“Three ordinary, normal old women”: Agatha Christie’s Uses of Shakespeare

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Abstract: This article draws on recent scholarship on Shakespearean allusions and crime fiction to develop an in-depth exploration of Agatha Christie’s quotations from the playwright. These quotations do not tend to point to the murderer or give clues to the plot, but fall into three major categories. In some novels she uses them to interpolate the reader within the layers of intertextuality within crime fiction, aligning them with the author and with the detective rather than other characters. In other novels she uses discussions of Shakespeare to position her characters in the midcentury “feminine middlebrow” mode of novels identified by Nicola Humble. In a trio of late novels, her characters use reflections on how Macbeth should be staged to gain insights about the dangerous worlds they inhabit. The article examines how the novels engage with the Shakespearean text, but also with the shifting conceptions of Shakespeare which developed during the twentieth century. It reveals a sophisticated set of textual strategies within Christie’s novels, which debate the meaning of Shakespeare’s plays, and stage controversies over the ways in which those meanings should be accessed and reproduced.

Keywords: Shakespeare, detective fiction, Agatha Christie, allusion, Golden Age,

In her latter decades, Agatha Christie wrote a loose trilogy of novels, in each of which a different character from *Macbeth* turns out to have committed the murder. This was the culmination of a long engagement with the plays of Shakespeare over her career, during which Christie reacted to the different ideas and images of the playwright which

developed during the twentieth century. In recent years scholarship on the citation of Shakespeare in the English novel has taken an increasingly theoretically sophisticated turn, with critics such as Daniel Pollack-Pelzner and Craig Raine focusing on the uses to which such citations are put. Their work has cast light on the subtle negotiations between author, reader and Shakespeare in these texts, enabling us to avoid the assumption that Shakespeare is simply and monolithically a cultural authority, or that to cite Shakespeare is to straightforwardly validate him and the text. Meanwhile, in the crossover between crime fiction and Shakespeare studies, Lisa Hopkins has demonstrated the echoes, images and references from Shakespeare which appear in detective novels by Michael Innes, Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh and others. Hopkins has made a convincing case that the practice was so widespread that alluding to Shakespeare in the classical "Golden Age" detective novel was not stretching or transgressing the genre's boundaries, but rather a means of signalling that a work fell within them (Hopkins, 1-8).

The detective novels of Agatha Christie offer a unique set of features to capitalise upon, test, and extend these developments in scholarship around Shakespeare allusions in modern prose. Firstly there is Christie's sheer longevity as a writer across crucial periods of the twentieth century: her published novels stretch from the late 1920s to the early 1970s. In terms of crime fiction, this means she began writing when Arthur Conan Doyle still had more than a decade left in him, and died fifteen years after Raymond Chandler. On the timeline of Shakespeare studies, this means Christie was writing detective fiction before T.S. Eliot published *Elizabethan Essays*, or before L.C Knights demanded "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?", whilst her last novel came a decade after Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, and only a few years before J.L. Styan's *The Shakespeare Revolution*. Very few other authors were

publishing such popular novels with a mass readership across this length of time. Secondly, Christie is fascinatingly responsive to the changing conceptions of Shakespeare during this period. Her novels do not simply coincide with character criticism, new criticism and performance criticism, they actively engage with these schools' shifting notions of what constitutes Shakespeare, and where Shakespeare's value is to be found. Her novels contain secret agents who quote Shakespearean aphorisms, schoolgirls who obsess about the feelings of Shakespearean characters, and a doctor who finds that his patient reminds him inexplicably of a recent production of *Macbeth*. Focusing on her engagements with Shakespeare will allow a dynamic approach which does not assume (as previous work has tended to take for granted) that Shakespeare and the contemporary author are both fixed points. Scholarly approaches to Shakespeare changed dramatically over the twentieth century, but even more significant were the changes in the public sense of what the term "Shakespeare" meant. Tracing Christie's use of his work allows a much more nuanced appreciation of how a modern author responded to a Shakespeare as a shifting point. On close examination, her novels reveal a set of sophisticated textual strategies, responding to shifts in the conceptualisation of Shakespeare and positioning her own work by the handling of different hermeneutic approaches.

Thirdly, and crucially for my methodology, her novels sit within a genre which is peculiarly concerned with textuality, and thus with intertextuality. I have already mentioned Lisa Hopkins' point that quoting Shakespeare is a generic marker (rather than a highbrow anomaly) for some forms of detective fiction, and this chimes with Carl Malmgren's work on crime fiction and signification. He considers crime fiction as uniquely concerned with the problems of sign systems, and detective fiction (as a subset of crime fiction) as engaged in layering sets of codes and interpretation upon each other:

> Every detective story necessarily contains an interpretant, someone engaged in decoding signs, and therefore a foregrounded figure of the reader. Like the reader, the detective comes after, after the text has been composed, by chance, witnesses, accessories, but most notably by the murderer. The detective, however, cannot be happy with that text, which is finally a surface structure; he or she must read through it to the deep structure, the true story informing its clues and events. The detective, like the reader, looks for the buried meaning of narrative facts.
>
> (28)

This model of the genre, in which the murderer (along with chance or providence) constructs a set of overlapping and ambiguous textual surfaces, which the detective must interpret, whilst they are themselves part of a textual surface which the reader must parse, leads Malmgren to more general conclusions about the nature of detective fiction. He stresses "the conflation of the literary and the real in mystery fiction" and "the genre's interest in, even obsession with, texts and textuality", declaring that "mystery is a bookish genre" and that "this preoccupation with textuality reflects a subconscious desire to treat the world as if it were a book" possessed of "readability, decipherability [and] intelligibility" (47).

Malmgren's work provides a theoretical basis for the investigation I intend to carry out into Christie's engagements with Shakespeare in several ways. It emphasizes the weight which such references and allusions carry. As I will discuss below, quotation in detective novels (especially those of Christie and her contemporaries) has often been discussed in terms of frivolity, snobbery or glib displays of pseudo-erudition. Hopkins has identified the prevalence of it in interwar detective fiction, and the analysis offered by Malmgren argues for its integration into our understanding of how the genre itself operates. This suggests that citation and reference are worth exploring, and that Shakespeare references which lie within Christie's work cannot do so inertly, whatever the author did or did not intend. Those references and allusions constitute a network or

matrix within which the novel conducts a negotiation between the reader and the detective, as well as potentially between those two figures and the murderer and reality/ providence. The overlapping layers of encoding and textuality which he identifies, and which are "read" by characters within the book and readers outside it, call attention to a major function of Shakespeare allusions within the genre. They introduce a set of codes which pre-exist the novel itself within the reader's experience and which potentially cut across the layers of textuality. A reader who recognises a reference does not need to wait to have the detective explain it to another character (though that may occur). They are already in possession of some of the textual code, and in a genre which desires to "treat the world as if it is a book" this goes beyond having a stray piece of knowledge (47). Moreover, it allows the reader to enter into the textuality of the genre, becoming part of a set of struggles and interpretations which are already taking place between the characters. As I shall show below, recognition or misrecognition of a quotation may have less to do with solving the case than with allying the reader with particular characters in their attempts to decode the world.

