Sleuthing from the Margins: Agatha Christie's Marple and Poirot as the Detecting Other

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Despite their central position in the canon of detective fiction, Agatha Christie's most famous characters, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, occupy an ex-centric position in their respective fictional worlds. Both sleuths can be interpreted as marginalized Others and as such challenge the normative assumptions of the society in which they live. Miss Marple's marginalization is primarily reflected in her gender, her amateur detective work, and her marital status, while Poirot's Otherness is implied by his foreignness, his effeminacy and his neurodivergence. Both characters can also be interpreted as asexual and analyzed as straight-passing queers. This article explores how Christie uses her detectives' status as Other to gently challenge the era's dominant ideas about authority, sexuality, gender and morality. The analysis focuses primarily on the works The Murder at the Vicarage*,* The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, "The Double Clue" and* Hallowe'en Party *and their film and television adaptations to examine both the textual and subtextual instances of marginalization, and the various attempts to keep the Other within the confines of normative identity.*

Keywords: English literature / detective novel / Christie, Agatha / Miss Marple / Hercule Poirot / marginalization / the Other

Introduction

Recent criticism (Rowland; Plain; Makinen; Bernthal) shows that Agatha Christie's innovations with regard to the detective genre can be observed from narrative, social, cultural, and feminist perspectives, to name but a few most important ones. Still, one of the most original aspects of her work are her two main detective characters, the elderly spinster Miss Marple and the funny little foreigner Hercule Poirot, who are based not only on the social context of the period (the genteel interbellum era which saw the publication of Christie's most celebrated

works), but also on a plethora of literary and non-literary intertextual relations. The two detectives are clearly positioned as marginalized in the society which nevertheless needs them to re-establish the disrupted order. Without explicitly questioning social and political norms of the turbulent period in which she was creating, Christie still points at the necessity of a search for alternative authority figures. The narrative thus constantly re-examines the two sleuths, facing them with official, accepted authorities and occasionally treating them as objects of scorn and ridicule. Christie playfully uses both conspicuous (Poirot) and unremarkable (Marple) Otherness as a corrective counterpart to the dominant, masculine discourses. Although her novels reflect the period's prevailing views on key social and moral issues through the characters who represent the pillars of society, Christie's narrative still dialogically engages with the Other, by depicting characters who may seem to be socially subversive, but who actually provide a different, even transgressive, perspective. These dominant, normative views are challenged in Christie's narrative by the fact, as emphasized by J. C. Bernthal, that "such figures as doctors, solicitors and politicians are statistically more prone to homicide in their work than are cross-dressers, homosexuals, adulterers and people from foreign countries or religious backgrounds that are not protestant" (Bernthal 78). Conservatism that is usually ascribed to Christie thus mostly stems from selective reading, that is, from taking the narrators' and characters' views to be those of the author, and from disregarding dissonant voices. This is to be expected within the framework of genre literature: the detective novel's formulaic structure of crime and investigation places the reader in a comfortable position where they are rarely expected to detect social and cultural ideologies, let alone the narrative's ironic distancing from those ideologies. Nevertheless, as exemplified in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), Christie shows the importance of *who is speaking*, so it can be deduced that this does not refer only to the facts of the crime, but also to the articulation of social rules, limitations, and freedoms.

Poirot and Marple also represent Otherness in terms of the conventional heterosexual family unit, since they are an independent, unaligned element of the community, a fact that is even more interesting given that large families feature heavily in Christie's work. In Alison Light's words, "[t]he disavowal of a romantic masculinity and its heroic performance in the public work of action" in Christie's novels is an obvious matter of disdain even for some contemporary adaptors (Light 75), so it is not surprising that Raymond Chandler bemoaned the feminization of the detective genre in England, which was made to appeal

to "the flustered old ladies—of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages" (qtd. in Light 75). The "no sex" part is particularly telling, clearly showing that certain readers saw a threat in what can otherwise be classified as a rather discreet intervention on Christie's part regarding the genre's legitimacy and social relations in the fictional world. A male detective more concerned with his appearance than with the charms of the fairer sex is a direct threat to the image of hegemonic masculinity of the British Empire, and if foreignness is added to the mixture, that image is doubly threatened. Representation of women not as objects of desire, but as agents, especially agents who resist sexualization and are yet quite aware of the particulars of the sexual dynamics around them, can be interpreted as a creative use of the term "surplus woman," quite prevalent in the 1920s. Taking into account what Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, Gill Plain, and Susan Rowland wrote on the subject, Merja Makinen states that "Miss Marple should be viewed within a context of cultural concern about the lone woman" (Makinen 45). This type of female Otherness is particularly threatening to the patriarchy, because female privacy and sexuality remain unknown and uncontrolled. In patriarchal societies, women's financial and professional independence, or their refusal to engage in conventional marital and familial relationships, are severely limited or completely neutralized through sexual control and policing. Christie sometimes depicts the detective genre's staple of *femme fatale* as a seemingly powerful, but essentially victimized woman ("Triangle at Rhodes," 1937; *Evil Under the Sun*, 1941). Poirot, too, challenges the social mores of the time by being flamboyantly Other: he is an effeminate, neurodivergent foreigner who does not fit in with the social image of the heroic, masculine detective in service of the Empire, and, by being "clearly the reverse of the masculine and English Holmes" (Knight 90), he also questions the literary norms of the period. Both Poirot and Marple thus represent marginalized identities, and yet they are the unmistakable moral superiors to superficially wholesome, but essentially repugnant perpetrators of the novels' many crimes. Therefore, the two characters are both eccentric and ex-centric. In this article, we will show how Christie uses her two detectives to challenge the dominant authorities and systems of thought, even if those challenges usually remain confined to the level of subtext. We will also touch upon some film and television adaptations in order to explore the ways those subtextual challenges rise to the surface or leave the text altogether, thus undermining the idea of marginalization in an attempt to force the characters into normative roles.

