

³⁵ See Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 5.

³⁶ Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in the Detective Novel* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 120–121.

social order, making detective fiction, with its fascination with isolating the criminal, an implicitly conservative fiction. This is a common stance, and a supportable one: undoubtedly, as Thompson has stated, Christie's novels (and those of many of her contemporaries) are marked by the 'valorization of middle- and upper-middle-class society and mores, her resolute individualism, her nostalgia for an Edwardian type of domesticity, and her remarkable exclusion of social conflict'.³⁷ However, broadening the range of authors under consideration and paying considerable attention to the novels of Gladys Mitchell, who has been unjustly neglected, helps uncover the golden age detective novel as a site in which politics and social conflict are approached both implicitly and explicitly. Using mass narratives of true crimes and the often vigorous debates they generated as a starting point for assessing the ways in which criminality, responsibility, and social deviance were conceived of during the interwar years, the relationship between high court, legal, and medical debates on these issues and on popular crime narratives can be revealed.

Many critics have drawn attention to the importance of bourgeois legal structures—in particular, laws dealing with property and inheritance—in golden age detective fiction.³⁸ Countless novels deal with the transference of wealth and its related documentation, and to this extent they are conservative in naturalizing bourgeois primogeniture and the rule of law. Detective fiction is also concerned with the treatment of criminals, including the legal process following arrest, what takes place at trial, and the assessment of what crimes have actually been committed. It is now commonplace to note that detective fiction has its origins in public digests of criminal trials published in the late eighteenth century *Newgate Calendar*.³⁹ Ernst Bloch has also linked the rise of modern, investigative detective fiction to the juridical developments taking place from the mid-eighteenth century: 'Because the *trial by evidence demanded* that evidence be sufficient for both the initial arrest warrant and the trial', he states, 'criminal investigations

³⁷ Thompson, *Fiction, Crime and Empire*, p. 129; also see Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 104.

³⁸ See Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, pp. 120–121; Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London: Pluto, 1984), pp. 28–29.

³⁹ Knight's history of this development in *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000* is particularly thorough.