Malmgren's emphasis on the layers of encoding and encoding which take place in detective fiction, and the textual shells produced which encompass characters and readers, brings the subject into dialogue with the most recent work on allusion to Shakespeare in later literature. In their general introduction to Shakespeare and Quotation, Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold note the frequent denigration of "mere" quotations in literary scholarship, in a "prevailing critical tendencies to treat quotation as merely an outward sign of a larger relationship between texts", whether those relationships take symbolic, thematic or other forms (10). They place the practice of quotation, and the complexities of its operations, at the centre of their collection, enabling the kind of sophisticated analysis I mentioned above by Raine and Pollack-

Pelzner. The allusions I shall be discussing in Christie's work do not tend to fall into the category of symbol or theme, and much of their significance lies in the implied processes of recognition and decoding (or lack of it) and how this positions the reader in relation to the text, as well as the text in relation to other texts. My work thus chimes with their insistence on the value of considering quotation in itself, rather than always framing it as a surface sign of a less visible, and therefore deeper and more significant, engagement with the work. Beatrice Groves, whose work also appears in Maxwell and Rumbold's volume, offers theoretical tools which sits helpfully alongside Malmgren's textual layers. Writing about Biblical references in Shakespeare she borrows Hannibal Hamlin's film-inspired distinction between "diegetic" allusions, which are intentional by the characters and can be "heard" within the fictional world, and "extradiegetic" ones which are only intended by the author and thus are "inaudible" to the characters (64). Groves uses this to prise apart "quotations" made by characters, and "allusions" made by the author, producing her own model of the textual layers and spaces between character, author and reader, within which the words of other texts can vibrate and resound. I will not be directly using the terminology and distinctions developed by Groves, Hamlin, Maxwell and Rumbold, but my scrutiny of Christie's work develops from their work and its textual emphases. Having highlighted their insights, I will review approaches to allusion in scholarship specifically centred on Christie before undertaking my reading of her engagements with Shakespeare.

Allusions to the poet

Agatha Christie's allusions have been the subject of critical comment since the earliest academic scholarship on her novels appeared. They have, however, often been dismissed as a matter of critical interest. Earl Bargainnier's *The Gentle Art of Murder*, the first full-length critical work on Christie, comments that:

> Unlike Dorothy Sayers, Michael Innes or Edmund Crispin, Christie makes no claims to erudition by filling her books with quotations from or references to esoteric literature. Nor does she use literary allusions as significant clues, with the single exception of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* in *Sleeping Murder*. Her attitude seems to have been that in the game of solving the mystery, she should not require any kind of special knowledge of her readers: one of the reasons for her popularity. When she does make allusions, they are never obscure – and always English. They are to works which were a natural part of the childhood and education of the upper middle class of her generation.
>
> (168).

Bargainnier also refers to the "relatively small number of allusions of any kind", and the "restricted number of sources", remarking that "though not as 'lowbrow' as she liked to pretend, she kept to the fairly obvious – and what she knew – in literary allusion" (168-9). He turns the seeming paucity of literary references into a virtue, implying that Sayers, Crispin and Innes were "claiming" erudition rather than incorporating it, and assuming that such practices were unnecessary to "the game of solving the mystery". The same line is taken in the more "appreciative" (as opposed to academic) commentaries by Robert Barnard and John Osborne. Barnard, in *A Talent to Deceive*, states that her "literary references" in the detective novels are "conventional, blank and anonymous" and "tired and threadbare", despite the evidence from elsewhere that "Christie was decidedly well-read in an idiosyncratic, self-educated way" (68, 67). Barnard does mention that "there are some more recondite quotations buried in the text from time to time", but does not mention what they are and remarks that "only a well-read reader could spot them" (68). For him, the conclusion to be drawn is that her quotations are part of Christie's "refus[al] to stamp her books with any individuality, if by that is meant the individuality of one's own tastes, and interests" (68). These comments are part of a broader tendency to regard Christie as a relatively simple writer – certainly when compared to Margery Allingham or Dorothy Sayers – whose talent lay

in her ingenious plotting rather than the texture of her prose.

When Alison Light brought Christie scholarship into a new phase and bracketed her as a "conservative modernist" along with other authors in *Forever England*, she dealt with the novelist's allusions as a matter of class and background. This also involved contrasting Christie with other detective writers of the period:

> The untitled detective was most commonly a public school and an Oxford man, like Nigel…Strangeways…who has been sent down for answering exam papers in limericks. His manner, though less bumptious than the persiflage of a Peter Wimsey, nevertheless serves with its scattering of literary quotation, as a constant reminder of his 'first class education'. Anthony Berkeley, himself a graduate of London University, was typical in upgrading his detective's alma mater, making him an Oxford blue. The adoration which was afforded to all things Oxford between the wars suggests that Christie's two major detectives, neither of whom was varsity, may have come as a welcome relief. With a complete absence of undergraduate humour and mannerism, Christie never risked condescending to or intimidating the reader; not herself a graduate, she seems to have been respectful of learning but uninterested in the airs and graces which attach to academe; she is not drawn as so many others are to base any of her whodunits in the scholastic world.
>
> (77-8.)

Light's analysis interrogates the assumptions which underlie Bargainnier's statement that Christie's references place her firmly in her class and upbringing, and build a more complex model of relations between character, author and implied reader. She nonetheless defines Christie's allusions by their absence, and there is still an assumption that references in crime fiction are "diegetic" in Hamlin's term, and are being made intentionally by a character.

It was not until ten years later that Susan Rowland's *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* emphasized some of the novelist's creative literary engagements. In the terms employed by Maxwell and Rumbold, this shifted attention from quotations to allusions, and it also connected them with the thematic and symbolic aspects which

those two critics eschew. The most striking example in Rowland's study is her pointing out of the fact that *Dead Man's Folly* is a response to *Jane Eyre*, a connection which Rowland reads in terms of psychoanalytical Gothic. Such allusions bring a previous work to mind, in order to allow the reader to ponder connections, echoes or reworkings, and can invoke anything from a mood to a character's motive. Rowland argues for a criticism which takes these writers seriously, and examines their intertextual connections as a constituent element of their meanings, rather than as an in-joke or a nod to "better" kinds of reading. Perhaps the most important emphases of her study are those on "pleasure" and "process", both of which she feels have been mishandled by earlier critics. She is concerned with "the deeply literate embedding of readerly pleasures in these crime and detecting stories", arguing that an obsession with closure over pleasure has led to Christie, Sayers, Allingham, James, Marsh and Rendell being read as straightforwardly conservative (viii). Her work points to the pleasures of recognition, scrutiny and questioning on both social and textual levels, and thus to the importance of reading and re-reading in these novels. My own investigation builds on this approach, in regarding the textual processes of reading – rather than the closure of a clue or a solution – as a central part of Christie's allusions.