Spinsterhood as transgressive femininity: Miss Marple

By placing her female sleuth into a sexually undefined zone, Agatha Christie stresses her independence and her non-participation in the web of human relations she observes. As Miss Marple has no personal interest in these relations, she is uniquely relevant for the disrupted order of the world, even as she herself stays out of its domain. Miss Marple is thus an author figure, much earlier than Ariadne Oliver. It is then not surprising that Juliette Wells makes a connection between Miss Marple and Jane Austen through cultural imagination of "Aunt Jane" (Wells 199–219). On the one hand, biopics tend to pad up Austen's biography with unfulfilled romances and depict her writing career as a consolation prize, unable to accept an unmarried woman as a cultural icon. On the other hand, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar show, the portrayal of both entrepreneurial and passive women is an ambivalent representation of Austen's attitude toward her own authorship (Gilbert and Gubar 146–183). It could be said that Christie, too, projects her own authorial authority and manipulative view of story, narration, and characters onto the character of Miss Marple, hiding behind more or less stereotypical depictions of writers like Ariadne Oliver or Raymond West. Miss Marple's behavior is steeped in performativity, conforming to the accepted social expectations regarding gender, age, and class, but the novels' narrators point to the irony and distancing inherent in this performance. This is already noticed by Leonard Clement, the vicar who serves as the narrator of the first novel featuring Miss Marple, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), while *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) demonstrates that even basic communication can be seen as acting. The latter's opening lines show Miss Marple in "a routine with which she was well acquainted": an elderly man, Major Palgrave in this case, tells her of his past adventures. Humorously and ironically, the narrator explains: "Miss Marple had bestowed on all of them the same gentle charity. She had sat attentively, inclining her head from time to time in gentle agreement, thinking her own thoughts and enjoying what there was to enjoy: in this case the deep blue of a Caribbean Sea" (Christie, *Caribbean Mystery* 1).

Although her mannerisms echo the cultural idea of an elderly English spinster, Miss Marple often slips out of her role and reveals that she is in possession of knowledge and control. Therefore, performativity is present even in her approach to crime, her *directing* of scenes and manipulation of other characters through the selection and presentation of the information she uncovers. Also, since the reveal

of the truth and the unmasking of the perpetrator often come with no concrete evidence, half of Miss Marple stories use traps and staging to arrive at the solution (e.g., *4.50 from Paddington*, 1957). In *The Murder at the Vicarage* even the murder itself is practically stage-directed for the old lady who notices everything, as a scene observed from "the danger point of Miss Marple's garden" (22). This element is also evident in Sir Henry Clithering's excited words in *A Murder Is Announced* (1950): "Once more a murder is announced—for the benefit and enjoyment of Miss Marple" (61). In both *The Thirteen Problems* (1932), which introduced the character of Miss Marple (the collection featured short stories published in fiction magazines between 1927 and 1930), and *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Christie demonstrates her male characters' condescending attitude towards Miss Marple and consequent role reversal, because the one who knows more—Marple—is shown as the dominant figure, despite that condescension. Thus, when the vicar objects to gossip, Marple replies: "You are so unworldly. I'm afraid that observing human nature for as long as I have done, one gets not to expect very much from it" (Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage* 18). When Colonel Melchett needs to talk to Miss Marple and asks about her reliability, the vicar says: "She has a powerful imagination and systematically thinks the worst of every one" (59). The Colonel, however, makes the same mistake as the other male characters, starting with Raymond West: he bases his opinion of Miss Marple on everything that is performative about her—her house, her salon, her appearance. According to Makinen, the repeated details about her appearance (pink cheeks, fluffy knitting, meandering talk) "point to an awareness of elderly femininity as a form or masquerade, a performance that lives up to expectations in order to gain its own advantages" (Makinen 58). Therefore, even the concepts of privacy and domesticity can be questioned, especially considering Makinen's conclusion that "Miss Marple's masquerade points beyond her own individual identity to femininity as a whole" (58).

