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Women's Disabled Bodies in the Novels of Agatha Christie

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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I want to dedicate this project to my late grandmother, Nanny Barbara Harrison, who loved Agatha Christie.

Introduction

“For we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary, or childless,” Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

In the 44 years since her death, Agatha Christie’s detective fiction has moved from the realm of popular culture into the academic environment of critical analysis. Studies of her work have become essential to surveys of twentieth-century British women writers, compared with other authors like Virginia Woolf, A.S. Byatt, and Beryl Bainbridge. As the backs of her books (and most scholars) will tell you, Christie is the most sold author in the English language behind the Bible and Shakespeare. Because of the popularity and scope of her work, Christie’s most famous novels epitomize inter-war Britain. We can often understand English sensibilities of class, gender, sexuality, and race by reading these ostensibly middle-brow and deceptively shallow detective stories. Other scholars have read Christie through feminist theory, race theory, queer studies, or adaptation lenses. But there is a gap in the literature: very little, if any, work has been done in disability studies.

My interest in disability studies arises from my interactions with my older sister, who is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I have a personal understanding of the real people who Christie and other writers depict, often unfairly and incorrectly. I recognize my sister’s life as full and complete, but the trouble with Christie’s characters, as this thesis will show, is that those with disabilities are often rendered as lacking in some way because of that impairment.

I understand disability – as Lennard Davis does – not as a discrete body or object with an inherent “problem,” but rather as a deviation from a particular norm. Even this definition is still a little vague, but that is because of our understating of normalcy. When Davis says that disabled bodies are those that “differ from the norm,” he is talking about bodies that do not fall within the

range of a pseudo-mathematical average of skills and characteristics of the body and mind. The real problem, though, is not with the deviant bodies themselves but with the way that society constructs itself for the “average” body. Bodies are considered disabled when they do not efficiently navigate an environment that did not consider the comfort of all bodies to begin with. This is not to say that there is not real pain from disability, but that pain could be reduced by restructuring physical and social environments to accommodate for more diverse bodies. Under this definition, disability is both socially constructed and perceived.

The gap I mentioned emphasizes a general desire in the literature to avoid disability, or at least a misunderstanding of the place disabled women have in Golden Age detective fiction. Disabled characters, especially disabled women, become the locus of violence and malice; they kill – or far more often – are killed. As Aristotle’s quote introduces, happiness, virtue, and goodness are linked to the idea of the able body. This thesis will look at childlessness, ugliness, and age as disability. These are often inherently feminine disabilities.

In an ableist society, when men age, they gain knowledge or sophistication, but as a woman ages and loses her reproductive value and physical allure, she is practically obsolete. Few older or disabled women are successful in Agatha Christie. If they are financially well-off, they are murdered for their fortune. If they have fewer resources, they are vilified or murdered for malicious or sexist reasons. While plenty has been written on the importance of bodies in the novels, notably the presence of female bodies¹, these criticisms rarely use disability theory to understand how women are subjugated in twentieth-century Britain.

Postwar Britain, struggling to stabilize its economy and encourage young couples to repopulate a country where many young men died in war, places a certain economic value on

¹ Earl F. Bargainnier notes, “Christie kills nearly twice as many women as men in her novels” (118).

women's bodies as mothers and homemakers. If you are unable to reproduce or too old to have new children, your value as a British citizen diminishes substantially. Even wealthy women are unsympathetic, especially because their wealth alienates them from the traditional reader. Therefore, older women often become the victim of murder in Christie's novels. We are detached from their killing because they hold little power or necessity in the society.

But what distinguishes Christie from subversive eugenics is the presence of the detective, both compassionate and determined, who solves the case, facing discouragement and even danger to their own lives. Gill Plain explains,

In the postwar popularity of detective fiction, a trend can be discerned towards the validation and restoration of the individual. In the excesses of death that characterize the world at war, the individual corpse is obliterated; it becomes impossible to mourn for each and every loss. But in detective fiction the reader enters a fantastical world in which the meticulous investigation of a single death is not only possible, but central to the narrative. (Plain 34)

The simultaneous act of violence and solving-of-crime complicates the ideas we have of disability in Christie's novels. She is not progressive, but she does not abandon her characters to the fate of being forgotten. Instead, the detective works diligently to bring the murderer to justice. Alison Light argues,

Christie represented that breed of conservatism which preferred 'gradual progress on a loose rein' and her work gives us an idea of how worried British conservatives sought to mark their difference from Nazism. For someone of Christie's mould fascism was a kind of hubris and its antidote was humility, the Christian 'contentment with a lowly place,' and an ideal of the balanced life. (Light 104)

In other words, while disabled women often suffer violence at the hands of able-bodied or elite individuals, Christie remedies these attacks by unmasking the criminal behind them.² Justice for the weak is a democratic ideal, whereas the fascist ideal would be, in the words of Ebenezer Scrooge, “If they would rather die...they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population” (Dickens 19).

Aside from a gap in disability theory, there is another reason why I pursued this research into Christie’s novels. There are few female experts on Christie’s works. Currently, the foremost Christie scholars are all men – Earl Bargainnier, J.C. Bernthal, and Alistair Rolls, to name a few. Some, like Merja Makinen and Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, represent a new place for women in Christie’s scholarship, but there are still fewer female experts on her literature. Part of my desire to pursue an honors thesis was to carve a place for myself in that tradition, helping more women to explore other female authors.

In preparing this thesis, two critics in particular most informed my readings of disability theory: Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Robert McRuer. In “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” Garland-Thomson relates how incorporating four lenses of feminist theory can improve the way in which disability studies is conducted. She argues,

Disability studies can benefit from feminist theory and feminist theory can benefit from disability studies. Both feminism and disability studies are comparative and concurrent academic enterprises. Just as feminism has expanded the lexicon of what we imagine as womanly, has sought to understand and destigmatize what we call the subject position of

² In the third chapter of this thesis, I argue that many of Christie’s victims are unsympathetic because of their disability. But I find that while Christie often shares her society’s capitalistic and sexist ideas of disability, she is saved by the presence of a sympathetic detective (see chapter 2) and by her compassion toward victims of PTSD. Characters like Poirot’s companion Arthur Hastings, Alexander Cust from *The ABC Murders* (1936), and Jerry Burton from *The Moving Finger* (1942). Dorothy L Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey also suffers immensely from Shell Shock.

woman, so has disability studies examined the identity disability in the service of integrating disabled people more fully into our society. (Garland-Thomson 334)

By studying representation, the body, identity, and activism – already realms of study in feminist theory – Garland argues that “representation deepens, expands, and challenges” conventions of feminist theory. Her goal is to show how most bodies are disabled through these lenses and that standards of perfection – which feminists and disability rights activists fight against – are meaningless and irrelevant to a world that accepts a complex, integrated idea of bodies.

Where Garland-Thomson’s essay enlightened me most was in understanding what constitutes disability and femininity. Because this thesis focuses on women’s disabled bodies, few theories could be as helpful to me as one that analyzes the intersection between disability and feminist theories. I look at physical impairment, but I also study women who are disabled by patriarchal and ageist systems. For example, Miss Marple – Christie’s spinster sleuth – suffers from rheumatism, but her femininity and age discredit her in the masculine and hyperactive world of police work. As Garland-Thomson writes, “[Disability] is the most human of experiences, touching every family and – if we live long enough – touching us all” (336). It is through Garland-Thomson’s lens that I study such diverse characters as Marina Gregg and Hercule Poirot.

McRuer’s essay “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence” suggests that queer theory and developments in disability studies overlap, demonstrating that, like compulsory heterosexuality, all bodies are expected to conform to a capitalist standard of ability. McRuer explains that “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness, that – in fact – compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and

vice versa” (McRuer 370). He argues that all subordinated bodies are disabled by a patriarchal, white, male, heteronormative culture. This is because “queerness and disability both have the potential to disrupt the performance of able-bodied heterosexuality” and therefore “both must be safely contained – embodied – in [queer/disabled] figures” (373).³

McRuer’s theory allows me to read in Christie what I think other scholars overlooked. While female characters, queer characters, or characters of color are indeed subject to violence or neglect, twentieth-century British society perpetuates that violence so that the capitalist engine can continue producing an able-bodied labor force facing a shortage of young, white men after the wars. As McRuer argues,

Compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality. But precisely because these systems depend on a queer/disabled existence that can never quite be contained, able-bodied heterosexuality’s hegemony is always in danger of being disrupted. (McRuer 375)

Work has been done on “para-disability” in Christie, but scholars have yet to understand the findings of feminist, Marxist, or queer theories in light of disability studies. The main goal of this thesis, therefore, is to provide a place for disabled female bodies in the critical literature today and to expand the definition of what constitutes “disability” in Christie’s novels.

In the chapters that follow, I examine 3 disparate types of disability in women. The first chapter focuses on Christie’s *The Mirror Crack’d* and Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” to show how society creates disability when a patriarchal system projects sexually transmitted diseases onto women. The importance of women’s bodies depends totally on their ability to

³ I use McRuer’s word capitalist throughout, but this thesis is not an analysis of economic theory. I use the word to mean essentially “the exploitation of physical bodies for labor, especially post-Industrial Revolution.”

successfully procreate, and women who are unable to have children or who express sexual desire are punished and bear the consequences of disease and disability which men evade in that system. The second chapter looks at age as a disability, particularly in the elderly detective Miss Marple and the peculiar last Marple novel, *Nemesis*. Her debilitating rheumatism and age actually serve as camouflage which allow her to enter and navigate the traditionally closed world of the crime. In the final chapter, I argue that Christie uses disability to distance us from the brutality of murder, because we are less willing to sympathize with an impaired, female victim; disability is a dehumanizing characterization. But alternatively, it is also a mode of access into the murder. The detective uses the world-knowledge of the disabled woman as a tool to solve the crime.

Chapter 1: Disease, Sex, and Motherhood in *The Mirror Crack'd* and Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott"

"People laugh at Tennyson nowadays, but the Lady of Shalott always thrilled me when I was young and it still does," Dolly Bantry, The Mirror Crack'd

I begin my thesis with a relatively overlooked form of disability: sexually transmitted disease. I do not only refer to the problematic social stigma attached to STDs but rather to the physical toll they take on the body. During most of Christie's writing career, medicine for treating STDs was not as effective as modern treatments, and there were still purely Victorian sentiments toward people with STDs, especially women. Dr. Fredrick Holmes writes that syphilis is "a chronic disease with disability occurring years after exposure" due to "infection of the heart and nervous system" (Holmes). Holmes specifically identifies this disease as debilitating (before the use of penicillin). For authors like Christie and Alfred Tennyson, syphilis would have manifested itself as a disability, and the bodies of the people (especially women) who contracted it were disabled.

In this chapter, I propose a new close reading of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott."⁴ Readers have not altogether appreciated the variety of spatial movements in the poem, movements which Christie appropriates into her novel, *The Mirror Crack'd* (1962). I argue that Christie and Tennyson punish feminine desire and employ the sexually transmitted disease of syphilis against their protagonists in order to control female sexual autonomy. The last section of this chapter poses the question, why does Christie's heroine Marina Gregg feel she has been robbed of motherhood just because her son has a disability? I argue that motherhood and

⁴ Although the poem was originally published in 1832, I am using the revised 1842 version, which Christie herself quotes.

childhood are inextricably linked to disability in Christie's oeuvre, with special attention paid to infertility and adoption.

A New Reading of "The Lady of Shalott"

From its publication, many readers and critics have noted the Lady's isolation from the rest of Camelot. Ward Hellstrom tells us, "Most critics agree that the poem deals with the artistic isolation and they are in general accord that the effect of the world may be destructive to the artist" (Hellstrom 10). James Kincaid elucidates further: next to the abundance and activity of Camelot, "the Lady lives on a 'silent isle,' imprisoned within 'four gray walls, and four gray towers'...Even the suggestive revelation that the curse is connected not to isolation but to life, that she is not cursed now but will be if she chooses to live, is submerged in the continuous development of the basic ironic contrast" (Kincaid 33). He defines that ironic contrast as "the carefree but incomplete self, imprisoned in that self and cut off entirely from any direct experience, is drawn by the lure of sexuality, beauty, growth, and change – life itself – not into freedom and expression but into obliteration" (32). In the system of artistic work and obscurity, the Lady is willing to risk death rather than remain imprisoned. Ellen J. Stockstill writes that "the Lady's position is contained and constructed by the phallic architecture surrounding her – a patriarchal structure of power" (Stockstill, qtd. in Athmanathan 34). Evidently, exploring the Lady's space and Camelot is no novel endeavor.

Whereas previous critics have focused on the physical space of the tower as symbolic of the lady's isolation, I further the discussion of how space becomes the means by which disease and frustrated sexual desire are transmitted. The idea of space is central to Tennyson's poem. Shalott is first described as an "island," in a river "flowing down to Camelot" (lines 9, 14). We

get a description of “Four gray walls, and four gray towers,” the ironic prison of the Lady’s world of artistic beauty. Her island tower means that she is both horizontally and vertically apart from the world of mundane reality, evidenced by the facts that the island is detached from Camelot by the river and that she would “look down to Camelot” from her tower (41). For the Lady, the tower is both the place to perfect her art as well as her prison from outside experience. Tennyson writes, “And moving thro’ a mirror clear / That hangs before her all the year, / Shadows of the world appear” (46-8). In order to experience a simulacrum of the real world, representations move through space, reaching the mirror, which moves through a new space toward the Lady’s eye, which moves onto the space of the tapestry. But the mirror through which she watches the world is a reversal of images; only when she looks outside of her window can she truly experience reality rather than its reversal.

In the most pivotal point of the poem, Tennyson’s imagery depends on spatial movement. After the scene during which the Lady watches Sir Lancelot, Tennyson writes:

She left the web, she left the loom,
 She made three paces thro’ the room...
 She look’d down to Camelot.
 Out flew the web and floated wide;
 The mirror crack’d from side to side;
 “The curse is come upon me!” cried
 The Lady of Shalott. (109-17)

In this stanza alone, there are at least seven phrases denoting changes of location. She must physically leave her artistic endeavor and “look down to Camelot.” As soon as she does so, objects in the room begin to shift position violently. The Lady’s use of the phrase “come upon

me” implies that the curse must move from a physical location outside of the tower to the location of her body. Finally, the Lady leaves her tower, described simply by the line, “Down she came and found a boat” (123). The movement from the world of artistic beauty to the world of mundane reality is explicitly a descent. She even lies “down” in her boat where she dies, emphasizing the descent further (134). In “The Lady of Shalott,” space is not simply the dichotomy of confinement or freedom; rather, the study of movement allows us to best understand the Lady and her characterization as a frustrated artist.