Most recently, Lisa Hopkins' *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction* provided a survey and case studies of the engagements which a number of novelists in the genre made with Shakespeare. She has demonstrated that "Shakespeare is a pervasive presence in detective fiction", presenting allusion, echo and quotation in the genre not as a self-conscious or pretentious aberration, but as an unsurprising part of the genre's own identity (1, 1-8). Hopkins also draws on Susan Baker's work to point to development in this citational tendency across time: "allusion to Shakespeare in detective fiction is a phenomenon that starts early in the development of the form", and

"the principal change, as Susan Baker notes, has been that 'the more recent the mystery, the more likely it is to identify the source of its Shakespearean citation'" (3). Hopkins' book, like Rowland's, goes far in naturalising the presence of Shakespeare in detective fiction, in contrast to the critics who see literary quotations as an unusual gesture beyond the agreed parameters of the form. When it comes to Christie, Hopkins emphasises the presence of Shakespearean imagery, plots and symbols in the background of the novels. For example, she discovers the use of the image of England as an unweeded garden to meditate upon postwar decline, and the imagery of milk and dangerous women which plays off *Macbeth* alongside detective plots. In this investigation I will be drawing on Hopkins' map of the field, whilst focusing much more intensely on the ways in which Christie engages with Shakespeare, and the levels of reading, re-reading and textual controversy which result.

Texts in Dialogue

My initial investigation of Christie's engagements with Shakespeare involved a relatively simple methodology: I read all her detective novels and noted each quotation, reference or allusion. Given the theoretical approaches I have assembled above, I must acknowledge that it is not certain that I noted all of them, and that there may very well be more implicit connections which have escaped my attention. However, since I am considering the meaning of quotations here, I restricted my list to moments when Shakespeare's words were quoted, a character or situation from the plays mentioned, or Shakespeare himself discussed. I have not detailed all the references (an impressive list of which can be found in Hopkins' work), but instead concentrated on those which represented broader tendencies in Christie's practice, and in which the reference was carrying out textual work. Assembling them and looking for patterns or tendencies revealed three major sets of engagements which have not been discussed by previous

scholarship, and which develop our understanding of the topic in productive ways. The first is the use of Shakespeare to mark out the mental world of certain characters in relation to the reader, the second is the appearance of discussions of Shakespeare within the contemporary "feminine middlebrow" style of novels, and the third is the clutch of Macbeth references I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

An apposite example of the first category is provided by the brief verbal quotation which appears in the first chapter of *Ordeal by Innocence*. It occurs in the internal monologue of the perspective character as a ferryman explains that the house called "Sunny Point" is known to locals by its old name of "Viper's Point":

> *Viper's Point*. What a horribly apposite name that must have seemed…
> *For sharper than a serpent's tooth…*
> He checked his thoughts brusquely. He must pull himself together and make up his mind exactly what he was going to say…
>
> (5)

The fragmentary (and approximate) quotation is from Lear's comment about the relative sharpness of ungrateful children and snake fangs. It is marked out as a quotation by the italics, and then cut off by the movement of the character's thoughts before the quotation is completed by the addition of the next line, rather as the same character cuts off the ferryman earlier in their conversation:

> 'You did say Sunny Point, sir? Where Mrs Argyle –'
> 'Yes, yes –' Calgary cut him short. He didn't want to discuss the matter.
> 'Sunny Point.'
>
> (4)

The parallel subtly establishes a connection between the two lines, offering the reader the possibility that the end of the quotation and the end of the ferryman's sentence point to the same event. The missing words foreshadow what the reader will later discover:

that Mrs Argyle is believed to have been killed by one of the underprivileged children she adopted, and from whom she expected gratitude and unconditional loyalty. The reader who can trace Calgary's train of thought, and continue is for themselves past the point at which he stops, is rewarded with an extra payoff of meaning, but only for a limited length of time. The mention of the appositeness of 'Viper's Point' is reiterated, close to another clue about its significance, a couple of chapters later, when Calgary is in conversation with the family lawyer:

> 'Then called Viper's Point,' said Calgary.
>
> 'Yes. Yes, I believe that was the original name. Ah, yes perhaps in the end a more suitable name than the name she chose for it – Sunny Point. In 1940 she had about twelve to sixteen children, mostly those who had unsatisfactory guardians or who could not be evacuated with their own families.'
>
> (52-3)

The quotation is not repeated, but an alert reader might turn back to it on registering this second mention of appropriateness, which is now added in during a discussion of children being brought to the house. The second mention of this idea thus gives a broader hint which might jog the reader's memory as to the significance of the quotation, and allow them to recognise the initial gesture towards Shakespeare. However, a reader who appreciates the meaning of the *King Lear* reference, and who even goes as far as speculating that Mrs. Argyle was killed by one of her children, only gains information which is available to every other reader within a matter of chapters. I have stressed the process of recognition possible here, and its place in the economy of information which the novel provides, because this example demonstrates unusually well what this category of quotation tends to do (and not do) in Christie's work. The information released does not act as a clue, but instead allows the reader to trace the movement of the main character's thoughts. It engages them in the practice of decoding

which Malmgren identifies, and moves them between the textual layers present in the work. The protagonist is concerned with decoding the pattern of events (produced by the murderer) and places a textual pattern (the quotation) over them. In recognising that pattern, and completing it by thinking of the next line, the reader has the opportunity to enter the same textual layer as the character. The process of recognition and interpretation is more significant than the information provided to "solve" the book, which chimes with Rowland's concern to read detective fiction in terms of pleasure and process rather than classify it by outcome or closure.

