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**Female Authors and their Male Detectives:**

The ideological contest in female-authored crime fiction

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

at Massey University, Palmerston North,

New Zealand

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2008

## Abstract

In the nineteen-eighties a host of female detectives appeared in crime fiction authored by women. Ostensibly these detectives challenged hegemonic norms, but the consensus of opinion was that their appropriation of male values and adherence to conventional generic closures colluded with a gender system of male privilege. Academic interest in the work of female authors featuring male detectives was limited. Yet it can be argued that these texts could have the potential to disrupt the hegemonic order through the introduction, whether deliberately, or inadvertently, of a female counterpoint to the hegemony.

The hypothesis I am advancing claims that the reconfiguration of male detectives in works authored by women avoids the visible contradictions of gender and genre that are characteristic of works featuring female detectives. However, through their use of disruptive performatives, these works allow scope for challenging normal gender practices—without damage to the genre. This hypothesis is tested by applying the performative theories of Judith Butler to a close reading of selected crime novels. Influenced by the theories of Austin, Lacan and Althusser, Butler's concept of performativity claims that hegemonic notions of gender are a fiction. This discussion also uses Wayne Booth's concept of the implied author as a means of distinguishing the performative agency of the text from that of the characters.

Agatha Christie, P.D. James, and Donna Leon, each with their male detective heroes, come from different generations. A Butlerian reading illustrates their potential for disrupting gender norms. Of the three, however, only Donna Leon avoids the return to hegemonic control that is a feature of the genre. Christie's women who have agency are inevitably eliminated, while conformist women are rewarded. James's lead female character is never fully at ease in her professional role. When thrust into a leadership she proves herself to be competent, but not ready or desirous of the senior position. Instead her role is to mediate the transition of her junior, a male, to that position. Donna Leon is different. The moral and emotional content of her narratives suggests an implied author committed to ideological change. Her characters simultaneously

renounce and collude with illusions of patriarchal authority, and could lay claim to be models for Butler's notion of performative resistance.

## **Acknowledgements**

Heartfelt thanks to Doreen D’Cruz my supervisor throughout this project. She was unfailingly helpful and constructive; her encouragement and quick response to my many queries was distance learning at its best. If every supervisor is as good as her, we extramural students enjoy a privileged position.

To my wife Anne who took up the slack while I pursued my obsession.

Thanks also to my daughter Sarah, whose enthusiasm for my endeavour and help with the complexities of computer formatting was both practical and morale boosting.

Thanks, too, to my daughter Catherine, who in the midst of her very busy schedule found time to proof read my efforts.

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## Abbreviations

BFS *Blood from a Stone*

BTM *Bodies that Matter*

DE *Doctored Evidence*

GT *Gender Trouble*

WB *Wilful Behaviour*

## Chapter 1

### Female-authored Crime and Performativity

It is the author who creates the crime  
And picks the victim, this blonde dark girl sprawled  
Across a bed, stabbed, strangled, poisoned, bashed  
With a blunt instrument.

Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder*

Detective fiction is popular. Hit the search button on Google and within a fraction of a second it will come up with thirty-four million sites. Romance is not far behind, but the crime story is unquestionably predominant. From libraries to airport bookshops, the genre consistently takes up the most shelf space, and its story lines are on television night after night. Centred on a crime, usually murder and the exposure of the murderer with the meting out of appropriate justice, the genre is formulaic. Yet within this tight formula, there is a great deal of flexibility as authors strive to introduce freshness and maintain entertainment value. The hardboiled detective of yesteryear, gun in hand and girl on arm, has been replaced by the white-coated forensic scientist who in her turn will be replaced by a new protagonist fashioned to keep sales rolling. There have been tough detectives, criminal detectives, housewife detectives, even blind and paraplegic detectives. Increasingly there has been a new breed of female detectives. Tough and independent, they include ex-lingerie buyers, elected sheriffs, and a range of lesbian cops and private eyes who bludgeon, shoot or sleep their way to success. Their encroachment into the masculine domain contests hegemonic norms. They have aroused also a hitherto dormant interest in the genre from academics and feminists, who had previously ignored the more established male detectives authored by women. The female author's implied relationship to authority, including the authority of writing as well as the authority invested in detection, provides fruitful avenues for considering the mutation of gender roles. Indeed, it is arguable that the intersections between the implied author's gender affiliation and the construction of the personae of the detectives could themselves indicate forms of resistance to, or endorsement of, patriarchal dominance. Of special interest is the implied authorial role assumed by the female authors with respect to the authority invested in male detectives.



Generally speaking, the female detective has spearheaded the challenge to regulatory norms. Her interrogation of established power structures is more overt than that of the male detective. Females such as V I Warshawski or Joanna Brady are often violent as they go about their business of solving a wide range of murders, rapes, and assorted killings, underwritten by easily recognised subtexts that frequently highlight feminist issues: abortion, reproduction, sexual harassment, and domestic responsibilities. Resistance to the patriarchal hegemony from male detectives such as Adam Dalgliesh and Hercule Poirot is less obvious. They rarely deal with offences other than murder, nor is there any overt feminism, but often there is an underlying social commentary on women's position within society. The female detectives, in contrast, are likely to offer a mix of crime, feminism, comedy and romance that flirts with the rules of the genre. Underwritten by some strains of feminist thinking, these characters inhabit stereotypical male positions that destabilise the masculinised format, and create tension between genre and gender.

Critics such as Sally Munt and Kathleen Klein agree, yet they also claim that the formulaic nature of the genre validates the pre-existing structures of power and that the appropriation of male values by female characters changes nothing (Munt 58; Klein 202). Too often, this creates a macho feminism that takes on the aggressive qualities of the male. Overlaying this with a sprinkling of feminist concerns does not disguise the fact that these female detectives implicitly work to support the prevailing hegemony. There is no attempt to analyse, understand or subvert the myth-making processes that collude to privilege the masculine. Hell-bent on beating men at their own game, they offer a conventional ideology of the same, rather than one of difference.

The same tension between gender and genre is not immediately apparent in crime or detective fiction where the author is female and her detective protagonist is male. This may be due to the implicit assumption that none of these authors present themselves as having an openly feminist agenda. Indeed, they may disingenuously project the singular aim of providing entertainment for their readers. Yet, as Wayne Booth argues in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, there are always two authors in any writing. One is

the implied author who constructs his or her story to suit both genre and prospective audience. The other is the flesh and blood writer of the tale. He writes,

Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a complete artistic whole; the chief value to which *this* implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form. (73-74)

The implied author is the presence that the reader envisages as the creator of the book. However, this does not necessarily equate with the actual author who may have written other books with different implied authors. Booth gives the example of Shakespeare whose plays range from light comedy to the highest tragedy, each of which presents the reader with a different implied author. We cannot tell from his plays whether Shakespeare the man “preferred blondes to brunettes or whether he disliked bastards, Jews or Moors”, but he cannot consistently suppress deeply held personal values: “[He] is not recognizably subjective [but] they are unmistakable violations of true neutrality ... and he does not conceal his judgment on the selfish, the foolish and the cruel” (76).

Booth goes even further, and claims in *The Company We Keep* that authors often take on the qualities of their protagonists: “We have a great deal of evidence, from Laurence Sterne to Norman Mailer, that artists often imitate the roles they create” (128). If we accept Booth’s postulation of a link between the actual author and his or her characters, it may be expected that a challenge to gender boundaries may be among a range of issues that will eventually find their way into the text. Female authors who have male detectives in their fiction project the sense of male authorship, and even imitate their protagonists, but they, like Shakespeare, cannot conceal deep personal values. Less obvious are their positions on issues of gender, but if values and beliefs cannot be suppressed, it is unlikely that something as important as their affiliations on gender issues can remain hidden. These may manifest themselves in the form of the fragmented libidinal voices posited by Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not*

*One* (103-4), and by Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman* (264-70), probably as a female perspective, which subtly repositions gender roles. This presumes that within the text there is some space that either deliberately or unconsciously reveals, through either omission or inclusion, a female worldview that, in spite of itself, colours the narrative. It does not disturb the rules of the genre but modifies gender norms without introducing the disjunctions to generic norms created by female detectives.

The question becomes how and in what way are the performative imperatives of gender and genre modified in female-authored crime fiction that features male detective heroes? The hypothesis is that the subtle reconfiguration of male detectives in crime fiction authored by women avoids the problematic contradictions of gender and genre that prevail in the case of female detection, and manifests itself through performative contradictions that challenge the collective normative practices relating to gender without violence to the genre. A close reading of selected novels by Agatha Christie, P D James and Donna Leon, informed by the performative theories of Judith Butler, will test this hypothesis. It will examine how, and in what way, contradictory performatives disrupt the representations of authority, which, empowered by endless repetition and citationality, shape and position gender within the symbolic.

Butler's concept of performativity aims at exposing the hegemonic notions of gender as fiction. In *Gender Trouble* she claims gender is "not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts" and it is "impossible to sort out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (4-5). Further she claims that the binary relationship between culture and nature produces a hierarchy "in which culture 'imposes' meaning on nature" so that culture itself comes to be considered natural (50). She posits that language and social rituals supported by institutional power create gender as a social performance. Retroactively this performance becomes the originating material that is self-validating. Everywhere, names, phrases, myths, bits of history, gestures of despair or desire become cultural memories that resonate to shape gender. A close reading of selected authors will illustrate how these myths, names, and gestures function as

instruments of phallogocentric power, and the potential that exists for reversing those same myths and performative acts to confuse hegemonic expectations.

### **The Male Detectives**

To avoid fitting the authors to the hypothesis, I asked the local librarian to give me the names of three female crime writers with male heroes who were popular, and came from different generations. She selected the following three: Agatha Christie, who was born in England in 1890, in the year US cavalry forces massacred two hundred Sioux at Wounded Bull, Kaiser Wilhelm fired Bismarck, and Queen Victoria's reign still had another ten years to run; P D James who was born in 1920, the year when Jack Dempsey ruled the heavyweight championship, the Dutch refused to give up ex-Kaiser Wilhelm to the allies, and Oxford University allowed women to receive degrees; and Donna Leon, who was born twenty-two years later, in the same year British forces surrendered at Singapore, the Final Solution became official Nazi policy, and Walt Disney's "Bambi" opened in New York. The conservative leanings of Christie and James and the more liberal politics of Leon are clearly visible in their texts, but what they have in common, beyond their gender, and creation of male detective heroes, is the little remarked fact they all have lived through periods of great change in the status of women. Christie was a young woman when Emmeline Pankhurst's momentous struggle led to the women of Britain (or rather, those over 30 who were householders, wives of householders or landowners) getting the vote in 1918, and James and Leon write today at a time when feminism is a specific discourse.

Christie's Hercule Poirot, is, arguably, along with Sherlock Holmes, the most famous of all fictional detectives. Considered a highly successful well-paid hack for much of her career, there has been some reassessment of both her feminist and literary credentials in the last twenty years, but critics remain divided. Her concentration on plot and lack of character development hinder feminist evaluation. In *Death on the Nile*, the artificiality of the set-up requires one to proceed with a degree of caution in

considering gender norms. Poirot is no red-blooded male, nor is he necessarily the feminised figure critics claim. The female characters, though described in the gushing tones of a woman's magazine, are often daring risk takers. At times hard and remorseless, they remain unrepentant even when caught out, but in the end, the rules of the establishment win, and the world remains safe for the already comfortable middle-class passengers of the *Karnak*.

P D James's creation, Adam Dalgliesh, is the most conservative of the three, and conforms most closely to the traditional detective role. He respects the discipline and hierarchic nature of the police force he works for, and supports the values of church and state. This conservatism and James's personal ambivalence towards feminism reveal themselves in the fluctuating subject position of Detective Inspector Kate Miskin. In *The Lighthouse*, Dalgliesh falls ill and Miskin takes over as senior officer. Placed in charge of Detective Sergeant Francis Benton-Smith, who by virtue of his mixed heritage and Cambridge education can also be described as 'other', she struggles to come to grips with their professional relationship.

Donna Leon's Guido Brunetti is a decent man working in a corrupt society. With rare exceptions, all those around him are tainted. Venal city officials, members of parliament, priests, cardinals, landlords, and university lecturers, can all be bought, if not with money, at least with favours. Brunetti himself is clean, but is prepared to turn a blind eye when Signorina Elettra, his boss's secretary, uses her wide network of friends to gain illegal access to the computers of Italy's major corporations in the furtherance of his investigations. Unlike most detectives, Brunetti has a functioning family, wife, children, parents, in-laws, who are all part of his life. He prefers to be home each night for dinner and rings his wife Paola if he is going to be late.

Christie belongs to the 'cosy' puzzle tradition: a tradition with its own rules and conventions aimed at being fair to the reader. In *Bloody Murder*, Julian Symons cites the rule that the clues provided must allow the detective to reach rational and inevitable conclusions, without recourse to luck or coincidence (105). This sub-genre flourished during the period called the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction, a time

between the first and second world wars when detective fiction by women was dominant and Christie was at her peak. James shapes her tales within the parameters of the credible puzzle inherited from that age along with its elements of murder in an isolated setting among a comfortable middle-class group, but she has extended the formula to allow for more character development and moral ambiguity. In extending the formula, she has moved to a position straddling both the detective and the crime novel. Symons defines the difference: “The detective novel [is] based on deception, which may be mechanical (locked room), or verbal (misleading remarks) and the crime novel [is] based on the psychology of characters” (191). In the crime novel the setting is also important as it is “frequently an integral part of the crime itself”, and such novels are “often radical in the sense of questioning some aspect of law, justice or the way society is run” (193). Leon with her evocative images of Venice, social commentary and muddied closures sits firmly on the side of the crime novel.

### **The New Girls**

According to Symons, Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, published in 1841, marks the beginning of the detective story (30). Since then the genre in its various forms has enjoyed a great deal of popular success with both men and women. Until recently, it attracted little scholarly attention, in part, perhaps, because its very popularity disqualified it from consideration as serious literature. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, issues of representation and deconstruction dominated literary theory, and criticism began to concentrate on the specific mechanisms of generating cultural meaning and its underlying value systems. By the 1990’s, issues of power, gender, subjectivity and sexuality dominated the humanities. The rise of the female detective in the last three decades and a similar rise in specifically feminist appraisals drew on the academic interests of the day to question how far generic boundaries could be pushed, and still proclaim a subversive message. The genre is simple, formulaic and hard to tamper with. P. D. James in an interview with Robert McCrum in 2001 describes it as

A central mysterious death, a closed circle of suspects with motive, means and opportunity for the crime, a detective who comes in like an avenging deity to solve it, and by the end of the book offers a solution which the reader

should be able to arrive at by logical deduction from clues inserted in the novel with deceptive cunning but essential fairness. (2)

What James describes is the classic British detective story, but whether from the hard-boiled school of violent, hard-drinking tough guys, or the police procedural with its concentration on detail and process, the generic form remains the same, but with different emphases. From a feminist perspective, the problem, notwithstanding the fact that many of the most successful crime writers of the last seventy years have been women, is that the form serves to support the hegemony.

The writers employing female detectives of the last three decades have attempted to reverse that support and, at a superficial level, they have succeeded. A closer look suggests that although they have produced an array of interesting women, and made several cross-overs into other genres that have pushed the boundaries, all of their novels are posited on the assumption of a gender binary system. Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski and J. A. Jance's Joanna Brady, two of the better-known detectives, simply appropriate male values. Warshawski comes from the hardboiled school; she drinks and eats with the gusto of a man, prefers casual sex to commitment, and in *Indemnity* leaves two male opponents severely battered. She breaks several of their ribs and in a final indignity vomits over them. More masculine than feminine, she remains faithful to the rules of the genre. Brady starts her career by deliberately breaking a man's thumb, and follows that up by beating him in an election for sheriff. Warshawski was a feminist activist in her days at college and Brady is a wife and mother, but it is only by becoming quasi males that they are able to create female agency.

*Exit Wounds*, Brady's eleventh adventure, sees her complete the transformation. She is accepted by her male colleagues, works all the hours of the day, has a daughter who is constantly disappointed by her absence, a husband who runs the house, and her attitudes towards criminals have moved from do-gooder to grim avenger. This transformation reads either as her complete absorption into the masculine world or as a social critique on the problems of modern working women. What the reader gets is a move away from the crime genre towards the women's *Bildungsroman* structure.

Spurred on by some sort of loss, in Brady's case the murder of her deputy sheriff husband, she goes on a journey of self-discovery that admits her into the masculine world of law enforcement, while allowing some concessions to a woman-centred view of that world.

Janet Evanovich has pushed the boundaries of the genre further. One of her heroes, Alex Barnaby, revels in her masculine name, and skills. She can use an acetylene torch, rebuild a 'blown' engine, and if forced to can use a gun. The other, Stephanie Plum, wants to avoid the fate of her childhood friends: "There are certain expectations [...] You grow up, you get married, you have children, you spread out some in the beam, and you learn to set a buffet for forty" (*Eight* 40). Both these women are fun, not that competent, but always get their 'man'. They provide an uneven mix of humour and romance which flirts with the genre—some call it 'tart noir'—but remain firmly ensconced in the 'crime' section of the nation's libraries.

These four detectives exemplify the problems of the female in crime fiction. Kathleen Klein, in *The Woman Detective*, claims they are counter-productive. The formulaic, conservative nature of detective fiction validates the pre-existing structure of power and order. The idea of an independent strong intelligent detective working to support the existing social system means by definition the detective must be male: "Either feminism or the formula is at risk" (202). Too many of the female detectives have simply taken on a masculine position that produces strong tough women who only win the approval of their male colleagues by proving their 'masculinity.' They fail to advance any vision that links difference with equality.

In *Crime Fiction*, Stephen Knight claims that one of the key problems for many feminist writers resides in their adoption of the "hyper-masculine sub-genre of the private eye", and suggests that this is a strategic mistake. The police procedural may have been more accommodating, by nature of its more cooperative approach, than the protocols of the private eye which are deeply implicated with masculine norms. The violence of the action and language, and the male chauvinist traditions of description,



attitude and behaviour along with the acceptance of the patriarchal social order are at odds with twentieth-century feminism (163).

Susan Rowland, in *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, makes similar comments saying that most of the researchers come to the genre looking at it as a “space where gender strategies may be tested confronted and reconfigured” through the disruption of the ways in which femininity and masculinity are construed. However, most of them came to recognise that the genre has historically privileged masculine values. It assumes as culturally desirable qualities of reason, intelligence, objectivity, judgement, action and heroism associated with masculine subjectivity, and “[leaves] the feminine by structural definition, to signify irrationality, foolishness, subjective passivity and the need for masculine guidance” (16).

It appears the “resistance” to patriarchal norms offered by female detectives focuses on such a narrow band that ironically it finishes up colluding with the binary gender system that privileges male values. The appropriation of so-called male characteristics, being handy with a gun, or an inclination towards promiscuity is simplistic and takes no account of the mechanisms that give the hegemony its hold. Marty Knepper’s criteria for defining a feminist novel is an example of this simplistic approach. She claims that a “feminist writer” is one who portrays women as intelligent and capable of independent action as the norm rather than the exception. They should be central characters, as heroes, not just members of the “other sex”. They should not be there just as wives, mothers, sisters or daughters of men; they should reveal the economic, social, political and psychological problems women face as part of a patriarchal society, explore female consciousness and female perceptions of the world and avoid sexist stereotypes (qtd. in Klein R 32). She does not take into account the myriad of other regulatory powers that coalesce into the unitary truth that supports the patriarchal hegemony. The detective genre, acting as a social commentary, accepts most regulatory powers as natural and normal. By its nature, it is conservative; any changes in the community that it reflects are channelled so that the established institutions of state and society—the government, the social hierarchy, the church, the law, the press and universities— remain intact.

Sally Munt, author of *Murder by the Book*, claims that all that the female detectives do is reflect the changing roles of men and women in contemporary society especially in the middle classes. She argues their authors come from a liberal feminist perspective that provides equal opportunities for women yet they introduce no suggestion for any radical restructuring of society's fundamental structures. She further maintains that the feminism of the female detective will remain tokenistic until their authors display a deeper understanding of the processes that construct our subjectivity (58). Through legislation and social change, it is now possible to imagine a woman detective, but she operates in a masculine world that expects her to fit in. Any success she has remains dependent on her performing to male standards into which she has no input. In *Women and Social Transformation* Butler appears to agree about the transformation of gender roles. She writes, "We live in a time when gender roles have indeed changed, but only to the extent of an 'unfinished revolution'" (76).

### **Gender and Performativity**

Judith Butler's theories surrounding performativity and the construction of gender would appear to provide a way into the complexities of subject formation. Unless it relates to homosexual or, more particularly lesbian issues, her work is rarely used to analyse crime fiction. Munt writes a short paragraph, but goes no further, on Butler's notion of the term "lesbian" as a shifting sign, a sense of play, that acts to "destabilise the seriousness of heterosexuality" (143). Sally Plain, writing on Raymond Chandler, claims that Butler's hypothesis is appropriate to the world of Phillip Marlowe where both men and women occupy the full spectrum of gendered positions from delicate femininity to brutal masculinity, but does not really go on from there except for some minor mention relating to lesbian detectives (71). It is the examination of performativity rather than its extension into Queer Theory that concerns me here.

Butler draws on many influences, including Austin's speech act theory, which posits the notion that language itself may be a form of action, and Foucault's idea that discourse is a determinant of gender within the context of a power relationship operating in the service of social regulation and control. Also pertinent for this

discussion are Kristeva's work on abjection, Althusser's on interpellation, plus the theories of Irigaray and Cixous, who posit a female voice, not recognised by male-dominated patterns, but which comes out of female morphology, and women's history.

Theories of performativity claim that our social reality and its gender distinctions are neither natural nor a given but continually created illusions built around language. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler argues that, "Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance..." (45). She also moves beyond the view that gender is the cultural expression of the sexed body. In *Gender Trouble* she suggests, "this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender itself" (9). By endlessly citing the conventions and ideologies of our social world, we perform that reality, so that over time it materialises not just to create the boundaries of gender we have come to see as natural or normal but also to become part of the body itself. Built on all manner of social rituals and institutional power, they will retroactively become the originating source. Butler, however, has constantly claimed that those practices, which construct and constitute the gendered subject, also provide the possibility for agency and reversal. In *Gender Trouble*, she makes it clear she is not interested in making judgements that distinguish the subversive from the unsubversive. Out of context such judgements are neither valid nor enduring. Just as "metaphors lose their metaphoricity, so subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés", more so through their repetition within a commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value: "The effort to name the criteria for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to" (xxiii). Butler has no utopian view of the future. What she wants to do is bring about a general acceptance that gender identification and its associated behaviour are politically regulated, but offers no concrete proposals to bring it about.

At the base of Butler's theory is the notion that language has the power to act, that it is not just a system of representation, but may itself be a form of action. In the nineteen-fifties, the philosopher J L Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* argued that certain verbs are capable of performing their own meaning, and it is now

accepted that certain utterances are performative—they have the power to perform their own actions. Butler considers that this ability to act or materialise is the key factor in the constitution of gender and identity. She believes our everyday speech creates our reality. Austin's engagement with language came from his position as a professor of moral philosophy. He challenged the convention that only speech utterances that could be verified as true or false (constatives) were of any value to philosophical thought. In *How to Do Things with Words* he argues for the existence of a category of performative verbs that are neither true nor false, but can act through reference to themselves. These he describes as performatives. He gives examples of promises, threats, and apologies as utterances that perform their own meaning. At first, he saw constatives and performatives as two distinct categories and considered performatives only in their explicit form. To illustrate his point he used examples such as “You are fired”, “I name this ship,” “I apologise” (236). “You are sentenced to...” or “You are free to go,” are other examples, but such utterances only become performatives under specific conditions. “You are sentenced to...” has no performative power unless uttered by a judge. The performative power of a judge's word is reinforced by the trappings that surround him: a courtroom with protocols, which emanate from the whole apparatus of the state, acts to validate his decisions. Once outside of his courtroom he reverts to the role of ordinary citizen, marking a clear distinction between personal and constitutional power. From this, Austin came to realise that constatives can also work like performatives depending on circumstance and context. He further refined his argument to claim that performative utterances, whether felicitous or not, operate only in the normal world, not in the ‘make-believe’ world of literature or the theatre. He excluded plays, poetry and novels, on the basis that they were entertainments: “Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in a way parasitic upon its normal use” (21).

