Reviews


Agatha Christie has always been popular with readers and, latterly, with TV audiences. Although she was only one of many clue puzzle writers—W. H. Auden, for instance, refers to Dorothy L. Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, and the now forgotten Freeman Wills Crofts as masters of the genre—but neglects to mention Christie in ‘The Guilty Vicarage’ (Harper’s Magazine, May 1948 <http://harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage/1/> [accessed 27 January 2017])—her work has come to represent all that is typical about Golden Age detective fiction. The cultural turn has involved a reassessment of genre fiction, previously largely ignored by the literary as well as the academic establishment. Queering Agatha Christie is the latest of many works subjecting Christie’s considerable œuvre to new readings.

If one opens this volume expecting a series of literary ‘outings’ given the sheer number of ‘masculine’ women and ‘queer’ men in Christie’s work, one will be disappointed. Indeed, doing so would be to miss the crucial point that Christie’s stereotypical characters do not simply uncritically reflect common preconceptions of her time; instead, she deploys them knowingly in order to deceive us. It is a kind of double bluff, and it is why her plots work.

J. C. Bernthal’s aim is thus not to uncover queer characters but to analyse how queerness is enacted in Christie’s fiction. He does not go on fruitless searches for ‘essence’, but accepts characters as being entirely constructed and moved about on the stage sets of the author’s stories and novels. Some of the questions he poses are: what constitutes characters’ queerness? To what end are queer characters employed? What are likely audience reactions, and how does Christie’s finely honed awareness of those potential reactions inform her plotting?

‘Queer’ does not, of course, simply mean ‘homosexual’—it is a term employed in its wider sense of ‘not fitting in to what is considered normal’. In Christie’s clue puzzles, society’s ‘misfits’ naturally gravitate together, making Queer Theory an ideal analytical tool. After a theoretical introduction, Bernthal moves on to the conscious identity performance that was ‘Agatha Christie, author’. Chapter 3 considers how queerness unsettles notions of English masculinity by looking closely at the queer (but straight) Hercule Poirot as well as other ‘unmasculine’ men. Chapter 4 looks at the enactment of femininity as masquerade, while Chapter 5 explores how unproductive stereotypes of the family are revealed as such, and which kinds of family Christie is advocating as holding the keys to the future. Chapter 6, finally, reconsiders the adaptation of Christie’s novels to the small screen, which, by erasing the productive ambiguity surrounding so many of her characters, ends up reinscribing traditional, sometimes prejudiced, viewpoints.

It is a fascinating analysis of some of the texts and adaptations of one of Britain’s best-loved writers. I find Bernthal’s thesis and analysis entirely persuasive. I was wondering, though, why the book focuses almost entirely on male queerness and ignores Christie’s various lesbian stereotypes and their functions. A comparison...
between male and female queerness and Christie’s adroit manipulation of gendered audience expectations might have been revealing. Thyrza Grey and Sybil Stamfordis in *The Pale Horse* (outside the scope of Bernthal’s volume, since published in 1961) enact the stereotype of the butch/femme couple, but are also characterized by mental instability, which is not something ascribed to, for instance, the ‘effeminate’ Cardew Pye in *The Moving Finger* (1942). I would also have liked to read more about Miss Marple, who, in contrast to Hercule Poirot, does not figure largely in Bernthal’s analyses.

However, these comparatively small gripes aside, this volume is a timely, rich, immensely suggestive, and—one does not say this every day about an academic volume—wonderfully well-written reassessment of Agatha Christie and her work.

**Swansea University**

Alyce von Rothkirch

Below you should find the contact details (postal and email addresses) that are on file. If the information is not there, please write it in if you are sending the proof back to the editor, or else email it to the assistant editor John Waś (john.was@ntlworld.com). The details should be correct and valid at least until October 2017. (Note that sometimes an item has to be postponed to a later issue if the volume in preparation proves to be over-long: please advise of any change of contact details up till the actual publication of your contribution.)

Dr Alyce von Rothkirch
DACE
Swansea University
Singleton Park
SA2 8PP

email address: a.v.von.rothkirch@swansea.ac.uk