The Lady’s frustration stems from frustrated sexual desire.⁵ I would add that sex and sexual desire must be transmitted through space and do not appear as organic feelings but instead through *disease*. In this way, disease and sex become inextricably linked in the poem, the disease a result of sexual desire that moves through space. When he describes Camelot through the mirror, Tennyson writes of the knights “riding two and two,” and adds that the Lady “hath no loyal knight and true” (61-2). The coupling of the knights serves to accentuate the Lady’s lack of comradery. In an episode later, Tennyson describes “two young lovers lately wed” walking to Camelot (70). The images of the knights and lovers seem to move through space into the mirror, and the Lady must look into the mirror and weave those images into her tapestry. That spatial movement of images prompts the Lady’s response: “I am half sick of shadows” (71). Through their ascent from the ground to the mirror then to her, the images contaminate the Lady. She contracts her sickness immediately after seeing the sexualized couple (new marriage being linked

⁵ The most famous interpreters of the Lady’s sexuality are the Pre-Raphaelite artists, William Holman Hunt and John William Waterhouse. Elizabeth Prettejohn explains of Hunt’s 1850 drawing *The Lady of Shalott*: “The lady abandons her duty when she sees the image of Sir Lancelot, the most manly of knights, in her mirror...Perhaps the pose, with one hand near the groin, is reminiscent of the ‘pudicitia’ poses of ancient statues of female nudes, in which the hands modestly cover the sexual parts of the body. The drawing would seem, then, to represent the Lady’s discovery of her own sexuality” (Prettejohn 227). Of Waterhouse’s 1888 painting of the same title, Prettejohn writes that the Lady “is a curious combination of the childlike and the erotic. There is an uncomfortable closeness between the suggestion of adolescent sexual awakening and the overtones of death” (229).

to “honeymoon sex”). In this way, sexual desire moves through space and causes disease. Hellstrom explains, “There has been no life in the tower and therefore none of the stuff with which the artist must deal, there have been only reflections of shadows” (Hellstrom 14). The presence of shadows rather than of reality frustrates the Lady, and nothing demonstrates her frustration more than her own incapacity to attain sexual desire. The Lady, despite her concentrated artistic prowess, does not feel that artistic pleasure is as meaningful as sexual pleasure.

The “half sickness” of seeing the young, married lovers parallels the sexual desire she experiences for Lancelot, the desire that leads to her death. Tennyson spends four stanzas describing Lancelot. The stanzas immediately follow the Lady’s declaration that she is “half sick of shadows.” All of Tennyson’s descriptions of the knight seem to mimic sunlight. Lancelot’s “brow in sunlight glow’d,” “He flash’d into the crystal mirror,” and his helmet and feather “Burn’d like one burning flame together” (lines 100, 106, 94). If he shines as brightly as the text suggests, Lancelot would be nearly imperceptible through the reflective mirror, and looking out of the window would be a practical decision for the Lady, who wants a better look at the object of her sexual desire.⁶ It is Lancelot’s glistening image moving through space into the mirror that drives the Lady to look out of the window and see him for herself, not merely his “shadow” – an ironic phrase considering his description.

Tennyson’s own interpretation is that “[t]he newborn love for something, for some one in the wide world from which she has been long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows

⁶ Tennyson might be thinking that love physically passes through the eye in medieval optics. Love essentially becomes a communicable disease. Whenever someone falls in love in courtly love stories, they pine away. For example, in Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale,” the moment when the hero sees Emily, he flinches from the pain of Cupid’s arrow and then cries out, “From one look of your eyes, O Emily!” (42) There’s an innocence or a silliness of love passing through the eye. Christie subverts the accepted medieval tropes by making love itself into a virus/std, but if love passes through the eye (literally, love at first sight), then the Lady does not feel mere infatuation but real love.

into that of realities” (Tennyson 117). But the Lady is unable to live outside of the world of shadows and dies as a result of the curse that she incurs for leaving her world of artistic beauty. The curse that comes upon her after she looks at Lancelot is, therefore, a result of her sexual desire that moves via the shadows into the mirror and then to the Lady staring at it. The curse, then, is the “full sickness” to which the Lady formerly alluded.

Christie’s Appropriation: The Lady, Movement, and Frustrated Sexual Desire

Studying Christie’s work as an appropriation of Tennyson’s poem allows us to read her heroine, Marina Gregg, as the Lady of Shalott. Broadly described, both Christie’s and Tennyson’s works tell the story of a suffering artist, frustrated by what I call “sex-gone-wrong,” who must descend from the world of artistic beauty into the world of mundane reality, leading to her death.

The “lady” of Christie’s novel is Marina Gregg, a troubled, aging movie star, who has recently moved into a Victorian mansion with her fourth husband, the director Jason Rudd. Like Tennyson’s poem, Christie emphasizes space, particularly the Victorian space of the isolated artist. Marina’s mansion becomes the tower of Shalott, the realm of artistic beauty and isolation. Jason’s secretary Ella Zielinsky tells Dolly Bantry, “[Marina] doesn’t come very much in contact with reality...Film stars lead a fairly insulated life” (*Mirror*, 30). The highness and grandness of the mansion matches that of the tower of Shalott. Ella uses the phrase “film stars,” an aerial term that reminds us of the height of the world of artistic beauty to which Marina’s assistant cannot ascend. However, Ella adds that it is an “insulated life.” The mansion is both a place for Marina to immerse herself in her art as an actress and a lonely place, separated from reality. Miss Marple comments that “things get round very quickly in a village, you know, though they take a little

longer...in reaching the Hall” (142). The slow pace at which information reaches the Hall demonstrates its physical distance from the rest of the village. Marina, like the Lady of Shalott, lives both above and away in her artistic space. Marina’s name, too, reminds the reader of Tennyson’s Lady. Her name conjures images of water (Latin, *marinus*, or sea), and we read that the Lady’s tower exists on an island (lines 8-9). Marina’s name is like the water that surrounds the tower, emphasizing the loneliness and tumult of each woman. Perhaps also Marina’s name could be an allusion to Mariana, the name of another one of Tennyson’s heroines, whose poem is featured in the same collection as the 1842 version of “The Lady of Shalott.”

Christie’s appropriation explains further that Marina’s descent into the world of mundane reality is a moral descent, as well as a physical one. Christie expands Tennyson’s theme of spatial movement by literalizing the descent from the world of artistic beauty into the world of mundane reality using a staircase as a conduit of that descent. Christie describes, “At the top of the stairs, Marina Gregg and Jason Rudd were receiving the specially chosen *élite*” who are invited into the house to chat and for cocktails (*Mirror*, 32). Heather Badcock, the secretary of the St. John’s Ambulance which held their fete on the grounds of Marina’s house, is described as moving “up the stairs” (33). Therefore, when Marina knocks Heather’s drink out of her hand and replaces it with Marina’s own poisoned daiquiri, she must move down the staircase from the landing to stand close enough to Heather so that she might knock the drink out of Heather’s hand. The spatial movement from the landing down to the guest is the same movement the Lady makes from the tower to the boat landing, on a staircase. The Lady, too, likely descends down the tower’s staircase – probably a spiral staircase that perhaps reflects the confusion and inescapability of the curse. Marina’s moral descent reflects the physical descent down the staircase and leads to her death.

However, more than just the literal vertical movements of the Lady and Marina Gregg, Tennyson and Christie use the movements of narrative to demonstrate the moral descent. In Tennyson's poem, we do not watch the Lady from her tower in Camelot. Instead, we too descend from the tower to watch the Lady in her boat. Tennyson writes, "Under tower and balcony, / By garden-wall and gallery, / A gleaming shape she floated by, / Dead-pale between the houses high, / Silent into Camelot" (lines 154-158). If the perspective had remained in the tower, the narrator would have trouble seeing the Lady in her boat, knowing the locations she passed, or the reactions of the knights, burghers, lords, and dames who come to see the Lady arrive, dead in her boat (160-162). Perhaps most obviously, had the narrator not descended with the Lady, he could not have read the name of her boat, the eponymous *The Lady of Shalott*. Likewise, Christie's narrator moves along with Inspector Craddock, who has to descend from Marina's staircase into the world of investigation and witnesses. The poem and narrative move just like the works' heroines, descending as their morality does, until the story concludes with the death of each lady.

But Christie distinguishes her story from Tennyson's by varying the motive of her heroine from that of the Lady. Marina descends the staircase out of a desire for vengeance, while the Lady chooses to leave her tower because of her sexual desire. But what does Marina's descent as driven by purely sinister, immoral motives reveal about Christie's characterization of Tennyson's Lady? I have argued that Christie's novel is an appropriation of his poem. So, if Marina is immoral, then Christie has condemned the Lady of Shalott similarly, equating murderous rage with sexual incontinence.

Sex, Contagion, and the “Threesome”

Marina’s moral descent, like the Lady’s, is prompted by frustrated sexual desire and contagion. However, unlike Tennyson’s Lady, Marina Gregg has physical sexual experiences, and we read about them in the various gossip magazines Miss Marple uses to solve the murder. Therefore, Marina Gregg does not experience frustrated sexual desire but rather what I am calling “sex-gone-wrong.” Her experiences of sex-gone-wrong result in contamination that ultimately kills her.

Despite her artistic fame and success, Marina Gregg’s one desire is to have her own child. She waits decades, then decides to adopt children, whom she neglects at the news of her pregnancy. Like the Lady, Marina’s artistic isolation prevents her from attaining her desires. For the Lady desires sexual contact, while sex predicates Marina’s (biological) maternal desire. Furthermore, space becomes a conduit for the sex-gone-wrong that results in a literal disease that seriously affects her pregnancy. While Marina finally had successful sex that led to pregnancy, Heather Badcock’s viral infiltration into that union ruins the pregnancy. Heather gives Marina the virus German Measles, which Miss Marple explains “may have a terribly serious effect” on a baby early in a pregnancy. “It may cause an unborn child to be born blind or to be born mentally affected” (*Mirror*, 144). Therefore, Heather penetrates Marina’s body with her disease, so sex goes wrong because a third party (who should have never been involved in the act) appears and contaminates the pregnant woman.⁷

One way that Rubella is spread is by breathing in droplets of throat or mouth secretions while someone infected is talking or coughing. We know Heather Badcock is a notorious talker. Jason Rudd says that she “burst into some long rigmarole of how although she was in bed with

⁷ Although a crude reading, I would like to point out Heather’s suggestive name: Badcock. Whether intentional or not, the name evokes a damaged or diseased phallus that participates in the metaphorical threesome.

‘flu, she had got up and had managed to come to this affair and asked for and got my wife’s autograph” (63). Although a pivotal clue to the mystery, Jason writes off Heather’s speech as “long rigmarole.” Heather’s interference prevents her from seeing “how things might appear to, or affect other people,” which ultimately leads to her death, as foreshadowed by the story of Alison Wilde (19).⁸ Miss Marple describes the moment when Marina discovers that Heather infected her during her pregnancy: “Here was this woman who had destroyed her happiness and destroyed her sanity and health of her child. She wanted to punish her. She wanted to kill her” (145). And Marina succeeds in poisoning Heather. The reintroduction of the contaminator forces the moral descent from artistic beauty into mundane reality that ultimately kills Marina Gregg, just as it did the Lady of Shalott.

The Cypher of Syphilis

Both poet and novelist infect their characters with a debilitating “curse” that eventually kills them. I should stress: Tennyson and Christie -as far as we know- did not intend for those “curses” to represent syphilis. But by reading the curses under this interpretation, Christie and Tennyson debilitate their characters for acting on their sexual desires, which contributes to a broader discussion of sexual autonomy for women’s bodies. The men in both works are free to have sex, but the women are punished for their sexual desires.

In Tennyson’s poem, we find a female artist, imprisoned in her world of artistic beauty under the threat of an unknown curse. Only after she sees Sir Lancelot does the curse fall upon her, so it is explicitly linked to Lancelot’s male body. Therefore, the curse actually comes from

⁸ Miss Marple says, “Well, Alison always saw her own point of view so clearly that she didn’t always see how things might appear to, or affect, other people.” When Heather asks Miss Marple “What’s your friend doing now,” Miss Marple replies (perhaps heavy-handedly), “Oh – she died” (*Mirror*, 19).

Lancelot himself. For its connection to sexual desire and its transference between “sexual” partners, I propose that the curse is akin to the STD syphilis. Lancelot infects the Lady, but while the disease kills her, Lancelot is free from its effects because of an unjust double standard Victorian women’s sexual bodies bore.

Major Sydney Laird, a twentieth century expert of syphilis, wrote in his monograph *Venereal Disease in Britain* (1943):

Venereal disease has been well described as the camp-follower of war. Wartime conditions favour the spread of venereal diseases for a number of reasons. These include the disruption of the family unit, the movements of large sections of the community, increased promiscuity arising from the unsettled conditions, and the return of troops infected in foreign theatres of war (Laird 33).⁹

Lancelot is a “red-cross knight” who carries a shield and “blazon’d baldric” (lines 79, 87). Lancelot himself, equipped with a sword and armor, is a soldier, possibly returning from various Arthurian wonderings, which take him far from Camelot. He identifies with the military man Laird describes. Since the Lady has spent her whole life (as far as we can infer) in the tower, she has probably not had any prior sexual experience to the desired one with Sir Lancelot. Therefore, it is as though Lancelot has been infected with syphilis and transfers it to the Lady during their pseudo-sexual experience.¹⁰

⁹ While there are newer studies about syphilis, I am using Laird’s 1943 monograph because it is the most relevant to Christie’s own understanding of STDs. This early data is the kind that she would have been familiar with. Any newer studies would skew my interpretation because Christie would not have thought in terms of penicillin. Interestingly, however, a 2017 study by Public Health England, a government organization, found that military service continues to be a risk factor for cases of syphilis.

¹⁰ As Dr. Richard Godden pointed out to me, Lancelot is not associated with the kind of philandering that characterizes the Victorian conception of venereal disease; in fact, he is famously monoamorous and utterly devoted to Guinevere. However, Tennyson does not necessarily remain true to an Arthurian source. His source for the poem was actually an Italian collection titled *Cento Novelle Antiche*. He fabricated “the mirror and the web it inspires, the curse, the geographical relationship of the island, the river, and Camelot” (Staines 11). In Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, the “red-cross knight” is Galahad, not Lancelot, and the philandering knight is Gawain. Tennyson

But Lancelot, unlike the Lady of Shalott, goes unpunished by his disease. His singing of “Tirra lirra” and his dismissal of the Lady as merely “a lovely face” prove his disaffectedness at the woman he kills (107, 169). In this scenario, he does not bear the burden of responsibility for infecting the Lady and likely continues to “infect” women throughout Camelot and beyond. This observation forces the question, why is the Lady punished for sexual expression but Lancelot is not? Tennyson’s contemporary, novelist Anthony Trollope, “cites men as most blameworthy for illicit sexual behaviors” (Bleicher 548). However, his stance was not popular in Victorian England. While the Contagious Diseases Acts were not passed until 1864, their rationale was certainly present in Tennyson’s 1842. Vern L. Bullough explains,

Both the fear of venereal disease and the medical emphasis on the danger of uncontrolled sexual activity fueled campaigns against prostitution...Although the military ultimately turned to advocating prophylactics, the campaign against venereal disease must be regarded as a major formative factor in Victorian attitudes toward sexuality” (Bullough 834).

