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‘Dad’s Back’: Mapping Masculinities, Moralities and the Law in the Novels of Margery Allingham

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Crime fiction was, in its ‘Golden Age’ form, a new product of the interwar middlebrow. It was a particular and very popular way in which conservative-modern problematics about the domestic and about human emotional relationships but also about criminality and the law were talked through. This article examines the novels of Margery Allingham as an exemplar of this genre with reference to her own professional and gender identity as well as the broader cultural context. Crime fiction was one of several kinds of crime (particularly murder) stories, both fictional and ‘real life’, which circulated between the official discourses of the law and middle-class culture. This discussion explores Allingham’s treatment of masculinities and of sexuality. It argues that narrative techniques that used the Gothic problematized the interrelationships of morality, modernity and history, and also inflected the pleasures of leisure reading with wider ‘middlebrow’ concerns about the gendered status of the modern citizen and more diffuse cultures of punishment and social responsibility. *Cultural and Social History* 2004; 1: 256–279

I. Reading, Pleasure and History

Fiction is not history. Historians have long acknowledged the ambiguous nature of fiction as historical ‘evidence’. Realist fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, offers enticing, rich descriptions of social (particularly domestic and familial) interiors and intimacies, which depended on offering its contemporary readership a plausible representation of ‘the real’. But still, fiction is not history. Fiction, of course, has a history, whose forms and structures, charted in a literature elsewhere

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than this, contribute to the history of culture. Cultural history asks more questions: about cultural production (the circulation, distribution and signification of texts) and cultural consumption (both the situated meanings, practices and pleasures of reading fiction and the subjective appropriation of fiction into individual and shared cultural imaginaries). Chartier's work on a history of reading in the early modern period emphasizes tensions between constraints and possibilities. Constraints were imposed both on the written text itself by the historical conditions of its production and upon readers by the 'writerly' tendencies of the finished work. Nevertheless, following de Certeau, he also acknowledges the indeterminacies of what a history of reading can know about what readers 'did' with those texts, as artefacts, commodities and, particularly, as imaginative raw material in the fashioning of subjectivity among historically located 'communities' of readers.¹

Works are produced within a specific order that has its own rules, conventions, and hierarchies, but they escape all these and take on a certain density in their peregrinations... about the social world. Deciphered on the basis of mental and affective schemes that constitute the 'culture'... of the communities that receive them, works turn the tables and become a precious resource for thinking about what is essential: the construction of social ties, individual subjectivity, and relationship with the sacred.²

Historians of the early modern period, with greater chronological and cultural difference from their subject matter, have long been comfortable with exploring what the *Annales* school termed *mentalités*, effectively the cultural imaginaries of individuals in the past. The 1920s and 1930s are also a 'different country' of the past when viewed from late or even post-modern perspectives. What imaginary frames of reference did interwar crime fiction readers bring to bear? Queenie Leavis, defender of the interwar highbrow modernist novel, disparaged middlebrow readers who 'enjoy those situations in which they may readily visualise themselves as taking a principle and heroic part'.³ Interwar crime (or romance) novels were 'escapist'; their pleasures were about a withdrawal from proper (*propre*) engagement with art, the intellect and one's social responsibilities. Nevertheless, however distanced in plot or setting, escapist literature must be imaginatively hooked up to the (however idealized) emotional economies of its readers to achieve the desired psychic catharsis.

Robert Darnton names folk tales as 'stories to think with', a device I have long found helpful in considering the kinds of interrogatory

¹ Roger Chartier, 'General Introduction: Print Culture' in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (eds), *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1999); Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Polity, Cambridge, 1994); Michel de Certeau, 'Reading as Poaching', *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steve F. Rendall (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984), pp. 165–76.

² Chartier, *Order of Books*, preface, p. x.

³ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Chatto, London, 1965 [1932]) p. 53.

imaginative work possible in reading practices of non-fictional 'crime stories'.⁴ The pleasures of reading (sensational or mundane) accounts of actual criminality are of course different from those of reading fiction. Nevertheless, this article makes tentative moves towards formulating how interwar crime fiction might provide a very productive nexus of 'stories to think with' among its middle-class 'interpretive community'. Following Chartier's preferred methodology, it will restrict itself to a case study of one author, Margery Allingham. Before considering the novels in detail, the claim that there was such a 'community of readers' and the justification of Allingham as a suitable case study need further explanation.

Chartier considers the impact on early modern cultures of the invention of printing. Although the British interwar market developments associated with the rapid growth of a 'new reading public' were by no means as far-reaching, they nevertheless changed the extent and the practices of reading among the middle and working classes. Leavis assumed that 'the universal need to read something when not actively employed has been created by the conditions of modern life'. This compulsive 'reading habit' debased (high) literary culture, and was fostered by the market through magazines, commercial libraries and book clubs. Even 'educated people', bemoaned Leavis, could 'indiscriminately' read middlebrow novels or magazines for up to eight hours a day.⁵ Working-class readers voraciously devoured undemanding but absorbing pulp fiction, romances and thrillers in the gaps of the working day.⁶ If middlebrow fiction sought a certain level of literary 'distinction', it shared popular market strategies and also produced much romance and detective fiction.

Margery Allingham was a successful career writer whose family background and social connections locate her amid the proliferation of middlebrow and popular literary production of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.⁷ Her parents and aunt were writers and editors for popular magazines. Her father edited the *London Journal*, then became a freelance writer in 1909. Her mother turned out children's fairy stories and detective fiction. When times were hard, money could also be earned producing advertising copy. Before the First World War the Allinghams were able to sustain a sizeable four-servant household on the products of these labours. Margery was publishing magazine stories and undertaking other 'hack' work in her teens. Her aunt was Maudie Hughes, who worked on *Women's Weekly* and edited the *Picture Show* and later *Girls Cinema*, from which Margery earned a steady income between 1919 and 1935 turning out regular film stories. The overlapping social network of bright young things around Margery and her husband, Phillip

⁴ R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985) p. 81.

⁵ Leavis, *Fiction*, pp. 48, 50–1.

⁶ Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914–1950* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1992) p. 86.

⁷ For the writing and editorial careers of her parents and grandparents, see J. Thorogood, *Margery Allingham: A Biography* (Heinemann, London, 1991) p. 5.

Youngman Carter (a commercial artist and from 1954 to 1957 editor of *The Tatler*), included Robert St John Cooper, who drew the original Mr Cube cartoon for sugar producers Tate and Lyle, and Tibby Clarke, who later wrote screenplays for the landmark postwar Ealing film comedies. Allingham was well in touch with the middlebrow.⁸

Nicola Humble defines middlebrow fiction less by content but in terms of its middle-class (particularly lower-middle-class) readership and its effective widespread marketing. If the English middle classes anxiously and competitively carved out their cultural position, middlebrow reading practices in Humble's analysis seem less subordinated to the highbrow than in Bourdieu's formulation of 'allodoxia' (the misrecognition of cultural 'distinction'). For Humble, the middlebrow novel was 'a powerful force in establishing and consolidating, but also in resisting, new class and gender identities' following the First World War.⁹ Although she sees its readership as feminine, her own quotation from George Orwell of the pleasures of reading the *Girl's Own Paper* – 'in your bath, ... late at night when you are too tired to go to bed, or in the odd quarter of an hour before lunch'¹⁰ – indicates both the domestic context of much middle-class reading and also that it might be better to see this readership as feminized rather than feminine. Middle-class men could, it seems, also be guilty of middlebrow reading practices.