This stereotypical gender performance is almost didactically emphasized by Christie through Melchett's mocking words: "The typical elderly spinster, in fact … I ought to know the breed by now" (Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage* 59). Upon seeing Marple's small drawing room, he exclaims: "A lady's room, eh, Clement?" (60). This statement shows that he is confident in his knowledge about both public and private domains and depicts him as a keeper of order who thinks he sees through both people and their environments. However, Christie shows a modern world where such convictions indicate outdated preconceptions about

gender and class, which only serve to cloud one's judgement. In her detective novels, the characters' feeling of disorientation remains even after the crime is solved and the order is restored, reflecting numerous social and political changes of the interbellum period. Indeed, the investigation itself often echoes the acknowledgment of the changed social structures, behaviors, or moral norms, or, as Light states:

> The instabilities which these popular murders set in motion bear a direct relationship to the existential crises which torment the writers of high culture: the obsession with unstable identities, the ultimate unknowability of others, the sense of guilt which accompanies civilisation, and the concomitant effects which such destabilisation has upon the certainties of realist narrative—all find their modified parallel in Christie. (Light 88)

Male authority figures can thus be seen as symbolic of the disrupted, ineffective old order, while marginalized voices, represented though social unremarkables like Miss Marple, actually seem to be the more reasonable ones and it is them who are crucial to the solution. Unlike his wife, the vicar misjudges the young girls Lettice Protheroe and Miss Cram, because he cannot safely pigeonhole them into any "breed." Melchett is so condescending in his treatment of Miss Marple that even the vicar notices that he is "putting on his bluff military manner which he had an idea was attractive to elderly ladies" (Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage* 60). Christie obviously takes great pleasure in having Miss Marple invalidate these preconceptions. She first demonstrates her powers of deduction, which the vicar reports to the reader: "Miss Marple shook her head slowly and pityingly. The pity was, I think, for two full-grown men being so foolish as to believe such a story. At least that is what we felt like" (64). Then, in her unassuming, polite manner, she concludes the conversation by saying: "But I'm afraid there's a lot of wickedness in the world. A nice honourable upright soldier like you doesn't know about these things, Colonel Melchett" (65). Throughout the novel, the author faces her sleuth with male authority figures whom she easily triumphs over, and key to that triumph are Miss Marple's knowledge of human nature and gossip as a "denigrated form of inter-female communication" (Makinen 62). Gossip is, more broadly, also seen as a form of folk wisdom passed down from generation to generation, available for creative use by Miss Marple, the author figure. All of these features are more emphasized in *The Murder at the Vicarage* not only because this is where the character of Miss Marple is established, but also because the novel's narrator is a man in position of social power, rather than a neutral omniscient narrator.

Later novels somewhat mitigate the image of the "nasty old cat" (Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage* 18), while the first British television adaptation of *The Murder at the Vicarage* (the fifth episode in *Agatha Christie's Miss Marple*, BBC, 1984–1992) "puts her more in line with later characterizations, a simple observer who quietly works everything out without fuss, but understandably makes her more prominent" (Aldridge 230). Since "Vicarage" was not the first episode of the series, Marple's character had already been shown as more refined in earlier stories ("The Body in the Library," "The Moving Finger," "A Murder Is Announced," "A Pocketful of Rye"), not gossipy and nosy, and less conspicuously clashing with authority figures. Joan Hickson was in her eighties when she played Marple, and so the character's liveliness, vivacity, and unconventional views were curtailed in favor of a more classical portrayal. Agatha Christie herself points out that Miss Marple was "born at the age of sixty-five to seventy" (Bunson 288). Writing about a 1970 German adaptation of the novel, Mark Aldridge points out that Inge Langen's Marple (quite a young version, as Langen was only in her mid-forties) corresponds better to the Marple from the novel, as an "outright busybody," not wholly likeable but somewhat irritant, and "not the kindly, softer version seen in most later adaptations" (Aldridge 290). The BBC adaptation of Marple novels, generally considered canonical, has obviously largely contributed to a conservative view of Agatha Christie.

Unfortunately, neither does the ITV series *Agatha Christie's Marple* (2004–2013) have "The Murder at the Vicarage" as its first episode, but places it after "The Body in the Library" instead. The latter caused quite a stir among fans, since a pair of lesbian killers were introduced into the plot. The ITV series' looser adaptation harkens back to the campy, parodic context of earlier Christie films, which also featured a slew of movie stars. The need to introduce a romance element into the life of the elderly spinster manifested itself early on, with the MGM adaptations (1961–1964) starring Margaret Rutherford. Writing about the adaptation of *After the Funeral* (the book version featured Poirot, but the movie uses Marple instead, and changes the title to *Murder at the Gallop*), Aldridge writes that, "[a]s with *Murder She Said*, the film ends with the hint of wedding bells for Miss Marple" (Aldridge 100). ITV's "The Murder at the Vicarage" (2004) goes one step further: it does not promise any future romantic involvements, but intervenes in Miss Marple's past. In her popular book *The Life and Times of Miss Jane Marple* (1985), Anne Hart points at two places in the novels where Marple hints at two suitors from her past (*At Bertram's Hotel*,