In *Speech Acts in Literature*, J. Hillis Miller both appropriates and transforms Austin's theory to argue that felicitous speech acts do exist within literature along with the performative dimension of the work as a whole (1). Warwick Slinn adds that speech acts, whether written or spoken, are social acts that by their nature are political, and in most cases imply a power relationship between speaker and listener,

author and reader (2). If this is accepted, the crime novel may be seen to be implicated in performative utterance through the gender performativity of the detective, the ideology of the implied author, and the work taken as a whole. The very writing of a gendered role is a political act that reinforces hegemonic norms. Miller writes that Austin's work

indirectly assert[s] and reinforce[s] a powerful set of presumptions: the ideal of the male on top in full possession of his "I," speaking from a position of authority in the right circumstances, with the conventions and the law all already firmly in place, and then women, animals, poets, "low types," actors and actresses, soliloquizers who mutter *sotto voce*, and so on, beneath the men of authority, firmly kept in place. (58)

Miller goes on to say that *How to Do Things with Words* is an attempt "to make politics, law, and ethics work but the attempt fails, because Austin's work read as a whole is itself a performative utterance more subversive of order than it is supportive of them" (59). [He] "speaks from a powerful tradition of apparently casual but actually severely rule-bound 'analytical' philosophical discourse, a tradition he reveres and cultivates even as he labours for his "revolution" (66).

While the judge's accoutrements of power are clearly visible, the power of language to shape gender is more obscure. Created through often unrecognised regulatory powers, gender formation operates constantly. A given name with a specifically designated gender such as Jemima or Matthew is a constant enforcer of gender norms, as is the pink nightdress or "ladies a plate". Hairstyles, footwear, use of language and appropriateness of emotional displays are all part of the regulatory power that controls gender.

The naming of a child at birth begins an on-going process of absorption into its subject place in society. According to Louis Althusser, this interpellation produces a being as subjects of, and to, an already existing ideology and necessarily limits both our autonomy and agency. The naming of a girl interpellates her into the ideology

surrounding “girlhood”. As Butler explains, it sets the limits of ‘girl’ behaviour so that over time it becomes a norm that is seen as natural:

[In] that naming the girl is “girled,” brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that “girling” of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalised effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (BTM 7-8)

The “girl” is given an appropriately feminine name; the colours she wears as a baby are preordained. The interpellation “girl” will decree that she cuts her hair in a certain way, does up her buttons on the left side, wears stockings and high heels, and would only be allowed to play three sets when she reaches the final at Wimbledon. These actions have no base in an ‘essential’ female identity; they are cultural fictions that have developed into signifiers of the female. Each time a woman dons a pair of stockings she is reinforcing that this is a female norm. Every year that the Wimbledon organising committee decrees that women play only three sets it reinforces the “norm” that women are the “weaker sex”.

“The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club” is thus part of the discursive networks described in Foucault’s *Power and Knowledge*, that serve to articulate social and cultural relations between power and knowledge (98). A committee in London has the power to prescribe the limits of female capability, and women who play in their tournament, in effect, accept their “truth”. The power of discourse is articulated through specific locations, such as a medical institution or a particular school of philosophical thought. This power does not have to sit within a formal framework. The word of the expert spreads further than the lawyer, doctor or scientist; it also sits in what Foucault calls “local centres of power-knowledge” (98) that include tradespeople, sports bodies and peer groups. These various bodies all lay claim to specialised forms of knowledge, and that knowledge becomes a form of power, which is mutually re-enforcing and generative. Each group fights for its own truth; as one group gains the ascendancy, its “truth” becomes accepted by the “mainstream” and, for a time, is the norm. For a “truth” to be accepted as the norm it must have a

history. Butler wants to avoid any misreading of performativity as wilful and arbitrary. For discourse to materialise, it needs to be understood as proceeding from a complex and divergent chain of knowledge holders and their associated power structures, which, by continuous citation or repetition, come to be accepted as natural. In *Bodies that Matter* she claims: “The ‘act’ by which a name authorizes or deauthorizes a set of social or sexual relations is, of necessity, *a repetition*”. Drawing on Derrida, she implies a performative cannot succeed “if its formulation [does] not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance... [that is] identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’” (226). No term, statement, or signifier can function performatively without the accumulation of historic citation:

This view of performativity implies that discourse has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and that this history effectively decentres the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said. (BTM 227)

However, normalisation also depends on exclusion. Similar to Austin’s illocutionary and perlocutionary<sup>1</sup> force of the performative, which distinguishes between the speaker’s intent and the listener’s interpretation, Butler’s performativity works through the normative forces of reiteration and exclusion. In *Feminine Contentions*, she claims that “in a sense the subject is constituted through an exclusion and differentiation, perhaps a repression that is subsequently concealed, covered over, by the effect of autonomy” (45-46). Exclusion is a way of defining and securing one’s own positive identity through the stigmatisation of an “other” through the “creation of a domain of deauthorised subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, [or] populations erased from view” (47). Whatever the markers of social differentiation that shape the meaning of “us” and “them”, whether they are gender-based, racial, geographic, ethnic, economic or ideological, they often become the basis for self-affirmation that depends on the denigration of another group.

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<sup>1</sup> The meaning of locution/perlocution follow: locution is the literal meaning, illocution is the intended meaning and perlocution is the listener’s interpretation of the literal statement .E.g. “It’s cold on here”. (locution); The intention of the speaker is to request the closing of the window (illocution). Listener gets up and closes the window (illocution). Equally listener could interpret “It’s cold” as a request for a jumper, a heater, or “Let’s go home”.

Popular fiction, whether crime, romance or western, is itself a link in the reiterative chain, working to reinforce patriarchal privilege and power. Kathleen Klein claims it as “an implement by which the ‘unsaid’ dogmas of culture are articulated and indoctrinated” (145). Collectively these works of fiction are performative acts, like the naming of a child or the prescribing of the length of a tennis match; over time they produce what they name and create conventions of reality that become natural and necessary. What is required for the hegemony of heteronormative standards to maintain power is our continued repetition of such gender acts in the most mundane of daily activities. Reading popular fiction for pleasure could become an act of unthinking complicity. The distinction between the personal and the political or between the private and the public is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo; what we consider as personal or autonomous acts are constantly scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies. In the politics of power and gender, the patriarchal hegemony depends on the creation of “other” and the abject to confirm and justify masculine privilege. Historically, within Western culture the self has been white, middle-class, male, and heterosexual. The process of objectifying those outside that group, whether they are women, illegal immigrants or homosexuals, deprives them of their own voices.

Women are “other” within a patriarchal society, but, according to Irigaray and Cixous, they have a distinct voice that goes unrecognised. It follows a different path to that of men. Women’s bodies and discourse are closely linked. Irigaray uses the imagery of “two lips” and Cixous of *jouissance* to support this claim. Irigaray claims “[the] distinguishing feature of women’s speech is one of contiguity” that needs to be listened to differently because it is multiple and outside of the ready-made grids of male listening (103). If that voice is present, unconsciously or otherwise, it may offer fragmentary, barely visible, contradictory performatives, identified, perhaps, through the implied author’s modification of gender iterations that disrupt the representations of authority that shape and position gender within the symbolic.



### Validating Patriarchal Power

Patriarchal power is always present, and crime fiction is one of its servants. It reiterates gender norms and validates patriarchal power structures. Poirot, Dalgliesh, and Brunetti cannot escape this. Consequently, even though we are looking for contradictory performatives, a great deal of their discourse acts to support normative gender behaviour. By first examining that discourse for the nuances, expectations and contexts that give meaning to our every day speech acts, we can see how regulatory power works before we move on to the contradictory performatives that are central to this hypothesis. History, myth, ideology, and countless random events provide the context of a convergence that creates and naturalises our understanding of gender.

There is universal agreement on what constitutes femininity in *Death on the Nile* when the new owner of Wode Hall arrives in the village. The locals of Malton-under-Wode, without even meeting her, know pretty much what to expect when

A big scarlet Rolls Royce stopped in front of the local post office. A girl jumped out, a girl without a hat and wearing a frock that looked (but only looked) simple. A girl with golden hair and straight autocratic features — a girl with a lovely shape — a girl as seldom seen in Malton-under-Wode. With a quick imperative step, she passed in to the post office.

In these short sentences, we learn a lot about Linnet Ridgeway. She is rich, attractive, has good taste, and although we do not know it yet, any experienced reader of the genre would not be wrong to think that she is destined to be the victim in *Death on the Nile* (9). The Rolls Royce, the dress that only looked simple, the autocratic features and the “imperative step”, all signify style, wealth, and confidence. Her “lovely shape” probably fits somewhere between the boyish flatness of the twenties and the curvaceous extravagances of the forties, and most importantly, as the author tells us several times, she is a girl. Within that word resides the Western world’s expectations of how she will act, think, and be positioned within the prevailing culture. The locals would also expect that at some stage she would become a wife and mother.

So used are we to the attributes that are attached to femaleness and maleness that we have come to consider them “natural” rather than a socially constructed reality. Within a broad band of normality and context, we expect men and women to act, or be, in a prescribed manner. We recognise certain styles of dress, speech, and gesture as being specifically masculine or feminine. Gender-particular names contribute to our identification as male or female. Kate, Rosalind, Pamela, Agatha, Emma, are attached only to women. Adam, Barry, Colin, are likewise dedicated male names. The description of “lovely shape” is contextually appropriate for a woman but not for a man. A dress is appropriate for a woman but not for a man. Raw-boned men, softly curved women, are distinctions that society has come to accept as signifiers of gender. Emotional women and rational men similarly are accepted as universal truths, as is the notion that women carry with them the burden of being daughters of Eve.

All women carry this burden and *Death on the Nile* witnesses its manifestations. Its origins rest within the confines of a Christian ideology that has dominated Western thought for two thousand years, and the mythic consequences of Eve’s eating the apple has shaped women’s lives ever since. They are held responsible for man’s eviction from Eden, so God punishes Eve and all women after her with the pain of childbirth and subjection to men (Genesis 3:16). Thundered from pulpits, and repeated interminably by folklore and film, the notion of woman as a dangerous temptress is woven into the fabric of a woman’s being, as is the guilt that flows from her failure to resist the blandishment of Satan. The foundation of Christianity’s guilt about sex, its insistence on female subjection and its dread of female seduction are a direct consequence of Eve’s fall from grace. Kristeva, in “About Chinese Women”, frames Judeo-Christian ideology within twentieth century feminism arguing that monotheistic religion is essentially a process founded on the scapegoating of women and denying them access to the ‘word’ (143). In the long reiterative chain that originates with Eve, the ‘otherness’ of women’s identity embraces notions of physical and moral inferiority that hold women responsible for men’s failings. It is this understanding that holds Linnet morally responsible for the criminal actions of her husband. He murdered her to inherit her fortune, yet in some way she is judged culpable. That she gave in to temptation—she could have turned down his proposal—is a sign of her weakness, and absolves him from virtually all responsibility.

As a woman in a predominantly male police force, Kate Miskin's uncertainty pertaining to her designated authority and her internalised sense of male authority are always there. Spelt out by the interpellation of rank, the hierarchisation in P D James's *The Light House* is transparent. At the top is Commander Dalgliesh, then Detective Inspector Kate Miskin, followed by the Anglo-Indian, Detective Sergeant Francis Benton-Smith. We visualise race along culturally formed lines, so unless the author tells us otherwise, our assumption is that Dalgliesh and Miskin will be Anglo-Saxon and pale-skinned. Dalgliesh's authority is unquestioned, whereas the hierarchal relationship between Miskin and Benton-Smith is always in a state of contestation. Her rank exceeds his, only to be balanced out by his privileged gender, which in turn is undercut by the "otherness" of his ethnicity. He is nearly always addressed as "Benton", she more often than not by the diminutive, "Kate". The use of the informal "Kate" instead of "Miskin", or "Detective Inspector", is an authorial choice that acts to exclude her from the masculine world of the Metropolitan Police where the normal mode of address is by surname or rank. It is a gender performative that suggests that in the "adult" world of men she is not quite grown up. Judith Butler makes a parallel acknowledgement in another context. In her preface to *Bodies that Matter*, she notes how she took exception to being addressed by the name Judy: "There was a certain exasperation in the delivery of that [...] diminutive, a certain patronising quality which (re)constituted me as an unruly child, one who needed to be brought to task..." (ix).

A similar discrimination based on race rather than gender occurs in *Blood from a Stone*. It creates a crisis in the Brunetti household when Brunetti's daughter, Chiara, complains that her father had no need to be late for dinner because the victim was "only a *vu cumprà*"<sup>2</sup> (26). Her mother, Paola, flies into a rage. She accuses Chiara of racism and rants that the only possible source of such vile behaviour rests with Chiara's friends, their parents and even perhaps the school. Brunetti's first reaction is of being pleased that Paola had not claimed "She never heard such things in [our] home" (30). He knew no Africans, so he doubted if it came from him. He has enough self-awareness, however, to recognise that though he thinks of himself as a moderate,

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<sup>2</sup> Street trader

without racial prejudice, his distrust of southerners and outright disdain for Albanians and Slavs constitute a form of racism that he prefers not to think about (BFS 30- 31). If Paola had claimed that Chiara did not get it from them, his innate honesty would have forced him to recognise his own position. In his earlier examination of the *vu cumprà*'s body, [he] “was struck by the blackness of the man’s skin, then was bemused by his own surprise: what other colour did he expect an African to be?” (10)

He had never troubled himself with the *vu cumprà* because few of them were ever involved in serious crime.... Like most of the police, indeed, like most residents, Brunetti had always assumed that the men from Senegal were under the control of organised crime, the reason most often offered to explain their politeness in dealings with the public: so long as their manner did not call attention to them, few people would trouble to ask how they so successfully managed to remain invisible to and undisturbed by the authorities. (14-15)

In this, we see how the “otherness” of the *vu cumprà* governs the expectations of his behaviour. That they are polite and hard-working becomes distorted into proof of their criminal nature. The very blackness of the man’s skin counted against him: “[Unlike] the black Americans Brunetti had seen with their shading from cocoa to copper, this man was the colour of ebony buffed to a high gloss” (13). The white American who witnessed the crime described the killer to Brunetti, as not white, more Mediterranean, and “she smiled to show she meant no offence, and Brunetti took none” (26). Her smile acts to soften her prejudice; it exempts “Mediterraneans” but perhaps more significantly it exposes the codification that reflects an instituted hierarchy of race based on colour pigmentation. The smile colludes with and helps reiterate normative racial views.

Performativity succeeds through repeated reinscriptions that accumulate authority through the citation of what has gone before. However, these reiterations are never exact replicas, and this creates the always-present risk of transgressing the boundaries of male representation. Self-perpetuating as performatives are, they do not always succeed. Each reiteration risks some deviation from the norm, which leaves open the possibility of change.

In the main, the action, gesture, and language of the detective novel, whatever the sex of the protagonists, act to support normative gender roles. Readers may question the injustice of Linnet being blamed for her husband's crimes but the long reiterative chain of misogyny that contributes to women's otherness always ensures that in the gender wars, a male, even a dishonest one, retains his position of privilege. Kate Miskin cannot enjoy the benefit of rank because her internalisation of male privilege binds her to patriarchal standards, and Brunetti, who considers himself a moderate, cannot escape the racism that sees the *vu cumprà* as outsiders and therefore lesser beings. History, myth, folklore, popular fiction and ideology serve to shape identities, so that some bodies matter more than others.

### **Subversion: Work in Progress**

Some female detectives try to disrupt gender norms by taking on male names and carrying guns. Resistance to the hegemony in tales featuring male detectives Adam Dalgliesh and Hercule Poirot is less obvious but it is there. Often in the form of a woman, whose wealth, intelligence or position disturbs patriarchal notions of gender, it is always counterbalanced by the personal cost of such disruption. Guido Brunetti subtly deconstructs phallogocentric ideologies relating to gender, genre, culture and politics, but this may be more about generational and societal change than his being the *avant-garde* of the new order wanted by Butler. She wants to create a world where all bodies matter, not just gender conforming heterosexual bodies, but also those gender transgressive bodies that fit loosely under the label of "queer". Her aim is to destabilise and denaturalise heterosexual norms of sex and gender so that gender as a category becomes deregulated. She sets out a strong case regarding the naturalising effects of performative discourse but she offers no detailed argument against biological difference. She is also weak when it comes to offering solutions. In the first edition of *Gender Trouble*, she offered the idea of cross-dressing and drag as parodies that confuse and resist gender boundaries:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. (187)

Later she retreated from this position, in response to criticism, from people, such as Martha Nussbaum, who were very dismissive. Nussbaum argues that Butler's resistance is always personal, more or less private involving no organised public action for legal and institutional change, and that it provides no empirical discussion of resistance: "Laws on rape were not changed on parodic performances" (8-10). Butler responds in the preface of the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* by clarifying her position on drag, recognising that it "is not precisely an *example* of subversion", nor is it the "paradigm of subversive action or indeed [a] model for political agency" (xxiii). In *Women and Social Transformation*, she returns to her earlier discussion on drag and the criticism of it. She concedes, "I probably wrote too quickly" (10), and admits she did not consider the controversy it would create. She then writes she had used drag because she came to recognise from her own homosexuality that many attributes of gender are transferable: "It [...] dawned on me that some so-called men could do the feminine turn much better than I ever could..." (10).

She has always been criticised as an unnecessarily complicated writer, so that at times her exact position is unclear. In *Gender Trouble*, she disagrees with Foucault's view of history because it implies a precultural body that exists prior to its social inscription whereas she believes the body is a blank page (175-93). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, she appears to back off from this position:

The claim that discourse 'form[s]' the body is no simple one, and from the start we must distinguish between how such 'forming' is not the same as a causing or determining, still less is it a notion that bodies are made from discourse pure and simple. (66)

One can never be too sure of Butler's meaning, but in this statement, she appears to concede the importance of the material body and accept that gender performativity is not written on a blank page but within a constituted order of biological differences, that impose limits on the boundaries of discursive performativity. Though there may be inconsistencies, at the heart of her, at times, very convoluted argument, Butler wants to destabilise and denaturalise patriarchal systems of sex, gender and sexuality. In *Women and Social Transformation* she recognises that though theory itself is transformational "something beyond theorising must take place: interventions at social and politicised levels which involve actions, sustained labour, and institutionalised practice, which are not quite the same as the exercise of theory" (1).

Legal changes help generate social change. However, the depth of language and gesture that ties gender to scripted behaviours has moved very little. Butler argues that while one cannot avoid the myriad of interpellative terms associated with racism and gender formation, it is "precisely because such terms have been produced and constrained within [historic] regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims" (BTM 123). Just as reinforcing performatives are so embracing as to be invisible, counter-performatives need not be wilful or arbitrary. What they have to do is to create their own history so that at some time they create a new norm. Or as Butler puts it in *Excitable Speech*, "The resignification of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never been legitimised and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms" (41). She does not speculate what those forms will be.

Warshawski, Joanna Brady and their like have, for the last thirty years, created a new "history" of strong masculinised women, but in doing so they, despite ruffling the genre, remain wedded to the patriarchal notion of women's identities created through their "otherness". Current political and social changes are shown to be essentially cosmetic, and confirm Munt's point that it is difficult for the female detective to move away from traditional roles while they fail to address the normative forces that hold gender in its respective place. Butler puts it slightly differently in *Women and Social Transformation* by posing three questions: "What is the good life? How has the good

life been conceived such that women have not been included in its conceptualisation? What would be the good life for women?"(2). The good life envisaged by the "new female" detectives is one of violence, promiscuity and appropriated male values. Poirot, Dalgliesh, and Brunetti make no overt play for the female market nor do their implied authors. In their choice of genre, and the decisions they make around the characters of their protagonists, the implied authors leave space either deliberately or through omission for ideological inconsistencies that challenge patriarchal expectations without flagrantly transgressing the boundaries of the genre. The challenges may be almost invisible but each deviation from gender expectations, no matter how small, becomes a point of resistance that over time may succeed because it accumulates through repetition or citation the force of authority. As Munt says, each "cultural shift is a ripple in the sea of representations which construct our reality" (201). By treating the works of Christie, James and Leon as ideological constructs we can observe how popular fiction acts to support the hegemony but also leaves room for contradictory performatives to disrupt the representations of authority, which, empowered by endless repetition and citationality, shape and position gender within the hegemonic hierarchy.



## Chapter 2

### Agatha Christie and Hercule Poirot

What is the difference whether it is a wife or a mother;  
It is still Eve the temptress we must beware of in any woman.  
Augustine

That Christie fits within the genre is not an issue. *Death on the Nile* is a classic whodunit. It follows the conventions of the genre as if engraved in stone. There is a murder, and a group of suspects contained in a small area, almost everyone on the steamer *Karnak* has a motive, and it is only the brilliance of Hercule Poirot, who puts all the pieces together, that eventually exposes the killer. Long acknowledged as the queen of crime, Christie averaged two books a year for almost fifty years. She has been dead since 1975 but the bulk of her output is still freely available in book-stores and local libraries. Poirot in his latest reincarnation features regularly on television in lavish period productions, and her play, *The Mousetrap*, currently at the St Martin's Theatre, has been running continuously in London's West End for fifty-two years. Though hugely popular, she has attracted little literary interest, and feminist analysis is both limited and divided.

Her alleged support of the status quo accounts for her dismissal by many feminist scholars. Roberta Klein in *Agatha Christie: A Feminist Reassessment* rejects many of their claims but acknowledges the weight of opinion against her. She contends that, even though Christie lacks a formal feminist agenda, her work shows “the deadliness of the patriarchal vision” and the need for values based on female sensitivities (29). However, in a section headed “Feminist Denigration of Christie”, she lists a series of comments through the eighties and nineties that discount Christie as both a serious writer and a feminist sympathiser. David Grossvogel considers her work little more than “trivial unpleasantness ... contrived for the pleasure of ending it” (qtd. in Klein 2). Krouse and Peters argue that “too many of [her] competent women are portrayed as either deadly or destructive and in her world men seek money and women seek men” (qtd. in Klein 5). Craig and Cadogan insist that Christie has no “authentic feminist voice and, apart from a handful of principals, her women are rarely more

than ciphers, who occasionally give vent to an outburst of simple minded feminism” (qtd. in Klein 7). Shaw and Vanacker claim, along with many others, that she cannot be a feminist because her hero’s role is “ultimately to protect and stabilise society and its structure of patrilineal inheritance and property ownership” (qtd. in Klein 8). Her creation Miss Marple comes in for more objections. Glenwood Irons blames the omnipresence of Christie for the paucity of female detective fiction because people considered that the “spinster sleuth” in the person of Jane Marple was the “quintessential representation of female ratiocination” (qtd. in Klein 11). Christie’s death she saw as salutary for the genre because it opened the way for different types of woman detective (qtd. in Klein 13). Disputing these opinions, Gill Plain suggests that Christie redefines women’s roles and that the assumption underlying her interwar fiction is one of female agency: “In her novels women have their own agenda and are assumed to be responsible for their own actions” (47).