'Good and gory' crime novels, many of them hard-boiled transatlantic imports, were favoured by male readers of popular fiction.¹¹ Leavis also saw middlebrow crime fiction as frequently read by middle-class men. So-called 'Golden Age' British crime fiction, much of it written by women, apparently appealed to men because of the soft intellectualism of solving the crime puzzle. Nevertheless, Humble includes the crime novels of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham in the feminine middlebrow. Asked in 1926 about suitable reading choices for a 'lady', a Manchester library assistant recommended a detective novel and a romantic adventure: 'something that is possible but outside her experience'.¹² The cross-gender (yet feminized and domesticated) readership of Golden Age crime fiction indicates this genre as a useful site for interrogating the gender and cultural history of the English middle class in the interwar and immediate post-Second World War decades.

Allingham was one of several much-read authors whose style was more literary and concerned with character development than the crime puzzle novels of Agatha Christie. Allingham is most frequently compared

⁸ Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, pp. 8, 15, 32, 33, 55, 123–4, 177.

⁹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class Domesticity and Bohemianism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001) p. 3.

¹⁰ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 24, quoting Orwell's 'Bookshop Memories' (1936), in *The collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 1, *An Age Like This, 1920–1943* (Secker & Warburg, London, 1968) p. 246.

¹¹ McAleer, *Popular Reading*, p. 97.

¹² McAleer, *Popular Reading*, p. 96, quoting *Manchester Evening News*, 22 Feb 1926, p. 3.

with Dorothy L. Sayers, but, unlike Sayers, whose theological and other writings occupied her exclusively from the late 1930s, crime novels were Allingham's main literary output and she continued to produce them until her death in the mid-1960s. Thus, Margery Allingham provides a useful case study, and not only because she has received rather less recent (feminist) critical attention than other Golden Age women crime writers. I want here to take up some of the recent arguments developed from literary critical and cultural historical perspectives by (among others) Alison Light, Nicola Humble and Susan Rowland, using them to put pressure on a slightly different set of questions. In exactly which ways did crime or 'mystery' novels appeal to a middlebrow readership? How did they relate to other kinds of non-fiction writings about crime and punishment that were being produced at the same historical juncture? How did this crime fiction, in particular, resonate with the gendering of middle-class culture?

II. Crime Fiction and the Interwar Middlebrow

This article follows other work in seeing middle-class interwar British culture as marked by 'conservative modernity'. Like the fiction it read, through its engagement with the market, its identification with domesticity, its respectable yet in some ways progressive gender identities, this culture can also be described as middlebrow. The growing suburbs formed the (stereo)typical social milieu of the growing interwar middle and lower-middle class. There they located not only their domestic lives, based on companionate if not necessarily egalitarian marriage and a social and civic life centred on societies, local government and religious or political groupings and institutions. The commitment to 'Englishness' and the ongoing development of the collectivist modern state meant that highly gendered constructions of active citizenship bridged between domestic and (often local) public life. Questions of style and culture were anxiously negotiated between an established middle class, some of whom found themselves noticeably poorer after the First World War, and a faster growing lower-middle class.¹³ These were white identities, and differently raced others participated to the extent that they could simulate them. Sexual lives were meant to be fulfilled, according to gender-differentiated heterosexual norms, but excessive emotionality was culturally inappropriate. Femininity was marked by cheerful and efficient domestic management and paid work before marriage.

Judy Giles argues convincingly that the domestic was a crucial arena for the production of modern feminine subjectivities, which developed

¹³ Alison Light, *Forever England: Feminism, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (Routledge, London, 1991); S. D'Cruze, 'Dainty Little Fairies? Women, Performance and the Boundaries of Social Identity in the Amateur Performance of the Savoy Operas since c1890', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000) p. 354; Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, pp. 81–8.

through domestic practices of labour and consumption, and were mirrored and reinforced through the cultural dissemination of a range of popular and advice texts.¹⁴ Masculinities were comparably focused. Historians delineate different patterns of British masculine identity, both over time and by class. A. James Hammerton indicates the ongoing domestic commitment of lower-middle-class men and underlines the historical provenance of the domesticized suburban 'little man' that Alison Light identifies with the interwar middle class.¹⁵ Personal and domestic consumption helped construct masculine subjectivities,¹⁶ which downplayed heroic, physically arduous, imperial, Edwardian ideals. Crime fiction was not straightforwardly 'conduct' literature; nevertheless, fictional representations could invoke the heroic en route to domestic respectability.

An early Allingham novel, *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929), deploys an array of types of 1920s young, elite English masculinity firmly on the side of good. The hero, George Abbershaw, is a successful pathologist, meticulous, precise, careful and rather stuffy. The comic Gothic adventure at Black Dudley demands all his intellectual and physical resource and unleashes new manly powers. Pitted against the dastardly foreign villains, 'for the first time in his life he was thrust into a position where quick decisions and *impulsive* actions were demanded of him'. At a decisive moment, Abbershaw first mobilizes this new persona not by trouncing the criminals, but by proposing to his sweetheart, Meggie. Intellectualism, career success and personal integrity are in Black Dudley important masculine attributes, but physical prowess and sexual success make the 'he-man'. His fiancé, 'fashionable without being ordinary', is also 'childlike'.¹⁷ She is plucky, attractive, fashionable but crucially young. Although later novels present more complex models of sexual attraction,

¹⁴ J. Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900–50* (Macmillan, London, 1995), and her *The Parlour and the Suburb* (Berg, 2004). See also W. Webster, *Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, 1945–64* (UCL Press, London, 1998).

¹⁵ A. James Hammerton, 'Pooterism or Partnership? Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class, 1870–1920', *Journal of British Studies*, 38 (1999) pp. 291–321; Light, *Forever England*. See also John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Yale University Press, London, 1999); Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (Routledge, London, 1991); Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Polity, Cambridge, 1992).

¹⁶ Christopher Breward, *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life, 1860–1914* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999); Frank Mort and Peter Thompson, 'Retailing, Community Culture and Masculinity in 1950s Britain: The Case of Montague Burton, Tailor of Taste', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994) pp. 106–27; Frank Mort, 'Montague Burton, the Tailor of Taste' in Frank Mort (ed.), *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth Century Britain* (Routledge, London, 1996); Jill Greenfield, Sean O'Connell and Chris Reid, 'Gender, Consumer Culture and the Middle-Class Male, 1918–39' in Alan Kidd and David Nichols (eds), *Gender, Civic Culture and Consumerism: Middle Class Identity in Britain, 1800–1940* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999); Katrina Honeyman, 'Following Suit: Men, Masculinity, and Gendered Practices in the Clothing Trade in Leeds, England, 1890–1940', *Gender & History*, 15 (2002) pp. 426–46.

¹⁷ M. Allingham, *The Crime at Black Dudley* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950) pp. 62, 7, 98.

this sexologically informed dyad, the compelling superiority of the heterosexual male and the transformative power of sexual attraction recur consistently among Allingham's representation of privileged gender identities. The inter-subjective realization of gendered subjectivities remains a pretty central preoccupation of Allingham's plotting.

Identity and personality in Allingham depend on experience and thus on historicity. Jimmy Sutane, the review star in *Dancers in Mourning* (1936), wore his skin and bones as makeup, producing his public identity out of a smile and charm.¹⁸ In Allingham, life experiences have psychological effects which potentially alter personality. However, sex roles and sexuality, although tricky and capable of producing varieties of taste and practices, are naturalized and elemental, and revolve around an axis of male superiority and social advantage and comparative female subordination. Such tensions pose problems about time and change. Sexology claimed scientific authority for this model of sexual relations as a natural 'law'.¹⁹ The law, of course, endorsed the organization of sexual relations through marriage and divorce, as well as regulating their material and social outcomes through property, inheritance and taxation, something it did increasingly across the mid-twentieth century.