A Caribbean Mystery), one of whom was disliked by her mother, and the other was "rather gay, almost Bohemian in his views" (Christie, *Caribbean Mystery* 170), but she found him very dull. Hart is decidedly unhappy with the fact that Christie never revealed anything from Miss Marple's life between early girlhood and middle age, and desires to "imagine something vaguely heroic" in that gap (Hart 32). A biographer would generally fill in those gaps, but the task is less straightforward when the biography in question concerns a fictional character, whose entire existence and all the corresponding material is already textual in nature, so that kind of freedom is not tolerated outside of realms of fan fiction. Hart's biography can be seen as a narrative extension of Miss Marple's detective adventures, offering a frame story for the procedural since, as one *Goodreads* review says, "it makes a nice companion to the *Miss Marple* series." Television and seriality created a type of parasocial relationship with the character that was not encouraged by the original novels. Hence the ITV series' need to create Marple's intimate world and to assign her *normative* sexuality.

The beginning of ITV's "The Murder at the Vicarage" takes us back to 1915 and shows us young Captain Ainsworth being photographed in his uniform, with the photographer asking him to "look brave" and a young woman offering to see him to the station, because he is off to war. At the end of the episode, we find out that the young woman in question was Jane Marple, who had an affair with a married man whom she told to come back from the war, not for her, but for his wife. The captain dies in the war, and at the very end we see his photograph on the vanity. This flashback parallels the emphatically romanticized story between Mrs. Protheroe and Mr. Redding, so as to suggest that Miss Marple does have some experience which allows her to understand the world. This is, however, contrary to the principles of deduction she reveals in the original novel, which are based on observation, comparison, and classification of people. Makinen shows that Marple creates liminal space within the investigation which connects intuition and logocentrism: "Miss Marple, as main detective, is in control of the complete process, both the initial 'feminine' disquiet and the 'masculine' explanation of the facts" (Makinen 60). Finally, if we return to our view of Miss Marple as an author figure, here too we have a parallel with the idea that a writer does not necessarily have to have a rich life, but the ability to combine and compare impressions and experience. On the other hand, it seems that the reason why Marple never married needs to be explained, albeit within the bounds of heteronormativity. Ironically or not, the series which includes two characters coming out

of the closet—Murgatroyd and Hinchcliffe are shown kissing in the fourth episode, "A Murder Is Announced" (2005), while in the corresponding novel the two women were "merely" living together—felt the need to explicitly address Miss Marple's sexuality and uncover the secrets from her "threatening" privacy. In the adaptation of *Murder Is Easy* (1939), which did not originally feature Miss Marple at all, an existing queer character, Mr. Ellsworthy, is not included. Moreover, he is missing even from the newest 2023 adaptation. In this way, historical representation of homosexuality is corrected: it is made explicit when it is only hinted at (like with Murgatroyd and Hinchcliffe), and an illusion is created that the society at large might have been approving of a queer relationship. This allows for a historical setting without any uncomfortable examinations of the actual historical context. A similar tendency can be seen not only in ITV's *Agatha Christie's Poirot* (1989–2013), but also in BBC's *Father Brown* (2013–), where the amateur sleuth is a Catholic priest in 1950s England (transposed from G. K. Chesterton's original stories, written between 1910s and 1930s) who has a remarkably modern and tolerant stance on queerness. While it is understandable that the heroic main characters of all of these detective stories cannot be seen as bigoted by modern standards, particularly because their genre is ultimately "cozy mystery" which does not usually explore the darker parts of human nature, this often results in obvious historical inaccuracy and an arbitrary set of rules where only the buffoons and villains tend to be aggressively sexist, racist, classist, or homophobic, and queer characters or characters of color tend to be represented in a more positive light in the adaptations than in the original stories, so as to avoid negative stereotyping. Therefore, when its representation in the original stories is negative, queerness is erased in another example of interference into the historical treatment of Otherness. Mr. Ellsworthy, thus, as a minor character whom Christie uses to show the community's paranoia, particularly at the dawn of World War II, does not appear in the adaptations. Nevertheless, however much her novel may reflect the prejudices of its time, Christie also points out how easily those who are different become scapegoats because they are seen as perverted, corrupt, and insane. Queer men like Mr. Ellsworthy and Mr. Pye (*The Moving Finger*, 1942), who are "relatively minor characters who act chiefly as red herrings and to allow the male protagonists' assertion of their own manly masculinity by comparison" (Bernthal 102) turn out to be innocent of the crimes in the novels, but what cunning sleuth could have relieved them of doubt in real life?