In *Death on the Nile*, two such women, Linnet Ridgeway and Jacqueline de Bellefort, are central to the story. Strong, and intelligent, they take responsibility for their own deeds. Although having lesser roles, the outspoken Salome Otterbourne, and maid turned blackmailer Louise Bourget, are also women prepared to take risks in the name of personal independence. All of them are killed: three of them murdered and the other dead by her own hand. The men on board the *Karnak*, variously described as seedy, incredibly simple, narrow-chested, weak-chinned mothers’ boys, rejoice in names such as Charle S Windlesham. As Lord Windlesham, he is a peer of the realm, a man of probity and breeding, but drop the Lord and insert his given name and he is revealed as “swindle sham”. The rest of the cast consists of a wealthy acid-tongued old woman who makes her cousin’s life miserable, a cantankerous nurse, two upper-class thieves, a crooked lawyer, a blackmailer, a lord going through his communist period, several assorted social climbers and a clutch of put-upon women. All in their own way are cowardly or corrupt, but worst of all is Simon Doyle, the man responsible for five deaths, including his own. In this mixture of the rich and titled, the alcoholic and the exploited, the politics of gender and power are covertly challenged. Yet by the end of the journey, Poirot has re-established the status quo. The women who challenge the conventions are dead, the petty swindlers are forgiven

and the excesses of the rich are forgotten. Simon Doyle is dead, shot by his own lover, determined to save him from the terror of the noose.

Their story is a tale of lust, greed, and murder: transgressive desire is always disruptive and potentially dangerous. However, Agatha Christie sanitises the powerful emotions to such a degree that only the puzzle drives the plot. The characters are one-dimensional and the reader has no particular interest in their personalities or fate. At the finale when Poirot reveals the killers and tacitly encourages them to take their own lives, there can be no visceral response. The puzzle is solved and the fate and motives of the protagonists quickly forgotten, but in these thinly drawn characters, we can observe a discursive performativity that both supports, and occasionally contests patriarchal norms. One site of gender disruption is the sexual-cum-romantic triangle of Simon, Jackie and Linnet. Poirot's own contribution to gender disruption is problematic. Several critics claim he is a femininised figure, but the textual evidence suggests that the implied author has invested him with such authority that his masculinity is beyond doubt. Marriage presents itself as both disruptive and restorative. There are enough gender transgressions to lend support to the notion of Christie as a champion of female agency, but examined in the light of narrative closures that work to endorse hegemonic control, she would appear less the feminist than some critics claim.

A Butlerian reading aims to reveal how and in what way the predicated behaviours of gender, sexuality, colour, ethnicity and class are disturbed. Sometimes these disturbances are little more than ripples. Butler does not go in for grand gestures. In an interview in *The Judith Butler Reader*, when asked to illustrate how resignification can reverse and displace their originating aim, she gave a personal example. She told of her fear of using the words "lesbian" and "queer" because of her concern they would upset people or even cause violence. Walking down the street a young man had pulled up alongside her and asked,

'Are you a lesbian?' Just like that, I replied, 'Yes I am a lesbian.' I returned it in the affirmative. It was a completely impulsive moment. It was an interpellation from nowhere. Of course, what such a questioner is asking is 'Are you the thing I fear and loathe? Do you dare say yes to this that you apparently are, at least on the basis of what you look like? And I have the

power over you to the extent I am seeking to expose you through the question I pose you.' To the extent that I could, I was able to turn quickly around and say, 'Yes I am a lesbian,' the power of my interrogator was lost (353).

Having your sexuality questioned in the street is not a common experience for most people, and while understanding the point Butler is making, it highlights how often she uses her own circumstances to advance queer theory. To recognise resignifications in *Death on the Nile* we need to understand that the articulation of power is always there. Informed by politics, history, culture and ideological remainders that are organised through particular relationships, and networks, language cannot escape its role as an instrument of power. Anything that disturbs a link or connection in the reiterative chain becomes a resignification. However, while Linnet Ridgeway's purchase of Malton Hall disturbs history, culture, and ideology, her premature death prevents these resignifications having sufficient time to build their own reiterative chain and become the accepted norm. One of the functions of popular fiction is to reinforce the patriarchal construct of unsaid, but pervasive, heterosexuality, and, as Kathleen Klein says, "the literature of detection assumes its function with avidity" (145). The search for gender resignification is as much about female transgression as the countering actions that reauthorize male dominance.

### **The Fatal Triangle**

The central puzzle of *Death on the Nile* hinges on the relationship between Jackie, Linnet and Simon. By sleight of hand, the implied author has the reader believe that the very wealthy Linnet has stolen Simon away from Jackie, leaving her embittered and desperate for revenge. The denouement, however, shows that Jackie and Simon had concocted an elaborate plot to murder Linnet and inherit her fortune. For a tale supposedly driven by passion and greed it is, apart from Jackie's false displays of grief, a remarkably passionless affair. It has neither sex nor romance, but, as Julian Symons reminds us, sex in the detective stories of the Golden Age was "strikingly inhibited": in theory, money and sex were the two main motives for murder but in practice, money becomes the prime mover. Symons observes, "Most of the characters are seen as [nothing] other than puppets in a game of murder" (107). To give them

emotions and depth would take interest away from the omniscient detective and the intricacies of the puzzle. Christie is well within the rules of the age when her narrative makes little attempt to depict the relationship and marriage of Linnet and Simon, rather choosing to concentrate on the real motive for it, Linnet's fortune.

The politics of power, money and status begin on the first page. Linnet with her scarlet Rolls Royce, golden hair, lovely figure and newly obtained ownership of Wode Hall is immediately a figure of comment and envy.

As she drove off the lean man followed her with his eyes. He muttered: 'It seems all wrong to me – her looking like that. Money and looks - it's too much. If a girl is as rich as that, she has no right to be a good looker as well. And she is a good looker. Got everything that girl has. Doesn't seem fair.'  
(11)

Linnet's purchase of Wode Hall, the stately home she bought from Sir George who had lost all his money on the horses, disturbs history, culture and ideology. The very word "owner" challenges male privilege: it sweeps aside rules of inheritance, and offers a model for female independence. The idea of a *female* owner disturbs thousands of years of common law and female dependence. Furthermore, Linnet is an active owner, who intends to spend £60,000 on renovations. She hires three architects but finds them rather impractical so she fires them. Her friend Joanna on hearing this responds with, "Darling you will soon put that right. You are the most practical person" (12). Linnet is good-looking, and intelligent. Her money gives her the power to dispossess a man of his home and dismiss architects from her service. Pragmatic and wealthy, her independence represents a threat to the patriarchal hegemony. Her wealth gives her room to reject threats to her identity. She turns down Lord Windlesham's proposal of marriage, rightly surmising that his central aim was to restore his family's fortune. Charltonbury, one of the grandest houses in England, and occupied by his family since the time of Elizabeth, would be restored at her expense. Owning two homes, naturally, the smaller of the two, hers, would be given up. She anticipates that Linnet Ridgeway, as a person, would cease to exist: "She would be the Countess of Windlesham bringing a fine dowry to Charltonbury and its master. She would be queen consort, not queen any longer" (32). As Countess of Windlesham, the

weight and expectations of the family name would put her identity at risk. The female agency she has enjoyed as the rich, independent Linnet Ridgeway would be lost.

Jackie Bellefort is not rich. Whatever money she once had was lost in the stock market crash, but she is intelligent, good-looking, quick-witted, energetic, and determined. She is also a long-term friend of Linnet's, who recalls Jackie stabbing a boy with a knife. He was teasing a dog and she tried to make him stop. Being stronger than she was, he pushed her aside so "she whipped out a penknife and plunged it right into him" (16). Jackie's response to the boy is a performative that disrupts gender norms. Her resistance is fierce and unfeminine. In her hands, the knife is a phallic symbol of considerably more power than the "real thing", which the boy has. Though well able to look after herself, her fiancée, Simon, whom she describes as, big, boyish, "incredibly simple and utterly adorable" (20), is less capable, and has just lost his job. Jackie asks Linnet to employ him as the estate manager at Wode Hall. There is a reversal of gender norms in the discussion that follows. Normally women are the objects of transaction between men, but here Simon is the object of transaction. The two women discuss his qualifications and merits, and Jackie clinches the arrangement by telling Linnet, "If he doesn't make good, sack him" (21). Jackie acts as Simon's "owner" selling him on the market like a slave.

Simon for his part is a good-looking, inarticulate bumpkin, and perceived as such by both Jackie and Linnet. He masquerades as his own man: he resents the idea that any woman should own him. While talking to Poirot about Jackie, he says,

A man doesn't want to feel owned, body and soul. It's the damned possessive attitude. This man is mine—he belongs to me. This is the sort of thing I can't stick—no man could stick. He wants to own the woman; he doesn't want her to own him. (95)

He is equally dismissive of Linnet, claiming that she is "terribly bossy", and much as he liked her money, he would prefer to have his own. He did not want a rich wife holding the purse strings: "I'd be a kind of damned Prince Consort" (405). Yet his act of independence and manliness is a complete sham. Linnet 'bought' him into their marriage and treats him as a kept man, while Jackie once she hears of his murderous scheme takes over the planning: "Because you see I realised he'd never pull it off.

[He] would probably have just bunged arsenic into her and assumed the doctor would say she died of gastritis” (406). Simon’s “uber” masculinity is a masquerade that cannot hide his reliance on two women who challenge the hegemonic binary norm of female passivity. One is wealthy enough to become the owner of a substantial property and confident enough to dismiss men she considers impractical or a threat to her independence: the other is comfortable enough in her proprietary role to objectify her fiancé in pursuit of her own desire for marriage. So, when only months after taking up his employment at Wode Hall, Simon devastates Jackie by calling off their engagement and announcing that he is marrying Linnet, it is not the ‘man’ of action who is orchestrating events; rather he is the pawn of two women, who want money, marriage and Simon, with disastrous consequences for all of them. In her masquerade as the jilted woman, a hurt, angry and upset Jackie follows them on their honeymoon, and, without breaking any laws, harasses them, and disrupts their honeymoon, until in desperation they turn to Poirot who is also travelling aboard the *Karnak*.

### **The Belgian Gent**

That Linnet and Simon should confide in a man, whom Munt claims is a parody of the male myth, is problematic. His name grants him a satirical status: a shortened Hercules, a poirot or clown who exhibits many female attributes. Christie’s readers of 1935 may have been less concerned with the implications of Poirot’s name. Possibly, they saw, as Munt did, the abbreviated Hercules along with the French word for clown as indication of a small foolish man, but within the context of the time, his Belgian origin may have served as an effective counter. Ask any one of Christie’s readers between the wars, and the answer would probably attach to Belgium the qualities of neutrality, loyalty and bravery and, perhaps as an afterthought, smallness. In 1914, Belgium won tremendous respect from the people of Britain when it refused German armies free passage through Belgium so that they could attack the French. It stayed true to the Convention of 1839, which recognised its independence in exchange for perpetual neutrality. Germany marched in, anyhow, but much to everyone’s surprise Belgium put up a spirited if, ultimately, futile resistance.

However, Munt's opinion is supported by, among others, Gill Plain who claims that Poirot's "feminisation" is the basis of his success, "because frequently his skill as a detective is revealed by his ability to decode the female body" (31). Susan Rowland also writes, "His feminized psychic constitution through detection...breaks down "gender polarity" (27). Despite these claims, a Butlerian reading of gender performativity contradicts notions of his feminisation by exposing the underlying masculinity written into his character. His rejection of the "heroic male" model, and knowledge of things domestic and female may be seen as a valorisation of feminine attributes. Yet knowing about nail polish, fine linen, and domestic ornaments is not outside the scope of a man who prides himself on his intelligence and powers of observation. True, he is inclined to prattle but the ability to differentiate between the smell of red ink and nail varnish—a vital clue in *Death on the Nile*—would hardly require a specific knowledge of cosmetics (390). Any schoolboy who has ever made a model aeroplane out of balsa wood and paper could tell the distinctive odour common to both aeroplane glue and nail varnish. Equally, as a well-dressed man, he would have no problem distinguishing between a handkerchief from Woolworths and one from Harrods:

Poirot picked up the handkerchief and examined it.  
 'A man's handkerchief but not a gentleman's handkerchief. *Ce cher* Woolworths I imagine. Threepence at most. [...] Andrew Pennington I notice carries a very fine silk handkerchief. (262)

This handkerchief is a key piece of evidence. To suggest that Poirot's knowledge of the difference between such an item from Woolworths and one of fine silk is a signifier of feminisation seems a long stretch.

Perhaps more interesting is his discussion with fellow passenger and friend from the British Home Office, Colonel Race, about the importance of the gun that had been thrown overboard:

'Tell me my friend; [...] you are more conversant with firearms than I. Would such a thing as this [scarf] wrapped round a pistol make much difference in muffling the sound?'  
 'No it wouldn't. Not like a silencer, for instance.



Poirot nodded. He went on: 'A man - certainly, a man who had had much handling of firearms would know that. But a woman would not know'. (262)

Considering Poirot's background in the Belgian police force and secret service, it is strange that he even had to ask the question. He appears to bow to Race's greater knowledge, but given his pride in his little 'grey cells' and powers of observation, it is an out-of-character question. It may be one of the 'clues' the author offers up or it may be that his distancing himself from the gun, one of the most potent signifiers of masculinity, represents a gender resignification. He tells us a 'man' would know, and then disavows such knowledge himself.

In doing so, he disrupts the boundaries of gender and leaves room for those actors who have played him on film, stage and television to interpret his character as eccentric and feminised. Conversely, the *Strand Magazine* of December 1935 features him on the front cover as lean and handsome in a well cut 'city gents' suit. Christie's description of him is minimal, as a funny-looking man with a big black moustache (64). He is fussy and careful with his appearance; he is also a good listener who has an easy empathy with both men and women, but the entrenchment of binaries in language makes it difficult to describe someone who sits outside gender expectations. Poirot is not gay, queer, or a transvestite; unlike Phillip Marlowe or his female doppelganger, V I Warshawski, he does not drink, fight or fornicate. There is no formal term for a man whose performance of masculinity does not quite fit. Munt calls him a feminine hero, yet his failure to read the female body with regard to Jackie's murderous scheme, while a necessity of the plot, tends to undercut his so-called feminine attributes. Ironically, by associating specific attributes such as narcissism, irrationality, emotiveness, and eccentricity with the feminine, Munt and others are contributing to the reiterative chain that validates and reinforces such traits as peculiarly feminine. The critics' feminisation of Poirot seems to be more about the curious gap left by his lack of any articulated or implied desire. Separated from sexuality with no apparent masculine desires, he may appear paradoxical and powerless, yet arguably, his implied creator vests him with such authority that his sexuality becomes irrelevant.

He is the moral centre of the novel. His reputation precedes him; from the moment he steps aboard the *Karnak*, he is the acknowledged authority, the symbol of impersonal truth and stability, through which justice and social order will be maintained. The murder of Linnet Ridge sees that authority formalised when Colonel Rice, in his capacity as the representative of the British Home Office, passes the responsibility of the investigation on to him: “Well, man, it’s up to you. This is your show” (188). The passengers quickly accede to this and put themselves under Poirot’s authority. Contrast this with the fate of Warshawski and Brady. Much of the tension in their tales revolves around their lack of acceptance by the male hierarchy. Constantly undermined by crank calls, and malicious practical jokes, both these women cope with a multitude of put-downs and slights. An exchange in *Indemnity Only* between Warshawski and a potential client is typical:

‘My name is V.I. Warshawski. I’m a private detective and I’m looking into Peter Thayer’s death.’ I handed him a business card.  
 ‘You? You’re no more a detective than I am a ballet dancer,’ he exclaimed.  
 (26)

In this questioning of Warshawski’s ability, we have a replication of the Dalglish/Miskin situation, where in Dalglish’s absence Miskin ‘fronts’ the village meeting in the local hall. Her gender negates her rank, requiring her lower-ranked but male officer, Benton, to take over the meeting when it gets out of hand. Compare this to the ready acceptance of Poirot’s authority by the passengers of the *Karnak*. He falls short of the masculine ideal, but his brand of maleness is enough to place him in a position of privilege. Put Miskin, Warshawski or Brady on board the *Karnak*, and the story would have been different. Poirot’s brand of maleness, regardless of any drift from the norm, is enough to carry with it the trappings of authority. The male detective, moreover, potentially incarnates the prospect of authoritative knowledge through which justice and social order are enacted. In patriarchal societies, or societies that reiterate patriarchal norms, power is vested in the male, and the detective is a reiteration of that gender norm.

In this context, Poirot’s lack of sexual partners is irrelevant: with no doubt about his authority, there can be no doubt about his masculinity. He also has the power of the gaze. The major players all confide in him and his response is predominantly an

ethical one that translates into an almost priestly role enabling him to hear ‘confessions’ and grant absolution. He stands outside of much of the politics of money, class and gender. His Belgian origins allow him to be classless in English society, and if he is snobbish, it has nothing do with class but revolves around pride in his “little grey cells”: “Me, I work with my brains and I am not ashamed of it” (141). He is famous; he can get into the best restaurants in London without booking a table, a privilege rarely extended beyond senior peers of the realm, and he has “...the means to enjoy the life of idleness” (24). His reputation as the great detective precedes him so that it is natural for Linnet and Simon to approach him and ask him to help resolve their difficulties with Jackie. Not intimidated by Linnet’s money, he refuses her offer of a considerable sum to warn Jacqueline off, and tells her bluntly that she has behaved badly: “You have deliberately caused injury to some one ...and must accept the consequences of your action... I will not accept a commission from you. I will do what I can in the interests of humanity” (82).

Poirot approaches Jackie in an attempt to defuse the situation. He comes to the meeting with the advantage that he remembers her and Simon from having been in the same restaurant a few weeks earlier. They were unaware of him, but he could not help but notice them as they danced around the floor obviously entranced by each other. By this device, the implied author invests Poirot with the power of the gaze. Kathleen Klein claims in *Women Times Three* that the gaze in detective fiction acts to consecrate sexual difference (144). Poirot’s use of the gaze to control the objects of his investigation brings into play a logocentric perspective that orders reality to fit within a masculine view. As Simon and Jackie return laughing to their table, Poirot could study the girl’s face and sees something else besides laughter in her eyes and ‘orders’ reality to that view. He shakes his head doubtfully, “She cares too much that little one,” he said to himself, “It is not safe. No, it is not safe” (26). In his ordering of reality, he accurately predicts that her caring too much would lead to trouble, but he fails to read the female body accurately. In describing Jackie as “that little one” he infantilises her, seeing a small girl, who, perhaps, needs looking after, rather than the dominant partner in the relationship with Simon.

He mistakenly considers Jackie badly wronged and about to make, or take, a very foolish and harmful decision and he is accordingly sympathetic. Later, on the *Karnak*, he tries to both comfort her and dissuade her from her present actions. He tells her that a man who marries just for money is not worth caring about, and she responds, “If he had married her for her money that would be true ...It’s more complicated than that. It was her glamour, she dazzled him, and he would never have fallen in love with her if she hadn’t made him” (88). Poirot acknowledges that Linnet’s behaviour is wrong but also that if Jacqueline continues on her chosen path, she will only produce more suffering. He advises her, “Do not open your heart to evil [...] It will enter in and make its home within you, and after a while it will not be possible to drive it out” (91). She does not heed his advice, and when, eventually, Poirot solves the mystery and confronts her with his knowledge of her guilt, she reminds him of their earlier conversation:

You did your best for me you know. That night in Assuan, you told me not to open my heart to the devil. It is true I could have stopped then, you know. I nearly did. I could have told Simon I would not go on with it... But then perhaps... She went all out to get Simon away from me. That’s why I am not really sorry about her even now. (403)

In this exchange, Poirot acts as her confessor, but without her contrition there can be no absolution. At one stage, she turns to him and asks if he cared for her and he replies, “Yes Mademoiselle.” She responds, “But it wouldn’t have occurred to you to let me off.” Hercule Poirot says quietly, “No” (402). Yet in the case of Tim Allerton, a fellow passenger aboard the *Karnak*, Poirot not only lets him off but also gives him absolution. Over the years, Allerton had taken part in a series of robberies from some of the great houses of England. He has also stolen a very expensive necklace from Linnet and Simon’s cabin. Confronted by Poirot, he quickly confesses and in the age-old fashion swears never to do it again. In contrast to his dealing with Jackie, who admittedly faces more serious charges, Poirot is almost avuncular with Allerton. He chooses to ignore his crimes and instead encourages him to marry Rosalie Otterbourne, also a fellow passenger: “It will be an excellent match... and would be very suitable” (379). Colonel Race objects, saying he is compounding a felony, but Poirot persists: “I know it is irregular, but I have a high regard for human happiness”

(379). Allerton had just proposed marriage to Rosalie, and Poirot does not want to spoil his chance of redemption, so he places himself above the law to let it happen.

Contrary to those critics who see him as the embodiment of the feminine, one may argue that the implied author uses a variety of strategies to invest Poirot with extraordinary masculine power. His social position is underlined by his acceptance into the best restaurants of London without the need of a reservation. He commands the highest respect, and yet cannot be placed and does not need to be placed. His reputation precedes him. In a tale where the power of money dominates, he stands outside its lure—he cannot be bought. He has the advantage of the masculine gaze; he is the moral centre of the novel and its centre of consciousness. People confide in him, indeed they confess to him, and he has the power to grant them absolution. He is able to put human happiness above the law and on behalf of society to forgive Tim Allerton for his sins. In some ways, his function is not very different from that of a priest. In this context, his lack of sexual partners is irrelevant as it is for priests. Because there is no doubt about his authority, there is no doubt about his masculinity, which does not need to be linked to sexual performance. Within Lacanian thought, the penis is dissociated from its anatomical and functional roles of urination and insemination, and having it becomes the privileged occasion for access to the privileged signifier, the phallus. Arguably, if you can be a father, which is a signifying function rather than one tied to the act of copulation then no further proof of manhood is required.

### **Neutralising Dangerous Women**

While textual strategies write Poirot into a position of masculine authority, other strategies work to hold the females in the subordinate role. They are constrained by deeply etched boundaries that hold them morally responsible for the actions of men. Within the crime genre, their essentialisation, as either Madonna or whore, redeemer or temptress, is the norm. While one could expect Simon to try to push the blame on to someone else, Poirot is also complicit in the expectation that women must shoulder

the blame for men's behaviour. He makes it quite clear to both Jackie and Linnet that he considers them to blame for Simon's actions.

Jackie acknowledges this in her confession to Poirot when she admits that she should have taken heed of his earlier warning: "I could have stopped him. I nearly did ... I could have told Simon that I wouldn't go on with it [but] once I saw he had made up his mind I had to come into it to protect him" (403.) As Poirot had cautioned Jackie, so he had also spoken to Linnet reminding her of her responsibility in her relationship with Simon:

I suggest you were highly attracted to him at once. But I suggest there was a moment when you hesitated, when you realised you had a choice—that you could refrain or go on. I suggest that the initiative rested with you — not with Monsieur Doyle. You are beautiful Madam you are rich: you have intelligence and charm. You could have exercised that charm or you could have restrained it. (81)

The performative effect of Poirot's words is to take the blame that is Simon's and move it onto the two women. Both of them had the chance to resist temptation and they failed. As women, they had a special responsibility to say no. Why this should be relates to Foucault's concept of discourse and context that enables us to understand how everything that is said fits into a network with its own conditions and history. In this case, the historic reiterative chain runs back to Eve's failure to resist the blandishments of Satan. Karen Armstrong in *A History of God* quotes Tertullian (circa 200AD), a prolific early Christian writer:

Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway; *you* are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; *you* are the first deserter of the divine law; *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* so carelessly destroyed man, God's image. (145)

Poirot is part of a two-thousand year old discursive regime that controls the meanings of gender difference, and defines women through their need to atone for bringing about man's fall from grace. Notable is how Jackie and Linnet passively accept Eve's reiterated guilt as their own, and how they both attempt to mitigate Simon's

behaviour. Despite Simon's being caught red-handed stealing from his employer, Jackie continues to defend him: "I don't believe he really meant to be dishonest. He just thought it was the sort of thing people did in the City" (404).