The same effect, of positioning the reader and character in relation to the textual process, can be seen in *They Do It With Mirrors.* At the end of the former novel, Miss Marple makes a brief reference, which two other characters draw out:

> 'I can't say fairer than that, can I, Wally?'
>
> 'You certainly cannot, Kate,' said Miss Marple.
>
> Wally, smiling indulgently at an old lady who got names wrong, corrected her gently:
>
> 'Gina, not Kate.'
>
> But Gina laughed. 'She knows what she's saying! You see—she'll call you Petruchio in a moment!'
>
> (213)

The text here produces a quotation and recognition which offers the reader alignment with either Wally or Gina and Miss Marple. Since Gina goes on to explain that Miss Marple means "you're just the right husband for me", the allusion to *The Taming of the Shrew* does not reveal any more information if recognised. Instead it allows readers to shift within the layers of the text, aligning themselves either with those who can traffic in Shakespearean names, or those who cannot. The quotation does not function as a code, which reveals secrets when broken, but as a marker of character and even

focalisation. Lengthier examples, with accompanying explanations after the references, appear in *After the Funeral*, and *Taken at the Flood*:

> Poirot found Rosamund sitting on a bench overlooking a little stream that cascaded down in a waterfall and then flowed through rhododendron thickets. She was staring into the water.
> 'I do not, I trust, disturb an Ophelia,' said Poirot as he took his seat beside her.
> 'You are, perhaps, studying the role?'
> 'I've never played in Shakespeare,' said Rosamund. 'Except once in Rep. I was Jessica in The Merchant. A lousy part.'
> 'Yet not without pathos. "I am never merry when I hear sweet music." What a load she carried, poor Jessica, the daughter of the hated and despised Jew. What doubts of herself she must have had when she brought with her her father's ducats when she ran away to her lover. Jessica with gold was one thing – Jessica without gold might have been another.' Rosamund turned her head to look at him.
>
> (263-4)

> "Because, you see, you have here *two different kinds of crime* – and consequently you have, you *must* have, two different murderers. Enter First Murderer, and enter Second Murderer,
> "Don't quote Shakespeare," groaned Spence. "This isn't Elizabethan Drama."
> "But yes, it is very Shakespearian – there are here all the emotions – the human emotions – in which Shakespeare would have revelled – the jealousies, the hates – the swift passionate actions. And here, too, is successful opportunism. '*There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune…*' To seize the opportunity and turn it to one's own ends – that has been triumphantly accomplished – under your nose so to speak!"
>
> (253)

In both passages Poirot elaborates both the meaning of the reference and its implication for the present situation, at the time of citation. There is no lapse of time within which the reader might recognise its potential significance, and then have that deduction validated or denied by later events. This tendency towards redundant quotations, which are rephrased in plainer language at the same time as they are made, is taken to an

extreme in two passages of *The Hollow*. In these moments, the quotation rephrases or reprocesses the meaning of a statement which has already been made:

> "Must we think and talk about John Christow? He's dead. Dead and gone." Midge murmured
>
> "*He is dead and gone, lady,*
> *He is dead and gone.*
> *At his head a grass green turf,*
> *At his heels a stone*."
>
> (209-10)

> " 'Ooever shot 'im it's a wicked shame! There aren't many of 'is sort." *We shall not see his like again*. The words passed through Henrietta's mind.
>
> (203)

Both passages involve characters speaking about John Christow, the murdered doctor. In the former, Edward hopes that Christow's death means that his impact on their lives will be over for good, whilst Midge's quotation of Ophelia shows that she feels herself to be trapped in a tragic series of events. In the second an elderly Cockney patient mourns Christow, in words which are rephrased as Horatio's epitaph for Hamlet by Henrietta, Christow's bohemian mistress. Her mental reworking of the words betrays her tendency to see the world in artistic rather than human terms, a trait which Christow had himself complained about (and which will lead to her self-consciously using her grief at his death to inform her sculpting.) Both passages show the use of Shakespearean quotation as signalling a perspective or attitude of mind which divides characters from each other. Tellingly, both Midge and Henrietta are deceived or harmed by this activity: facility with Shakespeare's text does not signal automatic superiority or wisdom. Even Miss Marple comes close to being misled by quotation, when she considers whether she should simply ignore the suspicious death in *A Caribbean Mystery*:

> Major Palgrave to remain quietly in his grave? Might it not be better to do just that? She quoted under her breath. 'Duncan is dead. After Life's fitful fever he sleeps well!'
>
> (40)

Of course this is not the right answer, either for Miss Marple's personal morality or for the mechanics of a detective novel. Indeed, her choice of quotation implicitly guides her away from taking that option: the line is from a speech by Lady Macbeth, not a character whom the detective would want to emulate. A Shakespeare quotation thus apparently justifies a line of action, but undermines it at the same time. The same effect, though in briefer and more trivial key, can be seen in *Three Act Tragedy*, where *Macbeth* is again quoted, only to be abandoned as inapposite:

> Am I guilty, Mr Satterthwaite? What do you think now?' She stood up and stretched out a hand. 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand -' She broke off. 'No, I'm no Lady Macbeth. Comedy's my line.'
>
> (181)

The casual reference does not pass critical information over the head of the character to the reader, but rather shows theme experimenting with the textual layers I have been discussing.

These latter examples are weighted more towards the internal functioning of the novels' fictional world, but relatively slight quotations can also reframe the reader's relationships with the text in generic terms. This can be seen with a pair of quotations at the beginning of *Cat Among the Pigeons*. The devil-may-care pilot Bob, who will be killed trying to fly his schoolfriend Prince Ali Yusuf out of the revolution in Ramat, attempts a Shakespearean tag as he tries to persuade Ali to leave: "But remember what Shakespeare or one of these poetical fellows said about those who run away living to fight another day" (17). The line does not, in fact appear in Shakespeare's works, but is

a rendering by the eighteenth-century poet and playwright Oliver Goldsmith of a Classical tag which appears in Menander and the reported speeches of Demosthenes. Its appearance here characterises Bob as a good-hearted public-school man, loyal to his friends and dimly remembering the Classical education of a few years ago, imbued with a respect for "these poetical fellows" but not very precise about the details of the texts in question. This attitude is thrown into relief by a more accurate Shakespeare quotation which is made soon after Bob and Yusuf are killed in the revolution, during a conversation between two members of the British Security Service:

> "Very sad, the whole thing," said Edmundson. "Prince Ali Yusuf would have made an enlightened ruler, with democratic principles."
>
> "That's probably what did the poor chap in," said Colonel Pikeaway. "But we can't waste time in telling sad stories of the death of kings. We've been asked to make certain – inquiries. By interested parties. Parties, that is, to whom her Majesty's Government is well disposed."
>
> (30)

The pilot who dies trying to fly his princely school-chum out of the country cannot quote Shakespeare with precision, but the Colonel of Intelligence who is now in charge of the matter can do so. Pikeaway's faintly ironic quotation of Richard II's plea, that his listeners sit on the ground and tell each other tales of kings dying, blends with the elaborately diplomatic language of "interested parties…to whom her Majesty's Government is well disposed". It marks him as urbane and educated, able to bring the resources of Shakespeare's works to bear (if only in a small and ironic way) on the modern power struggles between nations. Readers who recognise the misquotation (or at least the vagueness of "one of these poetical fellows") by Bob and then the quotation by Pikeaway are quietly interpolated into one character's view of the world, rather than the other's. Indeed the shift from Bob to Pikeaway is the shift from an action narrative

to a mystery narrative within the book, and the *Richard II* quotation marks the point at which the reading strategies of the detective novel will serve the reader better than those of the thriller. Christie considered that the two forms required different approaches and skills, distinguishing in her autobiography between "the light-hearted thriller, which is particularly pleasant to do", and "the intricate detective story with an involved plot which is technically interesting and requires a great deal of work, but is always rewarding" (453). It seems that the reader requires an equally distinct approach in order to read them correctly, and that the intertextual hinge here makes that clear, however unconsciously.