Such references to the social reality of the time, which Christie makes using the discourse of the period she belongs to, should not be erased in contemporary adaptations simply out of the desire to be politically correct. This does not only counterfeit social history, but exposes one's superficial reading of Christie. In the first Marple novel, the protagonist emphasizes that most people are "a little queer," and moreover, that "normal people do such astonishing things sometimes, and abnormal people are sometimes so very sane and ordinary" (Christie, *Murder at the Vicarage* 193). Normality and ordinariness are examined in connection with guilt in a complex manner. Christie often shows that, unlike the actual perpetrators who are guilty of crimes, those who are considered to be outsiders have no "blame" other than either their unconventionality or some small infractions, and they can therefore be reintegrated into the community, or "restored to a state of innocence" (Auden 158).

Otherness on display: Hercule Poirot

When it comes to her other, arguably more famous, fictional creation, Hercule Poirot, Christie makes him much more conspicuously Other than Miss Marple. Unlike Marple, who hides her superior intellect and deduction skills behind the image of unimposing femininity, Poirot is loudly and obviously different: he is not only a foreigner, but a refugee; not only a dandy, but a man so ridiculously vain and impractical that he chooses fashion over common sense (e.g., patent leather shoes instead of more comfortable footwear even when traipsing around the countryside); not only a genius at solving crime, but an insufferable braggart about it as well. He is immensely irritating, not only to many characters in his stories, but also to his author, who gradually became so disillusioned with her creation that she side-lined him in his own narratives. Everything about Poirot, from his foreignness, his atypical masculinity, and his heavily implied neurodivergence, screams "Other." Yet he too, like Miss Marple, plays a role and exaggerates a lot of these traits on purpose, using a performative version of self in order to either confuse, annoy or trick the culprits into confession, because he also, more often than not, lacks actual evidence and has to rely on the guilty party confessing when confronted with the detective's interpretation of the crime. Like Miss Marple, Poirot is also always right, and his performance at the denouement, when he gathers all the suspects to reveal the truth, has an air of theatricality about it. Unlike Marple,

though, he is a man, even if his masculinity is coded as Other; and a professional, rather than an amateur sleuth, so he is awarded more respect by his many police associates. Furthermore, as the most famous private detective in the fictional world he inhabits, Poirot is a wealthy member of high society, which accords him certain privileges that a less fortunate immigrant might not have enjoyed in the class-conscious British society. Thus, as much as he is Othered for being a foreigner who does not embody the Empire's ideal of hegemonic masculinity, he also benefits from the advantages given to him by his sex, race, and class. Despite this, Poirot is still noticeably different from other rich, white, male characters in the novels. Interestingly enough, he revels in that difference, probably because, in his endless vanity, he perceives it as superior. Moreover, as previously mentioned, it is often these ultra-privileged members of the society's upper echelons that commit the most heinous crimes, which leaves an outsider like Poirot to serve as the world's moral center.

Conceived as a simultaneously straightforward and parodic version of a genius eccentric detective in the style of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot first appeared in Christie's debut novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (written 1916, published in the US in 1920 and in the UK in 1921). Here, in an evident attempt to emulate the Holmes stories, the narrator is the detective's associate, Captain Hastings, who met Poirot some years earlier and knows him as an odd and dandyish, albeit brilliant investigator. Unlike Watson, whose palpable admiration for Holmes casts Conan Doyle's stories in a homoerotic light, Hastings does not immediately take to Poirot. Rightfully deducing that her detective did not need an engaged narrator, Christie would later abandon this formula and send her Watson-like character, Hastings, to Argentina, leaving Poirot's adventures to impersonal narration. In *Styles,* the two characters reunite while Hastings is on leave from the front (the action takes place during World War I), recuperating from an injury, and Poirot is in England because he was forced to leave his native Belgium as a war refugee. In contrast to Holmes, who is an addict and an eccentric, but still very much a proper Victorian Englishman, Poirot is a foreigner, and a foreigner during wartime at that, a direct threat to the colonial cultural constructions of nationhood and masculinity. Moreover, to his eternal consternation, he is often confused for a Frenchman, even though he is a Belgian, which, to Charles Brownson, makes him "twice an outsider" (qtd. in Bernthal 88), as he is Francophone, but not French. As Bernthal puts it, comparing Poirot with Doyle's Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin, two

famous fictional detectives who solve crimes in their native lands, he is "explicitly a foreigner" who invokes colonial British prejudice of foreign men's inferiority and effeminacy (Bernthal 36). However, he recognizes the potential benefits of being underestimated and thus he usually plays up this role, using other characters' xenophobia to his advantage, as he explains in *Three Act Tragedy* (1934):

> It is true that I can speak the exact, the idiomatic English. But, my friend, to speak the broken English is an enormous asset. It leads people to despise you. They say—a foreigner—he can't even speak English properly. It is not my policy to terrify people—instead I invite their gentle ridicule. Also I boast! An Englishman he says often, 'A fellow who thinks as much of himself as that cannot be worth much.' That is the English point of view. It is not at all true. And so, you see, I put people off their guard. (Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* 191)

Poirot's foreignness is thus steeped in performativity, just like Marple's spinsterhood. Both use other people's prejudice toward their Otherness in order to fly under the radar and to gain an (often invisible) upper hand. This testifies to our earlier assertion that Christie gently challenges the conservatism of her era through the transgressive nature of her two sleuths.