So "normal" is our cultural acceptance of women's responsibility for men's actions that Simon's role in the violent death of three women passes virtually unrecognised. For his part, he accepts little of the blame. The instigator and participant in three murders is, through words, action and nuance, almost excused from his responsibility. Jackie's original description of him—"big, and square and incredibly simple and boyish and utterly adorable!" (20)—remains constant right to the end. Trying to persuade Poirot to get Jackie to desist from her harassment, he complains:

'Doesn't she realise that no decent woman would behave as she is doing? Hasn't she got any pride or self-respect? Why can't Jackie take it like a man? I [mean] take it like a good sport. After all, you have to take your medicine when it comes to you.' (96)

Simon is expressing a long held view about the preferentiality of the male sex. St Augustine, one of the early Church's most important thinkers, had doubts that God should have ever bothered with the female sex at all: "If it was good company and conversation that Adam needed, it would be much better arranged to have two men together as friends, not a man and a woman." In Augustine's eyes, "woman's only function was the child-bearing which passed the contagion of Original Sin to the next generation, like a venereal disease" (Armstrong 146).

This fear and distrust of women created in part by reiterative language has its basis also in psychoanalytical thought and theory. Laura Mulvey, in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, summarises "the function of women in forming the patriarchal unconscious [as] two fold: firstly she symbolises the castration threat by her real lack of the penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic" (14). Linnet, because of her wealth, and intelligence, and Jackie, because of her murderous ways and control of Simon, incarnate castration fears. Notwithstanding his masquerade of masculinity, the two women contribute to unmanning Simon, thus bringing to the surface a fear that runs through the detective/crime genre. *In Women Times Three*, Kathleen Klein writes,

Women characters whose noncompliant behaviour—owning their own desire and acting upon it, against patriarchal strictures—is seen as menacing to the insecure male psyche and potentially catastrophic to the social scheme constituted around it; not surprisingly, the imperative of such fiction is to subdue female agency and desire. (144)

Typical of the genre, death or imprisonment is the fate of troublesome women who disturb patriarchal law. It certainly is for the four women in *Death on the Nile* who lay claim to female agency—three are murdered and one dies by her own hand. Louise Bourget, the maid who tries to blackmail Simon with her knowledge of his murder of Linnet, and Salome Otterbourne, the drunken novelist who claims to have seen the killer, are both despatched by Jackie with single shots to the head. Simon kills Linnet, and Jackie shoots herself. Only two of them have committed crimes, but all of them have acted outside of the regulatory norms for women. Louise Bourget, as a servant, is a fringe character, but her threat of blackmail disturbs the masculine order and she pays with her life.

Salome Otterbourne commits no crime, but her drunkenness and lewd manner go beyond the boundaries of acceptable motherhood and female sexuality. Her behaviour and relationship with her daughter represent a materialisation of the affront to an ideology that separates women from their sexuality and offers them a choice of motherhood, or martyrdom through virginity. Plain uses Kristeva's "concepts of the corpse and the mother as sites of abjection who inhabit borderline states between life and death" to posit the view that Christie writes "the body as a site of particularly intense negotiation of boundaries" (26). The taking and the giving of life are the boundaries of patriarchal society. Those who murder or kill are expelled, while mothers are exalted, that is, as long as they prove themselves worthy. Salome Otterbourne is not worthy. She is a failing author, a secret drinker who reduces all human desire to sex and blood lust. She boasts that her books are "strong meat", but libraries ban them. She is always keen to start a conversation about sex: "Monsieur Poirot—why is everyone so afraid of sex?" (65). She is a constant embarrassment to her daughter, who is always trying to cover for her mother's drunken trips and sexual innuendoes. "Look at some people's mothers, and look at mine" (118). Salome's ideology of sex, heavily influenced by alcohol, is vulgar and upsetting. She fractures



Western ideas of femininity. Her murder, while serving the symbolic purpose and plot of *Death on the Nile*, also acts to preserve patriarchal ideals of motherhood.

Linnet likewise has committed no crime but the rules of the genre demand her demise because she too has disrupted patriarchal norms. Through her wealth and intelligence, she inserts herself into the masculine discourse of power, and takes a dominant role. She buys a country house; she takes over from architects who do not please her, and hires other men to run her affairs. She can also read a balance sheet, and is familiar with legal documents. Pennington, her trustee, tries to get her to sign some documents that would serve to hide his fraud, or incompetence, with the bland comment, “Nothing of interest. Only legal phraseology.” However, Linnet conveys her sense of active agency in reply. “I always read everything through.” When Simon joins in, saying that he never reads legal documents, preferring to sign where he is told to, Linnet’s frosty response, “That’s frightfully slipshod”, reverses the binary that privileges male practicality (136) Linnet represents a threat. Practical and forthright, she operates in a man’s world with her money, coupled to her ability to read legal documents. She undermines one of the foundations of male power, the law. The nexus of power and knowledge conferred on Pennington through his gender and legal training is negated at what Foucault calls “the transformation point” (143), when Linnet rejects his advice and puts herself as subject within a hitherto masculine discourse.

Pragmatic, wealthy and independent, she represents a threat to the hegemony, yet her marriage to Simon may have been the cause of even greater disruption.

Her motives can only be guessed at. She turned down Lord Windlesham’s proposal of marriage, rightly surmising that his central aim was to restore his family’s fortune. Yet she is prepared to marry Simon Doyle, for although she gives up her name, she retains control: strong and domineering both financially and intellectually, she is Simon’s master. As Countess of Windlesham, the weight and expectations of the family name would have put her identity at risk. Marriage to Simon, however, means no loss of female agency, and it disrupts hegemonic norms that situate the man as the

head of the house. This suggests her desire for agency overrules everything, but in the context of nineteen-thirties crime fiction, this may only be part of the reason. Her decision to give up Windlesham makes sense, but her marriage to Simon is inexplicable on the information Christie provides. As Julian Symons reminds us, when it comes to sex or romance, the “Golden Age” is remarkably inhibited. Asked by Poirot why she married Simon, Linnet makes no protestations of her love or passion. Instead, she simply responds that Simon loved her more than he loved Jackie: “What is he to do? Be heroically noble and marry a woman he does not care for” (79). Linnet’s silence about her own motives for marriage becomes a performative enactment. If not for love, money or title what remains? Social and genre conventions of the time do not allow for explicit expressions of female sexual desire, yet it presumably remains the unstated motive behind Linnet’s decision. Sex outside marriage, while no doubt commonplace, was for women unacceptable. The desire for marriage, however, is socially approved, but to present even strong and independent women as sexual beings is a little more problematic. For Linnet, it means possessing the object of her desire. If that means marriage, so be it. Her actions subvert patriarchal notions of matrimony. She reverses its originating aims of male ownership, so that it is no longer a source of heterosexual power. She has the brains, the looks and the money. She acquires an attractive though dumb young man because she can. Conventions of genre and the times do not allow her to be sexually active outside the constraints of marriage, but she can reverse masculine signification by making Simon the object and herself the subject, where his only rational purpose is to serve her sexual needs. Her financial and intellectual independence, along with unstated sexual desires, threatens hegemonic norms and warrants her demise as demanded by patriarchal law.

Jackie, by contrast, is a murderer and has the blood of four people on her hands. Again, the limits of the genre make her commitment to murder inexplicable. Initially presented as the wronged woman, her only discernible crime is an intensity of passion that masquerades as a desire to inflict pain upon Linnet: “I want to hurt her—to stick a knife into her, to put my dear little pistol close against her head then—just press with my finger” (93). What becomes clear is that money drives the plot, and Simon’s weakness is an impediment to the success of their plan. He did not want Linnet; he

thought her good-looking but terribly bossy, but he liked the idea of her money. The realisation that Simon intends going ahead terrifies Jackie, not by the idea of murder, but from the fear of his incompetence: “So I had to come into it to look after him.” On hearing this Poirot has no doubt that this is her motive: “She herself had not coveted Linnet Ridgeway’s money, but she had loved Simon Doyle, had loved him beyond reason and beyond pity” (406). This suggests once again that Poirot’s failure to read the female body is a consequence of a gaze that orders the world to a masculine view. He wants to see a world where a woman’s love for a man fills all her needs; his desire becomes her desire, not intruded upon by something as worldly as money. Without irony, he offers her an excuse for her killing of Louise Bourget: “It was not your fault that [she] could not sleep that night” (406). What he does not want to recognise is that, despite her masquerade as the jilted woman, she carries the phallus, as witnessed earlier, in her stabbing of the boy who was teasing the dog. She wears the dissimulations of lack, to cover her own scheme. Her worst crime could be that she represents a competing centre of authority and consciousness that Poirot only recognises belatedly.

The work of the detective story is to wipe out any competition that threatens the hegemony, and to justify its action by declaring any subversive deeds as criminal. The truth is that most of Jackie’s acts are criminal, but like Linnet she is punished for competing with an established order that subordinates the feminine to the masculine. Salome Otterbourne through her lewdness and drunkenness contests the masculine ideology regarding proper female identity and suffers the consequences for her ‘crime’. Contrast this with the rest of the women on board the *Karnak* who are ‘content’ to remain within the patriarchal order. Put upon, demeaned, or overlooked by a collection of spiteful older women and a motley collection of flawed young men, nevertheless at the end they are rewarded for their passivity by the “gift” of marriage.

### Marriage and Social Order

The female characters in *Death on the Nile* have talents and skills, but language and social mores, such as the expectation of marriage and the denigration of the spinster, work against them. They are constrained by the boundaries of gender and genre that Christie exploits to construct her puzzle. In discussion with Race, Poirot offers a profile of the likely killer: “This is a crime that needed certain qualities—audacity, swift and faultless execution, courage, indifference to danger and a resourceful calculating brain” (309). The implication is that these are masculine qualities, and they act as a red herring to draw the reader away from any thought that the killer may be a woman. Romantic love, under its various guises, is also a staple of the genre. It acts to restore the natural order. Therefore, in *Death on the Nile*, though the plot conventions of the genre demand the punishment of those who have disturbed the supposed “natural” order, it also demands its symbolic restoration. New and more innocent women, who replace those noncompliant women who have disrupted the politics of gender, provide this. In *Death on the Nile*, two women fill this role. Rosalie Otterbourne, daughter of the drunken and recently murdered Salome, becomes betrothed to the narrow-chested, weak-chinned Tim Allerton, who, with shades of Oedipus, has until then considered his mother the only woman in the world he could respect and admire. The other is Cornelia Robson, the put-upon cousin of the dreadful Miss Van Schuyler, who with no hint of any relationship announces, “I am going to marry Dr Bessner. He asked me tonight” (412).

The sudden focus on romance underscores the pressure placed on women to be married. Both of the women concerned become involved with unsuitable men. They are unlikely combinations, and one needs to consider that marriage in Christie’s world may carry wider signification than being just a plot device. Intelligent, lively young women voluntarily join up with old or dysfunctional males, and willingly submit to their domination. Linnet and Jackie “love” a man who in almost every way is their inferior, yet they collude with all his actions that destroy their lives. The sensible and compassionate Rosalie Otterbourne remains unfazed when Tim confesses to multiple fraud and the theft of valuable jewellery: “she put out a ‘timid hand’ and touched his arm, ‘Don’t say that’” (377). Up until this moment Rosalie was a competent woman

upon whom her mother could rely, yet the prospect of matrimony acts to redefine her as timid so that she better fits her status as ‘wife’. Poirot encourages the romance by casually overlooking the theft of a necklace worth \$3,000,000 at today’s estimate. The implied author’s complicity with Poirot’s leniency to Tim Allerton reiterates male privilege. The loss of female innocence is detrimental to romance, but not the loss of male innocence. Nothing can save Jackie or Linnet, but Rosalie represents the Madonna—the other side of the temptress or castration threat—who has the power to redeem the fallen male.

Also with nods to Oedipus, Cornelia announces her engagement to Dr Bessner. He is a father figure at least twenty, perhaps thirty, years older than she is, and overweight. Challenged that she is marrying him for his money, Cornelia responds that Bessner is kind, he knows a lot, and she is sure she will have a wonderful life with him: “He says I really could help him in his work, and he is going to teach me all about neurosis” (413).

Both these women knowingly desire a marriage, which will see them play the role of mother or daughter, rather than partner, in the relationship. Rosalie Otterbourne replaces Tim Allerton’s mother—there to protect her child from his weakness. The expectation that Tim will have a sexual relationship with his new surrogate mother-cum-wife—Poirot expects her to put some stiffening into him—has classic Freudian overtones. Likewise, so does the marriage of Cornelia to the much older Dr Bessner. She expects to remain as “daughter” in the relationship, soaking up “the father’s wisdom” as she learns all about those things that are of interest to him.

As the implied author presents it, marriage is a great institution for dysfunctional men. It will save half-witted, greedy killers from the gallows, offer an apparent homosexual the chance to become “normal”, and provide a willing ear for the verbose “know-all”, who no doubt will in time be able to turn his wife into a study in neurosis. Both these women submit to the idealisation of the married state rather than be left as “old maids”.

How do we know, or can we ever know, whether this attitude to marriage is the pose of the implied author or the belief of Christie, the person? Wayne Booth opines that no story comes unmediated, and it is often through the novel's centre of consciousness that the actual author unconsciously filters his or her narrative (153). In *Death on the Nile*, Poirot, perhaps in competition with Jackie Bellefort, is the centre of consciousness, and both of them, for different reasons, are supportive of marriage, as was Christie. Her whole background presupposes marriage as a social stabiliser. Laura Thomson, the first biographer to have full access to Christie's papers, writes at some length about both of Christie's marriages. Her first ended in bitterness and her second was to a man sixteen years younger than her: "She was not in love with him. Nor was he in love with her. They were together for reasons other than love; and this, she thought, might well very well make for greater happiness" (297). In her life as well as her fiction, she appears to want a happy ending, and to her that means marriage with or without love. Despite her achievements, she believed that women's place was in the home, and often asserted that only men should have a career. Thompson reports her as saying, "Men have much better brains than women, don't you think?" Despite her immense wealth and success she also stated, "It makes me feel that after all, I have not been a failure in life, [because] I have succeeded as a wife" (83).

Christie's private statements about marriage and career are echoed sometimes, but not always, in her writing. Thompson cites the example of Rosamund Darnley, the heroine of *Evil under the Sun*, bemoaning her position to Poirot:

It seems to me to be an accepted idea that every woman will strive to live up to a man's ideals of her—that she will be grateful for his idealisation of her. One gets sick, tired, bored of being admired for impossible imaginary qualities. I am not a cross between an angel and a nurse. What respect can I have for the brains of anyone who thinks I am? (86)

On Poirot's reminder that she is a very successful businesswoman, she responds, "And yet all the same, I am nothing but a wretched old maid" (83). Similar to Rosalie and Cornelia, Rosamund has two choices: she either submits to the idealisation of the married state or remains on the fringe of society as an "old maid". Female masquerade should be understood as what women do in order to capture some

element of desirability, but at the price of renouncing their own desires. The betrothals of Rosalie and Cornelia restore the natural order but only at the cost of their identities. The implied author's support and idealisation of marriage suggest that, regardless of personal cost to the women, it is worth it. Those who disturb the "natural" order of marriage are denigrated or destroyed. The kleptomaniacal and vicious Miss Van Schuyler fits the "traditional" nasty role of the spinster, but any assumption that this is Christie the actual author's understanding of spinsterhood is unsettled by the implied author's creation of Miss Marple who challenges notions of spinsters as superfluous and fringe members of society. In *Death on the Nile*, however, "old maids" are portrayed as nasty; marriage is a reward, and anyone who disturbs the idealisation of marriage is despatched by a bullet. Poirot is no matchmaker, but as the novel's centre of consciousness he echoes Christie's private thoughts as to the desirability of marriage.

### Closure

Closure in *Death on the Nile* is circular and acts to negate any notions of female agency by returning society to the status quo. Poirot in the full knowledge that Jackie has a gun makes no effort to take it from her. As she is escorted ashore, alongside a stretcher bearing the cringing, frightened Simon, she reaches into her stocking top, pulls out the gun, and shoots him and then herself. Her action is the final transgression as she evades a masculine-ordered legal system by taking her own life. Yet by avoiding a public trial, she saves the "establishment" the embarrassment of acknowledging the presence of women who do not fit into the prescribed model of female passivity. The last scene returns to its original site, Malton-under-Wode, and to the locals of the Three Crowns who had first observed Linnet Ridgeway stepping out of her scarlet Rolls-Royce. The usual barflies are standing around discussing the death of "the famous, the beautiful, the wealthy Mrs Linnet Doyle", and one Mrs Burnaby remarks, "Well it doesn't seem to have done her much good poor lass." After a while, they stopped talking about her, and discussed instead who was going to win the Grand National (416). The threat of female agency has been repulsed, and the patriarchal order has been restored. All is right with the world.

Detective fiction has a gendered programme written into its narrative mode, and the tendency towards decisive closure reiterates an authoritative locus for knowledge. This programme is evident within Christie's *Death on the Nile*. A Butlerian reading has revealed how comprehensively the implied author punishes any transgressive behaviour by non-compliant females. Plain and others claim that Christie's females have agency, but there is no mention of the cost. She challenges the patriarchy with her strong, intelligent women, but also punishes them because of that challenge. She rewards the more compliant, the Rosalies and the Cornelias, with the "gift" of marriage, and is noticeably harder on her female sinners than on their male counterparts. One has to decide whether the way various speakers manipulate ideologies of feminine and masculine behaviour is, as Christie's supporters claim, a protest against the patriarchy or a social commentary that reflects her social milieu.

Is Linnet Ridgeway, with her wealth and property, a site of agency and political resistance, or merely a reflection of Christie's own propensity and ability to buy and accumulate property? Her concentration on genre conventions at the expense of character development leaves room in the text for the production of plural and contradictory meanings. However, the nature of the genre revolves around competing viewpoints and changing implications, so contradictions may say more about genre requirements than about authorial convictions. Jackie needs to be a sympathetic character for the plot to work, but she also needs to go beyond the boundaries of regulatory behaviour. She uses her feminine wiles to mislead Poirot by implying that she is a victim caught up in a situation she cannot escape, but she is not a convincing *femme fatale*.

The plot only makes sense if Simon is the *homme fatale* who leads females to their destruction, but Christie's underwriting of him makes this scarcely credible. The whole story is dependent on him possessing a powerful and seductive presence that creates a bond of irresistible desire that propels Linnet into an unfortunate marriage and Jackie into the leadership role that leads to her demise. The "underwriting" of Simon is a performative act that shifts the blame for his actions on to the two women, and illustrates how the genre serves the hegemony.



The feminisation of Poirot could act as a counter to Christie's treatment of non-compliant women, but a Butlerian reading suggests that the claim by Munt and others that Poirot is a feminised hero is open to question. Munt offers his name as a parody, a clown, whose many attributes reside in the realm of the feminine. Yet his birthplace suggests neutrality, independence and bravery. Arguably, his implied creator has invested him with a masculine authority of a high order, which he uses to preserve the hegemony. *Death on the Nile* appears to act as a cautionary tale for women who disturb patriarchal norms. The imbalance of the body count, however, leaves a small space for a covert female voice to draw attention to the gender politics while simultaneously supporting the status quo.

## Chapter 3

### P D James and Adam Dalgliesh

I accept that fiction is an artificial form. The detective story may be more artificial than most, but every work of fiction is a way in which the writer has used his or her interests, compulsions, perhaps neuroses, to provide a fictional world which he or she hopes will be attractive to the reader.

P D James

Phyllis Dorothy James White, Baroness James of Holland Park, is not overly impressed with Agatha Christie; in an interview with Robert McCrum she describes her as an indifferent stylist with a limited range of tricks that the experienced reader can see through easily (2). As P D James, the creator of Adam Dalgliesh, she claims that the detective story has moved on from the oversimplifications that always led to the triumph of the good and the punishment of the bad, where too often psychological realities are sacrificed to the demands of the plot. Identified only by her neutral initials, the general tenor of her early novels convinced many readers that Dalgliesh's creator was a man, a fact that, forty years on, gives her great pleasure. Despite her disregard for Christie's puzzle-driven plots or literary skill, James's *The Lighthouse* has all the elements of a classic Christie whodunit: the enclosed area, the limited number of suspects, nearly all upper class, a reason to dislike the victim, and the outsider who comes in to solve the mystery. A famous novelist is found hanged from the lighthouse on Combe, a small island off the coast of Cornwall. Used by the government as a retreat, it has half-a-dozen guests seeking respite from the pressures of high office. Closed off from the public and accessible only by private boat or helicopter, the novelist's murder can only have been carried out by an insider. It is never satisfactorily explained why the government should be interested in the death of a novelist, however famous. Sending a senior commander like Adam Dalgliesh is as much a contrivance as any of Christie's, but unlike in Christie's fiction, the complex, multi-faceted characters of James are more dominant than the mechanics of the plot.

Subjected to a Butlerian reading of *The Lighthouse*, the relationships of the characters, and their interaction in the politics of power, gender and agency, act as critiques of patriarchal practice. The phallic lighthouse is disused and redundant but perhaps open to resignification. Nathan Oliver, whose murder is at the heart of the novel, represents

a failed patriarchy. Alongside him sits the normative patriarchal “father figure” of Adam Dalglish whose role is revealed as the restoration of a more benign patriarchy. The contested political relationship of Kate Miskin and Francis Benton-Smith also contributes to this modification. On the periphery of the main action is Dalglish’s on-call girlfriend Emma Lavenham, who tacitly questions presumptive heterosexuality, and, along with Kate, mediates Benton’s succession. Closure under a Butlerian reading also brings into question the implied author’s positioning on matters of ideology and gender.

### **Patriarchal Models**

Nathan Oliver, the famous novelist, was an ill-tempered man of mean disposition, disliked, without exception, by all of the island’s twenty inhabitants. His death had been particularly gruesome; the fourteen-foot drop on the end of a rope nearly wrenched his head off, but apart from his daughter, nobody mourned his death. The reasons both permanent dwellers and guests alike wished him dead are attributable to a pattern of deceit, bullying, aggression and arrogance. The last remaining family member of the original owners of the island, eighty-year-old Emily Holcombe, is distressed by his claim that the island rightly belongs to him. The government scientist, Yelland, believed Oliver’s latest novel was a deliberate attempt to discredit him, and Maycroft, the administrator, driven near to breakdown by his bullying, wanted him off the island. More important for the outcome of the novel, we come to learn that Oliver’s murder is a direct result of his abuse of patriarchal power. His treatment of his adult daughter is appalling. He controls her and virtually turns her into a slave. When she exercises her sexual agency by taking a lover, he flies into a rage threatening to abandon her and throw her out of the house. His peremptory response is, “I propose to book the launch for tomorrow afternoon and I expect you and your lover to be on it” (84). It is not the treatment of his daughter, however, that leads to his murder; rather, it is the abandonment of his onetime lover and their illegitimate son some twenty-five years earlier. Seething with hatred for Oliver’s treatment of himself and his mother, the son, Daniel Padgett, had come to the island seeking redress for her, and recognition for himself. Oliver’s rejection of both claims

result in his brutal murder. From a genre perspective, James appears to cheat a little when she reveals Padgett as the killer. He is a minor character, the island's odd-job man. Long tradition dictates that the killer should come from the inner circle, not the butler, the maid, or someone of a different class. This is mitigated in part by the fact of him being Oliver's son. If Oliver had acted correctly, Padgett would have been a member of the "right class". The disruption of genre tradition acts to focus attention on the excessive use of patriarchal power. Oliver had abandoned both his lover and his new born son, and now rejects his son's claim on him. When his adult daughter takes a lover, he disowns her, and forces her from the house. He exercises a range of illegitimate power that is connotative of bad patriarchal performance. His murder is the failure of filiation. He also fails a fundamental rule of the patriarchal father-son succession. The way he is murdered and left dangling from the crumbling phallic lighthouse suggests that we consider the dysfunctional father/son relationship of Oliver and Padgett as amounting to the internal destruction of the phallocracy.