Those “formative factors,” however, concerned the control of *women’s* bodies, not the military men who most frequently carried the disease.

Writers like Trollope advocated for more accountability toward men for their “illicit sexual behaviors.” But reading the curse as a cypher for syphilis allows us to understand in what way a writer like Tennyson could have written into a system that tried to curb the flux of syphilis by restricting and punishing women’s bodies “with the rationale of protecting *men* throughout the British Empire” (Bleicher 549, my emphasis). This rationale was to protect the very men

probably combines several tropes of Arthurian knights and places them in Lancelot, explaining, then, the possible associations with Lancelot’s sexual proclivity.

most at fault for spreading the disease and displacing blame onto the women they infected, who became “immoral” or “promiscuous.”

Furthermore, Tennyson’s description of Lancelot shows that he does not bear the marks of the disease he passes onto the Lady. Tennyson describes Lancelot’s “broad clear brow” and “coal-black curls” (lines 100, 103). Margaret Marwick says that “the descriptions of leading men are coded sexual markers” (Bleicher 553). By emphasizing features like his forehead and full head of hair, Tennyson demonstrates that Lancelot is healthy and does not (at least apparently) carry syphilis. Marwick explains that characters’ “loss of teeth, noses, hair, and sanity were coded Victorian recompense for sexual incontinence” (552). Therefore, because he shows no ostensible symptoms of the disease, the Lady looks down at his glistening figure, and he is able to pass the disease to her.

In *Christie*, the metaphors become a little more obscured because we deal with a female Lancelot. The bearer of the syphilitic disease is neither Jason Rudd nor Marina’s former husband and father of her son, Isidore Wright. Lancelot instead becomes the busybody Heather Badcock. Heather herself confesses:

The big thrill of my life was when there was a big show in aid of the St. John’s Ambulance in Bermuda, and Marina Gregg came to open it. I was mad with excitement, and then on the very day I came down with a temperature and the doctor said I couldn’t go. But I wasn’t going to be beaten. I didn’t actually feel too bad. So I got up and put a lot of make-up on my face and went along. (*Mirror*, 18)

Miss Marple then asks if “there were no – unfortunate aftereffects,” to which Heather Badcock responds, “None at all. Never felt better. What I say is, if you want a thing, you’ve got to take

risks. I always do” (*Mirror*, 18). The irony of this conversation is, of course, that there is an aftereffect, though not for Heather Badcock.

Heather has German Measles, which she transfers to the pregnant Marina. Therefore, Heather, like Lancelot, infects Marina in the sex-gone-wrong experience. Heather’s work with the St. John’s Ambulance took her to volunteer sites around the world, similarly to the military. In her capacity with the St. John’s Ambulance, she becomes the figure of Lancelot, carrying contagion back to English women and to their offspring, since it can be transmitted to unborn babies. Heather’s makeup covers her imperfections, notably on her face – which Marwick explains would indicate an advanced stage of syphilis. The danger of covering the imperfection is in the “aftereffects.” The Lady or Marina would not have engaged with Lancelot or Heather had they not had a “broad clear brow.” The potential covering-up of disease puts these victims at great risk.

Christie would have experienced the damages syphilis ravages on the body in her work as a hospital nurse during World War I. Before the advent of penicillin, syphilis was treated with less effective drugs like arsphenamine and mercury, or even arsenic (Dennie 83). Curator Richard Marshall writes,

During the First World War, VD caused 416,891 hospital admissions among British and Dominion troops...Excluding readmissions for relapses, roughly 5% of all the men who enlisted in Britain’s armies during the war become infected...Although Trench Foot has come to symbolise the squalor of the conflict in the popular imagination, a man was more than five times as likely to end up in a hospital suffering from Syphilis or Gonorrhoea. (Marshall)

Christie would have come into contact with many soldiers diagnosed with syphilis, and the symptoms of syphilis she witnessed might have lingered in her imagination while writing her book.

If we read German Measles as syphilis, similarities between the diseases begin to emerge. Like German Measles, syphilis contracted by pregnant women and gone untreated could cause miscarriages, still births, or children who died shortly after birth (Dennie 83). Syphilis acts similarly to Rubella in the body of pregnant women. However, the main argument is that the disease is a direct effect of sexual intercourse (metaphorically for Rubella and literally for syphilis). Therefore, we can see the German Measles as a convenient viral disease that acts in a practical way to convey the disease from Heather's body to Marina's body in the pseudo-threesome. The second stage of syphilis is characterized by a rash on the genitals or mouth. In an unobvious way, the two diseases might be subversively connected with the image of Heather's rash. The disease acts literally as German Measles and metaphorically as syphilis.

With these possibilities in mind, I ask one final question about syphilis in *The Mirror Crack'd*. Why does Christie perpetuate a patriarchal restriction on women's bodies that punishes sexual freedom? Once the Lady's and Marina Gregg's bodies become infected, they carry a debilitating, stigmatized disease. The citizens of Camelot are intrigued by the Lady, but no one offers to touch her body or perform a proper burial for her. If we read the curse of syphilis, this rejection of touching her body symbolizes the fear of contamination from an STD attached to the *female victim* as opposed to the man who wanders freely among the townspeople. Similarly, Heather knows she is sick because she recognizes a rash on her skin. She covers it up in order to avoid the potential embarrassment of being contaminated with Rubella – and her obsessive desire to see Marina Gregg. While women are punished with disability, men are not. Marina

Gregg suffers enormous emotional trauma after her pregnancy, while Heather Badcock experiences no tribulation whatsoever; that is, until Marina Gregg kills Heather, but that is not a natural punishment like the one inflicted on Marina. In her work *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag writes:

The other notorious scourge among nineteenth-century diseases, syphilis, was at least not mysterious. Contracting syphilis was a predictable consequence, the consequence, usually, of having sex with a carrier of that disease. So, among all the guilt-embroidered fantasies about sexual pollution attached to syphilis, there was no place for a type of personality supposed to be especially susceptible to the disease... In its role as scourge, syphilis implied a moral judgement (about off-limits sex, about prostitution) but not a psychological one. (Sontag 39)

Sontag elucidates the position of women with syphilis in Tennyson's era – and by extension Christie's novel: syphilis is a punishment for the immoral decision to express sexual freedom. The hidden moral of both Tennyson's poem and Christie's book could be that women should refrain from sexual behavior or be cursed with disease. In both works, it seems as if after sexual contact, syphilis leaves "Lancelot's" body and remains in "the Lady's" body to punish her for her sexual desire. But men who carry the disease go unpunished and are free to continue enjoying sexual pleasure; in fact, it is the men who carry the disease who need the protection.

This rhetoric is reminiscent of abstinence-only speakers like Pam Stenzel, who says, "If you have sex outside of one, permanent, monogamous [partner]... *you will pay*. Boys, if there's a girl throwing herself at you, if she's the one pressuring you for sex, if this is a girl that's dressing in that manner that's saying 'not only do you but the rest of the world take me now,' I got a little word of advice for you: Run! Run from this girl. I did not say walk away slowly. I said run from

her!” (“Sex Education”) Stenzel, like a subversive reading of Tennyson and Christie, threatens people who engage in sexual activity (“you will pay,” like the Lady’s “curse”). Moreover, this threat is targeted specifically at women, who are less likely to carry an STD but who incur the responsibility and blame when men infect them with an STD. Consider Stenzel’s plea for boys to “run” from a girl who dresses in a particular way. The blame is not placed on a boy who objectifies a young woman’s body but rather on the woman’s body itself.

Christie and Tennyson both potentially perpetuate this type of rhetoric by punishing their female heroines for sexual expression and allowing their male counterparts to continue living undisturbed with the havoc that disease creates in the women’s lives. Perhaps the infection and subsequent illness of Marina Gregg and her baby go further than control of sexual autonomy. Christie might be making an active condemnation of the gluttonous life of a movie star. Marina’s many marriages and divorces indicate a certain restlessness that results in multiple sexual partners. Just as the community shuns Marina for her modern lifestyle (she shockingly has a swimming pool!), Christie might be passing a subversive judgment on the hedonistic Hollywood lifestyle.

Infertility as Disability

The final section of this chapter ends with an important discussion about women’s bodies in *The Mirror Crack’d* as well as other novels in Christie’s oeuvre. I argue that in Christie’s novels, a woman who is unable to have a child is considered disabled, and that disability is complicated by attitudes of malice, obsession, or neglect toward adoptive children.¹¹ This is not

¹¹ Christie’s ideas of conventional motherhood are extremely fallacious. We know that many women who are unable to have children or choose not to have children do not identify themselves as members of the disability community. Additionally, Christie’s notions of adoptive mothers are equally troubling, and any parent considers his/her child her own, regardless of the genetic disposition of that child.

to say that childlessness and physical impairment are necessarily equitable, but the attitudes toward infertile women participate in the same stigmatizing or othering discourse as disability. Christie's novels offer us several, varying characterizations of mothers who are unable to have children naturally. These are not simply women who choose not to have children, although Christie traditionally condemns these women too and associates them with rudeness toward children or lonely, embittered spinsters. There are exceptions to this trend, most notably present in school teachers (like Miss Marple) or governesses (like Cecilia Williams from *Five Little Pigs*). Yet these women are still linked to children in their professions. However, the women whom I discuss desire children, but because they are unable to have their own, they adopt children. What we see next in the lives of these women is either gross negligence or tyranny toward those adopted children. We conclude, then, that in Christie's novels, an inability to have children is directly related to a kind of sociopathy or a mental disability.

There are several examples of these adoptive mothers in Christie's works. Consider Rachel Argyle from *Ordeal by Innocence* (1959). Dr. MacMaster says of her:

I've seen many girls and women, with strong maternal instincts, keen on getting married but mainly, though they mayn't quite know it themselves – because of their urge to motherhood. And the babies come; they're happy and satisfied. Life goes back into proportion for them... Well, with Mrs. Argyle, the maternal instinct was very strong, but the physical satisfaction of bearing a child or children, never came. And so her maternal obsession never really slackened. (*Ordeal* 84)

According to Dr. MacMaster, women need the physical satisfaction of pregnancy in order to satiate their desire to interfere permanently in their children's lives. The lawyer Mr. Marshall remarks explicitly, "To understand Mrs. Argyle, you have to realize that the great tragedy of her

life was that she was unable to have children. As is the case with many women, this *disability* gradually overshadowed the whole of her life” (*Ordeal* 56, my emphasis). For Christie, any mother who cannot have children naturally does not know how to act rationally as a mother and will either be extremely negligent or tyrannical. Though Rachel Argyle did not know it, she was tyrannical; her inadvertent swaddling and control over her children’s lives made them hate her.

Similarly, we see the doting Mrs. Laura Upward from *Blood Will Tell* (1952). She has taken the playwright Robin Upward into her house in order to replace the son she lost. Poirot explains:

Mrs. Upward was morbidly anxious herself that no one should know that Robin was not her own son. She had probably heard too many ribald comments on brilliant young men who live with and upon elderly women...Robin’s attitude toward Mrs. Upward was not that of either a spoiled child, or a devoted son... Mrs. Upward, though she was clearly very fond of Robin, nevertheless unconsciously treated him as a prized possession that she had bought and paid for. (*Blood* 171)

Christie depicts Laura Upward as a woman desperate for a son, so desperate that she replaces her own dead son with the playwright who will eventually murder her. She loves Robin because he is a commodity, not because he is truly her son. Just like Rachel Argyle, Laura Upward sees her adoptive child as someone who owes her a great deal of gratitude. There is no unconditional love for the adoptive child from his/her mother; there is only the demand of indebtedness and worship.

An extreme version of the mothers like Rachel Argyle and Laura Upward is Mrs. Boynton, the ruthless tyrant of the family from *Appointment with Death* (1937). She demands only supplication from her adopted children. Poirot tells us that Mrs. Boynton is a “human

creature born with immense ambition, with a yearning to dominate and to impress her personality on other people...*She was the petty tyrant of one isolated family!*" (*Appointment*, 245). Mrs. Boynton's extreme malice and torment of her children makes her seem inhuman.¹² Each mother demonstrates Christie's attitude toward adoptive mothers: they are not natural mothers and do not, therefore, have a proportionate maternal instinct. The "motherhood mechanism" is broken, and so are their bodies; these are not *women* because they do not know how to properly nurture children.

Consider in contrast to these mothers Griselda Clement, the vicar's wife, in *The Body in the Library* (1941). Griselda reveals she is expecting at the end of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, and we see the now-crawling David in *The Body in the Library*. Griselda and Miss Marple talk about the little boy. Miss Marple comments that David looks "very bonny," and Griselda, "endeavoring to assume an indifferent manner," replies, "Of course I don't bother with him much. All the books say a child should be left alone as much as possible," an attitude which Miss Marple commends (*Body*, 636-637). While Griselda knows when to play with and when to distance herself from her baby, adoptive mothers like Rachel Argyle, Laura Upward, and Mrs. Boynton do not have the same ability. Christie presents them as disabled mothers because they cannot have children of their own.

Marina Gregg, like the adoptive mothers before her, has no sense of proportion with her children. She dotes on them and praises them, but when she becomes pregnant, she neglects her adoptive children. She has no communication with them post-breakdown after her son is born. Dolly Bantry describes Marina's motherhood early in the novel:

¹² Mrs. Boynton does have a biological daughter, Ginevra. However, there are implications that Ginevra might not be her daughter but rather the daughter of the poor pregnant maid Mrs. Boynton dismisses just before she gives birth.

[A]nd she had a baby – apparently she'd always longed to have a child – she's even half-adopted a few strays – anyway this was the real thing. Very much built up. Motherhood with a capital M. And then, I believe, it was an imbecile, or queer or something – and it was after this that she had this breakdown and started to take drugs and all that, and threw up her parts. (*Mirror* 20-21)

Evidently, Marina took seriously the prospect of her own child, but her adoptive family was more analogous to a movie role for the star. Miss Marple sympathizes with Marina's forgotten children. She asks Inspector Craddock, "'So when she got – tired of them,' said Miss Marple with a very faint pause before the word 'tired,' 'they were dismissed! After being brought up in luxury with every advantage. Is that it?'" Then she explains, "Children feel things... They feel things more than the people around them ever imagine. The sense of hurt, of being rejected, of not belonging. It's a thing that you don't get over just because of advantages" (77). And one of Marina's adoptive daughters, the photographer Margot Bence, agrees with Miss Marple:

She found out she was going to have a child of her own... Then we'd had it! We weren't wanted any more... Oh, she pensioned us off very prettily. With a home and a foster-mother and money for our education and a nice little sum to start us off in the world. Nobody can say that she didn't behave correctly and handsomely. But she'd never wanted us – all she wanted was a child of her own. (103)

Marina, like Laura Upward, buys her children, but Marina neglects the children rather than dotes upon the objects she purchases. Marina cannot act like a normal mother to the children who are not her own.

