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Rolls, Alistair & Gulddal, Jesper. "Reappropriating Agatha Christie: an introduction"
Published in Clues, Vol. 34, Issue 1, Pages 5-10, (2016)

Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1326200>

REAPPROPRIATING AGATHA CHRISTIE

ALISTAIR ROLLS AND JESPER GULLDAL, UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

Agatha Christie is, in various ways and according to what we take these two words to mean, a victim of her own success. In death, she has certainly become larger than life, to the point that continuous reassessment of her life is forever working against the critical renewal of her works. The International Agatha Christie Festival, which was held in Torquay in September 2015 in celebration of the 125th anniversary of the author's birth, is a case in point. Advertising this event, Claire Cohen, Deputy Women's Editor at *The Telegraph*, writes as follows of Christie's latest new look: "Imagine crime writer Agatha Christie and you probably think of Miss Marple—her grey-haired heroine. But a new movement is underway to rewrite the world's bestselling female author as a 'bit of a goer.'"¹ Nothing irreverent is intended here; and indeed, there is much of interest in Christie's life. It should be noted, however, that Merja Makinen, whose investigation of femininity in Christie's work is thoroughly sensitive to and informed by feminist debate, takes great care to avoid terms such as proto-feminist. And yet, sound bites like "feminist icon" are deemed suitable grist to the mill that is the rereading Christie machine. Questions of sexuality, for the purposes of the present reappropriation project, are, however, of interest only insofar as they entail, and derive from, Christie's textuality.² Agatha Christie here, then, means, first and foremost, text.

Given this focus on Christie as text, it seems appropriate to start at the end – in this case, by picking up a theme evinced in the review of Sophie Hannah's *The Monogram Murders* included at the end of this volume. As noted in that review, Hannah's novel fits into an emerging genre, or perhaps a sub-genre of detective fiction, known as authorial regeneration (other famous recent examples include Anthony Horowitz's new Sherlock Holmes stories and his forthcoming James Bond novel³). This trend works, if the pun may be excused, against the death of the author, and in Hannah's case also against the death of the detective, for whereas Holmes famously died and was then brought back to life (a fact on which Horowitz builds in both his Holmes novels), Poirot was killed by his author, whose initial intentions were to hold this fact back from her public until her death, thereby effectively forcing the careers of author and protagonist to coincide exactly (an aim that she, too, almost achieved: *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* was ultimately published in 1975, just before Christie's own demise the following year). Ultimately, the fact that Christie went on to outlive Poirot has done little to change this parallelism. Indeed, their posthumous careers display an equal overlap: online reviews of Agatha Christie – and the Internet is currently awash with these (as we write these lines it is 125 years since Christie's birth in 1890; this issue, for its part will be published in 2016, 40 years after her death) – are seemingly always accompanied by photographs of David Suchet, praise for whose depictions of Poirot for UK television focuses on their fidelity to the text and the way that the actor has, to all intents and purposes, *become* his character (in a way that Peter Ustinov and Albert Finney markedly did

¹ Claire Cohen, "Surfing, Single Motherhood and Sexual Betrayal: Agatha Christie Should Be a Feminist Icon", *The Telegraph*, 14 June 2015: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11672325/Agatha-Christie-Feminist-icon-surfer-and-single-mother.html?fb_ref=Default (accessed 19 August 2015).