More than fifty pages later Pikeaway once again quotes Shakespeare when referring to a freelance intelligence operative, a member of a group he characterizes as "Riff Raff International", and describes her to a policeman as "Nothing in your line, always strictly within the law, all perfectly respectable, but a grand picker-up of useful information." (92) The echo of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, that "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles", is very faint but definitely present, and imbues the character mentioned with a raffish, disreputable air which undercuts Pikeaway's surface description of her as "perfectly respectable". In fact the same line is quoted by another policeman to another intelligence officer in *The Clocks*, as they consider why a dead man was carrying a business card from a firm which does not exist:

> Perhaps he collected bogus premiums. Perhaps it was a way of introducing himself into houses and working some confidence trick. He may have been a swindler or a confidence trickster or a picker-up of unconsidered trifles or a private inquiry agent.
>
> (54)

In these examples the quotations are implicit, rather than explicit. They are just unusual enough in their phrasing to alert a reasonably aware reader to their status as drawn from

outside the usual narrative voice, but not so bizarre that they would stop every single potential reader in their tracks.

Most of these quotations and allusions are focussed simply around Shakespeare, though they are sometimes mixed with historical, Biblical or other literary references. An example occurs when Poirot is considering the character of the murdered Simeon Lee in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, and insists that it (rather than the convoluted investigations into who was standing where at the moment of the murder) holds the key to the truth:

> "The character of the victim has always something to do with his or her murder. The frank and unsuspicious mind of Desdemona was the direct cause of her death. A more suspicious woman would have seen Iago's machinations and circumvented them much earlier. The uncleanness of Marat directly invited his end in a bath. From the temper of Mercutio's mind came his death at the sword's point."
>
> (77)

Here Christie sets up a couple of literary and historical references with a humorous touch. The "uncleanness" of the French revolutionary Marat was literally a skin disease which meant he was in a medicinal bath when the Girondist Charlotte Corday stabbed him, but to a conservative like Poirot the "uncleanness" of his character was his enthusiasm for putting to death those whom he felt were a threat to the Revolution, which "invited" his end. The reference to Mercutio's quarrelsome and proud nature is made with a pun on "tempering" of a sword whilst forging it, implying that Mercutio's character metaphorically created the weapon which stabbed him. In all these cases, the reference may be more or less explicit, but it does not provide a solution to the plot. The actual information they convey is always duplicated by more explicit statements, but they work to engage the reader in the work of encoding and decoding which

Malmgren identifies. In doing so they enable the reader to act as the double of the detective, both within the story and in their interactions with its text, positioning themselves within the layers of meaning constructed the author, even being interpolated by the knowledge they instinctively connect with the references. The allusion to characters in the Poirot quotation, and the "use" of quotation by individual characters mentioned above, leads on to the next distinct use of Shakespeare in Christie.

Speak you this with a middling brow?

Having probed the way Christie's Shakespeare references function (and do not function) within the dynamics of detective fiction itself, I would like to move laterally and examine how they are in dialogue with the way another contemporary genre handled Shakespeare. The "feminine middlebrow novel", as identified by Nicola Humble, was a major genre of contemporary fiction, produced by novelists such as Angela Thirkell, E.F. Benson, E.M. Delafield and Mary Bell. The term "middlebrow", coined in the 1920s, was a generally derogatory one, implying insularity, frivolity and pretension without intellectual heft, but Humble makes an argument for its rehabilitation in order to recognise and value this mode of fiction. Its concerns were generally personal and domestic, leading to its relatively low status in contemporary literary discourse. There is a scholarly consensus that detective fiction was part of the middlebrow spectrum itself, and Alison Light described Agatha Christie as "queen of the middlebrows" in the 1990s (75). Humble distinguishes several strata of middlebrow fiction, positioning detective fiction at the top in terms of social prestige (or lack of social stigma) given the way it was discussed in publicity, reviews, etc. She argues that this was a consequence of detective fiction being framed as rational and ratiocinative, and therefore identified with a male readership. The feminine middlebrow novel, with its interest in relationships, gender issues and class, was marked as less prestigious. *Cat Among the*

Pigeons and *The Moving Finger* both use engagement with Shakespeare to leverage their genre towards the feminine middlebrow mode, modelling a form of engagement with his works which rejected contemporary academic criticism and emphasized character and identification. The way characters in these novels discuss Shakespeare goes beyond quotation into the areas Maxwell and Rumbold would call allusion, but my attention will remained focused on the textuality and process of these references. The most significant element is not the content of the allusions, but the way they take place, which foregrounds a feminine middlebrow mode of textual engagement.

In *Cat Among the Pigeons* the discussion of Shakespearean characters by the schoolgirl Julia Upjohn is part of the metatextuality Malmgren identifies as so important to detective fiction. The novel prints what purports to be a passage from a letter from Julia to her mother:

> We're taught English literature by Miss Rich, who's terrific. When she gets in a real state her hair comes down. She's got a queer but rather exciting face and when she reads bits of Shakespeare it all seems different and real. She went on at us the other day about Iago and what he felt – and a lot about jealousy and how it ate into you and you suffered until you went quite mad wanting to hurt the person you loved. It gave us all the shivers – except Jennifer because nothing upsets her. Miss Rich teaches us geography, too. I always thought it was such a dull subject, but it isn't with Miss Rich. This morning she told us all about the spice trade and why they had to have spices because of things going bad so easily.
>
> (46)

The reader, in scrutinising Julia's letter for information about the events at the school, finds that this text is itself concerned with the interpretation of another text. The details about school life, such as the relative temperaments of Jennifer and Miss Rich, and the hints about jealousy and "things go[ing] bad so easily" emerge through this discussion of a canonical literary work. At the other end of the novel, the same thing happens as

the reader is presented with another fragmentary document in which Julia engages in literary criticism. After the murders have been solved, Julia's mother finds her writing an essay:

> "Contrast the Attitudes of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to Murder" read Mrs. Upjohn.
>
> "Well," she said doubtfully, "you can't say that the subject isn't topical!" She read the start of her daughter's essay. "Macbeth," Julia had written, "liked the idea of murder and had been thinking of it a lot, but he needed a push to get him started. Once he'd got started he enjoyed murdering people and had no more qualms or fears. Lady Macbeth was just greedy and ambitious. She thought she didn't mind what she did to get what she wanted. But once she'd done it she found she didn't like it after all."
>
> "Your language isn't very elegant," said Mrs. Upjohn. "I think you'll have to polish it up a bit, but you've certainly got something there."
>
> (175)

The persistent intertextuality continues after the puzzle of the novel has been solved, offering another interpretation of the events at the school which allows a reader to engage with a major character's thoughts via textual patterns. As I mentioned, my concern here is not the result of the connection between the two texts, in terms of character or theme, but rather the specific mode of reading Shakespeare which Julia models.