The other murder victim, Adrian Boyde, is also a failed patriarch. An Anglican priest and recovering alcoholic, he is on leave from the Church after falling down drunk while distributing communion. He had come to believe that God "couldn't be both good and all powerful; life's a struggle between two forces—good and evil, God and the devil" (287). This made Boyde a party to the heresy of Manichaeism, and this, combined with his alcoholism, made him a "father" who had failed. He had also been one of Oliver's victims. Knowing Boyde's condition, Oliver set out to get him drunk to witness what happened when "you feed wine to an alcoholic" (276). Both men failed in their patriarchal roles, Boyde through weakness, indiscretion and indecision, Oliver through his arrogance and wilful disregard of anyone's comfort but his own.

Contrast the patriarchal failure of these two men to Adam Dalgliesh. He is the embodiment of a moderate, constructive patriarchy, the symbolic father and signifier of power and authority who structures the social order. He brings with him the "half ecclesiastical patina of authority bestowed on those who deal in esoteric mysteries" (6), the easy acknowledgement that he knows and sees more than others see, and he is the anchoring subjectivity for the progression and closure of the narrative. His name and rank establish his authority. The narrative opens with the words "Commander

Adam Dalgliesh”. As Commander Adam Dalgliesh, his rank, biblical name and solid Scots ancestry name him into power and privilege, whereas his lover, Emma Lavenham, is named into femininity and beauty. Her soft feminine given name, coupled with a family name the same as one of the most beautiful villages in England, establishes a relationship that puts Dalgliesh in the dominant position. Professionally, his rank assures him of dominance, but rank gives no such assurance to Detective Inspector Kate Miskin in her contested relationship with Sergeant Francis Benton-Smith. Most of the time she is referred to as “Kate”, while he is nearly always called “Benton”, sometimes “Sergeant”, but never “Francis” or “Frank”. Dalgliesh is “AD” behind his back but “Commander” or “Sir” to his face. The use of the informal “Kate” is a performative act that excludes her from the normative male address of surname or rank, and keeps her outside the masculine world of the Metropolitan Police Force. Thus, the implied author’s choice of names for her protagonists becomes part of the hegemonic process that privileges the masculine over the feminine, and lays the foundation, within the novel, for the construction of an ideology built upon masculine authority.

Having named Dalgliesh into power and privilege, the author proceeds to endorse that authority. The story opens on a meeting of senior bureaucrats called together at the express wish of the Prime Minister. Dalgliesh’s participation in such a meeting tells the reader that he has important roles beyond his titular rank. Kate Miskin and her lover Detective Inspector Piers Tarrant confirm this with their observation that “They are always after him for other and bigger jobs and he is always tied up with one top-level meeting or another” (20). That he knows and sees more than anyone else is also signalled in the first chapter when he is silently dismissive of the opinion of a fellow member of the group who suggests that, with such a limited number of suspects, the enquiry should be over quickly: “Only someone ignorant of a murder investigation ... could have been so misjudging” (13). Having accepted the assignment, he returns to his office, and contacts his junior officers. With the investigation underway, his thoughts then turn to Emma and the long weekend they had planned. He realises he could have turned down the job, but he wanted the excitement of the hunt, and besides, Emma “would make her own arrangement for the weekend, perhaps even excluding him from her thoughts” (15). In the first chapter, Dalgliesh’s primacy is

established; name, rank, and knowledge signal his dominant position, both publicly and privately. Even when struck down by SARS, racked by fever, confined to an isolation ward, and absent from the investigation, he remains the established and “knowing” authority.

### **Gender Processes**

As Dalglish is named into authority, his junior officers are similarly named into their subordinate roles. His ordering of priorities to begin the investigation is part of the process: “First he must phone Kate and Benton-Smith” (13). The informal “Kate” and the more formal “Benton-Smith” are performative utterances that act to reiterate gender difference and masculine privilege. The illocutionary effect of the familiar “Kate” suggests Dalglish knows her better than he does Benton. The perlocutionary effect is to demonstrate that his privileged position relative to that of Kate is not merely dependent on his higher rank, but also upon gender, which has already consigned her to second place. Conversely, by using Benton’s surname, Dalglish recognises his maleness and affinity to those senior Whitehall officials he had met earlier in the day and addressed in a similar manner. The interpellations of rank and gender mean that the hierarchic relationship between Miskin and Benton is always in a state of contestation. Her senior rank is neutralised by his privileged gender that in turn is diluted by the “otherness” of his ethnicity. The contest, however, takes place within a phallogocentric framework and is destined to favour Benton. He is supported by what Munt calls the myth-making process and what Butler calls the “foundationalist fable”—a performative invocation of a nonhistorical “before” guaranteeing a presocial ontology of persons who consent to being governed and, thereby constitutes the legitimacy of a social contract” based on the privileging of the phallus (GT 4). The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics is based on the presumption of a stable binary system of gender and requires that a defined subject needs to be in place before political action can occur, a view that Butler dismisses, arguing that “there need not be a ‘doer’ behind the deed, but that the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed” (GT 195).

The deed in this instance is the narrative action of *The Lighthouse*. The different reactions of Miskin and Benton to Dalglish’s telephone call telling them to make

ready to leave for Combe within the hour serves to endorse the foundationalist fable based on the presupposed male/female binary. Ostensibly, the different reactions of two people to similar calls become coded messages reinforcing gender expectations. Benton “listened to the brief message, said ‘Yes sir,’ and switched off. His bag, as always, was already packed” (33). Kate received the call, and minutes later, she began her packing: woollen trousers, tweed jacket, roll-top cashmere jumper, stout walking shoes, one change of bra and pants, a second warmer jumper, a silk skirt, pyjamas, a woollen dressing gown, and a spare toilet bag. In contrasting the two approaches, we see the reinforcement of at least two behaviour patterns designated as peculiarly male or female. Benton is organised and ready to go. Miskin—to keep using “Kate” contributes towards naturalising her lesser status—needs time to think. Her bags are not ready, clothes are more important to her than to Benton, or so it seems, and the whole scene buys into the cliché of the woman laden with suitcases to go away for a weekend, while the male travels the world with all he needs in a briefcase. The binary that goes male/female, organised/disorganised always situates the female and her qualities as subordinate. Benton takes a single bag, and by choosing not to detail what he has in it, at the same time as emphasising the contents of Kate’s, James becomes party to the continuation of gender stereotypes. Attention to clothing is accepted as a female attribute; for a man to show an interest in clothes, as per Hercule Poirot, immediately raises the question of his sexuality. That Kate’s clothes are eminently rational and suitable for the environment she is about to encounter is not mentioned by the implied author, nor is the dark green Nehru suit that Benton keeps in his permanently packed bag. By playing these things down, James reinforces notions of gender boundaries and foundationalist myths.

Once on the island, Dalgliesh, Miskin and Benton work as a team, but the protocols of rank and gender remain in place. Formalities remain observed and at the end of the first day, they retire to their respective apartments. Dalgliesh, as befits his rank, has the largest, and is closest to the main house. Miskin and Benton dine alone in their adjacent apartments, which are the same size. With other colleagues, Kate would have automatically dined with them, but with Benton, it is different. Although she outranks him, this would not normally be a barrier to a collegial relationship. She resents Benton’s education and ambition. His extraordinarily good looks, combined

with his touch of cynicism and ruthlessness, did not faze her. She is troubled, however, by his unspoken confidence that his intelligence would enable him to calculate a career path that would put him in the eye of those that counted and increase his chances of being on the fast track to promotion. For his part, he is unsure of Kate, not just because she is a woman. She is always correct. She is also less openly critical than some of his earlier bosses, but he senses that she is ill at ease with him: “It had nothing to do with his colour, his sex or his social status, although he sensed she had some hang ups over class” (31). In the end, he decides she just does not like him. She always addresses him as “Sergeant”. He always calls her “Ma’am”. In this situation, formal wariness between them precludes any notion of them dining together, but for Kate it is more than that. Rather, her reluctance arises from the after-dinner practice of reviewing the case with Dalgliesh. Traditionally, he always asked the junior member to speak first. Kate fears that, if she eats with Benton before the meeting, it would “provide a dress rehearsal” for him “to show off his intelligence” as a prelude to leading off their discussion with Dalgliesh later in the evening (265).

In preparation for the meeting, Kate showers changes her shirt, brushes and replaits her hair, then knocks at Benton’s door to signal she is ready:

He came out immediately and she saw he had changed into a Nehru-style suit in a green so dark it looked black. It gave him a look, hieratic, distinguished and alien, but he wore it unselfconsciously as if he had changed into something comfortable merely to please himself. (265)

Kate nearly makes a comment but knows it would be “revealingly petty”. She feels out-manoeuvred. The standard procedure at these meetings is to have a drink, then for convenience sake decide on a name for the presumed murderer. Normally she would be prepared, but, on this occasion, she is without an idea. Benton then volunteers two names, “Smeaton”, who designed the prototype of Combe’s lighthouse, and “Calcraft”, a nineteenth-century hangman. “Calcraft” is accepted. As the junior member, Benton then leads off the discussion. He gives a detailed account of the facts then speculates on what that may mean. Kate interrupts, “You are supposed to be giving us the facts. You’ve strayed into supposition” (269). She takes



over the discussion, but Dalgliesh raises doubts about some of her logic, and then the debate

moves evenly between the three of them. Yet the overall impression remains that Benton and Dalgliesh have somehow managed to isolate her. Benton's dark green Nehru jacket, not mentioned in any description of his ready-packed bag, and handsomeness give him an air of authority. He comes to the meeting better prepared than Kate, and her interruption is unnecessarily abrasive. More tellingly, Benton starts to pick up the glasses as they stand up to leave. Dalgliesh waves him off, "No, leave [them] I'll see to them" (271). This utterance acts to raise Benton to equal status with Dalgliesh, and tempts the reader to speculate what would have happened if Kate had made the same gesture. Despite her rank, Kate's subject position is held in place by a heterosexual framework that seeks to maintain a stable distinction between masculine privilege and feminine subordination.

Benton is subject to similar forces in relation to his ethnicity and the boundaries of racial expectations. His mother is Indian, his father Anglo-Saxon. She is a successful paediatrician, he the principal of a London comprehensive school. They live in South Kensington, and they have money, privilege and the cultural assurance of the prosperous, liberal, upper middle-class. His parents have paid for his up-market flat and its contents. He is cultured, Cambridge-educated, ambitious, but has still not won acceptance among his colleagues:

He was aware that he was still regarded with wary circumspection. He felt himself to be surrounded by a variety of organisations, including the criminal law, dedicated to protecting his racial sensitivities, as if he could be as easily offended as a Victorian virgin confronted by a flasher. He wished these racial warriors would leave him alone. Did they want to stigmatise minorities as over-sensitive, insecure and paranoid? (29)

No one is calling Benton "nigger" or "wog"; nor are these terms on their own what Butler calls foundational fables; they are part of a wider construct, the effect of historic discourses and interpellations that performatively constitute subjects as raced. Butler is pessimistic about the limits of language and its ability to bring about change on the issue of race. In *Bodies that Matter*, she asks the question:

Can [such terms] overcome [their] constitutive history of injury? ... When and how does a term like “queer” become subject to an affirmative resignification for some when a term like “nigger” despite some recent efforts at reclamation, appears capable of only reinscribing its pain. How and where does discourse reiterate injury such that the various effects to recontextualise and resignify a given term meet their limit in this other, more brutal, and relentless form of repetition? (223)

James appears to take a more positive attitude, and does so by overwriting Benton’s racial difference through the medium of his patriarchal heritage. His mother brought money, beauty, and Roman Catholicism to the marriage, but it was his father who moved easily between the East and the West. He loved to revisit Delhi where he “wore Indian clothes, [and] performed the salaam with more ease than he shook hands at home” (30). His paternal grandfather gives him access to the world of mountaineering; his paternal grandmother teaches him the game of Scrabble. When both these skills prove valuable on Combe, the text refers to their paternal origin. “I used to play Scrabble as a boy with my grandmother. The English one (255) ... My grandfather was a climber and he taught me” (401). When knowledge of religion also proves valuable, there is no accompanying mention of its maternal origin. The silence on the matter of any maternal contribution becomes a performative that devalues the feminine. Benton is a sophisticated, and ambitious man who faces no overt racism, but the efforts and sincerity of the “racial warriors” serve, by default, to remind and reiterate the historicity of racism and contribute to its endorsement as presupposed and natural. The author’s attempt to redress the racial balance is done through the valorisation of patriarchal lineage. This authorial performative has the effect of reiterating male privilege. This among other performative utterances and gestures acts to convey the implied author’s sympathy with the hegemonic model of gender organisation.

### **“Having” or “Being” the Phallus**

Dalgliesh’s falling ill, and replacement by Kate Miskin may be a performative choice by the implied author to allow for the intervention of female agency within a masculine context. Her “in-the-field” promotion, subsequently confirmed by Dalgliesh’s immediate superior, legitimises her authority, but it is authority she can

never quite master. She now occupies a hybrid position—a woman with authority traditionally vested in a male. Arguably, she now “has” the phallus in some sense. Within Lacanian thinking, the phallus is the crucial signifier of power, authority and speaking position. By means of the phallus, the subject occupies the position of “I” in discourse. Theoretically, Kate’s being a woman does not disqualify her from this role. Even though the possession of a penis predisposes the subject to “having” the phallus, it need not be its only occasion or fetish. In practice, however, the narrative has already sexualised Kate within the conventions of heterosexuality through her love-making with Piers Tarrant (22), so that despite her new responsibility she also remains in the female position of “being”, rather than “having”, the phallus. In this ambiguous position, her agency will always be limited, and apart from a brief moment at the lighthouse, she needs Benton’s cooperation to support her promotion to authority. Theirs becomes a collaborative effort that may represent a direct challenge to standard patriarchal formations of hierarchy. However, her “being” the phallus also ties her to hegemonic norms.

Lacan posits that the phallus is the “signifier of signifiers”, and that it defines each subject’s access to the symbolic order. In her account of Lacan’s theories, Elizabeth Grosz explains that “as a signifier the phallus is not an object to be acquired or an identity to be achieved. It is only through the desire of the other that one’s own position—as either being or having—the phallus is possible” (125). She goes on to say,

If the penis assumes the function of the phallus this is because female sexuality is considered a mutilation or castration. Because of its erectile form and ‘preference’ for penetration, the phallus serves to ‘fill’ the lack. This function can only be performed in so far as the phallus can also be regarded, in addition to being a sign of sexual difference, as the signifier of the object of the other’s desire. As a signifier, the phallus works its effects on the subject only through the mediation of the other. (257-258)

To the extent the mediation of the other is necessary for the phallus to “[work] its effects”, one may consider if Kate, through the ambiguities of her position, serves as the “other” who mediates the passage of authority from Dalgliesh to Benton.

Kate's 'promotion' alters her status within the police force but leaves almost unchanged her position within the symbolic. Already cast in a specific gender role that delineates her female attributes and fringe status within a male hierarchy, she never commands the discourse. Even when legitimately in charge her gendered history prevents her from consolidating her position of authority. This is clearly illustrated by her behaviour when Dalglish falls ill. His discovery of the battered body of Adrian Boyd coincides with the intensifying of the flu like symptoms he had been feeling all week, and he collapses. With no cars on the island, it takes some time for help to arrive. With her senior officer incapacitated, Kate should take control, or at the least order the crime scene secured. Instead, she and Benton wait for the doctor to examine Dalglish. Understandably concerned for his welfare, Kate is also waiting for his permission to take over. It is not until he calls to her from his stretcher warning her not to come too close and says, "...this means you will have to take over", that she feels able to act. For a brief while, "she appeared to have difficulty speaking. Then she said calmly, 'Yes of course'" (368). Her calm "Yes sir, of course" to Dalglish, makes her sound cool and efficient, but already the codings of gender are working to transfer the practicalities of power to Benton. Unlike many examples in the genre, this does not provoke a power struggle between her and her male colleague. Benton never questions her authority, and any suggestions he makes contain no hint of criticism.

The examination of Adrian Boyde's body begins the process that symbolically transfers power to Benton without disturbing the hierarchy of the Metropolitan Police Force. When Kate squats down to inspect the congealed mess of blood and smashed bone that was Adrian Boyde: "she felt herself shaking with emotions that she knew she must somehow control, a sick horror, anger and a pity which was more difficult to control than either anger or revulsion" (370). Her emotion allows Benton to play the rational male and make pertinent observations about the body and its position on the ground. She continues to fret, and worries about where the now two dead bodies could be stored while waiting for the pathologist. Benton responds, "In the circumstances, ma'am, it's hardly likely to worry either of them" (371). Their two different reactions, her fretting, his logic, are performative reiterations of gendered identity. As Kate continues to worry about moving the priest, Benton takes the active

role and suggests, “Why not move him into my apartment, ma’am? ... He can stay on the stretcher until [the helicopter arrives]” (371). Realising the practicality of his suggestion she thanks him, and then wonders why she had not thought about it herself. Kate’s foremost reaction to the problem is emotional, but it is the male attribute of reason that solves the problem. Shaken by her own indecision, she tries to gather her thoughts and without thinking says, “I wonder what AD would do?” She did not expect any response, “but after a pause, Benton said, ‘It isn’t a question of what Mr Dalgliesh would do, ma’am, it’s a question of what you decide to do’” (372).

Encouraged by Benton’s tacit acknowledgement of her leadership, and his timely reminder that she, not Dalgliesh, is in charge, Kate collects herself, and issues Benton with clear instructions on how to proceed. She then goes back to the main house and calls Dalgliesh’s superior and tells him what has happened. He confirms her position of authority, “You’d better carry on” (373). Kate with her leadership role endorsed is fully aware, that whatever the outcome, “the final responsibility would be hers” (376). Benton sees the tension in her shoulders and neck, and he “[feels] a spasm of pity” for her”; the case could make or break both of them but it was Kate “who was in charge” (379). Benson’s ready acceptance of Kate’s leadership may be politically motivated; he would be the one less damaged if the investigation went wrong. Nevertheless he displays an empathy towards her that is more feminine than masculine. Alternatively, it could be read as the empathy of one outsider for another thrust into leadership of a symbolic law that normally excludes them.

Officially, Kate is in charge but public acceptance is problematic. She calls a meeting of the islanders, and tells them there has been a second murder. She also tells them that, because of Dalgliesh’s illness, the island is quarantined, and she is in charge. Maycroft, the administrator, urges the islanders to “cooperate with Inspector Miskin’s inquiry as we did with Mr Dalgliesh’s” (382). Maycroft’s desire to help Kate unwittingly reinforces gender privilege—Dalgliesh’s maleness is acknowledgement of his authority, whereas Kate needs the interpellation of rank to give her credibility. It soon becomes evident that rank is not enough. Kate outlines her plan to bring everybody into the main house, or cottages close to it, until the murderer is

apprehended. At this, the islanders begin to object, and the meeting starts to get out of hand. Benton recognises that the ringleader is Emily Holcombe, and he wills Kate to take control. He glances over to her, and she picks up the message. She turns to him, “Have you anything to add Sergeant?” (386), and effectively passes control to him.

He fixes his eye on Emily Holcombe, and virtually repeats Kate’s message, which amounts to saying, we are not moving from whim, we are now short of manpower and it is sensible and prudent if we are all in one place. “If you put it like that, Sergeant, I suppose we have no choice,’ says a grim Emily Holcombe” (386). Kate’s gender undermines her rank, but in this instance, she is complicit. Once she recognises Benton’s implicit identification of the ringleader, she could have used the authority of her position to regain control. Instead, she defers to a male of junior rank. The more intuitive Benton reads the situation better, and it is his masculinity rather than his rank that wins Emily’s reluctant—“if you put it like that”—acceptance. Perhaps more interesting is that Benton commands both sides of the rational/intuitive binary. His intuitive recognition of Emily Holcombe as the ringleader, and his authoritative masculine presentation of the very same rational message that Kate had given, without success, only minutes before, allows him to regain control. This draws attention to the power imbalance between the genders. Kate, while not used to the senior role, is an experienced and capable police officer, well used to dealing with the public. When Emily Holcombe fires a parting shot, sneering that all of them squeezed into the hall will look like over-mature university students at an exam, and asks if Benton will be invigilating, Kate parries easily with “No one will, Miss Holcombe. Are you proposing to cheat?” (391). This quick retort leaves room for an alternative reading that presents Kate as a pragmatist who passes the meeting over to Benton when she recognises her limitations against powerful gender prejudice.

Once the meeting is over, Miskin and Benton set about reinterviewing the now widened group of suspects. They start with Mrs Burridge, the cook, “a woman so altered by grief that she was unrecognisable as the woman [they] had first seen after Oliver’s murder” (393). Again, Kate leaves room for Benton to move into Dalgliesh’s patriarchal role. Overwhelmed by the desolation and despair she sees in Mrs Burridge, Kate “wished passionately that A D were there. He would know what to

say, he always did” (393). Then she “heard Benton speaking and was surprised that his voice was so gentle” (395). Gradually Mrs Burrige calmed down, became coherent, and told them of Adrian Boyde’s visit the previous night when she had given him the cope found carelessly flung over his battered body. Kate leaves the meeting convinced it was a waste of time, but Benton reassures her that the interview was necessary because it could have supplied vital clues. With time for reflection, Kate realises that, limited as the interview was, any success it had come from Benton’s ability to handle the distraught Mrs Burrige. She compliments him and he responds, “I had a religious education, ma’am. It comes in useful sometimes” (398). Benton’s background gives him access to a discourse unavailable to Kate. Readers of earlier novels by James will be aware that Dalgliesh also had a religious upbringing; his father was the rector of a Norfolk country parish. Despite his colour, Benton is not an outsider.

This is again demonstrated as he and Kate consider the problem of how to retrieve vital evidence that they believe is at the bottom of an almost vertical cliff. The only way down is a dangerous climb that needs two people. One of the islanders, Jago, is a rock-climbing expert, but also a suspect. Benton admits to having done some rock climbing in his youth and volunteers, but Jago is reluctant to take an inexperienced partner. He changes his mind when he realises that Benton’s grandfather was a famous mountaineer, well known for his exploits in the Himalayas: “Are you Hugh Benton-Smith’s grandson?”(402). Benton’s affirmative acknowledgement removes Jago’s doubts and the climb down begins. The descent of the cliff is tense and dangerous, and all Kate can do is stand nervously at the top. Her “waiting” role is a performative act that serves to feminise her. Benton recovers the murder weapon and, after an equally dangerous return climb, passes it to a delighted Kate. The discovery naturally pleases him, but he gets far greater satisfaction from the shared danger, the mutual dependence and the fellowship of the climb. He and Jago shake hands silently, a moment of male bonding that leaves Kate as the outsider. They drive back to the house, and in what the reader must interpret as a necessary prelude to some erotic encounter Benton looks at her and realises “in a moment of surprised revelation that Kate could be called beautiful” (410). The whole action on the cliff top serves to feminise Kate as a possible object of desire. Benton’s access to the discourse of

mountaineering places him at the centre of the action, and forces her into the passive waiting role.