Marina's unsatisfied desire for "natural" motherhood manifests itself at the party where she again meets Heather Badcock. Christie employs Tennyson in the metaphor of mirrors. While

there is no literal mirror at the party, there are two images at the party that harken back to Tennyson's legacy. The first is the copy of a Bellini Madonna that Marina sees on the wall opposite the stairs while talking to Heather. The second is the photograph Margot Bence takes of Marina that Margot later shows to Inspector Craddock. In the first "mirror," Marina sees the image of idealized motherhood, represented by a fictional Bellini painting with Mary and the baby Jesus. There is at least one major takeaway from the Madonna story: Jesus is born from an utterly sex-less conception, so there is no possibility of contracting an STD. Miss Marple explains to Jason Rudd, "There was an expression on your wife's face and she was not looking at Heather Badcock but at that picture. At a picture of a laughing, happy mother holding a happy child" (143). Marina Gregg stares at the portrait of the idealized version of motherhood, the Madonna and Jesus. However, what Marina does not remember is that Mary has to watch her own son die later in his life. Even as Marina pictures idealized motherhood, her envy should be troubled by the fate of that relationship.

The second mirror is the photograph of Marina that her adoptive daughter takes during the party. It is a snapshot of the very moment Marina looks at the painting and decides to kill Heather Badcock. Christie writes:

It was a very good photograph of Marina Gregg. Her hand was clasped in the hand of a woman standing in front of her, and therefore with her back to the camera. But Marina Gregg was not looking at the woman. Her eyes stared not quite into the camera but slightly obliquely to the left.... The woman portrayed there was staring at something, something she saw, and the emotion it aroused in her was so great that she was physically unable to express it by any kind of facial expression. (101)

The inability to convey emotion or distractedness reminds us of the effects of trauma, and Marina Gregg is certainly a victim of the traumatic results of her pregnancy. Therefore, if the portrait of the Madonna is the mirror of an idealized motherhood, then the photograph of Marina Gregg is the mirror of real motherhood. For Marina, real motherhood is a traumatic experience, conveyed to us by her inability to express the emotion she feels for it. She desires the idealized version of motherhood she sees in the painting, but she only experiences the traumatic version we see in the photograph.

The final question I ask in this chapter is, why does Marina Gregg's vision of idealized motherhood reject a mentally disabled son? Marina's son remains unnamed in the novel, and he is described no fewer than three times with the cruel epithet "imbecile" (20, 65, 76). Disabled minds hold a precarious place in Christie's literature. While some characters are fastidious or obsessive, there are few characters who might identify themselves with the mental disabilities community.¹³ For Christie, then, disabled minds are either "mad" or non-existent. We find a partial answer to this question in Paul Longmore's article about poster children. Images of children on charity posters often made children look as "normal" as possible, but "as time went on, the drive began to stress those physical differences" (Longmore 35). But the children who appeared in these ads walked a fine line: "they had to appear helpless but mustn't be too disabled" (37). So only mild physical disabilities were stressed, and these poster children defined the image for all people with disabilities. Therefore, children and adults with mental disabilities would have been "too different" or "too disabled," and they did not enter the public

¹³ At a conference I attended, a fellow scholar suggested that we might read Hercule Poirot as neurodiverse or on the autism spectrum. Poirot certainly falls into the category of fastidious, but I do not believe that he exhibits any of the defining features of autism. Again, this shows how few encounters Christie might have had with mentally disabled or neurodiverse people. They do not appear in her idealized "country cozies," and when they do, they are the murders who have gone "crazy" or "balmy" by the end of the novel. Some of these characters include Robin Upward from *Blood Will Tell*, Honoria Waynefleete from *Murder is Easy* (1939), or Gerald Martin from "Philomel Cottage" (a short story from the collection *The Listerdale Mystery*, 1934).

consciousness. Marina's son lives in a sanatorium in America, so Marina is far removed from him. Rather than appreciating her son and loving him, Marina rejects him and marginalizes him, while she wishes for an idealized child and motherhood.

Children like Marina's son are marginalized in Christie's novel because there was no place for them in the collective imagination of mid-twentieth century disability. Another child similarly marginalized is Josephine Leonides from *Crooked House* (1949). Earl Bargainnier explains:

Though it is never stated explicitly that she is insane, her unbalanced mental state is evident throughout her presentation. She has a morbid curiosity, an absolute sense of her own superiority, and an utter callousness. One character says, "Sometimes I think that child isn't right in her head...She gives me the shivers sometimes." (Bargainnier 128)

We know that Josephine is not merely "crazy" or "insane" because she devises intricate and rational plots. Josephine is frightening not just because she is a multiple murderer but more so because she is an unbalanced child. But her psychopathic behavior is indicative of a writer who does not know where to place or how to define the real manifestations of mental illness. Both Marina's son and Josephine Leonides represent the culmination of fear and misunderstanding about mental health and disability in children.

Conclusion

Marina Gregg's body holds a multifaceted place in Christie's literature. It is all at once the site of appropriation of Tennyson, a political battleground for sexual rights and freedom, and the location of trauma and murder. We know that her body has been infected by a disease that debilitates her child. *The Mirror Crack'd* gives us initial insight into the kinds of women's

bodies and the kinds of issues we see permeating through her other stories. Are women's bodies really their own? Why is disability linked to sexual incontinence or lasciviousness? And what does the array of disability present in Christie's work, but overlooked by so many critics before, tell us about the desire to push disabled bodies aside and focus on healthy male bodies?

Chapter 2: Age as Disability in the Detective

“It’s me,’ said Miss Marple, for once ungrammatical, ‘though I should put it a little more strongly than that. The Greeks, I believe, had a word for it. Nemesis, if I am not wrong,” Miss Marple, A Caribbean Mystery

We may take precautions to avoid syphilis or Rubella or any number of contagious diseases. We can get plastic surgery, adhere to traditional gender roles, suppress natural sexual desires. But there is one disability that is inevitable with the progress of time: age. Robert McRuer writes, “Everyone is virtually disabled, both in the sense that able-bodied norms are ‘intrinsically impossible to embody’ fully and in the sense that able-bodied status is temporary, disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough” (McRuer 374). Age holds a privileged position in disability studies because of its universality. But despite its certainty, few critics have chosen to parse out the implications of age as a disability in Christie’s novels. Her two most famous detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, are notably elderly characters. But Christie’s victims, too, tend to be elderly – and the systematic verbal abuse or disregard of the elderly points to an ageist society which romanticizes the active and beautiful as heroes or martyrs.

In this chapter, I analyze the implications of the aging women’s bodies in Christie’s novels from the perspective of the detective. I focus in depth on Christie’s novel *Nemesis* (1971) This novel provides a framework for the cross-section of ageism, sexism, and ableism I want to examine. I argue that the narrative structure of *Nemesis* depends on Miss Marple’s old age to generate a different type of detective narrative, one in which retrospection and contemplation become the tools of the detective. I use David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s idea of narrative prosthesis to explain that Miss Marple’s disability is central to the narrative, and I use their

schematic to demonstrate that *Nemesis* is an example of a narrative that brings disability from the periphery to the forefront of the narrative, and finally that disability is cured at the end of the novel. *Nemesis* was not the last Miss Marple novel to be published, but it is the novel where Miss Marple is at her oldest and most immobile. She does not rely on taxing physical activity but rather on the sharpness of her mind to solve the murder. For this reason, it can be a tedious novel, but that tedium is a direct result of the lack of physical action of the narrative, which is replaced with lengthy scenes of dialogue and introspection. I analyze the ways in which younger characters marginalize Miss Marple's abilities by referring primarily to her age. I incorporate characters from other Miss Marple novels to emphasize the phenomenon of ageism throughout Christie's oeuvre.

Narrative Prosthesis

I take the hypothesis of Narrative Prosthesis from Mitchell and Snyder, who define it as “the dependency of literary narratives upon disability” (Mitchell 226). The authors explain that “disability provides literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (222). They explain that narrative often arises from a breach of normalcy, a physical or mental impairment that necessitates narrative but then is pushed to the periphery of the text or is “cured” by the end of the narrative. They argue that authors write onto disabled bodies, and those bodies become a locus for explaining “worldly meanings” in ancient texts and individual accounts of virtue or character in more modern texts. In this way, a character's disability necessitates a narrative (such as the narratives of self-discovery or journey) but that disability is then disregarded as the character moves through the text. By the end, the narrative must return to the normal, so the character – or more to the point,

the narrative – is cured of its disability. In an attempt to actualize a complete narrative, authors merely point out their dependence on disability when they intentionally introduce and disregard disabled characters.

Mitchell and Snyder introduce a “schematic of narrative structure,” which I will explain:

1. “A deviance or marked difference is exposed to the reader.”
2. “A narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation’s origins and formative consequences.”
3. “The deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come.”
4. “The remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in the same manner.”

Nemesis follows this schematic by introducing us to Miss Marple’s rheumatism and age¹⁴, which necessitate a new form of detective fiction, highlighted by the long scenes of dialogue and contemplation. The narrative is eventually “cured” of her disability by the attainment of monetary wealth. Christie’s narrative relies on Miss Marple’s disabled body while drawing attention to her extraordinary detection abilities.

The Evolution of Miss Marple’s Investigations

In order to understand the new plot Miss Marple’s rheumatism necessitates, it helps to understand the novel’s predecessors and how *Nemesis* differs from other Miss Marple stories.

When *Nemesis* begins, Miss Marple is looking at the newspaper, reading the obituaries column.

¹⁴ While we do not know Miss Marple’s age for certain, there are several clues in *At Bertram’s Hotel*. Miss Marple says she stayed at the London establishment when she was 14 (*Bertram’s* 15), and she later remarks that the good breakfast brought her back to 1909 (45). She would, therefore, have been born around 1890, which puts her age at around 81 at the time of *Nemesis*. The problem, however, is that if Miss Marple was born in 1890, she could hardly have been the aging old woman we see in *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), when she would have been around 40.

She recognizes Mr. Jason Rafiel's name but cannot quite place at first where she has met him: "Rafiel? Something stirred. That name was familiar...an unusual name. She supposed she'd head it somewhere before," only later to remember that he was the man who assisted her in bringing a murderer to justice in an earlier novel *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), set the year before *Nemesis*. Miss Marple's mind is as sharp as ever, and she demonstrates clearly that her powers of recollection and deduction are as astute in the later novels as in the earlier ones. However, she suffers from rheumatism, a chronic condition that forces her into inactivity. In his letter asking for her help in solving the murder of his son's fiancé, Rafiel imagines Miss Marple "sitting in a chair, a chair that is agreeable and comfortable for whatever kind or form of rheumatism from which you may suffer. All persons of your age, I consider, are likely to suffer from some form of rheumatism. If this ailment affects your knees or your back, it will not be easy for you to get about much and you will spend your time mainly knitting" (*Nemesis* 280). And this is indeed the case. In *Murder with Mirrors*, Carrie Louise Serrocold describes suffering with rheumatism: "It's gotten must worse lately. I find it difficult to walk. Horrid cramps in my legs" (*Murder with Mirrors* 49). However, her daughter Mildred Strete dismisses her mother's disability as "inevitable aches and pains" (126). Mildred conforms to the ageist idea that the elderly accept the inevitability of pain because they accept the inevitability of age. But Miss Marple's marked physical inactivity while trying to remain a participant in investigations in later novels is a direct contradiction to this belief.

Nemesis differs from earlier Miss Marple novels because of her startling immobility caused by her disability. In earlier books, Miss Marple is able to garden, an important metaphorical device that, as the Vicar Leonard Clement points out, "is as good as a smoke screen," used so that she can spy on her neighbors (*Vicarage* 13). She even solves her first case,

The Murder at the Vicarage (1930), because she is snooping in her garden, located at the center of her village. But by later novels, like *The Mirror Crack'd* (1962), Miss Marple must find other ways of gleaning information when she can no longer garden. Her age and rheumatism prevent her from digging and planting. She is allowed “at most a little light pruning” (*Mirror* 9). In *Nemesis*, she walks in gardens, which becomes a satisfactory alternative to the activity of gardening. Again, in this last Miss Marple novel, a garden plays a key role in the mystery as the grave of young Verity Hunt.¹⁵

Like her gardening, Miss Marple, who takes an active role in many of the earlier books and imposes herself into the mystery, must rely on more indirect forms of interference in later novels. In *The Body in the Library* (1941), Miss Marple travels to the hotel where the victim Ruby Keene worked and solves the murder in a space away from her own home. Michelle Kazmer argues that these earlier novels would exemplify a tactic of gaining information through action rather than passive listening. She writes, “To solve each mystery, once she has gained access through physical location and reputation, Miss Marple needs to act in various specific ways with respect to information. She needs to engage in a suite of information behaviors” (Kazmer 119). Most notably, Miss Marple actively puts herself into the proper place for *gossip*. Most critics have noted that her detection ability is aided largely by her age and inconspicuousness. The eminent Christie scholar Earl Bargainnier writes, “Consciously or unconsciously on her part, her image as elderly spinster effectively camouflages from strangers her detective activities” (Bargainnier 71). I would argue that Miss Marple consciously uses her

¹⁵ Although *Sleeping Murder* (1976) is technically the last Miss Marple novel published, it was written decades earlier and shows a much younger, more involved Miss Marple. For this reason, I refer to *Nemesis* as the last novel in Miss Marple’s chronology.

age to her advantage. Her unassuming persona makes it easier for people to confide in her.

Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker explain:

The abilities old ladies possess – knowing what, how, and why something happened, and what ought to have happened – amount to the essential qualities of the detective: a strong moral sense, a knowledge of human nature, and a capacity for deduction based on carefully observed evidence. It is the ‘trivial’ lives of old ladies, who have plenty of leisure, the wisdom of experience, long memories, little personal drama in their own lives, and a huge capacity for vicarious living through observation of and gossip about the lives of others, that makes them into potentially excellent detectives. (Shaw 63)

These theories apply to the earlier novels where Miss Marple intentionally puts herself into the drama of the murder, but what these critics have neglected completely is that Miss Marple’s detective abilities change as she ages. She is no longer able to place herself of her own accord into the situation of a murder.