At this period, for both men and women, negotiating oneself onto the respectable side of the boundaries of middle-class identity could prove an anxious process. Demonstrating a distance (however fictitious) from the discomforts and makeshifts of working-class existence was achieved through culture as much as material resources.²⁰ Despite the depredations of economic depression in particular regions and for particular sectors of the labour market, standards of living for many were rising, and the constituency of those that sought to attach themselves to middle-class culture was broadening. Technological and marketing developments were facilitating the ever-widening dissemination, through print media, radio and later television, of a very English and middlebrow national culture, which, however despised by elites, articulated the conservative-modern concerns of this increasing middle class.²¹ Crime fiction was, in its 'Golden Age' form, very much a new product of the interwar middlebrow. It was a particular and very popular way in which conservative-modern problematics about the domestic and human emotional relationships were articulated 'over' stories of murder, crime and the law.

Margery Allingham's series of crime or mystery novels, not counting short stories and other output, spanned almost four decades, from

¹⁸ M. Allingham, *Dancers in Mourning* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1948) pp. 19, 22.

¹⁹ Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000); Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton UP, Princeton, 1993); P. Caplan (ed.), *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality* (Routledge, London, 1987).

²⁰ A. Sinfield, 'War Stories', *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 2nd edn (Athlone, London, 1997) pp. 6–23.

²¹ J. Baxendale and C. Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making, 1930 to the Present*, Macmillan, London, 1996); Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919–1939* (Berg, London, 1993).

1929 to 1965. The 19 'Albert Campion' novels provide productive reflections on the social and cultural changes of a certain kind of England over this chronology. Early adventure stories were set against a surprisingly carnivalesque backdrop of neo-feudal East Anglian country life where aristocratic order and tradition held ultimate (and proper) hegemony, but not infrequently had to accommodate disorderly superstition and witchcraft. These highly coloured tales plotted the upper-class, jokey sophistication of Campion and his associates against melodramatic gangs of villains and spies supported by supernumerary cardboard cut-out crooks from the criminal underworld that periodically disturbed the rural social order. Despite later changes in style, the novels deserve to be considered as a series because of the internal continuities of character and preoccupation with the orderly progression of English social order from past into the future, but equally because the process of publication (and Allingham's need to maintain an income from serial rights, American publication and reprints – most notably in Penguin paperbacks after the Second World War) kept the whole Campion series before the view of a broad middle-class readership (at least) into the 1970s.²²

III. Crime Fiction and the Law

Allingham's novels contain strategic moments in which 'the law' authorizes a normative class and gender order and a (sentimentalized) evocation of England and its history. At the plot closure of *Look to the Lady* (1931), the key contrasting male characters – the authoritative government representative, the intellectual American professor, the father of the young heir, the heir himself and Campion – all gather together around a royal deed (an ordered legitimating history) which centuries ago gave the (patriarchal) Gyrth family the care of a symbolic national treasure, the (feminized) and quasi-religious Gyrth chalice. Together they visit the secret room in the tower where is revealed the chalice and its guardian – the mummified, giant, kneeling corpse of the first Lord Gyrth. They return together to the very English setting of tea on a country lawn on a summer afternoon where the womenfolk, clad in chiffon dresses, stroll among the roses.²³ Even if Campion 'works round' the law in mid-plot, it remains the final guarantor of moral order in general, if not invariably in particulars. At the beginning of the 1941 novel *Traitor's Purse*, Inspector Stanislaus Oates, the law's representative, his moral status enhanced through a combination of rural origins and urban competences, warns of the dangers the war posed to English civilization.²⁴

²² Richard Martin, *Ink in Her Blood: The Life and Crime Fiction of Margery Allingham* (UMI Research, Ann Arbor, MI, 1988) pp. 208, 211, 212.

²³ M. Allingham, *Look to the Lady* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950) p. 276.

²⁴ B.A. Pike, *Campion's Career: A Study of the Novels of Margery Allingham* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green, OH, 1987) p. 44.

Golden Age crime fiction was a conservative genre.²⁵ Nevertheless, its narrative possibilities and pleasures are not necessarily subsumed within the closure.²⁶ As Brooks argues, the textual 'erotics' of crime fiction depend on delaying the fictional puzzle's solution.²⁷ Crime fiction readers are invited to imagine different possible outcomes, and dispositions of guilt and innocence. Susan Rowland's recent critical study of six major women crime-fiction writers since the 1920s argues that their work is gendered as feminine not because this is an *écriture féminine* in Cixous's sense, but because the genre developed in relation to the authoritative and 'official' texts of the law. Rowland positions crime fiction as 'the other of the powers of legal institutions to represent crime to culture', which 'deals in the excess that the official texts will not tell'.²⁸ I certainly see Golden Age fiction as a cultural site producing 'excess' meanings about, *inter alia*, gender, class and Englishness. Boundaries between the active citizen, the criminal and the deviant or the debilitated individual who was the focus of the developing welfare and penal policies of the modern(izing) liberal state were being explored through such stories of crime and violence set in domestic, familial, leisure or community settings. Nevertheless, as a historian I would wish to complicate and problematize Rowland's formulation.

It is necessary to model how 'the law' was being historically and institutionally constituted at this period. David Garland²⁹ argues that the early years of the twentieth century saw the creation of a penal-welfare complex that reached its fullest development after the Second World War. To the Victorians the criminal was rationally motivated and thus required incarceration until the higher rationality of a law-abiding existence dawned on him. By the First World War, the offender was understood as defective or debilitated 'social wreckage' in greatest need of treatment or management across a complex of institutions which blurred the boundaries between welfare and punishment.³⁰ Crime rates were low

²⁵ Of the sizeable critical literature on crime fiction, apart from that cited individually, see also J.G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1976); Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple, 'Tracking Down the Past: Women and Detective Fiction' in Helen Carr (ed.), *From My Guy to Sci-fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World* (Pandora, London, 1989) pp. 39–58; P. Haining, *Mystery: An Illustrated History of Crime and Detective Fiction* (Souvenir, London, 1977); S. Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Macmillan, London, 1980); C. Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and their Audience* (Eyre Methuen, London, 1971); W. Chernaik, M. Swales and R. Vilain (eds), *The Art of Detective Fiction* (Macmillan, London, 2000).

²⁶ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2001) pp. 39–42.

²⁷ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Random House, New York, 1984) pp. 244–5.

²⁸ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, pp. 16–19.

²⁹ David Garland, *Punishment and Welfare: A History of Penal Strategies* (Gower, Aldershot, 1985), *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1990) and *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000).

³⁰ M. Weiner, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law and Policy in England, 1830–1914* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990).

and crime was not perceived as a threat to the social order, but as an obstacle to social progress – a problem essentially of management.