Dalgliesh's brief reappearance in order to solve the crime not only underlines the transient nature of Kate's leadership role, but also serves to render ambiguous notions of uncontested masculine power. After two days isolation and confinement his fever breaks, and suddenly, with absolute certainty, "he saw the answer to the puzzle" (423). He recalled snatches of conversation, smoke coming from a chimney, and Oliver Nathan's novel in an unlikely bookcase, and he realised the truth. He calls Kate to his bedside and tells her what he knows. This "vision" returns Dalgliesh to centre stage. Its illocutionary effect is to validate his role as the "great" detective and enhance the mystique of masculine power. At the same time, its perlocutionary effect acts to diminish Kate, by showing that a fevered middle-aged white male is superior to a young, healthy, educated woman. Arguably, however, Dalgliesh's action creates the possibility of a multiplicity of other perlocutionary effects that act to subvert his position of masculine privilege. The image of a man who has been seriously ill for days, suddenly waking with all his senses intact and sharper than a bright young woman, becomes a parody of the "great detective". In Austin's terms, Dalgliesh's brief reappearance has failed in its illocutionary aim; it is non-felicitous. The perlocutionary effect of this failure may well be to draw attention to the fictions of both the great detective and the male mystique. This parody, whether deliberate or inadvertent, serves to disrupt patriarchal norms. Performativity succeeds through repeated reinscriptions that accumulate authority through the citation of what has gone before. However, these reiterations are never exact replicas, and create the always-present risk of transgressing gender boundaries. Dalgliesh's "in a single bound Jack was free", the escape clause of so many kids' Saturday morning cinema, transgresses the boundaries of male representation. During Dalgliesh's illness, Kate has worked systematically towards a solution. She becomes the rational male, while Dalgliesh, who relies on emotion, and intuition, moves to the feminine side of the binary. Self-perpetuating as performatives are, they do not always succeed. Each reiteration risks some deviation from the norm, which leaves open the possibility of change. The nature of Dalgliesh's illness also disturbs his heroic status. Conventions of the genre would have him in bed recovering from gunshot wounds, or at least a severe beating. SARS, exotic as it is, is not the result of some derring-do or high-risk



rescue; it is a viral disease, not unlike influenza. He is simply a sick man too ill to get out of bed. Confined to bed, he may appear to be giving the orders, but he is powerless to act. Vision or no vision, his illness makes him dependent on Kate. Yet Kate in her turn is dependent on Benton.

Following Dalglish's lead, Miskin and Benton return to Padgett's cottage to conduct a further search. The subsequent arrest of Padgett at the old lighthouse acts to illustrate Kate's provisional or conditional access to masculine discourse as well as to suggest her role as the conduit that facilitates Benton's symbolic filiation and succession to Dalglish. During the search, Kate gives signs of becoming comfortable in her leadership role. When Benton ventures an opinion on one of Oliver's books, her "Spare me the literary technique. Let's get moving" (430) is in the tone of someone relaxed and in charge. She acts decisively when she hears that the suspect has a hostage locked in the old lighthouse. She advises the islanders to keep calm and "do what I say" (435). This time there are no objections. However, when she realises that the lighthouse, with its strong wooden door, barred windows and gallery too high for any ladder, is all but impregnable, she falters and returns briefly to feminine passivity. "She wished she knew what AD would have done" (437). However, she quickly recovers her nerve: orders the spectators back to the main house and tells Benton to go to the infirmary and bring back all the Vaseline. She estimated that if she stripped off and covered herself with grease there was a chance that she could slide through the bars of a small window about twelve feet from the ground:

[She] was already taking off her clothes, leaving only her pants and bra, socks and shoes. She prised open the tin of Vaseline and began scooping up the shining mess, smearing it thickly over her body. Benton came to help. She wasn't aware of his moving hands, only the cold slab of grease spread thickly on her shoulders, back and hips. (438)

With Benton holding her around the waist, she slides between the bars feet first until inevitably she is stuck. She urges Benton to push as hard as possible. "The pain was appalling and she felt the dislocation of her shoulder (...) But she managed to gasp, 'Keep pushing, that's an order. Harder, harder'" (439). In this simulation of a sexually charged scene, Kate is in control. Suddenly she is through. In agony, she scrabbles down to the heavy door, and "with difficulty she shot back the heavy bolt,

Benton came in” (439). Opening the door for him disrupts hegemonic norms. It reverses the practice of men opening doors for women, and marks Kate as Benton’s equal. More importantly for the thrust of this essay, it places her in the role of facilitator, admitting him fully into a patriarchal order that had previously been restricted by his “otherness”.

Once inside, Benton quietly and effectively takes control. He hands Miskin her trousers and jacket. She tries to put on the jacket, but needs his help. Anxious to push ahead, she says, “Leave the trousers. I’m decent.” Quietly he responded, “Better put them on, ma’am. You may need to make an arrest” (440). In popular parlance she now wears the trousers, which makes for an interesting amalgam of masculine and feminine performativity. They race up the stairs to confront the killer and his frightened hostage. Kate tries to reason with him, but is met with a “spitting stream of obscenities, violent, filthily sexual, full of hate”, which forces her back. Suddenly, “Benton’s quiet voice was in her ear, ‘Better let me try, ma’am.’” She steps away, and he moves past her “more confidently and purposefully than she had dared”. He took the hostage’s arm, and in a quiet voice begins to speak to the killer: “Kate couldn’t hear what he said but there was no interruption from [the suspect] and she had the ridiculous vision she was watching two acquaintances speaking together with the ease of mutual understanding.” After some time the talking stopped, and Benton quietly held out his hand to the hostage then motioned to the suspect to step away. Making herself stand upright, Kate looked into Padgett’s eyes and “spoke the words of arrest” (441).

The lighthouse episode is a rare example of Kate disturbing gender norms, but if the lighthouse is a phallic symbol, her entry illustrates the difficult position of the feminine within a phallic environment. The way she is characterised suggests an attempt to blend femininity and agency, but notwithstanding this she remains beholden to male patronage. Her move to the privileged side of the binary is always conditional or compromised. Benton’s paradoxical insistence that she put on the trousers, a signifier of masculinity, is immediately compromised by her inability to handle Padgett’s aggressive refusal to recognise her authority, and once again Benton has to take over. After the event, she asks him what he had said to Padgett while

standing high on the lighthouse's balcony. "I appealed to the strongest emotion he felt—hatred of his father" (444). It was better for him to be known as a double murderer and have his name forever linked with the famous father who had abandoned him and his mother, rather than as the cowardly killer of a young female hostage. Again, Benton demonstrates his control of the appropriate discourse.

Significant, also, is the implied author's treatment of Kate's near-naked body. Earlier Benton had recognised Kate as beautiful thus creating the potential for a sexual encounter. The scene where he rubs Vaseline over her semi-naked body is sexually charged and reaches its climax when, with her encouragement, he forces her through the narrow opening where her body becomes equivalent to the phallus/penis in its penetrative function. She thus enters the lighthouse, a phallic symbol of male dominance. Given the euphoria of the moment and the intimacy of the Vaseline episode, conventions of genre or fictional gender relationships could have emphasised her female sexuality as the lead into a torrid sexual encounter between her and Benton. But Kate is neither temptress nor victim. Half-naked though she is, she does not become a sex object. By maintaining a professional distance, she subverts both gender and genre norms.

However, her mediating role of opening the door for Benton, while in one sense a reversal of gender roles, is a performative act that serves to reinforce hegemonic norms. It signals the transfer of the role of the symbolic father from Dalglish to Benton. The phallic lighthouse is crumbling disused and redundant. As Emily Holcombe observes, it is merely a symbol, a relic of the past (336). Illness and murder have disturbed and damaged its symbolic importance. Dalglish, the symbolic father, has been rendered temporarily impotent, whilst Oliver and Boyde have proved failures in their patriarchal roles. However, though the symbols of power may be crumbling, the modified patriarchy of Dalglish remains intact. Its constitutive structures and institutions still function and are represented by Benton, through the mediation of Kate.

Despite her attributes and skills, authorial choice has maintained her in an ambivalent position. She lacks many of the things that contribute towards Benton's success: loving parents, family connections, a religious upbringing, and a tertiary education. Kate has none of these. Abandoned as a baby, brought up by a reluctant grandmother, she had joined the workforce as soon as possible. Without Benton's material and masculine advantages she is unable to control the discourse whether it is at after-dinner drinks, rowdy meetings, consoling the grieving or calming aggressive criminals. In each case Benton's command of the appropriate discourse has allowed him to take the lead diplomatically. Grosz observes in regard to the various meanings of the phallus: "The phallus is the signifier which establishes the subject's unconscious, and internalised locus of the 'other'" (126). Kate's unconscious holds her in the position of "being" rather than "having". Benton's dangerous cliff climb adds further proof of his patriarchal status. Kate's brave efforts at the lighthouse are qualified. Benton's climb comes with no caveats; it confirms his position in the patriarchy and underlines Kate's feminine role. She waits while he acts. She gains conditional entry into the phallogocentric world, but cannot sustain her position of authority there. That she can even gain qualified entry suggests an enlightened patriarchal view of women's role, which still retains the fundamental thrust of male succession. In broad terms, it is her lack that differentiates between her "being" and his "having" the phallus, but it is her "being" that mediates his transition to the role of symbolic father.

### **Emma Lavenham**

The previous discussion has focussed on the way in which Kate Miskin has mediated Benton's entry into the hegemonic order of male privilege. The focus now turns to Emma Lavenham, Dalgliesh's conveniently passive girlfriend, and the way in which her desires contribute to Benton's ascension. Dalgliesh is a worthy symbolic father, but everything about the narrative suggests that this may be his last case. There is never any direct mention of retirement, but his illness has shown him to be fallible and the possibility of marriage and domesticity threatens his mythic status. Unlike Kate, who is divided by her desire for success in a male-dominated world, and her

feminine ‘nature,’ Emma is rarely troubled by ambiguities in her subject position; it is her relationship with Dalglish that is important. His absence on Combe leaves room for speculation about normative sexuality and submission to the idealisation of marriage.

The murder on Combe means another cancelled weekend for Emma. Dalglish presumes she “would make her own arrangements for the weekend”, and rationalises that she probably would not even think of him (15). Emma goes to London, to visit Clara, a close friend from Cambridge days, and has occasion, in Butler’s terms, to consider that “heterosexuality is not the only compulsory display of power that informs sexuality” (GT 165). Emma is “heterosexual and burdened by her dark beauty”. Clara is “stocky, her hair close cropped above a chubby spectacled face [and] has the gallant sturdiness of a pit pony” (319). Beauty defines Emma’s femininity, while Clara’s gender role—she is attracted to both men and women—is determined by her masculine appearance. Her “butchness” identifies her with the masculine and assimilates her into the heterosexual matrix. Her lover “gentle-faced Annie is as frail and vulnerable as Clara is strong” (319), thus their relationship mimics the phallic model of domination. Butler however, rejects such an understanding of lesbian desire: “The idea that butch and femme are in some sense replicas or copies ignores the erotic significance of these identities ... in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled” (GT 168). However, James’s cultural stereotyping of Clara and Annie, as a butch/femme imitation of the phallic model, is a reiteration that cites their relationship within the boundaries of hegemonic sexual and gender politics.

Emma is vaguely jealous of Clara’s long-term relationship with Annie and her discontent is flamed by Clara’s ambivalence towards Dalglish and his intentions regarding marriage. Clara advises her, “Tell him it’s time to set a date” (322). When Emma says she does not know how, Clara scoffs and urges her to set the date: “Tell him, ‘No more weekends until the ring is on my finger’” (323). Emma is defensive but in the end confesses that she is not sure whether he wants to marry her. Clara accuses her of being afraid that Dalglish only loves her for her beauty. She demurs but somewhere in the back of her mind “the treacherous thought took hold” (324).

The doubt continues to grow when they return to Clare and Annie's house. With Dalgliesh on Combe, she could easily have invited Clara to his place. It never occurred to her and she wondered why. Then it came to her that she never felt at home there. When Clara says, "Let's go home", Emma thinks, "*And that is a word she can use. So when I am with Adam why can't I?*" (324). This tacit questioning of presumptive heterosexuality presents as its converse a warm, trusting homosexual relationship stable enough to have an attractive friend stay for the night with no suggestion of any sexual engagement. In contrast, Emma has never introduced Clara to Dalgliesh, even though she classes her as her best friend. Clara is comfortable enough in her relationship with Annie to see no problem in making Emma part of their circle. The interchange between Clara and Emma serves to undermine Dalgliesh's primacy. Emma lives her life very much within patriarchal boundaries; her identity is constructed through her male-defined beauty, but her acceptance and envy of Clara's lesbian relationship indicates unhappiness with, and questioning of, heterosexual expressions of desire.

The toxic effect on Emma's attitude manifests itself when Kate phones her to inform her of Dalgliesh's illness. Still mulling over Clara's words, Emma is reserved. Learning of the seriousness of his affliction, she briefly reverts to her role of self-deprecation and self-victimisation: "He mustn't be worried about me and what I am feeling..." Nevertheless, she finishes the call with, "Give him my love", which Kate considers as "the kind of message any friend would send" and not one between committed lovers (357). Though Emma's reserve acts in a small way to essay some agency, her "don't worry about me" confirms her "feminine" passivity by again putting Dalgliesh's needs ahead of her own. Her coolness, however, seems to have some effect. The island remains in quarantine even after the capture of Padgett, but during that time, they rarely speak and Dalgliesh, "who loved language had lost confidence in all words, particularly spoken over the telephone" (464). He knows she is fed up with his putting work first, and expects to be told their relationship is over: "He braced himself to hear the destruction of hope with dignity and without whining" (465). To imagine the "great detective" even contemplating that he might whine over his rejection by a woman, however beautiful, is a performative utterance that further undermines his mythic status.

For Dalgliesh the old order seems about to change. He is stunned when Emma flies to the island and without preamble tells him she wants to get married. Using Clara's formula, she tells him very firmly that she wants it to happen quickly as Fr Martin is getting old and frail. "Will you write to him or will I?" she asks. He responds, "We'll go to see him together. Tomorrow" (465). Just as Miskin cedes authority to Benton at the meeting of the islanders, Emma cedes to Dalgliesh. Offered the chance of a liberated female subjectivity, she fails to take the opportunity. Dalgliesh's "tomorrow" leaves room for manoeuvre, and given his history, another case will always interfere with his, however well-intentioned, plans.<sup>3</sup> If Emma had said, "I want us to get married by Fr Martin. I will call him and set the date. Agreed?" Dalgliesh could have said either yes or no, and Emma would have retained the initiative. Instead, her words act to pass control of the situation over to Dalgliesh and a return to the political norms of heterosexual relationships. Emma accepts her subjection to Dalgliesh, even though she has witnessed in her friends Clara and Annie other relationship possibilities. Nevertheless, the narrative thrust suggests that the time may have arrived when Dalgliesh finally makes it to the altar. As they helicopter off the inland the reader learns that for them "this day was a new beginning" (467). Emma's proposal is thus the last stage in the process that transfers the role of symbolic father to Benton. Authorial choice gives Dalgliesh a lesser role in the narrative, and shows that in his absence the Miskin-Benton combination operates successfully. Illness undermines his mythic status and his "father" role is further weakened by an unfavourable comparison to the relationship of Emma's lesbian friends. No longer the mythical great detective, and with a capable replacement as symbolic father emerging in Benton, Dalgliesh is almost redundant. Emma's proposal serves the patriarchy by being part of the mediation process that prepares the way for an orderly transfer of power between men.

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<sup>3</sup> Against all expectations, in 2008 at the age of 88, James published *The Private Patient*. In it Emma is still waiting to get married and Dalgliesh continues to think about retirement.

### Narrative Closure

Narrative closure sees the world more or less restored to its predisruptive state. With the murderer apprehended life on the island returns to normal, Dalgliesh and Emma are reunited, and Kate and Benton settle for being companionable colleagues, even as she comes to the realisation she is more comfortable being accepted as woman rather than a detective inspector (457). Kate's role, however, remains uncertain. As the plane carrying them back to the mainland takes off, Dalgliesh and Emma look forward to new beginning, while Kate hopes for a future "rich with infinite possibilities" (467). Kate's way forward is unclear. She can only hope, whereas Dalgliesh, even though somewhat diminished, remains as the opening and closing focus of the novel.

That Dalgliesh is restored to power and Kate accepts her continuing subordinate role will come as no surprise to the reader. James writes to gender expectations in a manner that is consistent with the systemic and structural nature of male power. Indeed, so well does she write the masculine elements of action, deed and language into the text that it is easy to understand why, for a long time, as she records in her autobiography, *Time to be in Earnest*, critics and readers alike, believed the author of the Dalgliesh series was a man (10). With few exceptions, her narrative supports the normative processes of the patriarchal hegemony.

Kate Miskin is written into the passive female role, and her "otherness" is always present. She is kept outside of the collegial intimacies of those males who are part of her professional and personal life, and has to repress her female attributes in the interests of her career. The narrative makes it clear that a woman acting as a law officer can only do so with the validation of the establishment and the frequent intervention of male colleagues. Her gender prevents her from ever being an entirely effective authority figure even if she is never less than a highly competent police officer. She works diligently in the service of a patriarchal hegemony, and rejects the appropriation of subversive gender violence common to the female detectives examined earlier. Strong and intelligent as she is, she remains feminine and subordinate. The implied author's choice to put her in a green dress that wins her the



“appreciative glances from the men” (457), and make her the object of the male gaze confirms in her rightful place as a “woman”.

The lighthouse scene is a rare example of her disturbing both gender and genre norms. Half-naked and covered in Vaseline, she does not become a sex object. She is neither temptress nor victim, the normal female roles available in crime fiction. Her disruptive behaviour is less dramatic than the extravagances of Christie’s women who disturb hegemonic norms through financial independence or crime. However, Miskin’s subtle deviations do not encourage, or encounter, the savage retaliation suffered by Christie’s subversive women. They escape serious notice or are tacitly tolerated by the system within the Metropolitan Police Force and the moderating presence of Dalgliesh. Though ill and out of contention for much of the investigation Dalgliesh remains a continuing presence. He is the benchmark against which Miskin measures Benton. That Benton’s ability to handle rowdy meetings, comfort the grieving, and calm aggressive criminals, are talents, along with the religious upbringing that he shares with Dalgliesh, make him in Miskin’s eyes a worthy successor to Dalgliesh.

### **Conclusion**

A Butlerian reading suggests that, in *The Lighthouse*, the relationships of the characters and their interactions in the context of the politics of power, gender and agency serve as critiques of patriarchal practice. The implied author appears to subscribe to a gender ideology that allows women to be capable, intelligent and in charge of their own bodies, but with limited agency. This constraint invites the question whether in the twenty-first century things have really changed for women, or whether the supposedly liberated woman continues in a masquerade that belies her lack of access to the performatives of power. This would suggest the implied author’s acceptance of the proposition that culture and law leave no place for a subject position that does not maintain a stable distinction between masculine and feminine.

James appears to equivocate. The gender divide remains intact for her, as does the primacy of male succession, but with the important proviso that it take place within a modified patriarchy. In contrast to Christie, who punishes disruptive women, James punishes males who fail to uphold their patriarchal role, and who bring into question the foundations for the so called “natural” order. The father-son relationship of Oliver and Padgett challenges notions of phallocratic succession, whereas Dalgliesh’s new found fallibility and loss of mythic status undermine the statue of the symbolic father. The lessening of his authority, coupled with his patriarchal benignity, are the catalysts that facilitate the process for a new authority to be constituted in his absence. Dalgliesh, Miskin and Benton are a trinity. Dalgliesh’s benign wielding of patriarchal power creates the potential for a peaceful passage of power from himself to Benton that is reliant on feminine consent. Miskin’s ambiguous oscillation between different gender positions make that consent possible without too much sacrifice of female aspirations. The newly emerging figure of masculine authority, as represented by Benton, is one able to work collegially and constructively with women who may occupy position of authority.

The implied author offers a modified patriarchy, but hesitates to write Miskin into the leading role. It is the relationship between her and Benton that builds on the moderated patriarchy of Adam Dalgliesh. Notwithstanding her superior rank, Miskin and Benton have a collaborative rather than vertical relationship. It is a direct challenge to the traditional hegemonic formations of hierarchy, and leaves room for female agency and the possibility of succession by “others” who are not necessarily white, middle-class or male. Until that day the implied author seems comfortable with a patriarchal hegemony shorn of its excesses.

## Chapter 4

### Donna Leon and Guido Brunetti

There is no justice here, Dottore.  
Donna Leon, *Uniform Justice*

Donna Leon has moved on both from the tradition of Agatha Christie's cosy puzzle mystery, and from P D James's modified form that embraces the moral ambiguities of human behaviour. Her novels are as much about the society and culture of Venice as they are about the crimes and corruption that are part of Guido Brunetti's working life. He is a more complex character than either Poirot or Dalgliesh. Whereas Poirot is paper thin in terms of characterisation, and Dalgliesh so wooden that the claim that he is a published poet lacks credibility, Brunetti by contrast is a believable human being who puts in an honest day's work, and worries what the future may bring for his children. An educated and moral man, he wrestles daily with a dysfunctional justice system, without succumbing to the temptations that abound, or becoming hard, embittered, or particularly flawed. More than either Poirot or Dalgliesh, he is aware of the limits of his power and contents himself with effecting change at the individual level, without for one moment believing that his efforts will disturb the deep ideological constants of power that dominate Venetian society. The corruption that is part of Venice's public and private life means that the decided closure witnessed in Christie and James is missing from Leon's novels.

Leon extends the generic formula described by P D James. Whereas James straddles the divide between the detective and the crime novel, Leon fits comfortably into the latter. As defined by Symons, it contains little forensic detail, and quite often, there are no clues in the detective story sense. More important is the psychology of the characters, their social attitudes and the questioning of the way society operates. The location of the action is also important. It sets the tone and style of the story, and is "frequently an integral part of the crime itself" (193). Leon also appears to have modified the genre in the manner prescribed by Kathleen Klein in *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre*, who offers suggestions for the reconfiguration of the genre, after noting that, "the predictable formula of detective fiction is based on a world whose sex/gender valuations reinforce the male hegemony". She proposes that

“a feminocentric novel does not necessarily need a feminist detective but it cannot evade questions of gender—intertwined with those of race, class, sexual preference and social attitudes—if it is to succeed” (228). She suggests the substitution of the usual dead body with crimes of societal importance such as social injustice, industrial corruption, and assaults against women. She also wants to see an alteration to the basic structure of the genre, such that it abandons closures that serve to reaffirm the status quo (225-29). Leon does not follow all of Klein’s precepts—her females are more inclined to be fantasy figures than realistic women, but her social commentary and muddled closures hew close to the Klein formula. A textual examination of place, character, and closure will seek to demonstrate that Leon manages to remain within the crime genre while simultaneously contesting hegemonic norms.

### **Venice and Pervasive Graft**

Christie prefers the country house or the cruise boat, James the isolated island, but in the work of Donna Leon the reader is immersed in the life and ways of a whole city. All her stories take place in Venice, and the serial reader gradually becomes familiar with its landmarks, streets, canals and corruption. It is a city that “like women of a certain age [needs] the help of deceptive light to recapture her vanished beauty” (DLF 33). In the manner of Symons’s formula, the physical and social setting is often an integral part of the crime itself. Murder is the usual crime in Leon’s novels, but, as per Klein, they always have at their core some topic of social interest, whether it is industrial pollution, the plight of illegal immigrants, or the dubious trade in university degrees. Too often Brunetti tracks down his man, or woman, only to lose him or her in a mire of corruption. Judges are paid off and the shadowy and oft times public figures behind the crimes remain untouched. Sentences are not served, witnesses have accidents, paper work gets lost, and murders are downgraded to suicides. This leitmotif of iniquity serves to qualify the glowing picture Leon presents of Venice, and may be the reason she chooses not to publish in Italy.

Brunetti is one of the few who offer any resistance to the city’s pervasive corruption, in contrast to most Venetians who have accepted it as a way of life. This is more a

matter of personal honour than the result of any belief in being able to change things. There are no grand gestures or histrionic threats of resignation. Governments never fall; the real villains never hear the clang of the dungeon door. Nevertheless, by remaining true to their moral code, Brunetti and his small cast of trusted players offer some resistance to the dysfunctional patriarchal society that is Venice. The three key players are Brunetti, his wife Paola, a university professor and woman of incandescent, if inconsistent, convictions, and Signorina Elettra, a cool beauty with a personal network that allows Brunetti access to information normally beyond his reach. The other characters are more or less standard issue. Patta, Brunetti's boss, is corrupt and always looking for political advantage. He and Scarpa, his lieutenant, are inclined to take short cuts, more interested in record-keeping than in questions of guilt or innocence. There is Count Falier, Brunetti's father-in-law, a man of considerable wealth with links to the power elite of Italy, both legitimate and otherwise, and there is Brunetti's trusted lieutenant, Vianello. However, it is Brunetti and the two women who succeed in modifying gender norms without damage to the genre. Through these lead characters, I will examine how Leon reorders qualities of masculinity and femininity to establish a fluid hierarchy of identity and worth. Paola provides a domestic counterpoint to her husband's job and in doing so helps construct his identity. Signorina Elettra uses her intelligence and beauty to subvert the status quo both physically and psychologically, while Brunetti with his quiet determination and humanity presents a rounded model of masculinity rarely found in the tough guy world of the crime genre.