² For an excellent account of the interconnectedness of these terms, see Judith Still and Michael Worton (eds), *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

³ Anthony Horowitz, *The House of Silk* and *Moriarty* (London: Orion Books, 2011 and 2014, respectively), and *Trigger Mortis* (London: Orion, forthcoming 2015).

not). Suchet is now taken unquestioningly for Hercule Poirot; but, of course, Poirot is also Agatha Christie. Sophie Hannah's novel, as a work of authorial regeneration, is a fitting *mise en abyme* of this scenario: it bears her name (as author) but also that of Agatha Christie, and that of Hercule Poirot. And, of course, photographs accompanying online reviews of *The Monogram Murders* show David Suchet, playing Poirot and adapting Christie, and thus, presumably, standing in for that other adapter that is the author of the work of authorial regeneration.⁴

There appears, at first glance, to be a deal of openness, or open-endedness in all this adaptation and regeneration, which one might think would appeal to critics like Pierre Bayard. Indeed, Bayard's self-styled "detective criticism" hinges precisely on a re-opening of the detective fiction text, which is itself predicated on a fundamental absence of closure; as he writes, "[t]hat apparent barrier against delirium, textual closure – the notion that a text includes only a limited number of readings – is a material closure, but not necessarily a subjective closure."⁵ In short, Bayard refuses to read Christie's novels, including, most famously, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, as though faced with a *fait accompli*; instead, for Bayard, all is still in play, and the crime is still there to be solved.⁶ By refusing to kneel before Poirot's great final revelation, he forces the detective fiction text to become, finally, the great exemplar of the hermeneutic challenge that it has always promised to be, which is to say, a genuine hunting ground for clues and truths. In the absence of such an approach, which in hindsight, of course, appears only as innovative as it is logical, detective fiction is denied its full potential as text by dint of its own endings. To use Roland Barthes's terms, it promises to model the writerly text, with its suggestion of a parallel between reader and detective, yet gradually morphs into the very essence of the transparently meaningful readerly text, whose clues, in the final analysis, coincide exactly with the given solution. Ultimately, as it were, the end explains the means and justifies our reading, whether it was active and engaged or leisurely and digestive.

While Bayard has led the way in the revitalization of detective fiction with his refusal of the solution-conclusion, he is not the only critic to bemoan the dominance of ending-focused readings in Christie scholarship. Gill Plain, for example, exhorts an analysis driven by the *beginnings* of Christie's texts, one promoting production over resolution: "[T]he genre's transgressive 'potential' is not to be found in its conclusions: rather, it finds expression in the writing *before* the ending – in the body of the text – which demands that we return anew to these deceptively familiar fictions".⁷ One might recall here a similar dynamics at play in Jean-Paul Sartre's famous attempt to existentialize the abstract entity that is the novel (which, for Sartre, was construed as something ineluctably propelled towards a single pre-defined conclusion) by forcing the protagonist of *Nausea* to recount events in real time, as if (but only, of course, *as if*) lived.⁸ Makinen also voices such concerns, adding that the

⁴ See Laura Thompson's review at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/09/monogram-murders-sophie-hannah-hercule-poirot-agatha-christie-novel-review> (accessed 4 August 2015), which accuses the novel of being "oddly lifeless", unlike Suchet's life-giving performances, an image of which accompanies Thompson's preference for Christie's (for whom Suchet is given as one and the same) "vitality."

⁵ Pierre Bayard, *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of 'The Hound of The Baskervilles'*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York; Berlin; London: Bloomsbury, 2008 [2009]), p. 64.

⁶ See Pierre Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery*, trans. Carol Cosman (New York: The New Press, 2001).

⁷ Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 6.

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938). Understandably, Sartre's attempt to counter the defining power of the ending was to produce a highly developed and markedly perverse beginning. For a reading of Sartre's focus on this beginning, see Alistair Rolls and Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan, "Postface: Paratextuality, Self-Alterity and the Becoming-Text", in Alistair Rolls and Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan (eds), *Masking*