Since diagnosis of fictional characters is never advisable and rarely useful, we will not get into medical detail about Poirot's numerous eccentricities. Still, it bears pointing out that the character is heavily coded as neurodivergent, with traits that would later become associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, and which would often characterize subsequent fictional detectives (e.g., in TV shows *Monk*, 2002–2009, or *Professor T*, which started in Belgium in 2015 and expanded into a whole franchise). In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Poirot's implied neurodivergence is an asset that solves the crime: since he craves order and symmetry, is forever straightening things, and is particular about details, Poirot is the only one who notices that the figurines on the mantelpiece have been disturbed, which leads him to the solution. The ITV adaptation of the novel provides more detail on these quirks, adding, for instance, a scene where Poirot suggests to the baffled village shopkeeper that she should arrange spices by their country of origin. Like in its sister series, *Agatha Christie's Marple*, the first episode of *Agatha Christie's Poirot* is not actually the first story featuring the titular detective; indeed, "The Mysterious Affair at Styles" comes after nineteen other episodes, as the first story of season three. This way, the audience is already used to Poirot's many eccentricities, so their effect is affection rather than

irritation in the viewer. This insistence on order is one of the keys to Poirot's success: he is detail-oriented and observant, and familiar with numerous obscure facts, due to what, if the neurodivergent angle is to be observed, might even be deemed hyperfixations. Thus, it is Poirot's mental Otherness that helps him challenge the authority of the dominant ways of thinking and allows him to succeed where they fail.

As was already stated, Poirot's gender expression is atypical and closely tied with his foreignness (insomuch that he cannot fully participate in homosocial bonding with true Englishmen, whose masculinity is uncontested), or, in Bernthal's words, he is "an alien whose stripe of masculinity is out of place in the world he inhabits" (Bernthal 36). This is signaled by his very name: he is named after the Greek demigod Hercules, the epitome of masculine strength, and yet, he is nothing like him. Further, his surname, Poirot, could loosely be translated as "little pear," which inspires neither dread nor awe. The character's full name is thus incongruous, and the effect is similar to that achieved by T. S. Eliot in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": by using a decidedly unromantic name, Eliot suggests that the love song the reader is about to encounter is a wholly ironic piece. Indeed, Hercule Poirot, unlike his mythological counterpart, is regularly described as a "little man." He is barely 5'4, and is known not for his strength, but for his intellect and his fastidiousness, reflected in his impeccably styled mustache, his neat morning suits, and his shiny patent leather shoes. Even though he takes great pride in his appearance (so much so that he dyes his hair black when it starts graying), he is never described as an attractive man (and indeed, does not think of himself as such, barring his admiration for his impressive mustache): much is made of his egg-shaped head and his small stature. Interestingly enough, though most adaptations portray him as overweight (even David Suchet's portrayal, usually regarded as the definitive one, includes a fat suit), he is not described as such in the books; on the contrary, he is often compared to a cat, with his agility and his green eyes, which grow more and more "cat-like" the more excited he becomes. This version of manliness is clearly not an ideal of masculine strength and beauty: unlike Sherlock Holmes, who is an accomplished boxer, Poirot is a "quaint dandified little man" (Christie, *Mysterious Affair* 35). Moreover, even though he is overly reliant on his "little gray cells" and "order and method" in earlier appearances, he becomes more of an observer and a "psychological" detective as time goes by. Thus, his masculinity is doubly feminized: at first, his mental faculties are placed before his physical prowess, so that the less "manly" brains are used instead of brawn, and later, that less manly, but still

masculine-coded intellectual ability gives way before feminine-coded powers of observation and analysis of people. Again, when compared with Holmes, who typically relies on cold, hard logic, Poirot solves his cases mostly by carefully observing the assorted suspects' interactions and emotional reactions, which aligns him more with Miss Marple's feminine style of sleuthing than with Holmes's masculine-coded logic. Even his impressive knowledge can be understood as "stereotypically female" (Knight 91), as exemplified by his understanding of poisons, explicitly mentioned as a feminine method of murder in *Styles*, or his observance of nail polish colors in *Death on the Nile* (1937). As Stephen Knight points out, "[b]efore Miss Marple is invented Poirot already represents a heightened version of female domestic knowledge as a weapon against fictional disorder" (Knight 91).