More than Christie or James, Leon injects herself into the text. An Italian American who has lived in Venice for twenty-five years, she is a former university professor who has been the crime book reviewer for the *Times* of London, and at last count had written sixteen Brunetti novels. She is also something of a music buff, using income from her writing to finance an opera company, *Complesso Baroco*, which specialises in the works of Handel. Her past profession and private interests find their way into all of her novels, and the reader cannot escape references to opera, English literature and Greek myth. The epigraph of every novel features an extract from a libretto of a Mozart opera. Brunetti's wife, Paola, a university lecturer, is always railing about the inefficiency of Italian universities, the lecherous tenured professors of either sex, and

the ignorance of her students. Conversations between Brunetti and his wife encompass, without awkwardness, writers such as Austen, Melville, Wharton, Henry James, and Dante. In *Wilful Behaviour*, mention of Ferrara prompts the statement that Paola's father, Count Orazio Falier, dismisses "all claims to the aristocracy which do not go back at least a thousand years", a small piece of intertextual one-upmanship, which the initiated will recognise as a reference to the duke with a mere nine-hundred-year-old name. In her novels and personal interviews, Donna Leon displays distaste for the military, Italian politics, the American way of life, and academic sloth. Her narratives are social critiques that juxtapose the idyllic family life of the melancholic Brunetti upon a world dominated by corruption, violence, and the shadowy presence of the Mafia.

### Paola

Paola provides Brunetti's idyllic family life. Yet, she is also a liberal feminist, who reflects the changing roles of women in a modern society. More concerned with equal opportunity than with radical change, she is independent and free with her advice. Between her and their two teenage children, they keep Brunetti informed of the significant social and political issues that form the subtext of each novel. She appears to be the perfect woman, ever there with the gourmet dinners, always available for her children and still able to hold down a full-time job as a university professor. Her attitude towards her work is cynical, but she revels in her family, and the home she has created. Brunetti always comes in at night to the welcoming aroma of well-prepared food, maybe swordfish one night, perhaps pheasant the next. So much is food part of his domestic life that, whenever possible, he goes home for lunch, returning to the office uplifted by the joy of being with his family. Given time on the weekend, he and Paola will visit the local *pasticceria* for coffee and a chocolate bigne. Sure, he gets angry when his son borrows his favourite jumper, or frustrated when Chiara, his daughter, bans flowers from the house because she believes the marketing of them for the transitory pleasure of the middle classes is immoral, but his underlying feeling is always one of pleasure at their presence.

He occasionally wishes that Paola would take more time for reflection before launching on her next crusade. She considers herself a member of the language police, always on the prowl for infelicities or stupidities. She vents loudly at breakfast, about press presentation of women in criminal cases, sexual harassment in the work place, the glass ceiling on women's career prospects, and the promotion of paedophilic sex tours. In the case of the sex tours, she once made a lone protest outside the tour operator's store. In an interview published in "Italian-mysteries.com," Leon was asked why in *Fatal Remedies* Paola did not seem to have a network of other women or an organisation to work through or give her support for her protest. Leon's response was why should she? She is an intelligent independent woman. She neither wants nor needs that kind of support. This apparently innocuous question demonstrates the near invisibility of gender performatives acting to reinforce stereotypes of identity. The very asking of the question is a performative utterance that reinforces the gender stereotypes. Repeated often enough, certain attributes become gender specific and accepted as natural. By acting as an individual, Paola resists the idea that part of being a female involves the need for support from other females. She also resists the rational/emotional binary. Impulsive as she is, Brunetti recognises that when the mood takes her she has a cool and calculating brain: she "was always comfortable when presented with an exercise in logic" (BFS 40). While pondering the motive behind the killing of the *vu cumprà*, he declares he knows nothing about the street traders: she leads him through a process of question and answer to the realisation that he "knows" more about the "other" of Venice than he first thought. Both rational and emotional, Paola undermines foundational assumptions of a stable relationship between gender binaries. She creates a domestic counterpoint to his job. She draws a line between the public and the private, delineating the domestic space as a place of spiritual reference and material comfort, yet remains flexible enough to move that line in support of his public endeavours. She enables him to move in and out of the household, participating in and enjoying the security of domesticity while still able to escape its confines through either his normal working hours or the midnight call that requires his attention. The combination of the enjoyment of domestic space and the masculine privilege of moving out of its boundaries is a part of Brunetti's identity. He has roots and a well-defined position within society. Elizabeth Glass, in "Così fan Tutti: The Pessimism of

Place,” cites Stoddard Holmes claim that “family and domesticity have become important in feminising male detectives created by women” and the means of grounding them in a specific urban geography (36). Contrast this to the typical detective of the genre. Threatened by domestic constraints, he protects his personal identity by fleeing from the entangling alliances of commitment and social definitions such as those of husband, brother or father. Traditionally a loner who has long lost contact with his family, he spends much of his time drinking alone or with the local barflies before returning home to a poky apartment and a takeaway dinner. The warmth of Brunetti’s home, his delightful and loving family, bring a new dimension to crime solving and mark him as more human than the hard-boiled traditionalist who starts the day with two cigarettes, and a hangover.

### **Signorina Elettra and Masquerade**

Signorina Elettra is no traditionalist. Nominally Patta’s secretary and occasional assistant to Brunetti, the masquerade she assumes, as the good-looking, smart-talking stereotypical token female of countless detective stories, hides a larcenous heart and an understanding of power. Her complex web of associates, colleagues, and old boyfriends, coupled with her undoubted skill on the internet, create an amalgam of power and knowledge that leaves Brunetti and Vianello, his sergeant, both admiring and wary. After ten years of working in the same office, Brunetti admits to knowing very little about her. Her name adds to the mystery. Always formally addressed as Signorina or Signorina Elettra—an Italian girl’s name derived from Greek meaning “bright” or “radiant”—her title identifies her as single and free. With her family name never mentioned, she is distanced from patriarchal control. Never fully named, she contests notions of otherness by never being fully known to Brunetti in the way that he ‘knows’ all Albanians are thieves and all *vu cumprá* are under the control of the Mafia. Unlike the Albanians or *vu cumprá*, her identity cannot be reduced to a single or simple explanation. Her behaviour does not let her fit into otherness. She is active rather than passive; she is controlling rather than controlled, and she owns language rather than being its object. Yet the reader sees her only through Brunetti and understands her only to the extent he does. Feminine in appearance and



demeanour, she understands how power works and fashions her own network of knowledge and influence.

She demonstrates through her actions an understanding of the argument, expressed by Foucault in *Power /Knowledge*, that “power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and... it only exists in action” and “is the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (89). In Italian society, Elettra’s mix of intelligence, élan and larceny allows her to create her own power base. She transgresses gender norms in ways far more imaginative than the performative strategies of insubordination offered by Judith Butler, who famously in *Gender Trouble* used the example of drag to expose the tenuousness of gender reality: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (187). Butler says further that the notion of gender parody does not assume that there is an original to imitate but rather implies that “the parody is *of* the very notion of an original”. It is an imitation of an imitation constituting a fluidity of identities that lends itself to resignification (188). In “The Professor of Parody”, Martha Nussbaum considers Butler’s ideas of resistance woefully inadequate and accuses her of a self-involved feminism that disregards political realities and practical politics (8-10). No such criticism can be made of Signora Elettra who holds a unique position in the Questura. Officially Patta’s secretary, she spends much of her time and special talents helping Brunetti gather sensitive and secret information using her own network of informants, ex-boyfriends, old colleagues and numerous people who owe her favours. Her resistance to patriarchal power ranges across a spectrum of subversion from imitation to identity theft. Masquerade and parody are part of her armoury.

Her smart dress sense gives her a panache that disguises her transgressive instincts. In *Doctored Evidence*, Brunetti glimpsed her as she came through a doorway, in a green skirt, white blouse, and a necklace of large cylinder amber beads. “As she came towards [him] the sun fell on the necklace turning the beads a flaming red and in the process decking her in the colours of the flag as if she were the walking personification of civic virtue” (141). This cloak of civic virtue is an instrument of power and parody. Both Elettra and Patta dress with considerable élan. The ongoing,

but tacit, competition between them is a fantasy of empowerment that while entertaining also signals its artifice. In *Doctored Evidence*, parody, Butler's weapon of choice, becomes an instrument of subversion. Patta arrived at work wearing a cream linen suit with a black shirt, also of linen:

Brunetti noticed, as he had failed to do earlier, that Signorina Elettra was wearing a black linen suit and a cream-coloured silk blouse. It occurred to him that, had the two of them planned this, Patta would probably have been motivated by emulation, she by parody. (108)

Patta dresses to impress his senior status on those around him. Elettra negates his peacock display by her own equally striking appearance. To dress the way they do is beyond the means of a civil servant. No one ever learns the source of her extra income, whereas the reader and everyone in the Questura know Patta's comes from 'friends' who occasionally need a favour. Consequently, she has little time for the Vice-Questore, and surreptitiously undermines him at every chance. Walking through her office, Brunetti sees a *Vogue* magazine on her desk and smiles, "glad to see this small piece of evidence that Elettra was once again devoting to Patta precisely the amount of attention she judged him to deserve" (WB134) Brunetti's smile, unseen by Elettra, is a performative act that signals his support of her action. He is not as supportive of her long lunches and erratic working hours, but he takes silent pleasure as she mislays Scarpa's application for leave, or "innocently" draws attention to Patta's frequent early departures from work. Each of these small acts of insubordination is an act of agency and resistance within a given schema of power but there is more to her than a quick tongue and a telling lift of the eyebrow.

For Elettra there is always room for personal resistance as if she recognises in some implicit fashion Foucault's stricture that power is not inescapable or absolute, and that "there are no relations of power without resistance" (142). There is no single formula that can guarantee complete power because the "relations of power are multiple and interwoven with other kinds of relations; production, kinship, family, sexuality and their interconnections delineate the general conditions of domination" (142). Couple this with human factors such as laziness, stupidity or greed, and the opportunity for personal resistance is also multiple. When she leads Scarpa, Patta's toady, into a seemingly innocent discussion that becomes a circular argument that leaves him

humiliated, or has the office overflowing with flowers, a refulgence of colour borne by the taxpayer, or “sells” a damaged computer to Vianello that is miraculously restored once he gets it home and plugs it in, she is mocking the whole premise of a bureaucracy where success and corruption go hand in hand. In the overall scheme of Venetian malfeasance, Elettra’s action may be of little consequence, but Foucault argues that resistance of this sort is real and effective: “It is formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real” (142).

Elettra also resists by being no “object of exchange.” In *Death on the Nile*, Christie reversed this notion of exchange between men, and Simon Doyle is the object traded between Linnet and Jackie. Within the Questura, Elettra neutralises any idea of “exchange”. Neither Patta nor Brunetti have the power to curb her independence. They cannot “own” her because her identity is not dependent on them, which suggests the locus of power, if there is one, is nebulous or decentred. In her dealings with Patta, she is the embodiment of hauteur; one suspects she only works with him because doing so gives her access to his files and the use of his name. In a reversal of patriarchal norms, Elettra has control of language. On one occasion, she condescends to help Patta with his English already knowing through her network that the job he aspires to in London has gone to another candidate. For a bit of fun, at his expense, she runs him through a series of painful and pointless tutorials for almost two weeks.

She approves of Brunetti because she knows him as an honest man; nevertheless, she will correct him where she thinks it is necessary. As much as Paola, she is his conscience with regard to the illegal immigrant “other” represented by Albanians, Rumanians, and Africans, who make up a large part of Venice’s invisible population.. When not too involved in her own agenda, Elettra will use her extensive network to assist Brunetti, but only on her own terms. His nonchalant response, “Tanto fumo, pocco arrosto”<sup>4</sup> to her telling him of a suspected rape victim who had not pressed charges, nearly lost him her goodwill. He had to make a hasty apology to get back into her favour. Often he needs information that only she can supply.

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<sup>4</sup> Translated as “ they smoke and then eat a roast” probably closer in English to “they had a few drinks and then dinner, these things happen”

Information or knowledge gives her power and she amasses it at every opportunity. In *Wilful Behaviour* Brunetti and his team had reached a dead end until Elettra, using the most Venetian of methods, an exchange of information resulting from friendship and a sense of mutual obligation, is able to gain certain knowledge. A functionary at the Registry of Public Documents recalls that Signorina Elettra, who is the sister of his wife's doctor, has displayed interest in certain women. He phones to tell her that the will of one of them has been registered that day. She asks him to fax it over and he agrees. In thanking him, "she provided him with an unspoken assurance that if he should ever come to the attention of the police he would be extended a degree of latitude not available to ordinary citizens" (296). Elettra has no official position within the police force, but acts as if she has. Her "unspoken assurance" of future latitude works because the 'listener' believes in her authority. She wields power because she exercises it.

Brunetti always presumed she obtained her information by hacking into the computers of government and company offices. Knowing it to be illegal, he prefers not to know about her methods and activities, and studiously avoids asking about her sources. In *Doctored Evidence*, her secret and major source of power is revealed when Brunetti and Vianello come to understand that none of her apparently boundless network of informants are aware that her requests for information are coming from the Questura, and they conclude she must be rerouting them. She is. With the help of insiders, she sends out all her requests under the auspices of her previous employer the *Banca d'Italia*. Companies and government departments can hardly refuse an apparently legitimate request from Italy's central bank. They send their replies, and Elettra's "friends" automatically forward them to her. If she does not get the information she wants, she responds with fearful menace. She politely thanks them, and then with deep regret informs them—under the letterhead of one of the few trusted institutions in the Italian state—that the information they supplied was insufficient to prevent her passing on their papers to the relevant authorities, i.e. the tax department, immigration or Interpol. Normally this is enough. This information about her sources stuns Brunetti and Vianello:

'Do you mean she is sending and getting information at an address she hasn't worked at for years?' To continue the conversation Brunetti suddenly realised

would lead either to madness or more dangerously to criminal knowledge, which at some time in the future he might have to deny under oath. (107)

Though willing to share information with those she trusts, Elettra is unwilling to give away the source of her power. She deliberately keeps Brunetti at arm's length, always deflecting any requests about sources. A typical refusal, "I could easily invent an answer so technically complex you would not understand but I would prefer to be more honest and simply say I'd rather not tell you" (DE 87). This allows her to retain her power and keep him from being compromised. She takes on the masculine role of provider and protector. Caught between his desire for knowledge and its illegal origins, he tries to avoid direct questions. Held up by a slow response from Interpol, he and Vianello bemoan the situation within Elettra's hearing and turn supplicating eyes toward her "I'll see what I can do" is her response (DE 312). On another occasion, she informs him that since what she was about to do was illegal, it might be better if he went out and had a cup of coffee. "Like Adam he fell", and went down to the bar at Ponte dei Greci (WB 154). Brunetti's fall is a reminder that a man had a part in the expulsion from Eden, whereas Poirot's admonishment of Jackie and Linnet for their failure to resist Simon Doyle infers that responsibility for the fall rests only with women. Officially, Brunetti holds the power, but Elettra, with her fragmented and fictitious identities, creates a model that moves her outside the realms of normative gendered performance. Externally she conforms to gender norms; feminine clothes that emphasise her shape, perfume, and a love of flowers mark her as feminine. Her internalisation of discourses of knowledge reifies and materialises in a way that gives her agency and power. For her, identify is a slippery fiction that she uses in order to exercise power. She is the slightly daffy secretary who "accidentally" overspends on office expense to buy flowers; she is the "police officer" with power to ease the path of criminal justice; and she is the senior bank official who can demand the release of the most sensitive information. There is no daffy secretary, police officer, or bank executive; they are fictitious personae who accomplish what their identities authorise them to accomplish. This mirrors Butler's statement: "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (GT 34). Elettra's assumption of authority and exercise of power illustrate that there is no power that sits

behind power. Because she understands this, she is able to insert herself into those vectors of power that control knowledge.

Under her masquerade of “civic virtue”, Elettra operates from a position of self-created authority that is every bit as real as those vectors of knowledge that have the power to reward or punish. The civic official passing on information does so in the expectation that she has the power of the Questura behind her; reluctant company managers send her information because they believe she is acting as an agent of the country’s central bank. Her authority is an illusion but her power is a fact. With her own informal vectors of power, Elettra does not need to appropriate masculine values. She controls specific and specialised knowledge, and can deny that knowledge to the uninitiated. Unlike Warshawski or Joanna Brady, she offers difference, not an extension of the same. She takes on no male attributes, and remains deliciously feminine. Knowledge, not the gun or the ability to punch out some obnoxious male, is her strength. Her identity is not dependent on her male counterparts; her access to knowledge places her as their equal, thus precluding her from being an object of trade between men. Such is her strength that, despite her femininity, perfume, and swishing skirts, nowhere in the series is Elettra leered at or demeaned by some male offering to look after the “little lady”. While Warshawski and Brady get riled by male colleagues’ sly offers of assistance, Brunetti, and even Patta, would never make that mistake. Elettra is gender proficient. Able to play her gender role to perfection, she simultaneously renounces and colludes with the illusion of an authorising authority. Her performative contradictions as she moves from marked to unmarked positions disrupt representations of authority, reconceptualising structures of power and knowledge to challenge collective normative practices of gender that we see as normal.

### **An Honest Man**

Brunetti may not have the panache of Signorina Elettra but he also offers performative contradictions. Born and bred in Venice, he cannot come in like some avenging deity; he is a quasi insider who needs to work around local politics. Through his wife, he has family connections to the wealthy and well bred who float mysteriously between the power brokers of industry, government, and organised crime. Friends from school and university days give him access to the civil service, press, university and priesthood, all of whom treat him warmly as a friend but with a degree of caution as a representative of the state. Placed in a difficult position, he is caught in an in-between world. He sees the corruption of prominent citizens and public officials, the perfidy of the Church, and the petty abuse of power at almost every level of society, yet he serves the interests of the law and the status quo. The attempted resolution of the dichotomy between his personal integrity and a debased society allows space for the modification of gender norms. While Elettra modifies these norms through her acquisition of power or knowledge, Brunetti does so through the exploration of identity and otherness. As a detective, he has a degree of power beyond that of the average citizen but he recognises its limits. When a friend asks him to intervene over the extortion that was part of the process of dealing with the local council planning office, they both recognise the impossibility of changing a Venetian tradition. Pay the council officer the prerequisite bribe and the consent to alter your apartment is granted. The alternative is to bribe the builder to go ahead without the consent. Knowing that his work will go uninspected, the builder may take a few short cuts so in the end the “official’ bribe” is the safer choice. While knowing when not to waste his time, Brunetti also knows when and how to resist certain aspects of institutional corruption. In his dealings with his boss, he blurs the lines of authority so that “knowledge” is not exclusively allied to those who hold the power.

Patta is well versed in the ways of Venetian “politics”, but those political needs also bring with them the danger of his authority undoing itself. Aware of Patta’s compromised position, Brunetti never challenges him directly but has developed a modus operandi that allows him to subvert pointless orders or avoid outside interference. As Foucault says, “resistance is not inexorably frustrated through being

the compatriot of power. It exists even more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple” (142). In her essay “In Whose Words?” Liz Bondi cites Jane Gallop as saying, that speaking without authority is nothing new:

Simply to refuse authority does not challenge the category of distinction between the phallic authority and the castrated other, between ‘subjects presumed to know’ and subjects not in command. One can effectively undo authority only from a position of authority, in a way that exposes the illusions of that position without renouncing it, so as to permeate the position itself with the connotations of its illusoriness. (254)

Within the Questura, Patta likes to run an efficient office and the way he does this is to “fiddle” the books on crime clean-up rates. He is determined to record the death of an American soldier as an “accidental drowning”, contrary to Brunetti’s well-informed belief that it was murder. Brunetti knows Patta is immovable on this matter, so he uses Patta’s vanity and preference for expediency over principle to reverse the decision. By claiming a particular expertise and “knowledge” of tourist numbers, he undoes Patta’s authority, exposing it as an illusion without the need for renunciation. Brunetti does not present his suspicion of a drugs connection and links to illegal toxic waste; instead, he claims that an unexplained death, whatever the cause, may affect tourist numbers. He does this in the knowledge of Patta’s pride in a “clean book” and association with “friends” who control a large part of the tourist industry. In this way, he is able to “resist” Patta’s power to close down the investigation. Even though he is the subordinate, Brunetti is able to take power away from Patta because he knows his foibles. Brunetti has an understanding of how power works at these levels, but his own morality does not allow him to think of authority as a fiction. Once he claimed to be a Vice Questore, a rank higher than his own, to help his interrogation, and another time he claimed to have read the complainant’s file knowing he had not; each occasion made him uneasy. Elettra would do it without remorse; for the more introspective Brunetti there is a notional centre of moral authority, which guides his behaviour.



### Fragile Identities

The fluidity of identity is a frequent theme in Leon's narratives where the boundaries between the genders and between the abject and the alien are all shown to be permeable. Through his family, Brunetti is aware of current social issues. In *Blood from a Stone*, the notion of the "otherness" of the *vu cumprà* is fully aired in the argument between Paola and Chiara. Even Elettra felt sufficiently roused to lecture him about the way they were treated: "We don't talk to them, or really see them. I think it is really strange that they can live among us ... yet remain invisible" (48). He gets similar lectures on female equality, and while he accepts them all intellectually, he at times struggles with social changes that see gender and identity as more fluid than he can accept easily.

The *vu cumprà*, the abject of Venetian society, are unable to get regular employment, are forced to live in hovels and are harassed by the police. In the lexicon of Kristeva, their expulsion from the body politic of Venice denies them access to the language of power, which effectively silences and objectifies them, and acts to establish the borders of Venetian subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> Brunetti sees them as little more than poverty-stricken Senegalese, 'black' men under the control of the mafia. However, by the end of *Blood from a Stone* we see that some of the supposed abject are not contained within the boundaries assigned to them. They are part of a high-powered trade in arms for diamonds by an Angolan resistance group. Within their ranks are potential presidents and generals. They are in Venice with a fortune in diamonds to finance an arms deal that will equip them to fight a war of independence over their tribal area. Their execution by Italian security forces is a political move designed to protect an important trade deal between Italy and Angola's ruling junta. Lumped together as *vu cumprà* they are not Senegalese, poor, powerless or abject. The abjection that functions as a boundary within Venetian society is disturbed and made problematic by these revelations. In Leon's conflicting systems, the abject in one scenario may be in another the agents of exchange.

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<sup>5</sup> In Kristeva's notion of abjection "the subject rids itself of something that is other than itself and yet part of itself, thereby seeking in the process of ab-jecting to re-establish the boundaries of the self" (Wolfreys 5).

In *Wilful Behaviour*, the behaviour of two men acts to illustrate the fluidity of so-called masculinity. Maxwell Ford wears the mask of a successful and sophisticated gallery owner. Under pressure from Brunetti, the “Italianate softness of [Ford’s] voice slips away to reveal its Anglo-Saxon bedrock” (190), and him as a vicious liar, and serial adulterer. At the conclusion of the interview, the shaken Ford quickly recovers his composure along with his Italianate softness and offers Brunetti “assistance” to forget the whole incident (190). On another occasion, Brunetti goes to see his father-in-law, Count Orazio Falier, for information regarding the fate of various art treasures that disappeared during the Second World War. Impulsively he asks the Count whether he was proud of what he did during the war, and is surprised that without thought his father-in-law responds instantly:

No, I am not proud. I was at the beginning I suppose. But I was young, little more than a boy. When the war finished I wasn’t even eighteen yet, but I’d been living and acting like a man, or how I thought a man was supposed to act, for more than two years. (179)

The Count adopted a model of masculinity that allowed him to survive the war, Maxwell Ford an identity that fitted his public role. Both examples serve to show gender and identity as free floating, rather than fixed or true in any simple sense.