Julia's concern with Shakespeare – understandably for an adolescent – focuses around character, and the psychological reality of the figures in the plays. She shifts instinctively into the second person, "it ate into you", "you went quite mad", showing the immediacy of the engagement with Shakespeare's tragedy which Miss Rich has been able to nurture. This form of reading can be found in other feminine middlebrow novels: a strong parallel is provided by the behaviour of Lydia in Angela Thirkell's *Summer Half*, when she attends a production of *Othello* at the Old Vic:

> "I say, isn't *Othello* wonderful?"
>
> Mr Merton said it was.
>
> "I feel as if I'd written it myself," said Lydia, stumbling into the foyer
>
> To this Mr Merton found no reply.
>
> "I mean," said Lydia in a penetrating voice "Shakespeare is so wonderful because he's like Horace. I mean everything he says seems to have something to do with oneself. For instance, when Iago says to Roderigo 'Drown cats and blind puppies', it made me think of our cook and the way she doesn't mind drowning kittens."
>
> (83)

She also displays a similar tendency to identify with characters, especially when she is sent to her room for rudeness (caused by the spontaneous overflow of Shakespearean feeling):

> …the aftermath of her emotion that afternoon caused her to be extremely uncivil and despise everyone, till her father said she had better go to bed early. Lydia accordingly went into exile as Bolingbroke, undressed as Coriolanus, and got into bed as Richard II. Kate, coming up to kiss her good night, found her in tears again.
>
> "Nothing really awful, is it?" asked Kate.
>
> "Only that I had such a lovely day," bellowed Lydia.
>
> (85)

During the same conversation she comments that Mr Merton enjoyed the play too, "But I always think no one can understand Shakespeare as well as one does oneself" and is starting on the subject again, "I'll tell you what I think about Shakespeare, Kate –" when her sister manages to escape (86).

Lydia plays out an extreme version of the personal engagement and gusto which Julia demonstrates in her engagement with Shakespeare. The assumption of personal relevance which appears comic in Lydia is more serious for her, since she is surrounded by violent deaths at her school. The kind of reading and interpretation carried out by both chimes with Humble's description of the characteristic female reader in the

feminine middlebrow novel, whose reading "encompass[es] many genres of literature,…combining highbrow and lowbrow interests in a daring disregard for conventional judgements. She is voracious in her reading, and responds to literature with a visceral immediacy" (8). The immediacy and personal identification involved in Julia's engagement with Shakespeare reappears at the end of the novel.

Both the idiomatic language and the insight into character mark Julia as a feminine middlebrow reader, concerned with personality and motivation when faced with high culture or low. She can interpret Shakespeare's characters as both figures of high tragedy and as murderers, bringing them within the generic framework of the fictional universe she inhabits. Put another way, Julia's mode of engagement with Shakespeare shifts the generic markers of *Cat Among the Pigeons*, making it recognisable as feminine middlebrow.

If Julia only understands the importance of Shakespearean characters in retrospect, Megan in *The Moving Finger* uses her similarly personal response to the plays to achieve insights into the murderous events surrounding her whilst they are still going on. Another schoolgirlish figure who reads her Shakespeare with middlebrow gusto, Megan discusses his characters with the injured airman Jerry:

> "What's wrong with Shakespeare?" I enquired with interest.
>
> "Twisting himself up to say things in such a difficult way that you can't get at what he means. Still, I like some Shakespeare."
>
> "He would be gratified to know that I'm sure," I said.
>
> Megan suspected no sarcasm. She had, her face lighting:
>
> "I like Goneril and Regan, for instance."
>
> "Why those two?"
>
> "Oh, I don't know. They're satisfactory, somehow. Why do you think they were like that?"
>
> "Like what?"
>
> "Like they were. I mean something must have made them like that?"

> For the first time I wondered. I had always accepted Lear's elder daughters as two nasty bits of goods and had let it go at that. But Megan's demand for a first cause interested me.
>
> (20)

Megan's refreshing irreverence guarantees the authenticity of her response for the reader, as she dismisses Shakespeare's poetry but admits that she regards some of his work as worthwhile. Rather than seeing him as a cultural icon, Megan reads him as a writer who might provide enjoyment and knowledge of human character. Jerry's irony, as he remarks "He would be gratified to know that I'm sure", rebounds on him and emphasises his consciously cultured and jaded response to the tragedy in question. His knowledge of the cultural scale in which Shakespeare is generally weighed, his surprise at Megan's direct personal engagement with the characters, and his deployment of irony in defence of the established literary standards, throws into relief her enthusiastic and personal response to the play. This again maps onto the model of the feminine middlebrow novel offered by Humble, in which the "defiance of conventional literary judgement" exhibited by women in these books and the "visceral immediacy" of their reactions which "contrasts with the cool distance of the response of men to books in this fiction" (12). Megan and Jerry's discussion casts them, for this moment, in the roles Humble describes, with her gusto and immediacy revealing depths to Shakespeare which he had not considered. It is striking that Megan finds Shakespeare's language tiresome, and only regards his characterisation as worth deep consideration. This involves a rejection of the characteristic high modernist valuing of form in the abstract, and in Shakespeare's case the valuing of language and poetry over narrative and character. This strand of thought made itself known in the verbal convolutions and modernist experiments of Woolf and Joyce on the creative side, and the criticism of Eliot, Wimseatt and Beardsley on the other: the high modernist novel with its self-

consciously “difficult” language finds a counterpart in the critical practice of close reading and its focus on verbal complexity. Megan dismisses this concern with verbal form in favour of a personal and visceral reading which values the “people” to be found inside the textual construction, and their potential similarity to people outside it.