result of “concentrat[ing] analysis on the ending rather than the process of the novel as a whole” enables a “fetishisation of the detective to the detriment of all other characterisations” – and this, too, from a scholar for whom fetishization is far from being in itself a dirty word.⁹ One can only imagine the reactions of scholars such as these to the image of David Suchet advertising, and metonymically signifying, the development of a new mathematical formula for “work[ing] out the perennial question [of] whodunnit”.¹⁰ Occasioned again by the author’s 125th birthday, and constituting, one would think, a rather poisoned anniversary present, a panel of UK scholars has applied computational methods to Christie’s novels in an attempt to crack the Christie code and thereby re-prove Poirot’s truth. The result is an unbeatably pithy instance of literary criticism – “ $k r, \delta, \theta, c = f\{rk + \delta + \theta P, M, c(3 \leq 4.5)\}$ ” – that appears to take literally, and lend mathematical weight to, the long-standing critical prejudice that detective fiction is “formulaic” in nature. This conclusion conveniently releases readers from the effort, not just of engaging with Christie as *text*, but of reading the novels at all. A review of this new mathematical formula in *The Sydney Morning Herald* dubs the question of how Christie came up with her plots and their solutions “the greatest mystery in fiction”.¹¹ Interestingly, this review bucks the Suchet trend, favouring a photograph of Geraldine McKewan as Miss Marple, in which her head leans slightly to the right; just beneath this image is a photograph of Christie herself, in which the author’s head is leaning on an identical angle. The parallel is clear, but while Marple, although rejuvenated by McKewan’s sprightly performances (it is true, too, that Marple did not age over the course of the novels in which she featured, quite the reverse if anything), is portrayed as a mature woman in full, glaring colour, the black and white photograph shows Christie as a young woman. There is a distinct tension here between a keen and renewed interest in Agatha Christie as a biographical person and a sense that her novels are somehow critically uninteresting, their mysteries having been definitely solved. As the article concludes, “[t]he research was commissioned by [UKTV-owned television channel] Drama to celebrate its *Agatha Christie Hour*. The channel is screening 10 of her most famous stories between August 3 and 14 to mark the 125th anniversary of her birth.” Furthermore, the title “Agatha Christie Hour” crystallizes this paradox, celebrating renewal and simultaneously tightening the constricting bonds of the solution, condensing it into just sixty minutes. There appears little elbow room here for Bayard’s brand of detective criticism.

And yet, mathematics can also be used to unleash a text’s potential for multiple meaning. We might think of the Oulipo school, the French-based think-tank for “potential literature”, whose authors have included Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau and Italo Calvino. Oulipian writers take as their point of departure a set of extremely rigid formal constraints, often in the form of mathematical formulae, within which their literature is moulded but also, crucially, from which text explodes. For, while the formulae are set by the authors (who thus, nominally, control the text), the texts grow exponentially, to the point that control ultimately become synonymous with its own loss. In this light, it is of little surprise that these authors would also be interested in such conceits as the locked-room mystery,

Strategies: Unwrapping the French Paratext (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011; *Modern French Identities*, vol. 92), pp. 159-85 (especially pp. 171-79).

⁹ Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Makinen is also the author, with Lorraine Gamman, of *Female Fetishism* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Haroon Siddique, “How to Spot Whodunnit: Academics Crack Agatha Christie’s Code”, *The Guardian*, 3 August 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/02/academics-unlock-formula-agatha-christies-mysteries> (accessed 3 August 2015).

¹¹ P. A., “Researchers find a formula for how to spot whodunit in Agatha Christie’s books”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/researchers-find-a-formula-for-how-to-spot-whodunit-in-agatha-christies-books-20150804-giqrmz.html> (accessed 12 August 2015).