Garland sees the relationship between punishment and culture as 'two-way': not only do institutions and ideologies of punishment have 'cultural determinants', but also 'Punishment ... is a communicative and didactic institution. Through the media of its practices and declarations it puts into effect – and into cultural circulation – some of the categories and distinctions through which we give meaning to our world.'³¹ However useful, Garland's theoretical, criminological work is largely present-minded and does not take gender issues into account. Most of those tried and convicted were men, and the criminal was normatively assumed to be male. Apparent or actual offending by women was troubling to dominant gender norms and, as Zedner argues, tended to be particularly pathologized by the criminal justice and penal systems.³² The elision between hegemonic idealizations of the family and social stability, established by the later nineteenth century, amplified the significance of women's actual and symbolic association with domesticity. Therefore, offending behaviour by juveniles that was held to be produced by the (defective) home, as well as the disturbances that adult women's offending produced in the home, became a central focus of interwar penal welfarism. Such offending provoked concerns about family, relationships between public and private, and the role of the national state in modern society. Albeit in uneven, contested and sometimes contradictory ways, penal welfarism extrapolated such concerns outwards from 'the law' to police the boundaries of respectability through broader cultures of punishment. These boundaries were increasingly defined through the values of 'conservative modernity' by which the middle classes also judged and positioned themselves. Arguably, criminality and (gendered) social responsibility were dialogically mapped against each other in middlebrow cultural imaginaries.

I would query Rowland's argument that crime fiction can be confidently named as 'the' other of the law, though its positioning of the law as masculine, authoritative and incontrovertible is part of its conservative reassurance. In their historical realization, twentieth-century British judicial, penal and policing establishments did not comprise a totalizing patriarchal system, nor were ideologies identical to either formal laws or to everyday institutional practices and professional relations. Neither was crime fiction the sole alternative discourse. Press reporting of sensational crime, for example, although originating in fact, self-consciously adopted hybrid and partially fictionalized representational and market strategies directed towards middlebrow and popular consumption. Despite some little rise immediately after the First World War, the interwar period saw fewer people committed to trial for murder

³¹ Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society*, pp. 193, 251.

³² Lucia Zedner, *Women, Crime and Custody in Victorian England* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991).

than at any period since the 1830s. Annual averages of committals show 56.5 persons per year in 1931–8, compared with 70.7 in 1908–13 and 72.4 in 1946–56. However, press and public interest in ‘notable’ murders gave them a cultural prominence unrelated to their incidence.³³

Proliferating press narratives around high-profile criminal cases, particularly murders, sought out meanings excess to those called for by the operation of the criminal law, and told of dangers and disruptions around sexuality, romance, domesticity or family relationships as a central or related theme. Both crime fiction and many ‘real life’ murder stories were tales about how strong passions and sexual and psychological turbulence deformed normative narratives of romance, leisure, family formation and domestic harmony. For example, May of 1924 saw widespread and detailed press coverage of both the Vaquier case and the so-called ‘Bungalow Crime’. Vaquier had poisoned the landlord of a public house in Byfleet, Essex, following a continental affair with his rather glamorous wife, Mrs Jones. Patrick Mahon (35 and married) had murdered and dismembered the body of Emily Kaye (37 and single) at an Eastbourne holiday bungalow. Such trials attracted large audiences, including women who were also readers and purchasers of crime and romantic fiction.³⁴ For both crime fiction and popular journalism, the law was the agent of closure which authorized the punishment of individual deviants and ‘solved’ the problems murder posed to social order through disturbances to a normative private sphere. However, exactly because both genres were middlebrow forms whose market position required widespread consumption and hence whose narrative forms necessarily attended to reader pleasure and identification, the plotted middles of crime narratives acted against the totality of any such closure. The press described Patrick Mahon in terms redolent of middlebrow romance – a matinee idol, rather sympathetic and distinctly attractive, with ‘the appearance of a striking-looking actor’ and a ‘suggestion of pathos and laughter’ in his ‘grey-blue’ eyes.³⁵ Readers, of course, distinguished ‘real’ crime stories from novels. Fiction is not history. Nevertheless both crime genres generated meanings excess to the requirements of the law, their narrative strategies overlapped, and both kinds of ‘crime story’ circulated in the middlebrow ‘interpretive community’.

³³ C. Smart, *Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1976), and *Law, Crime and Sexuality* (Sage, London, 1995); S. D'Cruze, ‘A Warning to Frolics: Notable Trials and Constructions of Criminality in Britain, c1920–c1950’, paper presented to North American Conference on British Studies Annual Meeting, Baltimore, USA, October 2002, and ‘The Eastbourne Foxes and the Shorthand Typist: Gender, Murder and Suicide in an Inter-War Seaside Town’, paper presented to Social History Society conference, Leicester, UK, January 2003; J. Stevenson, *British Society, 1915–1945* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984) p. 373.

³⁴ Lucy Bland, ‘The Trial of Madame Fahmy: Orientalism, Violence, Sexual Perversity and the Fear of Miscegenation’, in Shani D'Cruze (ed.), *Everyday Violence in Britain, 1850–1950: Gender and Class* (Longman, London, 2000) pp. 185–97.

³⁵ *Evening Standard*, 8 May 1924, p. 1.

In Allingham's 1938 novel *The Fashion in Shrouds*, the murder plot intertwines with stories of several stalled, problematic or simulated romances. In particular the novel explores the predicament of a fashion designer and an actress, two highly successful businesswomen inhabiting a patriarchal world, for whom self-realization consequently comes on harsh terms. The actress, Georgia Wells, allows her emotional and sexual desires to dominate her actions. Her passions drive the plot and are 'the pivot on which the entire double action turns' since the murderer, a theatre impresario, successively does away with Georgia's two husbands when each seems likely to end her acting career. Val Ferris, the fashion designer, and Campion's sister, is distraught when the man she loves falls for Georgia, and when she at last regains him, she appears to give up her vastly successful career for marriage. For these women, sexual and professional fulfilment are represented as incompatible, both socially because of the power dynamics of gender relations and psychologically since (hetero)sexuality is understood as unalterable, compelling and requiring female submission.³⁶

All Allingham's late 1930s novels are London or London-related stories, set in a series of professional milieus: publishing, the musical theatre, art and fashion. In each case a close-knit network of successful professional people, centred on some sort of (however incomplete or simulated) family, is undermined by the mysterious death of a marginal but disruptive figure. This breeds terrible insecurities until the murderer is unmasked. The killer is inevitably a charismatic, successful, controlling man whose deluded intellectual brilliance leads him to ever more extravagant murders. These overweening villains become grotesque and degenerate into madness in the mode of Gothic masculinity. As Campion summed up: 'All murderers are a little crazy. The people who get away with incredible things are those that never look round the subject, but just go ahead and make for their objective with blinkers on.'³⁷ Nevertheless, not only the murderous experienced psychological strain. David Armstrong argues that with a new-found preoccupation on neuroses, interwar medical discourses on mental health focused increasingly 'not on the mind of the mad, but on the mind of the precariously sane'.³⁸ For Allingham, evildoing is a psychological risk in even the 'good' characters through

³⁶ Pike, *Campion's Career*, p. 63. But apparently Val's career continues in some form, since in the 1950s the young heroine of *Tiger in the Smoke* (1952), Meg Elginbrodde, is also a fashion designer who began her career working for Val. Martin, *Ink in Her Blood*, p. 118.

³⁷ M. Allingham, *Flowers for the Judge* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1994), p. 209. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie*, p. 70, sees this as caused by corporate capitalism. I would argue that, since plenty of other characters do negotiate capitalism, it is about the potential instabilities of masculine intelligences who are unable to deflect their capitalist ventures with appropriate morality and legal rectitude. The critical literature on the Gothic is large, including C. Bloom, *Gothic Horror: A Reader's Guide from Poe to King and Beyond* (Macmillan, London, 1998); Andrew Smith, *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Macmillan, London, 2000); David Punter, *The Gothic Tradition*, 2nd edn, vol. 1, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present* (Longman, London, 1996); R. Mighall, *Mapping the Victorian Gothic* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999).