As mentioned above, "Styles" is not the episode which introduces the ITV adaptation of Poirot. That honor falls to "The Adventure of the Clapham Cook," where the character's first scene has the camera zoom in on his feet and then slowly pan up, lingering on his legs, and finally reaching his face. Such scopophilia is typically reserved for female characters, as a textbook example of Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze. Yet, Poirot is not eroticized here—what is on display is not his sexualized body, but his fastidiousness: his shiny shoes, his neatly pressed trousers, his well-manicured hands that are clearing off some invisible lint. He is not just dapper, but a proper dandy, and, as Judith Halberstam explains, the dandy is symptomatic of queer threat, since he is "too feminine," "a Gothic monster," who "represents too much and too little, excess and paucity; … the parasitical aristocrat and the upwardly mobile bourgeois. He obviously also represents the homosexual male" (Halberstam 62–63). Nevertheless, Poirot's queerness is only ever implied, and easily explained away by his foreignness (e.g., his enthusiastic kisses to greet Hastings). Moreover, he, like Miss Marple, could more properly be read as asexual-coded, the type of queer that is still societally safe on the surface, linked as it is to the notion of *passing*. Indeed, both Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot can thus be interpreted as straight-passing queers. Asexuality may be described as invisible queerness, and is often excluded from more radical, hierarchical queer spaces for not being visibly queer enough or not understood as queer at all (see Serano). The homoerotic gaze in "Clapham Cook" is thus teased but ultimately thwarted, and the prospect of homoeroticism is, as Patrick Schuckmann says, both "evoked and disavowed" by the genre's constraints (Schuckmann 675). The reader (or in this case, viewer) is invited to be a voyeur, but it is Poirot's Otherness (i.e., his

overemphasized neatness, which could be linked to all three main features of his Otherness: his foreignness, his effeminacy, and his neurodivergence) that is on display, rather than his sexually objectified body.

Nevertheless, Poirot, like Marple, suffers from being "straightened" in adaptations. One of the most egregious examples is the ITV version of his relationship with Vera Rossakoff, which turns his fascination into a full-blown infatuation, and even a doomed romance. Of the character's three book appearances ("The Double Clue," 1923; *The Big Four*, 1927; *The Labours of Hercules*, 1947), two were televised, and each time, Rossakoff's dubious aristocratic title is taken at face value, and her relationship with Poirot, loud and cordial in the original, gets a wistful note in the adaptation. Bernthal rightly points out that Rossakoff's book version is so flamboyant and exaggerated that it easily invokes Judith Butler's notion of performative gender as artifice (Bernthal 129–134). In "The Double Clue," Hastings describes her as "a whirlwind in human form [which] invaded our privacy, bringing with her a swirl of sables … and a hat rampant with slaughtered osprey" (Christie, *Poirot's Early Cases* 65). She is "a disturbing personality" (65), with a taste worthy of a drag queen, as evidenced by her "marvellous negligée of barbaric design" (67). Poirot's fascination stems from her clever and dangerous nature (she is an accomplished thief), and not from any overt sexual attraction. In spite of this, the ITV adaptation of "The Double Clue" plays up the relationship between Poirot and Rossakoff, who is refined and subdued here, and when the couple separate at the end of the episode, the viewer is invited to consider Rossakoff as "the one who got away." Interestingly enough, even though Poirot is thus placed within a heteronormative context, he is still not entirely sexual: while saying goodbye, Rossakoff kisses him, but instead of a passionate lip lock, he is only given a peck on the forehead. Thus, even with all the attempts to straighten him, Poirot still manages only to appear as a straight-passing asexual.

The latest in the long line of cinematic Poirots is Kenneth Branagh, who also assumes the mantle of director in his adaptations (*Murder on the Orient Express*, 2017; *Death on the Nile*, 2022; *A Haunting in Venice*, 2023). Branagh's Poirot is noticeably less Other: he is still eccentric, but the quirks are toned down and even played for sympathy; moreover, he is also more conventionally attractive than any other portrayal. Branagh interferes in Poirot's past quite heavily, giving him an unoriginal back story (he is no longer a former Belgian police detective turned refugee, but a World War I trench veteran who only ever wanted to be a farmer and ended up a detective by chance) and inventing a tragic

loss of love in the character of Katherine, Poirot's fiancée who died in a train crash. Even Poirot's mustache is given a tragic past: it is no longer simply a sign of his dandyism and vanity; now it is there to conceal shrapnel scars. In short, Branagh's version of Poirot is not an outsider by nature, but by circumstance, which changes the entire conception of the character. In Branagh's *Death on the Nile*, Poirot is conventionally heterosexual, and, if the flashback with Katherine was not enough to prove it, he is even given another love interest in Salome Otterbourne, who is no longer a drunken has-been writer constantly talking about sex, but a tough jazz singer who overcame racial prejudice (this version of the character is African-American) in order to become successful. At the end of the movie, Poirot, his mustache now shaved, enters the club where Otterbourne (the character is spared in this adaptation) practices her performance; the implication is that Poirot and Otterbourne are either already in a relationship, or about to enter one, leading the viewer to conclude that Branagh's Poirot is Poirot in name only. In *A Haunting in Venice*, a loose adaptation of *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), all subtextual signs of Poirot's queerness have been eradicated, and, despite the gothic atmosphere of the movie, the traditional relationship between the Gothic and the queer is left unexplored. In *Hallowe'en Party*, Poirot is entranced by Michael Garfield and his great beauty from the moment he sees him, and he keeps returning to it:

> There was no doubt that Michael Garfield was a very beautiful young man. He found it difficult to know whether he himself liked Michael Garfield or not. It is always difficult to know if you like anyone beautiful. You like beauty to look at, at the same time you dislike beauty almost on principle. Women could be beautiful, but Hercule Poirot was not at all sure that he liked beauty in men. (Christie, *Hallowe'en Party* 308)

The last sentence in particular could be linked with suppression of homosexual desire in Poirot, which could then shed light on his seeming asexuality as a defense mechanism against internalized homophobia. Poirot's relationship with Garfield in the book is one of fascination, and a scene in which Garfield admires Poirot's mustache (incidentally, the only part of himself that Poirot considers beautiful, as he explicitly states in the book) could be read as flirtation. As Garfield turns out to be the killer and commits suicide at the end, there is no need for Poirot to explore these confusing feelings, and he remains safely desexualized. The ITV adaptation of the novel greatly reduces Poirot's interactions with Garfield and does not have him explicitly admire his beauty, while *A Haunting in Venice* removes the character altogether

and entirely changes the killer. Interestingly enough, the ITV version pulls a lesbian relationship between two minor characters out of the novel's subtext, where it is only hinted at, and even easily dismissed as a joke, as one of the many implausible theories by two teenage boys. The subtext between Poirot and Garfield, on the other hand, is completely ignored. In this way, Poirot is once again, like in "The Double Clue," pushed back into the realms of sexual normativity, while the series remains superficially inclusive by queering two unimportant characters.

Conclusion

As we have seen, both Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot function as moral centers of their respective fictional universes, although their social position in those universes is more closely connected with the margins. Unlike Miss Marple, who is more explicitly marginalized as an elderly spinster who solves crimes by interfering in the investigations undertaken by real police officers, Poirot seemingly occupies a more central position, given that he is a famous and rich detective sought out by the police. Nevertheless, it is actually Poirot who is more obviously Othered, since his seemingly central position belies his actual excentricity, as he is an effeminate, neurodivergent foreigner who is not really a part of the homosocial group, but an outsider only occasionally allowed in. Miss Marple's true transgressivity, on the other hand, manages to remain hidden. As a woman, she is already marginalized, and she uses this underprivileged position to her advantage.

Christie utilizes her two sleuths to challenge normative ideas of gender, authority, sexuality, and morality; however, taking into account the social and literary context in which she creates, these challenges mostly remain on the level of subtext. For reasons of focus and space, we confined our research to a few representative texts and their adaptations, but hopefully, they served as an illustration enough of the complicated relationship between the center and the margin, the dominant and the Other. The books cleverly show Marple and Poirot's balancing act between the socially acceptable surface and their inner Otherness, all the while keeping it clear that they are the only ones who can serve as arbiters of morality and truth. When it comes to adaptations, the two sleuths' Otherness seems to be perceived as threatening and is therefore neutralized, most often through their forceful heterosexualization. As disheartening as this may seem, it only serves to prove our point: Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot do their best work while sleuthing from the margins.

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Zasledovanje z obrobja: Marple in Poirot Agathe Christie kot zasledujoči Drugi

Ključne besede: angleška književnost / detektivski roman / Christie, Agatha / Miss Marple / Hercule Poirot / marginalizacija / drugi

Kljub svojemu osrednjemu mestu v kanonu detektivske literature zasedata najslavnejša junaka Agathe Christie, gospodična Marple in Hercule Poirot, v svojih fikcijskih svetovih »izsredni« položaj. Oba detektivska lika je mogoče razmeti kot marginalizirana Druga, ki predstavljata izziv za normativne predpostavke družbe, v kateri živita. Pri gospodični Marple gre zlasti za marginalizacijo na podlagi spola, njenega amaterskega detektivskega dela in zakonskega stanu, medtem ko Poirota kot Drugega implicirajo njegova tujost, ženstvenost in nevrološka atipičnost. Oba lika je mogoče pojasniti tudi v okvirih aseksualnosti in ju analizirati kot na videz heteronormativni kvir osebi. Članek razkriva, kako Christie uporablja status detektiva kot Drugega, da bi previdno izzvala prevladujoče ideje o avtoriteti, spolnosti, spolu in morali svojega časa. Z namenom raziskati besedilne in podbesedilne primere marginalizacije ter različne poskuse, da bi Drugi ostal v mejah normativne identitete, se analiza osredotoča predvsem na dela *Umor v župnišču*, *Skrivnostna smrt v Stylesu*, »Dvojna sled« in *Zabava za noč čarovnic*, pa tudi na njihove filmske in televizijske priredbe.

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