whose very hermeneutics of the hermetically sealed is none other than an expression of self-alterity, the sign that the room was necessarily breached or, alternatively, never occupied.¹² This confrontation of two interfaces of mathematics and literature – one decidedly reductive, the other disseminative – serves to remind us of how detective fiction is located in a field of binaries: structure vs innovation, stability vs mobility, the one final solution vs the many possibilities of the beginning. These binaries suggest that this genre, and perhaps Christie's contributions to it in particular, is less settled than is commonly assumed, and that there is a need for a rereading of Christie that does justice to the often unacknowledged complexity of her writing. As Susan Suleiman notes (1999, 129), rereading is a playful act, one designed to "save" the text, to read its difference – to read it different, we might say – not to discover deeper or true meaning. In this re-readerly act, we readers too are saved, from repetition, from the typecasting of self-coincidence. The processes at play in the adaptations of Christie's work that are so fashionable now, and for which David Suchet is now the ubiquitous public face, are differently, less fundamentally ludic; despite their variations on an original theme and their various takes on the theme of originality, they typically serve to repeat, to reproduce what is already if not known then at least anticipated. They are, to return to our point of departure, ending-focused; they reinforce the death that coincides with the author's relinquishment of the creative act that is usually synonymous with the publication of the (complete) work. To be truly creative an adaptation requires a distance from the original text that can perhaps best be termed critical.

This is the critical distance of Bayard's detective criticism. For Stephen Knight, Bayard's irreverent reading of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is "sensational", even "puzzling".¹³ Yet, Knight's own critical mission, namely "to pay attention to the voices of the texts themselves" (2015, 4), while ostensibly and wilfully more conservative in its focus on a more conventional type of meaning, is nonetheless a rereading, in this case a salvaging of *original* textual vitality from a canon of scholarship obsessively focused on who- and how-dunit, and thus on works and their endings. Thus, genuine critical engagement with Christie – reappropriative criticism, we might say – depends both in its radical and non-radical forms on rereading as a renewed attention to the literary text itself.

What does it mean, then, to "reappropriate Agatha Christie"? In the first instance, negatively, it means to look beyond the heteronomous agendas that surround her as a writer and effectively serve as so many ways of avoid direct critical engagement with the novels as literary texts. The biographical interest, which has gathered strength in the wake of the author's anniversaries of birth and death in 2015 and 2016, clearly raises Christie's public profile, but at the expense of the detective stories themselves. The Christie industry – heirs, publishers, television networks – similarly have a vested interest in promoting and protecting a certain perception of the author and her works, which rarely involves challenging established orthodoxies. The fan mentality that surrounds the author does, of course, involve extensive reading of Christie's works, yet this approach ultimately hinges on encyclopaedic accumulation of facts rather than critical rereading. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the present context, the scholarly literature on Christie, like that on detective fiction in general, has often taken the form of the historical overview (Knight 3), and while the genre is

¹² For a description of the way in which Oulipian writers have engaged with crime fiction, see Lucy O'Meara, "Georges Perec and Anne Gorréa: Oulipo, Constraint and Crime Fiction", *Nottingham French Studies*, 53.1 (2014), 35-48.

¹³ Stephen Knight, *Secrets of Crime Fiction Classics: Detecting the Delights of 21 Enduring Stories* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015), p. 105.

no longer simply dismissed as a product of mass culture, there is still a lingering sense that this is somehow uncomplicated literature with no need for detailed critical analysis and interpretation. This reductionist notion is perhaps epitomised by the recent attempt to reduce her writings to a set of mathematical formulae.

The antidote, and the means of reappropriation, is *rereading* – in the sense of reading anew, setting aside, as far as possible, critical preconceptions and established genre norms, but also in the sense of supplementing consumptive reading practices with detailed textual analysis. In an area of literary studies where “distant reading” was always the default option, close reading is arguably an experimental approach with the capacity for teasing out the genuinely experimental and decidedly non-patterned aspects of Christie’s writings. Redirecting attention towards the detective text itself is a means of resisting the textual authority of this genre, whether embodied in the detective protagonist, in the ending as the point of complete interpretative transparency, or in the formula as a prescriptive rule-set for reading as well as writing. More generally, rereading has the potential to overturn a critical tradition of seeing Christie’s novels as inherently *stable*: simple, formulaic, lacking in literary sophistication. Close analysis belies this notion of stability. If Christie was in fact “a bit of a goer”, it is in a literary sense of a writer given to textual perversity, flaunting conventions as often as respecting them, and tirelessly reworking detective fiction as a genre on the move.