³⁸ D. Armstrong, *The Political Anatomy of the Body* (Cambridge University Press, 1983) p. 26.

complications around sexuality or the disruptive and brutalizing experiences associated with modernity, particularly capitalism and modern warfare.

In Allingham's crime fiction and sensational trial reporting, representations of the criminal played between depictions of implacable wickedness and 'tragic' weakness, and seem at first sight discontinuous with other contemporary descriptions of the criminal personality. The sensational (or fictitious) murderer was a representation mapped against constructions of criminality in professional and criminological writings whose focus was the inadequate or defective offender. The penal-welfare complex had learned the Victorian lesson and generally saw criminality as working-class behaviour. Nevertheless, when it addressed itself to a middle-class readership in professional memoirs or popular criminology, its arguments were also peppered with tales of once-respectable identities shattered and not entirely disingenuous protestations that offenders came from 'all walks of life'.³⁹ The governor and medical officer of Holloway Prison recounted the case of a nurse, dismissed because she had taken to drink in distress at being jilted: 'Her character was ruined and she gradually went down hill. ... She deteriorated very rapidly and has been in [Holloway] several times.'⁴⁰ In a quasi-Victorian melodrama, the ruin of her character itself leaves the nurse incapable of resisting the seemingly inevitable slide down the ladder of class, respectability and personal integrity into habitual drunkenness, prison and psychological deterioration. Middlebrow psyches disintegrated by neurotic instabilities might end dramatically on the gallows, but the loss of personal integrity and class status involved in these non-fiction narratives was also highly disturbing to respectable perceptions. Confronting 'all that remained' of one imprisoned murderer, an erstwhile genius, who, precipitated into insanity, 'smiled at him with drooling lips', Campion was moved by a 'primitive horror of that which is not a right thing'.⁴¹ If professional discourses not infrequently concerned themselves with women and juveniles, commonly those who lacked or could not maintain appropriate domestic identities, Allingham's fiction projects such anxieties principally onto male subjectivities: those, that is, that middle-class domesticity was required to produce, service and accommodate.

The audiences for these different categories of publication arguably overlapped among a broader middle class that, among its other attributes, staffed the growing institutions and interest groups associated with the welfarism of the modern liberal state and contributed strongly to that public opinion that its broader politics addressed. Consequently crime fiction should be taken seriously as a genre of 'stories to think with', in

³⁹ Among many possible examples: M. Size, *Prisons I have Known* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1957) p. 155; Xenia Field, *Under Lock and Key* (Max Parish, London, 1963) pp. 58–64; F. Tennyson Jesse, *Murder and its Motives* (Heinemann, London, 1924) p. 18; Pamela Cox, *Gender, Justice and Welfare: Bad Girls in Britain, 1900–1950* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2003).

⁴⁰ J. Hall Morton, 'Alcoholics in Prison', *Howard Journal*, 2 (1929) p. 307.

⁴¹ M. Allingham, *Death of a Ghost* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1998) pp. 245–6.

terms of the historical development both of penal welfarism and of middlebrow culture and its relationship to state formation at this period. I want now to develop this proposition through an argument about masculinity, the Gothic, morality and modernity in Margery Allingham’s fiction.

IV. Masculinities

Masculinities in Allingham’s novels are multiple and relational. Plotting and strong characterization keep a range of masculinities (and of course femininities) in play; nevertheless, a dynamic, dialogic structuration is detectable. Certain models are privileged; class position, (hetero)sexual potency and moral integrity tend to imply and reinforce each other, though some of these characteristics may, in early or mid-plot, be mirrored by what later emerge as flawed, criminal masculinities.⁴² Non- or less heroic men are depicted sympathetically, particularly in the later novels. Campion’s manservant, Lugg, a one-time burglar ‘before, as he remarked himself, he had lost his figger’, was ‘an immense and gloomy individual’, but ‘he had the quick keen eyes of a cockney in spite of the lugubrious expression which he almost always wore’.⁴³ Lugg is, of course, also a parodic and grotesque riposte to Dorothy L. Sayers’s character Bunter, manservant to *her* aristocratic detective Peter Wimsey. At one point in the late 1930s, nettled by a drinking acquaintance, Mr Tuke (a rather grander ‘gentleman’s gentleman’), Lugg was set on self-improvement:

‘Look’ ere’, he said belligerently, ‘... I’m going to educate myself, and then I’ll never feel inferior, not with anybody, see?’

‘My dear chap’ – Mr Campion was touched. ‘You don’t feel inferior with anybody now, surely do you?’

The other man regarded him shrewdly. His little black eyes were winking, and there was a certain sheepishness in his expression which was out of character.

‘Not with you, of course, cock,’ he conceded affectionately. ‘But I do with Mr Tuke.’⁴⁴

Class boundaries are underlined by Lugg’s licensed transgressions. He is feminized in relation to Campion; monstrous if benign in his physicality, he frequently nurses and cares for his employer. In Allingham, men in subordinated class positions are not core protagonists and are also in subordinated gender positions. Allingham’s working- and lower-middle-class male characters, except those clearly to be disliked, often demonstrate such qualities of caring and compassion, as well as stoical

⁴² Compare Angus McLaren’s view of a ‘dominant’ form of masculinity as discerned through the constructions contested in criminal trials: *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999).

⁴³ M. Allingham, *Sweet Danger* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950) p. 33.

⁴⁴ M. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950) p. 52.

English endurance and cheerfulness, attributes also valorized in *The Oaken Heart*, which recounts life in her own village during the early war years. Village men (those not, of course, on active service) are capable, patient and de-sexualized. Norrey, the blacksmith, cares for and 'mothers' the horses.⁴⁵

Allingham's 'detecting intelligence', Albert Campion, although originally something of a parody of Dorothy Sayers's Peter Wimsey, emerges, thin, tall and elegant, as a complex and liminal masculinity. Campion's stock in trade is unobtrusiveness. There is the mystery of his undisclosed aristocratic identity, its social status conveying authority and its partial occlusion enabling licence. Not always firmly part of the establishment, though unquestionably on the side of 'right', Campion moves between social worlds, across class, from high society to a working acquaintance with the criminal underworld, in London and in the countryside. He sports a range of names; to criminal friends he is Bert, to his friends he is Albert, to the Suffolk gypsies, Orlando, but his given family name is Rudolph. He has a variety of aliases, and on several occasions gives his 'second best name'. He becomes associated with the police, but is never part of them.

In Allingham's novels, sexuality and its passions are invariably risky territory and jeopardize emotional and psychological stability, for both women and men. Allingham, both in her fiction and her private correspondence, contrasted the staple, sustaining 'bread and butter love' that she associated with her marriage to the overwhelming, debilitating and unmaning 'cake love' of sexual attraction.⁴⁶ Several key male characters experience this contradiction: if sexuality is the apotheosis of masculine identity, if it underpins masculine superiority, it is also (temporarily at least) 'unmaning' in its realization. It jeopardizes agency, a key masculine attribute. Campion himself is profoundly affected and hampered by an impossible and unrealized sexual attraction on at least two occasions in the 1930s. His ongoing effectiveness as a 'detecting intelligence' depends on his achieving a masculinity which skirts round these sexual dangers. After an extended and circuitous courtship Campion makes a successful marriage (with a quintessentially modern aeronautical engineer, competent, aristocratic and 'always a gentleman'). Amanda can pursue her own career, of course, because the couple's wealth and class position displace the tasks of domestic maintenance and parenting onto paid help – most obviously in the novels, onto Lugg.