By a later novel like *The 4:50 from Paddington* (1957), Miss Marple depends on a trusted female confidante, Lucy Eyelesbarrow, to assist her in the “legwork” of gathering clues. After reading through train schedules and maps, Miss Marple has found the location where a body could have been thrown from the train and hidden. She then realizes that “the next step involved action – a good deal of action – the kind of action for which she, herself, was physically unfit. If her theory were to be definitely proved or disproved, she must at this point have help from some other source” (4:50 29). This becomes the new norm for Miss Marple. She reads the preliminary material and sends a younger, more active sleuth to dig up clues for her. Consider *The Mirror Crack’d*. Miss Marple begins her study of the gossip magazines which gives her information about Marina Gregg’s children and marriages, but Chief Inspector Dermot Craddock performs

the “nitty gritty” aspects of investigation, tracking down Marina’s former lovers and children, interviewing them, and conveying that information to Miss Marple. Kazmer comments, “While much of Miss Marple’s information is acquired through everyday conversation and through her day-to-day lived experience, she also explicitly engages in information *seeking* tactics...Miss Marple’s personal use of *formal* information is relatively rare, and thus is noteworthy when it happens” (Kazmer 120). She uses Miss Marple’s investigation into the gossip magazines as an example of formal information, but she makes no reference to age as a *cause* for this different tactic. In other words, Miss Marple would not consult gossip magazines or railroad timetables if she could go out and investigate herself. Her disability, though, prevents her.

Moreover, as she ages, Miss Marple does not place herself intentionally at the scene of a crime. Rather than seeking out gossip, those tidbits she hears tend to be serendipitous. For instance, in *At Bertram’s Hotel* (1965), Miss Marple overhears an important private conversation. She tells Chief Inspector Davy, “I wasn’t eavesdropping. It was in a public room – at least technically a public room. Quite frankly, I enjoy listening to people talking. One does. Especially when one is old and doesn’t get about very much. I mean, if people are talking near you, you listen” (*Bertram’s* 221). Miss Marple does not actively seek the conversation she hears between Lady Sedgwick and her ex-husband Micky Gorman, but she uses the information she discovers to track down his killer. Similarly in *Nemesis*, Elizabeth Temple and Professor Wanstead approach *her*. Her disability prevents Miss Marple from controlling the investigation even though she remains the critical element in it.

What is absent from *Nemesis* is Miss Maple’s certainty, decision-making, and control. In the earlier novels, whenever Miss Marple puts herself in the midst of the action and gossip – or even when she sends others to carry out inquiries for her – she remains an active participant in

the investigation, often demanding that her helpers ask specific questions or find particular information for her. There are few scenes of Miss Marple's own thoughts until the end of these novels when she tells her audience how she solved the crime. However, *Nemesis* is a more interior novel. We are used to the idea of the detective who crawls about at the scene of the crime, looking for clues – most famously Sherlock Holmes.¹⁶ But, Miss Marple's disability prevents her from taking an active role in this crime, and this crime took place eight years before the start of the narrative, so there is no crime scene where she can search for clues, as she does in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, *The Body in the Library*, or *A Pocketful of Rye* (1953). Instead, she relies on deductions she makes from brief conversations with other characters. There is comparatively little dialogue in *Nemesis* than earlier Miss Marple novels. She agrees to investigate the crime for her old friend, but this is a passive approach to detection for Miss Marple. Because of her rheumatism, she no longer seeks crimes herself or goes looking for suspects. She must allow the criminals to approach her or be introduced to them through Mr. Rafiel's intervention.

***Nemesis* as Narrative Prosthesis**

I will now demonstrate how this new form of the Miss Marple novels is an example of narrative prosthesis. First, Christie “exposes” Miss Marple's physical deviance to us. This deviance is both the rheumatism that keeps her confined to her bed and chairs and away from her

¹⁶ “Holmes concentrates on concrete, material data. It is part of his approach not to neglect the smallest particular, and therefore, not to form premature hypotheses. Careful consideration of all material data as well as an uncanny ability to identify key elements allow him to uncover the logic underlying the available facts, which is often underpinned by the general laws beforehand known to him. On this basis, a linear chain of reasoning leads directly to the solution. In the linear deterministic world of his investigations, from which ‘a dialogical search for truth’ is excluded, there can only be a single path to the solution, which makes it essential that the correct data be identified as relevant. Once the relevant material data have been identified, the unraveling of the puzzle follows inevitably” (van der Linde, who compares the data-driven approach of Holmes to the more psychological approaches of Poirot and Maigret).

garden and her age, which makes her sometimes forgetful and inactive. As Miss Marple explains to Mr. Rafiel's former secretary Esther Walters, "Well, of course, I am rather older now. And one has so many ailments. I mean, not desperate ones, nothing of that kind, but I mean one has always some kind of rheumatism or some kind of ache and pain somewhere" (*Nemesis* 288). Later, as Miss Marple studies the itinerary for her homes and gardens tour, she remarks "that one choice of itinerary was for the young and active and that the other choice would be peculiarly suitable for the elderly, those whose feet hurt them, who suffered from arthritis or rheumatism and who would prefer to sit about and not walk long distances or up too many hills" (295). Both of these quotes acknowledge a physical impairment for Miss Marple, whose pains from rheumatism prevent her from seeking out criminals herself. She relies on Mr. Rafiel's guidance in order to find the right people to interview, usually while seated. This is not to say that Miss Marple is helpless in any way. After Mr. Rafiel instructs her to take the Homes and Gardens tour, her housekeeper Cherry asks, "Do you think it's all right to do that at your age?" To which Miss Marple replies, "My health is really quite good...and I have always heard that in these tours they are careful to provide restful intervals for people who are not particularly strong," and then later gives Cherry the curt but dignified response, "I can take care of myself" (294). Miss Marple suffers, but she is also independent and does not want to be coddled.¹⁷

Still, the pain and exhaustion associated with her impairment necessitate a narrative structure based on introspection and passivity. As I have demonstrated, Miss Marple traditionally sought out suspects and witnesses by herself, but the only time Miss Marple seeks out a witness

¹⁷ She has previously thrown out the meddlesome and irritating helper Miss Knight, who has particularly condescending views toward the elderly. For example, Miss Marple imagines (quite correctly) Miss Knight saying, "Poor old dears, they've got so little to look forward to. One must humor them. And she's a sweet old lady. Failing a little now, it's only to be expected – their faculties get dimmed" (*Mirror* 14). But Miss Marple, at the thought of Miss Knight's concern, declares, "But I, although I may be old, am *not* a mentally afflicted child" (13).

herself in this novel is to visit Esther Walters, who provides little insight into the mystery. Miss Marple relies on Mr. Rafiel's leads and machinations to place her into the appropriate setting where she might interview suspects and witnesses. Miss Marple explains that "I was, as it were, directed...I was not told who my contact was there, but *she* made herself known to *me*" (397). Miss Marple does not need to exert herself physically in order to solve this crime because the physical work is done for her. For this reason, there are fewer scenes during which Miss Marple seeks suspects herself. Instead, as in the case with Rafiel's associates Elizabeth Temple and Professor Wanstead, they seek her in order to illuminate the mystery placed before her.

There are also many scenes of Miss Marple's own mental processes, which we do not often read of in the earlier novels. While Miss Marple talks often, we do not hear her inner monologue. In *Nemesis*, however, there are full chapters devoted to Miss Marple's thoughts and deductions, including her summary of her fellow passengers on the coach (295-298). In fact, between pages 308 and 311, the narrator comments that "Miss Marple thought" something nine times. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the narrator never uses the line "Miss Marple thought" in the whole novel. This indicates a clear evolution from dialogue to Miss Marple's own reflections. This all, then, illustrates the second part of Mitchell and Snyder's schematic, which calls for "an explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences." It is the pain of Miss Marple's rheumatism and age that necessitates a narrative of contemplation rather than a narrative of action.

In the third part of the schematic, Miss Marple's deviance is brought from the periphery of the narrative to the center of the story. Christie does this by distracting us from the implications of Miss Marple's disability, only to then draw our attention back to the fallibility of her physical body. This is another aspect of narrative prosthesis, in which a narrative attempts to make a body

“whole” or “complete,” only to remind the reader that the narrative is itself incomplete without disability. In its application to *Nemesis*, Christie tries to make Miss Marple’s body “whole” by deifying it. In her attempt to deify the body, she only brings Miss Marple’s disability to the center of the narrative and focuses our attention on Miss Marple’s physical body.

We are first introduced to the deity Nemesis in *A Caribbean Mystery*, when Miss Marple elicits Mr. Rafiel’s help in order to bring a murderer to justice. Miss Marple comes to Mr. Rafiel’s room in the middle of the night and declares, “‘It’s me,’ said Miss Marple, for once ungrammatical, ‘though I should put it a little more strongly than that. The Greeks, I believe, had a word for it. Nemesis, if I am not wrong’” (*Caribbean* 253). At the end of the story, Mr. Rafiel cannot help but laugh at the idea of Miss Marple as the avenging Greek deity: “He leaned back suddenly and roared with laughter. ‘It’s a damned good joke,’ he said. ‘If you knew what you looked like that night with that fluffy pink wool all around your head, standing there and saying you were Nemesis! I’ll never forget it’” (261). Mr. Rafiel cannot imagine Miss Marple as the deity because of her physical impairment. He even remarks on the night in the Caribbean in his letter soliciting her services: “I see you, as I saw you once one night as I rose from sleep disturbed by your urgency, in a cloud of pink wool” (*Nemesis* 280). While Mr. Rafiel mocks Miss Marple, he has now accepted that there could be no more suitable model for the deity than the fluffy “old tabby” who floats on clouds of wool and sits all day knitting. Professor Wanstead, too, cannot imagine Miss Marple as the deity until she has accomplished her goal and found the murderer. Wanstead recollects:

Old Rafiel. He told me about her, you know, and then he laughed. He said one thing he’d never forget in all his life. He said it was when one of the funniest scatterbrained old ladies he’d ever met came marching into his bedroom out in the West Indies with a fluffy

pink scarf around her neck...And she said she was Nemesis. Nemesis! He could not imagine anything less like it. (404-405)

These characters recognize the mythological body as ideal and youthful¹⁸, but when they encounter Miss Marple, that perception changes. She becomes a body not of this world but of an ideal form. However, in Christie's attempt to alleviate Miss Marple's disability, it is only brought to our attention more. At the same time that Mr. Rafiel acknowledges Miss Marple as Nemesis, he also observes, "You are not young, but you are, if I may say so, tough. I think I can trust a reasonable fate to keep you alive for a year at least" (280). While the mythological body is immortal, Rafiel immediately draws our attention back to the fact that Miss Marple's body is subject to both illness and death. Therefore, when Miss Marple's body is at its most ideal, we are reminded of its fallibility and suffering. We are confronted with Miss Marple's disability from the moment we learn of it to the closing of the narrative, where Rafiel's lawyer Mr. Broadribb declares, "Nemesis...That's what Rafiel called her. Nemesis! Never seen anybody less like Nemesis, have you?" (408). While praising her for solving the crime, Mr. Broadribb still sees Miss Marple's disability. So, it both necessitates and remains at the center of the narrative.

Alongside deification, elderly women become associated with witchcraft. While her body is deified, Miss Marple sees more menacing undertones in the bodies of the three sisters of the Old Manor House. She thinks:

The Three Sisters, though Miss Marple, once again considering that phrase. Why did anything thought of in threes somehow seem to suggest a sinister atmosphere? The Three Sisters. The Three Witches of Macbeth. Well, one could hardly compare these sisters to the three witches. Although Miss Marple had always thought at the back of her mind that

¹⁸ Some artistic renderings of Nemesis appear more gruesome or frightening, more like the Furies. But for the most part, antique sculpture – the primary source for images of Nemesis – focused on idealized and beautiful bodies.

the theatrical producers made a mistake in the way in which they produced the three witches...Miss Marple remembered saying to her nephew... “if *I* were ever producing this splendid play, 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 just look at each other rather slyly and you would feel a sort of menace just behind the ordinariness of them” (315)

People often ask Miss Marple how she solves a case, and there does seem to be something preternatural about her ability to observe. But these associations with otherworldly powers only serve to mystify and perpetuate fear of aging. Miss Marple is an ordinary woman with heightened perception. The sisters, however, are made out to be much darker. The witches of Macbeth control the fates of the hero and his allies, and it does seem as though at least one sister, Clotilde Bradbury-Scott, plays the role of the witch who twists others’ fates. They are quite ordinary, “distressed gentlewomen,” as Miss Marple’s father called women like them (309).¹⁹ Just as Miss Marple’s deified body highlights her rheumatism, Clotilde’s “witchified” body underscores her “atmosphere of sorrow” and “deep-felt unhappiness” (399). In other words, while Miss Marple tries to direct us to “slyness” or “menace” in Clotilde, the association with her body and that of the witch of Macbeth reminds us that the witch is merely a character, but the actress underneath is wracked with guilt and regret at having killed the person she loved most.

In the last part of the schematic, the disability is “cured,” or the body is made whole. As I have demonstrated, Miss Marple’s body is subject to the pain of her impairment, and this

¹⁹ In another novel, Christie associates elderly bodies with witchcraft, quite literally. In *The Pale Horse* (1961), Mark Easterbrook and his friend David Ardingly are talking about how to stage the witches from Macbeth. Easterbrook describes “three old Scottish crones with second sight – who practice their arts in secret, muttering spells round a cauldron, conjuring up spirits, but remaining themselves just an ordinary trio of old women” (34), and we find that the three women living in the former inn practice a hit-woman service using their “witchcraft.” Clearly, the associations between these witches and elderly female bodies runs deep in Christie’s novels.

impairment is brought to the center of the narrative by characters who deify her body. At the end of the novel, Christie tries further to cure her heroine of her impairment, again only to draw our attention back to her disability. I will briefly use Ato Quayson's notion in *Aesthetic Nervousness* that "we consider the plot of social deformation as it is tied to some form of physical or mental deformation" (Quayson 207).²⁰ I interpret his comment to mean that social hierarchy is an ableist structure, and social mobility depends on physical mobility. Christie plays upon this idea. At the end of *Nemesis*, Miss Marple inherits 20,000 pounds from Mr. Rafiel, and rather than saving the money, Miss Marple says, "I'm going to spend it, you know. I'm going to have some fun with it." (*Nemesis* 408). We then have an interesting narrative digression by Rafiel's lawyer Mr. Schuster:

She looked back from the door and she laughed. Just for one moment, Mr. Schuster, who was a man of more imagination than Mr. Broadribb, had a vague impression of a young and pretty girl shaking hands with the vicar at a garden party in the country...Miss Marple had, for a minute, reminded him of that particular girl, young, happy, going to enjoy herself. (408)

The last image of Miss Marple we have is not one of her but of a "young, happy girl" who does not suffer from Miss Marple's rheumatism. In this way, Christie attempts to make her narrative "whole" by "curing" Miss Marple of her disability, an example of narrative prosthesis. But additionally, when Miss Marple receives money, she is able to move up in the social hierarchy, and her mobility up that hierarchy implies a movement of her physical body, an example of aesthetic nervousness. At the moment she received money, her disability is cured and she can move up the hierarchy free from her disability. This reading joins narrative prosthesis to aesthetic

²⁰ While Quayson focuses on the aesthetic, I would argue that the descriptions of Miss Marple indicate her social status, so we can glean the social or the economic from the aesthetic.

nervousness but is complicated by our knowledge that Miss Marple is an old woman who suffers from her physical impairment. But the narrative still tries to cure her. We see both images simultaneously. Even as we imagine the young, happy girl laughing, we picture the elderly, impaired Miss Marple, about to spend her money.