It is worth pointing out here that Jerry’s mode of reading Shakespeare is not simply that of an injured airman in a novel. Christie’s allusive strategy here invokes – and rejects – the dominant mode of Shakespeare criticism of the time, as practised by literary academics. Academic criticism and high modernism alike tended to treat Shakespeare as a gifted poet, whose characters were mainly vehicles for advanced poetry and whose greatness resided in the intricacy of his verse. Language and the formal qualities of the poetry were to the fore, and the study of character was rejected as Victorian, sentimental and lacking in rigour. In academic terms the movement is typified by the shift from A.C. Bradley’s largely character-centred *Shakespearean Tragedy* to Caroline Spurgeon’s *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What It Tells Us*, with its specific tracing of sets of poetic symbols. In Cambridge F.R. Leavis and his colleagues were developing the style of “practical criticism” which bracketed out almost everything except the text in front of the reader and the internal patterns of that text. For a slightly wider readership, T.S. Eliot’s *Elizabethan Essays, The Sacred Wood* and *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* established close attention to textual detail and symbol as the quintessence of appreciating poetry for the high-brow reader of the period. Character-based criticism was famously and scornfully summed up in the satirical title of a paper given by the scholar L.C. Knights in 1933: “How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” Knights was not interested in collecting hints in the play as to the past family life of the Macbeths: for him this kind of scholarship, which treated Shakespeare’s characters as real people with backstories beyond the confines of the

play, was exactly where literary criticism had gone wrong. Such criticism seemed as outdated as Mary Cowden Clarke's mid-Victorian *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, and resting on as unsound an intellectual basis. In setting Megan's reading of Shakespeare against that of Jerry, Christie sets the feminine middlebrow against the reigning school of Shakespeare criticism, and invites the reader to pick sides.

Later in the novel, Megan returns to the subject of Gonerill and Regan's motivation, showing that her kind of immediate and psychological reading of character can produce new insights:

> "But now," I said, "we shall be able to have all sorts of interesting discussions – about Goneril and Regan and things like that."
> Megan's face lit up.
> "I've been thinking about that, and I think I know the answer. It was because that awful old father of theirs always insisted on such a lot of sucking up. When you've always got to be saying thank you and how kind and all the rest of it, it would make you go a bit rotten and queer inside, and you'd just long to be able to be beastly for a change – and when you got the chance you'd probably find it went to your head and you went too far. Old Lear was pretty awful, wasn't he? I mean he did deserve the snub Cordelia gave him."
> "I can see," I said, "that we are going to have many interesting discussions about Shakespeare."
> "I can see you two are going to be very highbrow," said Joanna. "I'm afraid I always find Shakespeare terribly dreary. All those long scenes where everybody is drunk and it's supposed to be funny."
> "Talking of drink," I said, turning to Megan. "How are you feeling?"
>
> (54)

Megan makes the same verbal shift that Julia made in her letter, into the second person, from "that awful old father of theirs" to "make you go a bit rotten", "when you got the chance". In Megan's case this immediacy is even more appropriate, since her own problems are largely caused by her mother and step-father's treatment of her. She identifies family dysfunction as the source of the problem in Shakespeare's

characterisation, and suggests that Cordelia's refusal to play along with her father's scene was a "snub" which the "pretty awful" king deserved. The novel validates this approach by showing that Megan's strategy of reading is more productive than Jerry's, since Megan's father is in fact a murderer. As with *Cat Among the Pigeons*, it is less striking that the novel engages with a Shakespeare play than that it foregrounds a particular mode of interpreting that play. *The Moving Finger* stages a confrontation between the stale, received academic approach and the visceral, character-based middlebrow approach. It invites the reader to engage in the textual game of decoding, and even to choose on the meta-level between the ways in which that decoding should take place.

A poet's lines wrapped in a player's hide

In three of Christie's later novels, her engagement with Shakespeare's work shifted again, focusing around the idea of the plays as the source of potential performances. In *The Pale Horse*, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* and *Nemesis*, Christie's characters discuss the value and the difficulty of performing *Macbeth*. In each case the murderer is recognisable as a character from the play, but a different character each time: in one the guilty party resembles Macbeth himself, in one Lady Macbeth and one the trio of Weird Sisters. These novels see Christie developing her allusions to Shakespeare in a new direction, this time incorporating the dominant academic conception of Shakespeare, rather than resisting it as she did in *The Moving Finger* and *Cat Among the Pigeons*. As with those novels, nonetheless, the significant element for scholarly investigation here is not the particular play with which Christie engages, nor how it shapes the meanings of her novels, but the mode of textual engagement and the conception of Shakespeare which this reveals.

Within the opening chapters of *The Pale Horse*, characters are discussing Shakespeare in terms of performance:

> 'Ah, what do you think of Batterson's production?'
>
> 'I liked it,' said Hermia. 'The lighting was very interesting. And I've never seen the banquet scene so well managed.'
>
> 'Ah, but what about the witches?'
>
> 'Awful!' said Hermia. 'They always are,' she added.
>
> David agreed. 'A pantomime element seems bound to creep in,' he said. 'All of them capering about and behaving like a three-fold Demon King. You can't help expecting a Good Fairy to appear in white with spangles to say in a flat voice: Your evil shall not triumph. In the end, It is Macbeth who will be round the bend.'
>
> (42)

Later in the same scene, one of the characters (who directed plays at university) says that the only effective way to produce the witches would be to "make them very ordinary. Just sly quiet old women. Like the witches in a country village" (43-44). This is a dramatically different engagement with Shakespeare from either the apposite verbal tags of Colonel Pikeaway or the puzzling over character of Julia and Megan. Shakespeare here is imagined as a source of possible performances, and even of moments and characters which are difficult to realize on the stage. The book's plot does contain three women who claim to be witches, and the killer is eventually identified as a megalomaniac man who used the women as a cover for his psychopathic ambitions. However, the notion of Shakespeare invoked is as significant as the results of that textual connection.

In *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* the characters develop this notion of Shakespeare as a basis for performance, even using it to understand their world. When explaining the death of an old woman, a doctor tells Tommy (one of the main characters) that she died without any prior illness and that "I will use the phrase that has

always intrigued me in Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*. I have always wondered what Macbeth meant when he said of his wife, 'She should have died hereafter.'"(165) In response, Tommy agrees that "I remember wondering once myself what Shakespeare was getting at", and mentions a production (though he cannot remember who directed it or who played the lead) in which "Macbeth certainly played it in a way to suggest that he was hinting to the medical attendant that Lady Macbeth would be better out of the way" (165). He goes on to explain that after this convenient death "Macbeth, feeling safe after his wife's death, feeling that she could no longer damage him by her indiscretions or her rapidly failing mind, expresses his genuine affection and grief for her" with the line (166). The doctor agrees that this matches his feelings about the phrase; that the patient's death suggests some conspiracy behind it, "I felt that she should have died hereafter" (166). As with *Pale Horse*, the Shakespeare invoked here is not apposite quotation or a character to identify with, but the possibilities (and problems) of performance. The doctor finds that a puzzling line stuck in his memory, and when Tommy explains how he once saw the line performed, and how it made sense in context, the doctor agrees that this sheds light on his feelings of unease. In due course – as Hopkins has elaborated – the murderer in this novel turns out to be an old woman who has become mentally unstable and kills children to provide companions for the unborn child she terminated as a young woman. She thus echoes Lady Macbeth's rhetorical mentions of killing children and her own absent child, reworked into a detective plot.