⁴⁵ M. Allingham, *The Oaken Heart* (1941). Billeted soldiers are encountered mostly as an undifferentiated but unthreatening mass; the few pen portraits of particular soldiers are of gentlemanly bewhiskered officers or of the handsome young soldier, sleeping childlike in the busy front hall, cradling his rifle. I am reminded of the arguments that Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird are making about masculinity and the Home Guard, both through oral history and in contemporary representations. See for example P. Summerfield and C. Peniston-Bird, "'Hey, You're Dead!': The Multiple Uses of Humour in Representations of British National Defence in the Second World War', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001) pp. 413–85.

⁴⁶ Allingham, *Fashion in Shrouds*, pp. 107, 288; Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, p. 261.

V. The Gothic

Campion's liminal masculinity moving across the series of novels is textually strategic in the repeated pairings, mirrorings, oppositions and doublings between characters that point up the plotting, particularly of the later narratives, and establish both tensions and connections between styles of masculinity. Uncanny doppelgänger pairs and oppositions, for example, emphasize moments of both physical danger and risky sexual encounter in *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938). At a fashion show where she first meets the man with whom she is to have a passionate and inappropriate affair, Georgia, the emotionally undisciplined stage star, is confronted by her double, modelling a dress designed for her. Later Georgia's husband (her second) escorts the model, dressed identically to his wife, to a nightclub where Georgia and her lover are dining. Both the model and the husband are later murdered, his death uncannily repeating that of Georgia's first husband.

Nickerson remarks on the use of the Gothic by American women detective-fiction writers from the late Victorian period as a means to critique the domestic and subordinated roles of middle-class women at that period. As David Glover has pointed out, Golden Age women crime writers not infrequently drew upon the Gothic in their crime novels.⁴⁷ Although she plays it for laughs in the first Campion novel, *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929), which is set in an isolated country mansion with secret passages, an ancient family legend and a madwoman in a locked room, Allingham makes increasingly sophisticated use of the Gothic as the series of novels develops. In Allingham the Gothic in part comes to articulate tensions around sexuality and changing gender roles, which marked middle-class domesticities and public identities in the 1930s to the 1960s. Humble sees in middlebrow novels of the later 1940s and 1950s 'a profound anxiety about the changing social determinants of gender, which emerges in a re-examination of masculinity, and in a nervous shying away from the new ideology of maternalism which was increasingly dominating women's lives'.⁴⁸ It is also possible to see how some of these tensions were realized in Allingham's own autobiography.

Margery Allingham married Phillip Youngman Carter in 1923 when she was 21. However, only in the Second World War, with his officer's salary, did Pip earn any kind of regular income. Consequently, for years Allingham's writing supported not only her, but also her husband, the live-in family friend A.J. Gregory, and sometimes other friends and kin. Pip was a man who certainly claimed the prerogatives of his sex, was charming and self-interested, sought an active and expensive social life,

⁴⁷ Catherine Ross Nickerson, *The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by American Women* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1998); David Glover, 'The Stuff that Dreams are Made of: Masculinity, Femininity and the Thriller' in D. Longhurst (ed.), *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure* (Unwin Hyman, London, 1989) pp. 67–83.

⁴⁸ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 255.

spent little time at home and was sexually unfaithful. Allingham's personal writing records a durable but not particularly easy marriage.⁴⁹ Pip's material and emotional comfort were the core concerns of the household. Moreover, after the war when Pip's earnings at *The Tatler* combined with the fact that she was taxed as a married woman, Allingham incurred punitive levels of supertax to which Pip (legal owner of the house and its contents) refused to contribute. Divorce or giving up her profession seemed the only possible way to ease the financial pressure. As she put it in the late 1940s:

In view of the present taxation on married people I am forced to do one of two things. One is to devote part of my time making extra money in the US in order to pay supertax due on my earnings. The other is to give up writing altogether and do my own housework and cooking as our government expects a married woman to do.⁵⁰

Allingham had her artistic revenge in *The Beckoning Lady* (1955), a thinly veiled fictionalization of herself (in the character of Minnie Casands) and family, where the unloved, snooping tax inspector here nicknamed 'Little Doom' is killed off summarily, even before the action begins. *The Beckoning Lady* is the name of the fecund, ancient estate which Minnie owns, and whose female, rural, semi-occult powers win out through the carnivalesque action of a potent midsummer bacchanalia. The stresses were more easily resolved in fiction than in life, however. Early in the 1950s a threefold crisis had occurred over finances, Pip's infidelity and Margery's health. The intrusive investigation of her personal and household finances brought out anxiety, illness and even paranoia in a woman who suffered both from an overactive thyroid and from associated clinical depression, for which she underwent electroconvulsive therapy in 1955 – a terrifying ordeal which she thought had ended her professional career. Her recurrent depressive episodes hampered her writing and rocked her sense of self. In 1960 she was compulsorily detained in a mental hospital under the Mental Health Act of 1959. The law – such a normatively reliable defender of the English values and community in most of her crime novels – when embodied as the inland revenue inspector or when authorizing the actions of the mental hospital physician, threatened not only her identity as a professional writer but also the very fabric of her home and family. Allingham's final autobiographical act, dictated to her secretary as she lay ill with cancer, was to represent herself as 'Queen Beetle': waiting for death, her intellectual and artistic abilities extinguished by bloated, grotesque, female physicality.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, chapters 7 and 8.

⁵⁰ Letter to her agent, P. Watts, 12 Nov 1946, in Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, p. 264.

⁵¹ Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, pp. 208–9, 297, 346.

VI. The War

For Allingham, secure personal identities depended on firm roots in home and family, including and notwithstanding the gender inequalities that these involved. She had, by the 1940s, a fully elaborated philosophy, laid out in her correspondence, but traceable in her fiction, which emphasized morality through social connection. The conservative modernity of her writings values tradition and social continuity, but sees personalities and attitudes which seek to cling to, or are inappropriate survivals from, the past as disruptive (her mother, for example). Her own unpublished book about her family, 'The Relay', spells out her model of intergenerational succession; as people aged, they were able to hand over tangible attributes of personality, memory and character 'back into the family', leaving in old age only the 'hard bright core' of their identities.⁵² Passing generations can hand on their knowledges, but should not dictate how the young make use of them. And of course, her view of sexuality as naturalized (hence ahistoric) meant that intergenerational change was predicated on sexual relationships that were essentially unchanging. There is thus a morally inflected tension between the survival of the past through human connection and the necessary historical imperative towards the modern. Progress required morality in social identity and social relations; it required connection. It was, however, always already jeopardized both by inappropriate survivals from the past and the opportunities for human weakness and immorality that historical change, exemplified particularly by the Second World War, brought about. As Mighall points out, intrusions from the past 'disrupt temporal propriety': 'The Gothic dwells in the historical past, or identifies "pastness" in the present, to reinforce a distance between the enlightened now and the repressive or misguided then. The tyrants and monsters of this mode represent an attempt to exorcize the ghosts of the past.'⁵³

In the Campion novels, the Gothic repeatedly provides a textual means of articulating these kinds of anxieties, and since they were contemporary anxieties, a means that would have been legible to a middle-brow readership. Bracco argues that middlebrow writing of the interwar period was attached to patriotism, continuity and community in its reformulations of the First World War, as opposed to the harsher high-brow, modernist view. Invocations of the past were more than conservative nostalgia. They established 'a contemporary moral model' of a society 'based not on a realignment of existing social structures but on the denial of the ugly symptoms of class; envy, acrimony, the eruption of demands'.⁵⁴ Bracco sees the cultural success of such writing evinced in the powerful call of patriotism and social cohesion in 1939. Neverthe-

⁵² Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, p. 332–3.