Intersectionality: Age, Sex, and Disability

What is most troubling about Miss Marple as an aged, female detective is that despite her incredible credentials, she is often ineffective at getting the detective establishment to listen to her. As Kazmer argues, “For Christie, in the Marple novels, the specific problem is how to get Miss Marple to a place where she can access information, make her own judgments as to its value, analyze the information and present her conclusions in a way that is valued by those in a position to act upon them” (Kazmer 116). Miss Marple is aided foremost by her friendship with Sir Henry Clithering, who knows about her detective abilities and can vouch for her as a credible “assistant” to the detective. However, her ability and assistance are often snubbed, such as by Inspector Slack who writes Miss Marple off condescendingly as a “smart old pussy” but then pursues a different line of questioning than she recommends (*Body* 172). J.C. Bernthal writes of *The Body in the Library*: “In this novel, the masculine mind, scientific and inadequate, represents seeing but not observing—looking for preordained clues rather than reading the general scene and set-up” (“If Not Yourself, Who Would You Be?” 47). But Miss Marple “observes and listens,” and she is rewarded by capturing Ruby Keene’s murderers (48).

Despite her proven ability, Miss Marple often requires assistance from men. She is quite explicit about her needs in *A Caribbean Mystery*, when she discovers who has killed Major Palgrave, Victoria, and Lucky Dyson. She bursts in on Mr. Rafiel (in the scene he describes in

his letter from *Nemesis*), and she tells him, “Mr. Rafiel, will you trust me. We have got to stop a murder being committed.” When Mr. Rafiel asks, “What do you think *I* can do about it? I can’t even walk without help,” Miss Marple clarifies: “I was thinking of Jackson,” Mr. Rafiel’s strong masseuse who apprehends the murderer on Miss Marple’s command (*Caribbean* 254). Yet even this exchange is troubled by currents of sexism. Miss Marple’s reputation should precede her, but she is still unable to get help from men without bribery – Mr. Rafiel informs Jackson that “[he] won’t be the loser” if he helps Miss Marple, and at the end of the novel, Jackson coincidentally “comes into money.” Her age and sex hinder her from achieving the proper level of enthusiasm in Jackson and Mr. Rafiel that she has naturally for capturing the murderer. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, “Disability thus both intensifies and attenuates the cultural scripts of femininity. Aging is a form of disablement that disqualifies older women from the limited power allotted females who are young and meet the criteria for attracting men” (Garland-Thomson 344).

The same ageist associations, however, are not projected onto Mr. Rafiel, someone so impaired that he requires a wheelchair as opposed to the more mobile Miss Marple. In *Nemesis*, Mr. Broadribb and Mr. Schuster question Miss Marple’s ability because she looks like a scatty old woman, but they are quick to defend Mr. Rafiel’s brilliance: “Mentally he was as brilliant as ever. His physical ill-health never affected his brain, anyway. In the last two months of his life he made an extra two hundred thousand pounds. Just like that” (*Nemesis* 275). This exchange demonstrates that Mr. Rafiel’s masculinity and wealth protect him from the conventional associations of incompetence or defectiveness. Miss Marple, though still mentally agile, has to overcome the difficult intersection of her sex, age, and social class.

A Note on Hercule Poirot

Although the focus of my thesis is women's disabled bodies, I feel as though I cannot write a proper analysis on Christie's detectives without mentioning her fastidious Belgian sleuth. He does not identify as a woman, and Christie would define him as male, but in this section, I would like to briefly posit a few ideas. In an overly masculine, post-and-inter-war Britain, Poirot stands out as a feminine and disabled figure with (perhaps) indeterminate sexuality. His status as a refugee, his feminine attire, and his questionable homosexuality all contribute to a "disabled" character. I argue that in the same way that Miss Marple's sex and age hinder her, Poirot's perceived femininity hinders him.

From the first description we receive of him in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Poirot is a comical figure in his way. His own pride and demureness make him laughable to the British socialites for whom he finds trivial bracelets and solves intricate murders. His friend and associate Arthur Hastings describes him:

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little to one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible, I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint dandyfied little man who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. As a detective, his *flair* had been extraordinary, and he had achieved triumphs by unravelling some of the most baffling cases of the day. (*Styles* 172-173)²¹

²¹ While it might seem counterintuitive to not talk about his limp, my main focus is on the disability/ableism system and the ways in which his femininity disables him in that system.

The juxtaposition of his qualities as Hastings presents them is utterly jarring. While we would expect to see a humble man based on the description of “little,” we find a haughty man, confident that whatever look he is wearing, he is pulling it off. His head is famously “egg-shaped,” but the egg is not a symbol of male virility but rather of female fertility. His very genes seem to contradict and fluctuate between the masculine and feminine. His well-groomed mustache and suit might remind us of a military uniform, the military being the most hypermasculine of professions – although, as Mary Wollstonecraft reminds us, nobody cares for their appearance more than British military men.

We can draw some interesting parallels between this initial description of Poirot and other women from the novels. For example, the tilt of his head could remind us of Cora Lansquenet from *After the Funeral* (1953). Cora’s noticeable tilt becomes a crucial clue in discovering her murderer, as Poirot explains, “When you saw in the glass the perfect reproduction of Cora’s birdlike sidewise tilt of the head, you didn’t realize that it was actually the *wrong way round*. You saw, let us say, Cora inclining her head to the *right* – but you forgot that actually your own head was inclined to the *left* to produce that effect *in the glass*” (*Funeral* 277). The tilt of Poirot’s head becomes inextricably feminine after this association.

Similarly, his egg-shaped head, aside from its association with female reproduction, is echoed in Magdalene Lee from *A Holiday for Murder*: “She was a slender creature, a platinum blonde with plucked eyebrows and a smooth egg-like face” (*Holiday* 22). Her glamorous femininity is accentuated by the roundness of her face, which reminds us of Poirot’s own head. Hastings’s description does not mention Poirot’s equally famous patent leather shoes, but these are notoriously uncomfortable in the novels – he wears them everywhere from Syria to Devon. However, many female characters also wear patent leather shoes. Take, for example, Mabelle

Sainsbury Seale from *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940). Given the title, the shoe is obviously an important clue. Mabelle wears a “brand new patent leather shoe with a large gleaming buckle” (*Buckle* 14). Interestingly, Poirot does not like Mabelle’s shoe, despite the identical material to his own shoes. Poirot rejects the buckle as “provincial,” but perhaps he recognizes that the patent leather shoe on a woman is another severe blow to his already precarious masculinity.

More than these subtler links, however, Christie also makes Poirot’s sexuality particularly (though probably unconsciously) ambiguous. Like his predecessor Sherlock Holmes, Poirot is a bachelor with a close male confidante. But also like Holmes, Poirot has an Irene Adler: the Countess Vera Rossakoff.²² We see her in *The Big Four* (1927) and “The Capture of Cerberus” (from *The Labours of Hercules* 1947), but “The Double Clue” (originally published in 1923) gives us their backstory. The Countess steals an expensive necklace, a robbery which Poirot investigates. They strike up a friendship, which is the closest Poirot comes to a romantic affair. Yet after he has accused her of the theft, Poirot exclaims, “What a woman!” and continues, “Not a word of argument, of protestation, of bluff!” (“The Double Clue” 293). Her ability to accept her defeat will make her successful, Poirot predicts, and he is correct. When we meet her for the final time in “The Capture of Cerberus,” she runs a successful nightclub, Hell. He continues to complement her: “[He] was fully conscious now that twenty years is twenty years. Countess Rossakoff might not uncharitably have been described as a ruin. But she was a spectacular ruin. The exuberance, the full-blooded enjoyment of life was still there...” (“The

²² The ITV adaptations starring David Suchet feature several romantic interests. Aside from an accentuated romantic relationship between the Countess and Poirot in *The Double Clue* (1991), the adaptations also exaggerate his involvement with Virginie Mesnard from *The Chocolate Box* (1993). When A&E took over production, they also included a subversive romantic relationship between Jane Wilkinson and Poirot (*Lord Edgeware Dies* 2000). In the ITV series, Poirot defends his bachelorhood: “In my experience, I have known of five cases of women murdered by their devoted husbands...And twenty-two husbands murdered by their devoted wives” (*Double Sin* 1990).

Capture of Cerberus” 838). Bernthal, I think correctly, sees a potential queer reading in Poirot, both in his friendship with Hastings and his love of the Countess Vera Rossakoff. He says:

Christie presents Poirot’s attraction to Rossakoff as a deviation from his usual primness that is entirely consistent. [Vera’s] “voluptuous” and “exotic” nature stands for over-the-top femininity. As Poirot himself routinely fails as a masculine hero, the type of woman who attracts him has to be more feminine than he is, lest he also be considered a failed heterosexual. As a result, however, Rossakoff’s performance of femininity is so heightened that it becomes self-parodic; a drag act (“The sumptuous and the alluring” 83).

While Christie never explicitly says whether or not Poirot is homosexual, he certainly has an unstable physical identity, which he overcomes with stable mental acuity. He knows that he is the greatest detective in the world, and this is enough for him to remain certain in himself and maintain his dignity, even in a world that marginalizes and mocks him.

Conclusion

Given his age, ambiguous sexuality, femininity, and limp, Poirot is disabled in many ways. He seems to reflect Miss Marple’s intersections of age, gender, and disability. Although their intersections look different, both of Christie’s detectives are almost comically underqualified to be a Sam Spade (if we look to American Hardboiled detective fiction) or even an Inspector Geraud, the “foxhound” whom Poirot mocks for his Holmesian style of detection (*Murder on the Links* 1923). Both detectives are underestimated, and especially for Miss Marple, underappreciated. Poirot is aided by his credentials as a former police officer and professional private detective, so Miss Marple must struggle harder to create a place for herself in the local investigations. Her disabled and feminine body is subject to more restrictions than Poirot’s, and

the patriarchal system in which she lives takes credit for her achievements. Yet she continues to fight for morality and justice, even in the face of society's ill-use of her. We should ask if this is noble and humble behavior or is the blatant disregard of Miss Marple's accomplishments by the police establishment worthy of more righteous indignation?

Chapter 3: Disability and the Victim

“In fact, a great many women would be better poisoned. All women who have grown old and ugly,” Dr. Gerard, Appointment with Death

“Then there must be a beautiful girl or two,” Arthur Hastings beings his dramatis personae of a good detective novel. “One of the beautiful girls, of course, must be unjustly suspected – and there’s some misunderstanding between her and the young man. And then, of course, there must be some other suspects – an older woman – dark, dangerous type – and some friend or rival of the dead man’s – and a quiet secretary – dark horse – and a hearty man with a bluff manner – and a couple of discharged servants or game-keepers or something – and a damn fool of a detective” (ABC 23). We learn from Hastings which characters matter the most to Christie’s average reader, notably the “beautiful girl,” which relates to ideas of age and youth discussed in the second chapter. But there are other things we infer from Hastings’s list: the “older woman” is related to “darkness” or race and skin color, and a man’s death is more important than that of a woman’s, since he says that in his perfect story, a man should be the victim, “[some] bigwig. American millionaire. Prime Minister. Newspaper proprietor” (22). Poirot congratulates his friend for making “a very pretty résumé of nearly all the detective stories that have ever been written,” but Hastings neglects a largely overlooked, and extremely common type of character, in his list: the physically impaired.

This chapter studies individual impaired women, so it looks at those conditions we commonly associate with “disability” in the general use of the word. For Christie, because these women lack control over their disabled bodies, they choose to control other bodies. The disabled woman, then, is often a villain or the victim of a murder. Her disability means that her death is unimportant or the murderer is justified in his/her actions against the disabled woman. As Lennard Davis tells us, “If disability appears in a novel, it is rarely centrally represented. It is

unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although minor characters, like Tiny Tim, can be deformed in ways that arouse pity...On the other hand...more often than not villains tend to be physically abnormal: scarred, deformed, or mutilated” (Davis 9). Earl Bargainnier drives this point home referring specifically to Christie’s novels:

There is one overriding convention regarding victims in classical detective fiction: the reader must not be unduly disturbed by the victim’s death...The usual methods of preventing the reader from becoming emotionally involved are to give the victim traits which make him or her objectionable, or worse, or to deny the reader any but minimal access to the victim before the murder. (Bargainnier 113)²³

Following Bargainnier’s observation, I argue that disabled women are villainized, and their disability is linked to malice, criminality, ugliness, and age.

But there is more to Christie’s disabled women than villainy or obscurity. Following Tobin Siebers’s notion of intersectionality and complex embodiment, I argue further that each character’s experiences as a disabled woman provides her with a body of knowledge that enables her in a society that oppresses her. Siebers argues:

We speak blandly of finding different perspectives on things, but different perspectives do in fact give varying conceptions of objects, especially social objects. Nevertheless, situated knowledge does not rely only on changing perspectives. Situated knowledge

²³ This vilification is not unique to Christie’s detective fiction. Fellow Golden Age writer Dorothy L Sayers contributes to the narrative of contemptable older women with Annie Wilson from *Gaudy Night* (1936). Miss Lydgate tells us that Annie is “too independent” and “absent-minded” because “she is a widow with two children, and really ought not to have to be in service at all” (39-40). At her confession, Annie decries the academic women, “[It’s] women like you who take the work away from the men and break their hearts and lives. No wonder you can’t get men for yourselves and hate women who can” (443). Annie’s role in twentieth-century British society relegates her to the realm of domestic service or wife, while intellectual women are characterized as unfeminine. In Sayers and Christie, older women struggle to find a proper place in an ageist and ableist society, and they are depicted as sources of violence and malice, but we might understand their behavior as misdirected anger against the system that oppresses them.

adheres in embodiment. The disposition of the body determines perspectives, but it also spices these perspectives with phenomenological knowledge – lifeworld experience – that affects the interpretation of perspective. (Siebers 288)

Siebers's idea in relation to this thesis is that, because of their nonnormative embodiment, disabled women provide new perspectives on the world of the murder, perspectives without which the detective is unable to solve the crime.