Shakespearean performance provides the clue to the last-written Miss Marple novel, *Nemesis*, which is also the last of the Macbeth trio. The detective is dining with the three women whose garden will turn out to contain the body of a young woman buried many years ago, and "it was all very pleasant, very natural, and yet she wondered

why for some reason she had a feeling of strain. A feeling that there was something unnatural here" (69). Miss Marple feels that "[s]he herself was making conventional remarks and so were the three sisters" (69). That last phrase leads her into a reverie on a familiar topic. "The Three Sisters, thought Miss Marple [,] once again considering that phrase. Why did anything thought of in threes somehow seem to suggest a sinister atmosphere?" (69). She connects it with *Macbeth* and mentally comments that "theatrical producers made a mistake in the way in which they produced the three witches", remembering a production in which "the witches had looked more like pantomime creatures with flapping wings and ridiculously spectacular steeple hats" (69).

> Miss Marple remembered saying to her nephew, who was standing her this Shakespearean treat 'You know, Raymond, my dear, if I were ever producing this splendid day I would make the three witches quite different. I would have them three ordinary, normal old women. Old Scottish women. They wouldn't dance or caper. They would look at each other rather slyly and you would feel a sort of menace just behind the ordinariness of them.'
>
> (69)

Here, in the third novel, Miss Marple finds a situation in which the characters corresponding to the witches really are guilty. Her intuition coalesces around the image – almost a false memory – of a production of Macbeth which she has never seen, and which may never have been performed. Nonetheless, she sees the women as performing a satisfying version of the witches, and this builds her ongoing sense of their guilt. The tendency to imagine Shakespeare as (and through) performance is epitomised in *Third Girl*, where the recognition of a similarity to a Shakespearean character leaves the question of what it might mean open:

> He came back to Norma, came back once again to the third girl. What was her place in the pattern? The place that would pull the whole thing together. Ophelia, he thought? But there were two opinions to that, just as there were two opinions about Norma. Was Ophelia mad or was she pretending madness? Actresses had been variously divided as to how the part should be played— or perhaps, he should say, producers. They were the ones who had the ideas. Was Hamlet mad or sane? Take your choice. Was Ophelia mad or sane?
>
> (216)

Like the discussion of the witches and Macbeth's instruction to the doctor, this brief reference locates the meaning of a Shakespeare passage in the way it is performed. Indeed it goes further than suggests that knowing the play itself cannot provide resources with which to understand the significance of Norma in the world of the novel: different performances of the same role would produce variant Ophelias and thus, implicitly, variant Normas. In *After the Funeral* (as quoted above) Poirot could ask Rosamund whether he was disturbing Jessica or Ophelia by the stream, and in *Hallowe'en Party*, Mrs Oliver could describe a murderer as like Lady Macbeth, "a handsome woman— efficient and competent— a born administrator", using those characters as fixed points of meaning (183). In *Third Girl* and this *Macbeth* trio, the Shakespearean characters have themselves become capable of shifting meanings and potentially deceptive performances.

Each of these engagements stress both the performance of Shakespeare, rather than its existence as a text, and the potential difficulties, ambiguities or pitfalls in producing the plays. This extends to the way each of the trio of *Macbeth* novel itself "performs" the play in echo, with the killers corresponding to different Shakespearean characters. In shifting into this mode of engagement, Christie was following the dominant direction of Shakespeare's image during the mid to later twentieth century. After the character criticism of the Victorians, and the formalism of the early century,

the criticism and discussion of Shakespeare became increasingly focused around the notion of the works as scripts for performance. The groundwork was laid by studies such as E.K. Chambers' *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923), and the shift is reflected in titles such as Una Ellis Fermor's collection *Shakespeare as Dramatist* (1962) and J.L. Styan's *Shakespeare's Stage-craft* (1967). By the end of the century there was a consensus that the theatre was the natural site for the releasing of meaning from Shakespeare's plays. In these later novels her concern with performance, and its ambiguities, shows Christie reacting to the changing conceptualization of Shakespeare in criticism and public discussion.

Conclusions and Implications

This investigation of Christie's engagements with Shakespeare has sought to develop our knowledge by bringing together recent work on the citation of Shakespeare in twentieth-century fiction with scholarship which pinpoints the intertextual qualities of detective fiction in the period. The results have the potential to move the field forward significantly, shedding light on Christie as a significant figure in her own right and as a case study of how popular fiction engaged with Shakespeare in the twentieth century. Firstly, my research has shown that Christie's use of Shakespeare became more frequent and more complex as the decades passed. This complicates the general tendency which Hopkins notes, for Shakespeare to be present in detective fiction since the early days of the genre, since Christie begins to develop her more intensive and complex references from the mid period of her career (3). It also reflects on the point Hopkins cites from Baker, that later writing is more likely to identify the source of Shakespeare quotations. Christie does follow this shift from casual verbal echo to explicit mention of characters and plays, but she counteracts any suggestion that this

means that such references are simpler or easier for readers to appreciate. Indeed the appearance of the notion of performance in her Shakespeare references renders meaning more difficult and ambiguous, rather than less, asking more mental nuance from the audience. Focussing on an individual author has allowed me to reveal subtle and specific textual strategies which Christie developed across her career, which are less visible from the genre-level perspective provided by Hopkins. Through this approach, I have discovered the deep functions of Shakespeare quotation in an author whose work is often dismissed as derivative, formulaic or simplistic. Engagement with Shakespeare is not simply a matter of showing off by a detective novelist (as some critics cited above suggest) but involves author, reader and character in a network of textual reference and decoding, which manages relationships of sympathy, identification and perspective. I have shown that Shakespeare provides a textual matrix through which Christie can pivot between genres within the same text, subtly handle the focalisation of the narrative, and reprocess plot material in different voices. This has uncovered aspects of detective fiction's textual strategies, and the use of Shakespeare in popular fiction, which have so far remained undiscovered. If such effects and techniques are visible in Christie, there is surely work to be done investigating the Shakespearean engagements of other authors from the same period, especially writers whose lower cultural cachet has led to their being overlooked in the same way as Christie (middlebrow writing, women's writing and popular fiction are only the most obvious categories.) Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this article has added a new axis or dimension to the consideration of Shakespeare in detective fiction (and popular fiction more broadly), by showing that Christie does not simply refer to Shakespeare, she stages confrontations between different modes of citing and interpreting Shakespeare. Novels like *The Moving Finger*, *Nemesis* and *Cat Among the Pigeons* show characters adopting contrasting Shakespeare

hermeneutics, backing rival ways of reading the meanings of his texts, and finding that they serve better or worse in the dangerous world of the whodunit. This suggests that popular fiction not only participates in the afterlife – or reception history – of Shakespeare's works, but that it reacts to the debates and controversies via which that history progresses. The result is a more dynamic and multifaceted vision of Shakespearean allusion, which offers critical tools to future scholarship.

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