⁵³ Mighall, *Mapping the Victorian Gothic*, pp. 251, xviii.

⁵⁴ Bracco, *Merchants of Hope*, pp. 18, 199, 201.

less, Allingham's use of the Gothic arguably signals the incompleteness of this project.

The First World War features less in Allingham (born 1904) than it does, for example, in Dorothy Sayers (born 1893). One of the vulnerabilities of Sayers's detective Peter Wimsey was his horrific wartime experience of burial alive by shelling in France. Allingham and her network were just too young to have been participants in the 1914–18 war. She created Campion as four years older than herself. Those four years were, however, crucial, since Campion was old enough to have made 'the last six months' of the war.⁵⁵ Sparing him the horrors of the Somme and Passchendaele, Allingham nevertheless endows her character with the memory and experience of the Marne and Amiens – battles that the Allies had reasonable certainty of winning, but large scale and hard fought none the less. Even though Campion is hardly a muscular hero, he has experienced something of one of the key defining moments of twentieth-century British masculinity, though between the wars this seemed by no means an entirely triumphant moment. Social and cultural anxieties around damaged postwar masculinities are well documented; overall, 1.2 million men were entitled to disability pensions in 1919.⁵⁶

Allingham was well aware of the difference between her contemporaries and 'these war blokes'. Writing in her diary of a friend, Leslie Cresswell, who had suffered shell-shock, she saw him as an uncanny post-war identity: 'there's something odd and missing about him (half a dead thing)'.⁵⁷ She reflected in diaries and correspondence on the rather brittle and heavily sexualized gaiety of the 'barmy nights' with which her social set sought to laugh away the shadow of war in the 1920s. Feeling the lack of the generation immediately ahead of them, they forged their own mores (she claimed) in something of a moral vacuum: hence, the stoicism and uncertainty with which they later, in their early forties, confronted the beginning of the Second World War.

The early war years produced a novel, *Traitor's Purse*, of Campion at work for the security services 'saving England', and unable to deliver vital secrets because of amnesia. This psychological liminality does, however, enable Campion to overcome his reticence and propose marriage to Amanda Fitton. The later war years are marked by another London mystery. *Coroner's Pidgin* (1945) is redolent of the late 1930s novels but clearly signals change in this post-blitz metropolis. On leave after three years of overseas service, Campion stumbles on a murder which both highlights the disintegration of the interwar, elite social world and underlines the staying power of what was good, moral and essentially 'English' across the upheaval of total war. The aristocratic and superlatively achieving

⁵⁵ Allingham, *Dancers in Mourning*, p. 66.

⁵⁶ J.M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Macmillan, London, 1985) pp. 273–5.

⁵⁷ Thorogood, *Margery Allingham*, p. 164. On anxieties about masculinity post-First World War, see Joanna Bourke, 'Effeminacy, Ethnicity and the End of Trauma: Shellshock', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 (2000) pp. 57–69, and her *Dismembering the Male* (Granta, London, 1999).

Johnny Carados, a remnant of interwar high society, seems set to be another version of the deluded and insane killers of the 1930s novels. He began, he says, to suspect himself: 'Whenever I get a thread and follow it up and see a vague figure disappearing at the end of it, and I press on until I see his face, whom do you think it turns out to be? Mr. Campion. Myself. My God, it would almost be a relief to think I was mad.'⁵⁸ Carados, split between the two worlds of society and the RAF, two periods of past and present and potentially two identities (hero and killer), turns out to be heading out on a secret and successful bombing raid, and is in the end vindicated. But if Carados can be vindicated in the stringencies of war, his place in the postwar world seems less secure.

Postwar London retained key elements of continuity with the culture and society of the pre-war city. As Porter's social history puts it:

the trams sailed majestically through pea-soupers; East Enders had their knees-up at the pub and went hop-picking in August; contented commuters ... tended their herbaceous borders ... variety enjoyed its swansong at the Hackney and Deptford Empires ... The coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, when ... neighbourhood parties were staged in bunting-festooned streets, was the high spot of London as a prosperous, well-integrated, secure ... city.⁵⁹

Yet the tensions with elements of modernity, of the limits to postwar consensus despite the leap forward into a welfare state, of a new generation coming to grips with a postwar nuclear age, were evident. To confront this new world Allingham invented a new character. Deputy Detective Inspector and later Chief Superintendent Charles Luke, as a companion detective intelligence for the upper-class amateur, Campion. Luke is an amazing hybrid – a star policeman and therefore very much a representative of the law, he is also affective, moral, emotional, highly sexualized, hypermasculine and 'a tough':

Seated on the edge of the table, his hands in his pockets, his hat over his eyes, his muscles spoiling the shape of his civilian coat, he might well have been a gangster. There was a lot of him, but his compact and sturdy bones tended to disguise his height. He had a live dark face with a strong nose, narrow vivid eyes, and his smile, which was ready, had yet a certain ferocity.⁶⁰

Charlie Luke is Allingham's take on Raymond Chandler's 'complete man'. Luke is 'a heterosexual physical and moral entity',⁶¹ but emerges twenty years after *The Simple Art of Murder* formulated the 'hard-boiled' riposte to the English school of Golden Age detective fiction. Luke walks the mean streets of rain-soaked, postwar Bayswater 'like a proud cat', and

⁵⁸ M. Allingham, *Coroner's Pidgin* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995) p. 129.

⁵⁹ Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1994) p. 344.

⁶⁰ M. Allingham, *More Work for the Undertaker* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991) p. 28.

⁶¹ Nickerson, *Web of Iniquity*, p. 203.

confronts (among other criminals) murderers who are as intelligent, sexualized and masculine as he is.⁶² In some ways, Campion is displaced from the centre of the detecting enterprise, his milder mannered polite aristocratic style being, as Luke says, 'too nice' for the new world. Rather it is more effective to see the dyad as an (uncanny) doubling of detection from the old and new worlds.

Allingham's postwar fiction re-examines the relationship of present and past and the moral problems it posed.⁶³ The 'Bayswater' novels explore postwar London through a different and more pervasive notion of evil. The criminal gangs of the early 1930s have given ground to both greater and lesser criminals, from 'subnormal' delinquents to a couple of well-drawn, distinctive and thoroughly ruthless serial killers, potentially more bad than mad. These four novels all take place in a Gothicized (I'd argue feminized) Dickensian London townscape.⁶⁴ In *More Work for the Undertaker* (1948) the local bank manager, chemist and undertaker turn out to be running a racket whereby escaping criminals are drugged and smuggled out of the country in a coffin. The killer, the unobtrusive bank manager, is motivated in part by greed but (perversely) by a pathological hankering after the more gracious Edwardian social world. After a police chase across a London irrevocably changed by bomb damage, the undertaker is apprehended making away with a coffin which, when opened is found to contain the drugged murderer, packed in with bundles of money. In *Hide My Eyes* (1958) the Gothic is more restrained, but still significant. A ruthless serial killer denies both sentimentality and his own past. Gerry Hawker is vulnerable only through his friendship with Polly Tassie, a motherly figure who runs a museum of bizarre curios, the property of her late husband. This grotesque adjunct to the domestic seems to construct Polly's house and neighbourhood as a liminal space. Feeling entirely safe around the house and museum, Gerry eventually grows careless and gives himself away. Hawker uses the museum's life-size models of a Darby and Joan elderly couple as uncanny talismans. He sits them as passengers in a bus he uses as a getaway vehicle, and they are the means by which the police eventually identify him as the killer.