Christie's pejorative treatment of disabled women – usually manifested in their murder or criminal activity – tries to distance us from these women, but instead, the detective can learn from their disability, often allowing him/her to solve the case through the perspective of that disability. I focus on three characters in particular: Mrs. Boynton of *Appointment with Death* (1938), Millicent Peabmarsh from *The Clocks* (1963), and Alice Ascher of *The ABC Murders* (1936). Each woman's particular disability – infirmity, blindness, and age, respectively – elicits repulsion from the audience while providing the detective with the means of solving the case. This duality also represents a kind of narrative prosthesis, in which the authoress relies on disability to write a riddle that will not unnecessarily upset her reader, only perhaps to draw our attention back to the detective's own disability²⁴ as a means of solving crime.

Mrs. Boynton: Disability as Villainy

Mrs. Boynton is easily remembered as Christie's most disliked and repulsive villainess.

Bargainnier writes of her:

²⁴As I argued in chapter 2, both Miss Marple and Poirot are disabled characters whose disabilities are crime-solving tools, giving the detective a camouflage or a perspective she would not otherwise have had she been nondisabled. So by pointing out disability in other characters, we are only reminded of the detective's own disability and the advantages she has because of those disabilities.

The foremost example [of the arrogant and demanding domestic bully] among women is, without question, Mrs. Boynton, who is “that hulk of shapeless flesh with her evil gloating eyes” and “a stupid, malignant, posturing old woman.” She is compared over and over to a snake or a spider, and the desire to murder her is expressed on the first page. A former prison wardress, she cruelly dominates her children for sheer pleasure. A doctor in the novel comments that “*she became a wardress because she loved tyranny. In my theory, it was a secret desire for power over other human beings,*” and he later says, “I think she rejoices in the infliction of pain – mental pain...” In her case, the reader is actually relieved when she is murdered, for she is a monster, and only with her death can her put-upon family have lives of their own. (Bargainnier 115-116)

What Bargainnier’s analysis makes explicit is that Christie renders Mrs. Boynton not so much as a victim of a heinous crime but as the perpetrator of emotional abuse toward her children, so her murder is a kind of vigilante justice for the oppression of her children. As Bargainnier correctly claims, we are relieved that she dies.

But Bargainnier obscures Mrs. Boynton’s most important trait: her pitiable disability. It is Sarah King who first draws our attention to the nature of Mrs. Boynton’s infirmity: “You like to make yourself out a kind of ogre, but really, you know, you’re just pathetic and rather ludicrous” (*Appointment* 75). For the first time, Mrs. Boynton moves from the realm of offender to victim. While Christie uses Mrs. Boynton’s cruelty as a way to distance us from her as a victim, Sarah King forces us to sympathize with her and her disability. Mrs. Boynton herself admits that she has precarious health (32) and she often needs her children’s help moving around. One scene in particular demonstrates the contradiction I presented earlier: in her frustration at not being able to control her own body, she controls others: “Mrs. Boynton struggled to get up. Mechanically,

Carol came forward and helped her. Mrs. Boynton walked slowly across the room supporting herself on her stick. She paused in the doorway and looked back at the cowering girl. ‘You are to have nothing to do with this Miss King. You understand?’ (59). Mrs. Boynton’s infirmity prevents her from ambulating freely on her own, so she restricts the free movement of others, in this case her daughter Carol from being friends with Sarah. While Dr. Gerard sees Mrs. Boynton as a monster for this manipulation, Poirot, investigating her murder, agrees with Sarah King. We should pity Mrs. Boynton for her disability:

“Let us, if we can, think ourselves into the mental condition of Mrs. Boynton. A human creature born with immense ambition, with a yearning to dominate and to impress her personality on other people. She neither sublimated that intense craving for power – nor did she seek to master it – no, *mesdames and messieurs* – *she fed it!* But in the end – listen well to this – in the end, what did it amount to? She was not a great power! She was not feared and hated over a wide area! *She was the petty tyrant of one isolated family!* (245)

Through these two presentations, perpetrator of abuse and victim of disability, are simultaneously repulsive and considerate toward Mrs. Boynton.

But those presentations are a false dichotomy. Mrs. Boynton’s disability is more than something monstrous or pitiable. While she is unable to properly control her body, she demonstrates great mental acuity. She tells Jefferson Cope, “I don’t give into my body! It’s the mind that matters! Yes, it’s the *mind...*” (33). In order to compensate for her physical disability, she has gained perfect control over her mind. She maliciously whispers – ostensibly to Sarah but actually to Lady Westholme: “*I never forget...Remember that. I’ve never forgotten anything – not an action, not a name, not a face...*” (76). This perfected mental control is perhaps only

possible because of a lack of physical control. And it is only through her memory and this remark that Poirot is able to solve the case of her murder. Her “lifeworld experience” with disability has allowed her to develop a better understanding of the mind – her own and that of her children, as she uses her understanding to then subjugate her children. The perspective she cultivates through her “phenomenological knowledge” provides her with the means of posthumously helping Poirot, who knows Mrs. Boynton’s murderer when he properly interprets her statement that she “never forgets anything.” Without the outlook her disability lends him, Mrs. Boynton could not have assisted Poirot. Through her unique perspective as a disabled woman, she can help the detective in an otherwise obscure case.

The problem with this depiction of Mrs. Boynton, however, is that she is only valuable because she has replaced her physical disability with extreme mental agility. This is to say that she must compensate in order to appear less disabled. Disabled women in Christie’s novels always need to compensate for their disability. Otherwise, they are utterly useless. Christie, therefore, perpetuates what Siebers identifies as the ideology of ability: “the ideology that uses ability to determine human status, demands that people with disabilities always present as able-bodied as possible, and measures the value of disabled people in dollars and cents”²⁵ (Siebers 294). Because Mrs. Boynton cannot present as physically nondisabled, she presents as mentally

²⁵ Anne Beddingfeld from *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924) represents the capitalistic implications of the ideology of ability. She is beautiful, young, with great legs, and her features get her a job and in close contact with Sir Eustace Pedler. When Anne approaches Lord Nasby for a job with the newspaper the *Daily Budget*, he tells her, “I rather like cheek – for a pretty girl” (*Suit* 35), and Sir Eustace references Anne’s legs several times as “the best on the ship” to South Africa (83, 86, 125). Anne exploits her good looks for financial gain and social position, but she risks sexual objectification by powerful older men. Anne’s paradoxical status as nondisabled and subjugated by men represents perfectly the paradoxical nature of the ideology of ability. Nonnormative bodies make the “machine run,” so to speak, but they are vulnerable in a system which capitalizes on those bodies. Similarly, Dr. Rathbone of *The Came to Baghdad* (1951) says that young people are the “secret” to the success of his mission to translate literature and distribute it in Arabic. He tells the beautiful Victoria Jones, “I’ve no use for anybody but the young. Once the mind and spirit are musclebound, it’s too late. No, it’s the young who must get together” (*Baghdad* 88). Rathbone’s explicit use of young bodies demonstrates, again, the paradox that the capitalistic able-bodied system values those bodies precisely because they are useful to the system, not because they are inherently better bodies.

normative. Robert McRuer has an analogous notion to the ideology of ability with his compulsory able-bodiedness:

[B]eing able-bodied means being capable of the normal physical exertions required in a particular system of labor...It is here as well that we can begin to understand the nature of compulsory able-bodiedness: in the emergent industrial capitalist system, free to sell one's labor but not free to do anything else effectively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else. Like compulsory heterosexuality, then, compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice. (McRuer 371)

Mrs. Boynton ostensibly has a "choice" to hone her memory, but actually without her memory, she is useless because she has little physical ability. The pressure for disabled women is always to remain necessary in an ableist and patriarchal system that is constantly trying to find a way to make them obsolete. While Mrs. Boynton's perspective helps Poirot solve the crime, it is uncredited and would not have mattered at all had it not benefited a *man*.

In contrast to Mrs. Boynton, I will turn briefly to a villainous and disabled man, Simeon Lee of *A Holiday for Murder* (1938).²⁶ While this thesis focuses on disabled women, I find it constructive to discuss Simeon Lee as a way to demonstrate the intersectionality of disability and feminism. The wheelchair-user Simeon is hated by his family, whom he controls with his fortune, like Mrs. Boynton. But Simeon Lee is valuable because he is a rich man, far richer than Mrs. Boynton. His body may be disabled now, but we are constantly reminded of his virility and

²⁶ It is interesting to note that the two novels, *Appointment with Death* and *A Holiday for Murder* were published in the same year. Because Christie's sensibilities toward disability hardly changed throughout the course of her work (as this thesis shows by covering almost every book in her oeuvre) and especially not over the course of the year, I conclude that the difference between the characters is necessarily gender-based, not a result of either's disability. Simeon Lee's disability is rendered differently *because* he is a man, not because Christie's opinions toward disability changed.

physical ability. We meet several of his children (many illegitimate and unknown even to Simeon), and he made his money mining diamonds in South Africa. On the other hand, Mrs. Boynton is “[old], swollen, bloated, sitting there immovable in the midst” of her family (*Appointment* 17). She is an explicitly ugly and disabled character.

The descriptions of Simeon give us the impression that he was able-bodied and quite attractive. His niece, Pillar Estravados, comments, “Of course, he was very, very old. He had to sit in a chair – and his face was all dried up. But I liked him all the same. I think that when he was a young man, he must have been handsome” (*Holiday* 103-104). Mrs. Boynton is not given the luxury of virility – most of her family consists of step-children – nor is she ever construed as beautiful. She is always “old, swollen, bloated.” She is never beautiful or young. Importantly, while Mrs. Boynton’s perspective as a disabled woman gives Poirot insight into her murder, Simeon’s disability offers Poirot no assistance. Only Simeon’s notorious womanizing in his youth allows Poirot to solve the crime. Therefore, Simeon remains valuable through his able-body, whereas Mrs. Boynton’s femininity means she must find a new way to be valuable, despite her disability. We neither pity Simeon for his disability nor reject him for his maliciousness. We admire him for his former (overtly capitalist) able-bodiedness.

Mrs. Boynton is instead more analogous to Simeon’s wife. David Lee’s complete devotion to his mother has stunted his maturity. He unwaveringly and unquestioningly adored his mother. He tells his wife, “She was so sweet, Hilda, and so patient. Lying there, often in pain, but bearing it – enduring everything... Even if she had divorced my father, what would have happened? He would probably have married again. There would have been a second family. *Our* interests might have gone to the wall. She had to think of all those considerations” (17-18). In other words, David believes his mother to be a “saint” because she bartered her physical

disability for her children's comfort (97). Her disability was of monetary use to David. Her pitiable condition is more like Mrs. Boynton, who trades her physical comfort in order to help men in her life – David's mother helps her children to their fortune, and Mrs. Boynton helps Poirot to catch her killer. Their bodies are not valuable in and of themselves but because their nonnormative bodies benefit men around them, whereas Simeon's body is valuable in itself because of its former virility and rigor. The perspectives of disabled women, then, are relegated to a purely economic system, where their bodies need to produce enough economic impact to benefit other men.²⁷

Millicent Pebmarsh: “Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?”

I take the subtitle of this section from McRuer, who argues that in the capitalistic culture where perspectives from the disability community must be rendered economically, “able-bodied identities, able-bodied perspectives are preferable and what we all, collectively, aim for. A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?” (McRuer 372). In other words, isn't it better not to be disabled? Blind teacher Millicent Pebmarsh is constantly confronted with this kind of condescending question. She represents a problem that Christie often has in her novels when dealing with disabled characters: they are either saccharinely pitiable or villainously deformed.²⁸

²⁷ Poirot makes one refreshing remark. Despite working within the system where perspectives are traded for monetary gain, he reminds us poignantly that all life is unique and important: “To me, it is all the same. The victim may be one of the good God's saints – or, on the contrary, a monster of infamy. It moves me not. The fact is the same. A life – taken! I say it always – I do not approve of murder” (*Appointment* 136). He does not say something similar about Simeon Lee (probably because he does not have to; everyone agrees that the more viscerally brutal murder of Simeon should be solved). Considering my observations at the end of the previous chapter, then, it is noteworthy that Poirot should show so much sympathy toward a fellow member of the larger disability community.

²⁸ These extremes might remind us of Charles Dickens's contrast of Jewish characters: they are either Fagin or Mr. Riah.

Miss Pebmarsh lies somewhere between these two extremes. Because characters do not know how to interact with a disabled woman, they are laughably overindulgent. After typist Sheila Webb finds the body of an unidentified man in Miss Pebmarsh's house, the police do not treat Miss Pebmarsh as a viable witness (or possible murder suspect). Colin Lamb even questions her ability to make tea, to which Miss Pebmarsh nobly replies, "To be blind is not necessarily to be helpless" (*Clocks* 6). Because no one has informed her of Edna Brent's death, when Miss Pebmarsh finally finds out several hours after the fact (despite it taking place only a few feet from her home), she reacts, as Christie describes, with a "kind of anger." The narrator continues, "It was as though her disability had been brought home to her in some particularly wounding way" (173). Miss Pebmarsh is overlooked constantly as a valuable source of information, but we know her capabilities from our first contact with her. She independently cooks and cleans her home (she has an obligatory house maid given her social position). She knows the layout of her neighborhood and home, including the number of clocks that are supposed to be in her living room – yet the police insist on double checking this with her unimpaired house maid.

But we know that Miss Pebmarsh is an independent woman, a teacher, and even a spy. Colin Lamb correctly points out, "Your cover is very good. You're blind, you work at an institution for disabled children, you keep children's books in Braille in your house as only natural – you are a woman of unusual intelligence and personality" (293). Again, Miss Pebmarsh must compensate for her blindness in a material, economical way in order to be of use to society. Lamb associates her espionage with money by linking the Braille records she keeps with the Czech coin that her associate drops in her garden. She manipulates her blindness in order to make money, again perpetuating compulsory and capitalistic able-bodiedness. Miss Pebmarsh's

exploits her unique perspective as a disabled woman, but that disability benefits the conspirators, not the detective.

However, in other Christie novels and short stories, visual impairment becomes the key to solving the mystery. Without the world knowledge visual impaired characters have, the detective cannot properly interpret vital clues. Take for example “The Dream” (*The Regatta Mystery* 1939). Poirot visits elusive millionaire Benedict Farley, who describes a dream he has of shooting himself. Farley points a bright lamp in Poirot’s eyes, obscuring his view of the notable man, and when Farley asks for a letter requesting his services back from Poirot, the detective hands him a receipt. What Poirot deduces from these impairments, then, is that the “Benedict Farley” who sat across from him at their meeting was not the real Benedict Farley. This imposter points a bright light at Poirot so that he is unable to recognize the man beneath the costume. It is Poirot’s temporary blindness by the lamp that arouses his suspicions of the Farley-impersonator who sits across from him. Farley’s eyeglass prescription allows him to overcome his disability, but those same eyeglasses render the imposter practically blind, allowing Poirot to test his theory that the man in front of him is an actor by substituting the letter with an obvious receipt. Farley’s impairment is an essential clue to unraveling his own murder. Poirot uses the perspective he gains from disability to solve the crime.