In *Death in a Strange Country*, Brunetti is discomfited by the fact that the witness he is about to interview, Captain Terry Peters of the American army, is a woman and a doctor. He is not sure whether this is because of the smugness of the American officer who gave him the information or his own reaction to it: “What was he meant to do ...fall over on his side because the Americans allowed women in their army? Or because they also allowed them to be doctors” (47). Putting the phone down, he realised that his reaction to the call had done everything to confirm any cliché about hot-blooded, thin-skinned Italian men. Waiting for Captain Peters at the station, one of the Carabinieri observed that she was late and “added a scornful chuckle at the idea a woman could be an officer.” At the sound of the laugh, Brunetti determined he would give her the respect that her rank entitled her: “Not for the first time he cringed when he saw his own prejudices manifest themselves in other people” (55). Despite this determination, it is notable that Brunetti can never quite bring himself to address her as “Captain”. He is comfortable identifying her as a doctor, but cannot cope with

her transgression into the military and its overtly masculine associations. Captain Peters' identity is constituted through gender and profession. She is an amalgam of three things, a woman, a doctor and a military officer. Butler claims that "sex" is a regulatory ideal that materialises over time and not a simple fact or static condition. Brunetti accepts this sort of notion intellectually, but his emotional rejection is an unconscious defence of his own masculinity. His identity is subsumed into an ideology of defining performative acts and vectors of power. If institutions of power and knowledge traditionally controlled by men become regulated to include women, what does this say about male identity? For thousands of years masculinity and the military were synonymous. Captain Peters's very existence reveals the gendered body not a being but as a "variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated" (BTM 139). Brunetti encounters a similar example of a regulatory decision that alters previously accepted gender boundaries when he questions a friend about his homosexual associates. He wants to know if any of them were likely to be the target for blackmail. His request is dismissed with the terse reminder that homosexuality is no longer a crime in Italy, and no longer fertile ground for extortion. Furthermore, his friend wants no part in Brunetti's harassing people because of their sexuality. In this, we see that political regulation has altered the boundaries of gender acceptability, leaving Brunetti behind political reality, if not public acceptance.

In a moment rarely seen in the genre, Brunetti ponders the "truth" of his own nature and sexual identity. He has just finished interviewing a prospective witness to a yet-to-be committed crime. Tassini is a broken man: several years earlier he had delayed taking his child to hospital and as a result she had been brain damaged. Brunetti plays on Tassini's guilt to persuade him to talk. The interview left him uneasy. He felt cheapened by the way he had deceived the man and induced him to talk about his daughter:

Brunetti was neither a religious nor a superstitious man, though if he could have thought of the proper deity, he would have given thanks for the health and safety of his own children. As it was, he was left with the vague sense of unease at their continued good fortune and never ceased to worry about them. Sometimes he viewed this quality in himself with favour and thought of it as feminine: other times he saw it as a form of cowardice and chided himself with being womanly. Paola, not much given to sparing him the rough edge of

her tongue, never joked with him about this tendency, certainly an indication that she saw it as essential to his being and thus unapproachable. (98)

In this scene, Brunetti contests traditional representations of both the detective in fiction and normative masculinity. Earlier the reader saw how he worried that he might appear as the stereotypical hot-blooded, thin-skinned Italian male; now concern for his children has him question his own gender. Even here he differentiates; he sees femininity as positive whereas “womanly” carries connotations of cowardliness. Paola, however, considers the feminine aspects of his character to be essential to his being. Judith Butler sees the process of self-identification as part of the complex way we make ourselves fit into this world: “Identities come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them” (GT 22). They are the result of historical factors that regulate ethnic denomination, sexual classifications, and gender practices. When for all his life Brunetti has received as “universal truth” that soldiers and doctors are men, that homosexuality is an abomination, and the *vu cumprá* are feckless thieves, is it any wonder that residual doubts cannot be suppressed when these “truths” are rendered invalid by the stroke of a pen? The recognition of identity as fluid makes Brunetti different from other fictional crime fighters.

In the world of the detective story, Hercule Poirot is first and foremost a detective, as is Adam Dalgliesh. Dalgliesh lays claim to being a published poet, but his creative endeavours are never part of the narrative, and add nothing to his personality. As with Poirot, his detectiveness subsumes him. The identities of these two men are fixed. From his first appearance in 1920 until the death of his creator, fifty years on, Poirot remains the same. Mannerisms, methods, dress, are constant, only his original limp has disappeared.<sup>6</sup> Apart from that, his identity remains unmoving. By contrast, Brunetti’s identity is fluid, contingent and responsive to a complex barely coordinated set of historic events and national boundaries. Shaped by Italy’s defeat during the war, his father’s descent into intermittent madness, the corruption that surrounds him, a dislike of Americans and Germans, he could have been developed as a clichéd hard man. However, influenced by his wife, children, and domestic commitments, his

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, he has a permanent limp presumably the result of some secret mission in the service of the Belgian government.

identity is always in flux, such that his understanding of what it is to be a man undergoes constant transformation. Without the certainty of Poirot or Dalgliesh, he cannot inherit the mantle of the infallible detective and its corollary of hegemonic control.

### **Closure and Dottore Moro**

The classic detective's infallibility reinforces faith in an orderly universe. With the murderer caught and order reimposed, life resumes its usual way. The closures of both *Death on the Nile* and *The Lighthouse* use circular strategies to signal that life is back to normal. With the bodies removed from the *Karnak*, Christie immediately shifts the scene back to Malton-under-Wode where the reader first met Linnet Doyle née Ridgeway. The usual locals in the Three Crowns briefly discuss her fate but before very long the conversation moves on to the more pressing matter of who was going to win the Grand National. Similarly, with the removal of the murderer from the island, Combe quickly returns to domestic and almost idyllic normality. In fact, both James and Christie go beyond a simple return to the status quo, and use the despatch of the murderer as a catalyst for improving upon what had prevailed. For several of the residents of Combe, life improves. Dr Staveley recovers his confidence and his wife's affection, thus enabling them to return to the comforts of Harley Street. Kate enjoys her last few days on the island. Able to relax for the first time in years, she finds herself accepted as a woman, not a detective inspector. Benton goes rock climbing, and Dalgliesh and Emma leave the island knowing there "was a new beginning, a future rich with infinite possibilities" (467). Christie goes even further as several of her characters find happiness in unexpected marriages. Such is the extent of relationship mending at the conclusion of *Styles*, this reader gave up counting the unlikely number of couples that were reconciled or betrothed. The return to order or better is the prescribed closure for the genre. The reader may not necessarily agree with the detail of how things turn out but derives assurance from the knowledge that good triumphs over evil.

What then is one to make of the muddled closures of Donna Leon? Brunetti is fallible, and the best he can do is hold the line. He has no illusions that he can return order to a society where disorder is part of its heritage. Yet, he does offer his readers, through his honesty and integrity, the attraction of some certainty, and the validation of shared assumptions that confirm culturally constructed values. His personal values, however, are not enough. More often than not the “system” allows him to only partially solve the puzzle, sometimes only to the extent of creating doubt about the “official” version. He is able to cast culpability on various institutions, such as the Mafia, the state, or the army, sufficient to render doubtful the boundaries of order and disorder. What he cannot offer is resolution: his “triumphs over evil” are always qualified; too often, suspects simply disappear into a protective web of corruption. Catching the crook, or knowing who he is, means little; the ambiguous nature of Italian justice makes no guarantees.

The impotence of the Italian state makes the arrest of Dottore Rossi, the Direttore of Pubblica Istruzione, on a charge of murder, little more than a charade. From experience, Brunetti knows Rossi will probably escape punishment. He will plead not guilty on the cynical ground that he, not the dead woman, is the victim. The woman who had been blackmailing him with the knowledge that his PhD is a forgery will elicit little public sympathy, and the judge will have no compunction about releasing him on bail. He will remain at home on full pay and retain his position as director. Eventually he will come up for trial. Pleading provocation, he will, if unlucky, be sentenced to seven years jail. An immediate appeal will see him remain out of jail on full pay, until eventually the case is quietly dropped. He might lose his job as director, but if he does, the bureaucracy will shift him sideways, still on his old salary, and he will continue unhindered towards his pension.

In a continuation of muddled closures, *Wilful Behaviour* sees the killer jailed while her husband, Maxwell Ford, the person responsible for goading her into the murder of an innocent young girl, remains free to continue running his art gallery and preying on other young girls. In *Blood from a Stone*, Brunetti never identifies the killers other than as agents of the state. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, he fails to establish murder as the cause of death, and the only crime he can prove, pouring tons of toxic

waste into the Venetian lagoon, is dismissed as a misdemeanour. The failure of the state means that the burden of administering justice often falls on Brunetti. His solutions are imperfect, but they do mean there is some form of retribution. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, he informs a friendly newspaper of the toxic waste going into the lagoon; in *Blood from a Stone* he “donates” the cache of diamonds he found while searching the apartment of the dead *vu cumprà* to a priest friend to provide housing for the illegal immigrants who flood into Venice on every tide. In another, he shatters the world of Maxwell Ford’s jailed wife, by informing her that the jealousy which drove her to kill her husband’s supposed seductress is founded on cruel lies. Claudia was a girl of impeccable virtue, a virgin, who had never spoken to Ford let alone seduced him as he claimed. These are not conventional endings in the manner of Poirot or Dalgliesh. For Brunetti to solve the case and tie up the loose ends, as they do, would be contrary to the whole tenor of Leon’s work. Torgovnick reports Henry James as saying, “A proper ending can only be established by a process of selection and comparison, by artistic arrangement that makes the novel a unified and organic whole” (4). Traditionally, the genre defends the established order, but the narrative thrust of Leon’s work refuses to convey order and “organic” wholeness, and instead presents the disorder and corruption of a patriarchal society that fails its duty to its citizens. In the very dark *Uniform Justice*, Leon ignores one of the canons of the genre. The criminals outwit her detective and leave him no way of redressing the balance. His world does not return to security and safety. It remains corrupt and, if anything, gets worse.

This break with genre tradition earned a mixed reception from the critics. “Book Browse” presented a range of American reviews of *Uniform Justice*. Among them *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* considered it outstanding, and as having “achieved perfect pitch”. Her technique was considered to be Kafkaesque, with plots that are never clean and inevitable, told in “silken prose” and “conveying considerable charm almost concealing its underlying anger”, containing an unlovely story set in the loveliest of cities (3). At the other end of the scale, Alan Paul Curtis, critic for *Who Dunit*, felt the downbeat closure destroyed the expected pleasure of readers looking for resolution: “It is supposed to be fiction where the bad guys are

foiled and justice prevails. Donna Leon needs to remember that fiction is read for enjoyment more than enlightenment” (2).

The investigation of a supposed suicide at a boys’ military college turns out to be a disclosure of murder. The boy’s father, Dr Moro, is a rare thing—an honest politician, a man of impeccable behaviour and honesty, who, when put in charge of a parliamentary committee investigating corruption, carries out the task with vigour and intensity thus earning the wrath of many of his colleagues. His wife is “accidentally” shot in the leg, and Moro tries to protect her by separating from her and his family. His son, who is the same age as Brunetti’s, is found hanged. Brunetti’s investigation reveals the killer, but stronger forces make it impossible to charge him. The only one capable of providing the evidence is Dr Moro, who has already seen his wife shot and his son murdered. Moro refuses to talk.

In an exchange between them Moro asks Brunetti if he had read Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. This is typical of Leon; she always assumes that the reader is as well read as Brunetti. Central to the story of Ivan Ilych is an examination of death’s inevitability and the self-congratulations and indifference of those not under imminent threat. We all face death and loss, even though we may convince ourselves that our present good health or good fortune precludes our mortality. Brunetti recognises that Moro’s separation from his wife and family had been in the mistaken belief that he could keep them out of harm’s way. He had given up his family and all its pleasure in order to save them, only to lose them anyhow. Once Brunetti understands Moro’s dilemma in terms of the terrible choice between endangering one’s family and pursuing the truth in spite of threats, he can empathise with the man. He recognises their similarities. For Brunetti family is extremely important, and he wonders how he would have handled a similar threat. What little residual respect he has for Patta is based on memories of Patta’s ferocious counterattack on Mafia thugs who overstepped the mark and threatened his family rather than pay the normal tribute direct into his Swiss account. Faced with the threats of a similar magnitude, Moro gives in. Brunetti has no word of criticism, only sympathy. His compassion separates him from the traditional detective. Detectives are supposed to be tough, and Brunetti is tough enough, but his compassion exposes the fragility of the male/female binary



and myths of masculine power and control. Leon's muddled closure disputes the primacy of the masculinist hegemony, or at least conveys the ethical and human cost of that hegemony.

Reluctantly Moro comes to recognise Brunetti's humanity, and finally responds when Brunetti asks him why the Mafia should kill his son, having already intimidated him through shooting his wife: "Because they are stupid and didn't believe it was so easy to stop me. That I was a coward and would not stop them" (325). In the exchange that follows Brunetti's humanity is once again revealed, as is his helplessness against the full force of Venetian corruption. They sit there in silence until Brunetti leans forward and asks,

'What do you want me to do, Dottore?'

Moro raised his head and looked at Brunetti with eyes that had grown even sadder in the last half hour. 'You want me to make the decision for you?'

'No. Not really. Or not only. To make it for yourself. And for your family.'

'You'll do what ever I say?' Moro asked.

'Yes.'

'Regardless of law or justice?' Moro's emphasis, a very unkind emphasis, was on the last word.

'Why? Don't you care about justice?' Moro anger was undisguised now. Brunetti had no taste for this, any longer. 'There is no justice here, Dottore, he said frightened to realise that he meant not only for this man and his family, but for this city, and this country, and their lives.

'Then let it be,' Moro said exhausted. 'Let him be.'

Everything that was decent in Brunetti urged him to say something that would comfort this man, but the words, though summoned, failed to come. [...] He thought of his own son, of Phillip's son, and of Moro's, and then the words came: 'Poor boy' (326).

### *Finis*

Curtis is right; the rules are broken, but for many readers the genre is resilient enough to accommodate such a deviation. More importantly, to remain true to the genre as Curtis imagines it, Brunetti would have to coerce Moro into appearing as a witness, destroying the carefully drawn portrait of Guido Brunetti as an honest and compassionate man. Crime fiction posits a particular myth of order, justice and rationality. Leon exposes the myth as myth by showing that it can find no congruence in the Venice she presents. Instead she offers a counter-mythology of frayed endings and muddled closures.

### Donna Leon

Donna Leon's characters and plotting render assumptions of an essential gender core as problematic. There are no radical departures from dominant writing practice as with Cixous or Irigaray, but Leon works towards the margins of the conventional form by crisscrossing generally accepted boundaries of gender and genre performativity. She does not appropriate masculine values into a feminist story in the ways the creators of Warshawski or Stephanie Plum do. Rather, in the manner of critics Katherine Klein and Sally Munt, she attempts to change the foundational myth that privileges the phallus: her stories tend to highlight the discursive nature of gender rather than its so-called essence. The standard detective story portrays a fixed hero in a fixed world where a rigid set of binaries, good versus evil, strong versus weak, male versus female, seek to affirm the 'rightness' of patriarchal dominance. Leon's is a reverse discourse, which subtly deconstructs phallogocentric ideologies relating to gender, genre, culture and politics. Her main protagonists remain firmly heterosexual yet reveal a more nuanced and flexible approach to both gender and genre. Brunetti is a more complex man than most fictional detectives, and Paola and Signorina Elettra move beyond simplistic roles of dependency and victimhood. The implied author has made choices that have moved on from the works of Christie and James. As much as they are crime stories, they are social commentaries that concern themselves with Venetian morality and gender identity. They seek to challenge the power of dominant "knowledge" groups, whether they are the military, the universities, the government, or the patriarchy, by demonstrating the fraudulence of their normalising claims. The site of authority remains unknown, nebulous, contradictory and corrupt. Gender is problematic and fluid. Within the novels of Donna Leon, contradictory performativity operates in two ways: in general through the implied author's ideological positioning, and in particular through the contradictory gender actions and utterances of Brunetti and Elettra. The simultaneous renouncing and colluding with illusions of patriarchal authority allow Leon to remain firmly within the flexible boundaries of the genre and her characters to move between marked and unmarked positions of gendered performance. She uses the formula of the crime genre as a tool to break the conventional narrative codes that work to support heterosexual norms. Her adaptation

of the genre offers a culture of resistance able to flourish within the context and demands of best-selling formulaic fiction.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions

Each cultural shift is a ripple in the sea of representations,  
which construct our reality

Munt

The advent in the nineteen eighties of a whole host of works of crime fiction written by women and featuring female detectives proved popular with the public, and attracted the interest of scholars anxious to see how these new detectives, with their overtly feminist agenda, negotiated a genre heavily implicated in promoting patriarchal concepts of sexual difference, gender and hierarchy. Their aggression whether with tough talk, flying fists or blazing gun, coupled with their sexual appetites, challenged hegemonic notions of female passivity. Narratives that often combined crime with romance, comedy, or voyeurism destabilised a previously conservative genre. While many readers appreciated this fresh approach, academic opinion was muted. The appropriation of male values, the failure to move convincingly beyond the genre's central convention, and the restoration of the hegemonic order, acted to privilege masculine values and colluded with an ideology that treats the female as "other". Furthermore by attempting to alter the tight formula of the crime novel, the female detectives risked sliding beyond generic boundaries of crime fiction into comedy or romance.

Ignored among the flurry of academic interest in female detectives were those very successful female authors whose heroes were male. As an avid reader of crime fiction it appeared to me that these authors and their detectives, while sitting comfortably within generic boundaries, could provide different opportunities for the disruption of gender norms. This presumed that somewhere within the text either deliberately or unconsciously through omission or inclusion a female worldview would emerge to colour the narrative and disrupt normative gender behaviour.

The question is how and in what way are the performative acts of gender and genre modified in female-authored crime fiction that features male detectives as their heroes? The hypothesis is that the subtle reconfiguration of these male detectives manifests itself through performative contradictions that challenge the collective normative practices relating to gender without serious disruption to the genre. This was tested through a close reading of selected crime novels using the performative theories of Judith Butler. Wayne Booth's notion of the implied author was also important as it provided a link between the actual author and his or her characters.

A Butlerian reading shows all three detectives operate within a framework that treats the attributes of patriarchal authority and masculinity as the cultural norm. It also reveals the limitation inherent in a hypothesis that posits the emergence of a female voice or world view. This assumes that certain attributes are specifically feminine. Voicing this assumption contributes to the multitude of reiteration and reinscriptions that over time accumulate the force of authority that comes to see these attributes as natural. Sally Munt makes similar assumptions when she ascribes Poirot's habits of fastidiousness and keen observation as feminine, while disregarding the notion that these would be the expected qualities of an ex-military man trained as a spy. This type of gender definition is implicit, and may be unavoidable; it is an intuitive and automatic aspect of social interaction that Butler's theories draw attention to. Also problematic was the issue of the implied author's relationship to the actual author. Limiting the close reading of Christie and James to a single novel each, while indicating their complicity in hegemonic enforcement, was not enough to observe a consistent pattern of values or beliefs that may represent the actual author's personal view. In contrast, the close reading of several Leon's novels allowed room for the emergence of a consistent pattern which, not unreasonably, may be judged as the personal views of the actual author. Whatever the values of the actual authors, their biological sex does not guarantee that their values will coincide with a particular set of gender attributes. Christie, James, and Leon act out their own masquerades of femininity that are beyond the remit of this thesis, as it would require not only a close study of their fiction, but access to considerable biographical information as well.

Time and history are necessary ingredients in the shaping of gender norms. The difference in gender attitudes is the result of the assimilation of cultural changes that have occurred in the almost ninety years since Hercule Poirot made his first appearance. These changes are recognisable in the text, not only in the presence or absence of servants, in the types of cars, or size of the telephones, but also through the political positioning of the “other”. Christie’s Poirot is the all-seeing symbolic father who solves the mystery and returns the hegemony to its predisruptive state. Females who attempt to assume a subject position are inevitably disenfranchised within the narrative. In *Death on the Nile*, all four women who seek agency are despatched with bullets and few regrets. Bubbling along under the morality tale of failed female agency is the clear indication that marriage, not agency or independence, should be the preferred choice of all young women. Christie, or the implied author, is wholly supportive of the hegemony, so much so that it is arguable she transgresses herself through identifying with the cognitive superiority of Poirot rather than the travails of put-upon women.

Adam Dalgliesh, who appeared some forty-two years after Poirot, continues in essentially the same vein, with some minor adjustments. He has many similar characteristics. An all-seeing father figure, in the tradition of most great detectives he lives alone and is unencumbered. Age and approaching marriage suggest his symbolic father/great detective role may be coming to an end. This provides room for his assistants, Kate Miskin and Benton Smith, to develop a working relationship based on collaboration rather than a contested relationship built around hierarchal notions of gender and race. Kate has agency but it is limited by the fact that in the male world of the Metropolitan Police she is associated also with the “otherness” represented by her femaleness. She is an authority figure, who is dependent on masculine support and, consequently, her accession to authority is invested with ambiguity. Competent in her job, she comes late to the realisation that she is more comfortable identifying herself as a woman than as a police officer. James offers women a qualified agency; although the narrative closes on a positive reconfiguration of women’s place within the patriarchy, this revision is still dependent on male approval.

The twenty-two year difference in the ages of Leon and James reflects further cultural change, even though for the last fifteen years they have been writing concurrently. With her subtle disruption of phallogocentric notions of gender politics and male authority, Leon has moved on. Guido Brunetti is domesticated, loves his family, and sometimes wonders if he is masculine enough. He can be tough, but may weep when he thinks of his children. He contests traditional representations of both the detective in fiction, and normative masculinity. Signorina Elettra inserts herself into dominant knowledge groups and demonstrates the fraudulence of their normalising claims. Delightfully feminine, she resists the idea of being an object of exchange; nor is her identity dependent on male desire or approval.

Leon claims she only writes detective fiction because it allows her to indulge her love of opera, but the emotional and moral content of the narrative action in the Brunetti series suggests an implied author committed to more flexible notions of both gender and genre. Leon's nuanced approach allows her to subvert hegemonic norms without obvious damage to the genre. In this way she is able to avoid the fate of the female detectives who with their guns, hard drinking and intermittent comedy, succeed only in colluding with the very hegemony they oppose. She uses the authority of writing as well as the authority invested in detection to disrupt gender norms in a manner that, apart from a minor quibble, creates no backlash.

Time and social change, along with the politics of the genre, must be taken into account when evaluating the success or failure of the subversion of genre conventions and normative gender. In terms of the hypothesis it was difficult to make a convincing case that either Agatha Christie with Hercule Poirot or PD James with Adam Dalgliesh offers any substantive challenge to gender or generic norms. There is a return to hegemonic control in both, but each is attentive in her text to the disruptive potential represented by female power (Christie) or an unfettered patriarchy. James is different from Christie in her ability to criticise and criminalise the actions of an excessive patriarchy. Both detectives are demonstrably servants of the hegemony seeking to restore order to a society disrupted by murder. The major difference between them rests in their handling of female claims to agency, and the evidence from the text suggests this is more a reflection of cultural change than any personal

conviction of the actual author. Donna Leon is different. She uses the crime formula as a tool to break conventional narrative codes and undermine the system of heteronormativity enforced through combinations of power and knowledge, and the reinscription of thousands of social customs. In the context of a Leon narrative, women are imagined as strong and independent well able to live fulfilling lives in a patriarchal society that wallows in its own corruption. Moreover, she modifies her male lead without damage to his deductive powers or his masculinity. This typifies Judith Butler's preferred mode of subversion. She has no "big bang" theory, or Cixousian vision of a phantasmagorical transformation, just the belief that if the boundaries of acceptability are expanded life becomes more liveable for those who exist as "other" within a masculine hegemony.



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