In *Tiger in the Smoke* (1952) the return of a repressed violent masculinity into a fog-stifled London sets off a chain of murders. Jack Havoc, who had followed a violent teen age as an interwar juvenile delinquent with a military career marked by criminal as well as battlefield killing, breaks out of prison and returns to London searching for clues to the location of a treasure he found out about in a bloody wartime

⁶² R. Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (Ballantine, New York, 1972); Allingham, *More Work for the Undertaker*, p. 280.

⁶³ For a different kind of attempt at the reconciliation of pre- and postwar styles, see also C. Breward, 'Style and Subversion: Postwar Poses and the Neo-Edwardian Suit in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain', *Gender & History*, 14 (2002) pp. 560–83.

⁶⁴ Compare Frank Mort, 'Majesty, Morality, Murder: Metropolitan Culture and the Rillington Place Killings, London 1953', paper presented to North American Conference on British Studies Annual Meeting, Baltimore, USA, October 2002.

commando raid. 'Dad's back,' he announces, reclaiming an NCO's pseudo-paternal authority over his platoon, itself grotesquely reconstituted as a war-damaged, maimed ex-servicemen's band. Havoc, believing that fate or (as he terms it) the Science of Luck is directing him, murders four people before he finds the treasure he seeks is worthless to him.

In a 1963 novel, *The China Governess*, the plot revolves around establishing the identity of a baby abandoned among wartime evacuees. History and narrative compete with biological inheritance as the raw materials of identity formation. Could Turk's Mile, the corrupt, Dickensian pre-war slum, produce a clean-limbed young hero such as Timothy, or only Barry, the vicious, criminal delinquent? These two finally confront each other in the ancient cellar of the family house:

[Barry] stood there facing them, still swinging on his strangely rooted feet. Even in full light he was horrific, and that despite his terror which came across to them like an odour. He was tall and phenomenally slender but bent now like a foetus... He was dressed in black from head to foot in jacket and jeans so tight that they did not permit a wrinkle... and also – an item which gave him a particular element of nightmare – his head and face were covered with a tight black nylon stocking which flattened his features out of human likeness without hiding them altogether.⁶⁵

The Gothic signals a past that inappropriately refuses to go away. Several of Allingham's female characters – for example Georgia Wells in *The Fashion in Shrouds*, or Polly Tassie, who, in *Hide My Eyes*, refuses to see the evidence that her favoured Gerry is the murderer – are marked as inappropriately old-fashioned once the era which shaped their personality is past, and therefore function to produce dangers within the plot. Both Barry and Havoc are modern terrors, but at the same time products of the pre-war urban nightmare. Julian Symons argued that 'the crime novel is a modern version of an old morality play'.⁶⁶ Yet the power of the law as the embodiment of secular morality is severely tested in Allingham's post-war novels. Havoc escapes the due process of law, evading the police to make his own end through suicide. As a depiction of evil, the (female and middle-class) killer in *China Governess* is overshadowed by Barry. Even as he is led away by police and probation officers, it is clear Barry will prove an intractable problem for the methods of penal welfarism. In *The Mind Readers* (1965), Allingham's last completed novel, the murderer is individually eliminated, but he is merely an apparatchik of a dehumanized, disinterested evil generated by corporate capitalism in the nuclear age, which will produce other similar killers. The power of law as represented contingently by Campion, or more directly by Luke, seems diluted. 'The theme of each generation's responsibility for itself is

⁶⁵ M. Allingham, *The China Governess* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965) pp. 223–4.

⁶⁶ J. Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (Faber & Faber, London, 1972) p. 133; Martin, *Ink in Her Blood*, p. 4.

brought into focus,⁶⁷ and the characters charged with the responsibility of carrying the law into this risky future seem painfully and idealistically young; in *Mind Readers* they are children. Nevertheless, one thing remains constant: however bright, enterprising and beautiful, the young women of the romantic dyads who lead the way into the clouded future are quite clearly positioned as the supporters and maintainers of the final guarantor of secular morality – the heroic, sexualized, authoritative, moral English male.⁶⁸ The timeless heterosexual dyad is Allingham's uncertain answer to the troubles of the altered postwar world.

VII. Conclusion

Margery Allingham's novels, successful and well-read examples of middlebrow Golden Age crime fiction, indicate contingencies between stresses in a middle-class household and the professional use she made of these in her novels. Allingham's narrative use of the Gothic comprised tactical textual manoeuvres signalling tensions over gender, sexuality and the unevenness of progression from past to present, both these aspects interrelated for Allingham through her ideas about social connection and her commitment to family.

Detective fiction was frequently consumed within a framework of domesticity, leisure and pleasurable reading practices. Its tropes, and those of middlebrow romances, could be appropriated by journalists seeking acceptable ways of presenting 'real life' murders in the press. Although the point cannot be fully argued here, I would suggest that across clear differences, the shared ground between fictional, journalistic and much professional writing about crime was the inflection of criminality and deviance with disrupted or disruptive domesticity. These could often be positioned as working-class delinquencies, thus manageable through the disciplinary projects of penal welfarism. Yet, the middlebrow reader also had lived experience of the imperfections of conservative modern domesticity. Crime novels appealed to a middle-class readership because their closures and literary gestures offered reassuring identifications between reader and plot, yet they were detailed and involving enough to explore tensions within middlebrow cultures. Conservative modern citizens' public and private roles were linked through the (gendered and classed) cultural capital invested in domestic middlebrow respectability. Appropriate and 'modern' gender relationships underpinned domestic respectabilities which both secured middle-class status and, from 'conservative modern' perspectives, offered a model of desirable social progress. Crime fiction was interesting, at least in part, because the criminal was the uncanny opposite of the respectable citizen,

⁶⁷ Pike, *Campion's Career*, p. 210.

⁶⁸ Nicola Humble also argues for continuities of traditional gender identities, across the massive upheaval of the Second World War.

the abjected other haunting the boundaries of social responsibility, should middlebrow respectabilities unravel.

Although anxious, mutable and often uncertain, the English middle classes between the 1920s and 1960s were in major respects a social and cultural success story. The cautious progressivism of 'conservative modernity' made sense both in suburban villas and in (at least stretches of) the corridors of power. Although this limited discussion does not support a firm conclusion, my tentative suggestion is that the cultural historian might also find the professional narratives of the penal welfare system implicated in middlebrow assumptions.⁶⁹ This is not to argue that the penal welfare complex followed the logics of detective fiction, or that the voices from suburbia were unanimous and uncontested, or that one can read off cultural determinants from fictional texts. Far from it. Fiction is not history, and only cautious, conservative and extensive research preserves histories from becoming fictions. Nevertheless, what this brief excursion can suggest is ways in which a contribution to a history of reading among the twentieth-century middle classes might proceed. Detective stories were clearly not 'real', but they were sufficiently hooked into middlebrow concerns to act as 'stories to think with'.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Cox, *Gender, Justice, and Welfare*, pp. 157–60.