But Pebmarsh and Farley use their disability to their advantage, so they are not to be pitied or mocked. While Poirot’s experience with temporary blindness gave him an otherwise unknowable perspective into the crime, simulating disability often only engenders pity. Siebers explains:

Disability theorists have attacked the use of simulations for a variety of reasons, the most important being that they fail to give the student pretenders a sense of embodied

knowledge contained in disability identities. Disability simulations of this kind fail because they place students in a time-one position of disability, before knowledge about disability is acquired, usually resulting in emotions of loss, shock, and pity at how dreadful it is to be disabled. (Siebers 292)

Poirot's use of the perspective of disability as an asset contrasts with Tommy Beresford's use of that perspective as a burden. In their short story "Blindman's Buff" (*Partners in Crime* 1929), Tommy acts like Thornley Colton – Clinton Stagg's blind detective – by putting on an eyeshade and pretending to be blind. After Tommy stumbles on a chair, Tuppence remarks, "It must be beastly to be blind," and he concurs ("Bluff" 85). Later in the story, a man known as the Duke kidnaps Tommy. The Duke locks Tommy in a room, and the only way to escape is for Tommy to make his way through a room with electric knobs, and touching one means instant death. Assuming that Tommy is blind, the Duke gives Tommy his walking stick. However, Tommy momentarily blinds the Duke with a spark produced by magnesium wire and takes a sword out of his "walking stick." The Duke, who forgets about the dangers of the metal floor, electrocutes himself when he steps on a nearby knob. At the end of the story, Tommy declares, "And the first thing I shall do when I get back is write a thumping big cheque for St. Dunstan's. Lord, it must be awful not to be able to see" (95).

Tommy's sense deprivation experiment only results, as Siebers puts it, "in emotions of loss, shock, and pity." Tommy is unable to see how being blind would actually be an advantage. Early in the story, he says to Tuppence, "But they say that when you live in the dark you really do develop special senses. That's what I want to try and see if one couldn't do" (85). His attempt to learn the lived experiences of someone with a visual impairment fails miserably. He recognizes that people with visual impairments could have advantages, which might have helped

Tommy when he is kidnapped. For example, a more dexterous sense of touch might have allowed Tommy to feel the slight knobs in the floor of the room and escape without killing a vital witness. Also, being blind would have benefitted the Duke, at least momentarily, who would have gone unharmed by the flash Tommy produced as a distraction. Rather than using the perspective of the visually impaired as a tool, both the Duke and Tommy dismiss it rather than gaining a useful new world knowledge.

Alice Ascher: Age as Disability in the Victim

While the previous chapter focuses on age as a disability in the detective, this section focuses on victims. As I claimed in the introduction, Christie creates disabled characters so that we are distanced from them. Within her novels, we do not need to sympathize with these disabled women because they are not living full lives, so perhaps it is better that they are dead. Although many women represent this claim about Christie's novels, I choose Alice Ascher because her case is paradigmatic of the treatment older women receive from the police and newspaper media in these detective stories. Her brutal murder attracts little attention and is immediately overshadowed by the death of the beautiful and young Betty Barnard and the wealthy Sir Carmichael Clarke. Christie's treatment of Alice Ascher indicates a subversive implication in her novels: older women are murdered, but their deaths are not important because they are old.

In his book on the structure of the Classical Detective Story, John Cawelti argues, "The crime must be a major one with the potential for complex ramifications, but the victim cannot be mourned or the possible complexities of the situation allowed to draw our attention away from the detective and his investigation" (Cawelti 81). This quote reflects Bargainnier's own

conclusions about victims in Christie's novels, that they are made "objectionable" so that we can distance ourselves from the brutality of their murders. However, Bargainnier makes one more observation about victims that illuminates ideas of what constitutes "objectionable" traits:

Though readers may differ as to the exact number, as well as to the amount of sympathy aroused, hardly ten victims whom the reader is allowed to know to any degree are basically sympathetic. Five choices are Mary Gerrard of *Sad Cypress*, Dora Bunner and Amy Murgatroyd of *A Murder is Announced*, and Celia Austin and Patricia Lane of *Hickory Dickory Death*. The major exception is Ellie Rogers of that singular novel *Endless Night*, who is almost saintlike; even her murderer comes to a realization of her nobility and compassion. (Bargainnier 118)

Gerrard, Austen, Lane, and Rogers are all *young* women. Their youth makes their deaths more tragic. While Murgatroyd and Bunner are both older women, their naivety marks them as youthful, almost childlike, characters. Tragedy is linked to youth because it is somehow more normal for an older person to die, even if under unnatural circumstances. The elderly have more experiences than the young, so Christie reasons that her readers could distance themselves from older victims more because they had enough experiences – even if their death is premature.

Alice Ascher is the ABC Killer's first victim. She is the elderly owner of a tobacco shop. Although her death is the beginning of a murderous spree, her death is hardly sensational. Christie supposes that as readers, we could look over the murder of an old woman because she was past her prime as a profitable member of British society. While she is "hard-working," she has only "just about managed" to operate her business (*ABC* 267). Her body is simply described as "huddled-up" and old. At the mortuary, Hastings briefly recounts that she has a "wrinkled old

face with the scanty grey hair drawn back tightly from the temples” (266, 269). Hastings later reports:

I read in the paper the account of the inquest. It was very brief, no mention was made of the ABC letter, and a verdict was returned of murder by some person or persons unknown. The crime attracted very little attention in the press. It had no popular or spectacular features. The murder of an old woman in a side street was soon passed over in the press for more thrilling topics. (282)

The brutal bludgeoning of an elderly shopkeeper attracts little attention because it lacks the sex appeal that murders of young women have. However, Poirot comments, “She must have been beautiful once,” as if the importance of her solving her murder comes from the fact that she was at one time beautiful even if she is not so now.²⁹

Alice Ascher’s bloody and violent murder is compared with the more sexual and seductive strangling of twenty-three-year-old Betty Barnard at Bexhill-on-Sea. One of Poirot’s first questions to Inspector Crome is “I wondered – if she were pretty?” (286). According to Poirot, for women, being pretty “is of the first importance. Often it decides her destiny!” Immediately, Poirot draws attention to Betty’s youth and beauty and away from the exploitative nature of her death. The murderer had to cajole Betty into removing her belt with which she was strangled, so Poirot focuses on Betty as an object of sexual desire as opposed to her murderer as the perpetrator of coldhearted violence. Furthermore, Betty’s death becomes the sensation that Alice’s death could not become because of her age. Hastings narrates:

²⁹ The 1992 ITV adaptation of *The ABC Murders* features a rather strikingly ugly scene in the mortuary. We see the wrinkles that Hastings describes, but Ascher’s mouth droops open in such a way that her teeth stick out. The rather gauche positioning of the head makes her appear more monstrous as an elderly woman. We do not see Betty Barnard’s face after her death, only in a flashback as she flirtatiously removes her shoes and the belt that the killer eventually uses to strangle her. The adaptation accentuates the ageism already apparent in Christie’s novel by exaggerating Alice’s ugliness and preserving young Betty’s innocent youth.

The Bexhill murder had attracted much more attention than the Andover one. It had, of course, far more elements of popularity. To begin with the victim was a young and good-looking girl. Also, it had taken place at a popular seaside resort. All the details of the crime were reported fully and rehashed daily in thin disguises. (298)

The Bexhill crime receives more press because the victim is young and pretty whereas in Andover, the victim is old and ugly. After the death of Sir Carmichael Clarke, Hastings informs us that “The Andover murder was now bracketed with the other two,” but the most recent description of the crimes in a newspaper undercuts Hastings’s comment:

Only a month ago England was shocked and startled by the murder of a young girl, Elizabeth Barnard, at Bexhill. It may be remembered that an ABC railway guide figured into the case. An ABC was also found by the dead body of Sir Carmichael Clarke, and the police incline to believe that both crimes were committed by the same person. (311)

Hastings insists that Alice Ascher is not forgotten, but the newspapers focus solely on the young woman and the rich man. Alice’s age and income disable her body, relegating the importance of her case to Poirot’s lone mind.

The focus on Betty’s young body as opposed to Alice’s old one represents what Rosemarie Garland Thomson labels the “Ability/Disability system.” She explains,

[Disability] is a broad term within which cluster ideological categories as varied as sick, deformed, abnormal, crazy, ugly, old, feeble-minded, maimed, afflicted, mad, or debilitated – all of which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards. Thus the disability system functions to preserve and validate such privileged delegations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent – all of

which provide cultural capital to those who can claim such status, who can reside within these subject positions. (Garland-Thomson 336)

Ascher's status as elderly and poor devalue her in this system, meaning that the loss of her life is not as important as the loss of the life of the young and beautiful Barnard or the wealthy and powerful Clarke.³⁰

However, while Bargainnier may be correct in assuming that readers do not sympathize with Alice Ascher, there is at least one character who does: the loving niece, Mary Drower. She presents us with a particular complication unique to the domestic tragedy. With their intimate knowledge of the victim, other characters within the novel do not have to share the reader's luxury of separation. We may be repulsed by or attracted toward a particular character, but those acting out the drama within the story may not feel similarly. For example, Bargainnier claims that one of Christie's unsympathetic female victims, Linnet Ridgeway from *Death on the Nile* (1937), is "willful, even tyrannical, as a result of wealth," which separates her from the audience (Bargainnier 114). But characters within the novel sympathize with Linnet in her death. At the same time, they disregard the subsequent deaths of Louise Burget and Salome Otterbourne. As readers, we might be more inclined to identify with the hard-up maid trying to help her former lover or the writer who has turned to alcoholism to cope with a decrease in sale. But the characters maintain an ableist structure. Even as Christie tries to distance us from Linnet, the ableist structure inherent to twentieth century British society prevents the characters from distancing themselves from the rich and beautiful Linnet. For example, Cornelia Robson declares, "She was so beautiful – just as a woman – as anything in Greek Art. And when anything beautiful's dead, it's a loss to the world" (*Nile* 634). But this speech comes mere

³⁰ Carmichael Clarke's wealth, like Benedict Farley's, perpetuates the capitalistic nature of the ideology of ability. Despite his age, Clarke is still valuable because of his economic impact.

moments after Mrs. Otterbourne's death. Even though her father lost all of his money to Linnet's father, Cornelia can still sympathize with the nondisabled victim, at least for Linnet's beautiful body if not for her mind, while disregarding the death of the poor or nonnormative women.

Characters like Cornelia obscure the more straightforward interpretation of the unsympathetic victim that Bargainnier presents. For example, Bargainnier argues that “[unsympathetic] male victims are most often criminal or sexually immoral,” and he points to *The Hollow*'s (1946) John Christow as an example (Bargainnier 114). But Bargainnier overlooks the two important characters who do sympathize and mourn Christow's death, his lover Henrietta Savernake and his patient Mrs. Crabtree, who reflects, “Why, the doctor was one in a thousand. Ever so clever, ‘e was! And a nice way with ‘im! Got you laughing whether you wanted to or not. The things ‘e used to say sometimes! I’d ‘ave done anythink for the doctor, I would” (*Hollow* 295). Henrietta ascents, “Yes...he was a very clever man. He was a great man” (295). Again, they value John Christow for his youthful charm and intelligence – which, as Garland-Thomson explains, give him capital in an ableist system – and for these qualities, they mourn him. But Mrs. Crabtree is a patient of Dr. Christow's, suffering from the painful and incurable Ridgeway's Disease, and Henrietta – though pretty and able-bodied – suffers trauma from the deaths of her lover and his wife. When we find Dr. Christow reprehensible, women with disabilities provide a new outlook through which we can look at the victim and find different ways to sympathize with him or her.

Characters like Mary, Cornelia, and Mrs. Crabtree demonstrate the complexity that exists with disabled women in the detective novel. Despite an attempt to isolate her reader from the victim to make a brutal murder more palatable, Christie might also provide a subversive character, like Mary Drower, so that we feel compelled toward the victim. We want Poirot or

Miss Marple to succeed in finding the murderer because we are so touched by the declarations of these characters. On the other hand, a character like Cornelia might demonstrate the inherent bias we have toward able-bodied characters because we ignore the ordinary or the disabled and focus our sympathies on the young and beautiful. Finally, a disabled woman, like Mrs. Crabtree, can provide us with a new perspective that enlightens our view about the victim. Women like Mrs. Crabtree or Miss Pebmarsh expand our own interpretation of what it means to live with a disability in the world of Christie's novels, especially because their world knowledge and lived experience often becomes a vital clue in understanding the victim.

Conclusion

As I said in my introduction, disabled women operate as a different kind of narrative prosthesis. Their disability reminds us of the disability of the detective, which I argued in the previous chapter gives the detective different abilities or perspectives that allow her or him to solve the case. Christie's detective fiction, then, relies on disabled bodies, even while paradoxically devaluing those bodies in an ableist structure by making disabled women the object of violence and pity. Disability becomes a lens through which we can see the flaws of the capitalist-driven ableist system of twentieth century Britain.

Conclusion

Although I have been working on this thesis for almost two and a half years, within the last few weeks of completing this project, the Covid-19 outbreak hit the United States. There have been both positives and negatives to finishing this mammoth during that time. Most importantly, it gives me time to spend time with my family to reread and rewatch my favorite novels and shows. We love British crime shows, so I have been able to reorient this project and incorporate some new ideas I wouldn't have had without those resources or input from my family.

However, what the outbreak has done is brought to light many of the issues this thesis discusses. Because we have commodified bodies, some lives are considered more worthy of saving than others – the elderly and the mentally or physically disabled are marginalized. Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick said recently, “No one reached out to me and said, ‘As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?’ And if that is the exchange, I’m all in” (Sargent). And in Alabama, “any of a wide range of underlying health conditions – such as metastasized cancer, AIDS, ‘severe mental retardation,’ advanced dementia and ‘severe burns’ – could disqualify patients from being put on potentially lifesaving ventilators if the pandemic grows dire enough” (Sheets). Dying for the economy or dying because your body is worthless to that economy are the anxieties that founded the Disability Rights Movement.

We can learn a lot from Christie about the status of disabled bodies before that movement, but the rhetoric of this pandemic might show just how little distance the movement has covered. That’s not to say it’s hopeless; but we should learn from Christie and her contemporaries about the importance of disabled bodies – not simply as cogs in a capitalist

machine – but as people who understand the need for individuality. And from an outside or alienated position, the disabled female characters are best adept at identifying the flaws of an able-bodied, patriarchal system. I hope that this thesis has allowed readers to look at some of Christie’s novels differently, perhaps as sources of topical information about disabled bodies – or at least a reminder that her stories make for a great distraction during times of quarantine.

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