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Home is Where the Hearth Is: The Englishness of Agatha Christie's Marple Novels

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I

Agatha Christie's popularity seems obvious to everybody except literary critics. In this chapter I shall explore this persistent popularity, and try to articulate it by drawing on German literary terms; in particular the notion of *Heimatlichkeit*.

Although Agatha Christie is the world's best-selling English-language novelist, she has received remarkably little sustained critical attention. As a writer of 'middle-brow' detective fiction, and as the creator of a discretely charming world of the bourgeoisie, she has not appealed to most literary critics. Above all, the writer, whose works are a considerable presence in bookshops, libraries and homes, is quite noticeable by her absence in most surveys of female novelists and in recent studies of women's writing. Her books' popularity has, however, been tentatively investigated by writers on crime fiction.¹ What these studies overlook, though, is the way that the 'mechanical reproduction' of Christie's fiction by film and television has contributed to her continuing popularity. Therefore, I shall consider why the Christie texts in both their printed and reproduced forms have continued to satisfy their audiences. In doing this, I shall concentrate on those works that feature Christie's spinster sleuth, Miss Marple, and discuss their sustained cultural resonance.

The ability of Christie's novels to enthral has been attributed, in appropriately pharmacological terms, to her craft in distilling the formula for the 'Classic' detective story. All twelve Jane Marple novels and the various short stories follow a clue-puzzle scheme. Christie's satisfaction with the potency of the formula is demonstrated by her prolific output, with most of her novels adhering to the pattern of narrative established in very early texts, such as *The*

Mysterious Affair at Styles (1920) and *Murder on the Links* (1923).² The repeated ordering of her novels with a constant movement towards 'closure' through 'disclosure',³ involving recurrent characters and types, offers predictability and reassurance. Her books' popularity depends on a certain propriety and familiarity of structure, and, moreover, on the decorum of her moral universe. Although peopled by murderers and petty criminals, the realm of the Christie novel is both materially and morally comfortable. Violence takes place in the wings. Unresolved needs and messy emotions remain unexplored and are eventually closed off for good by the solving of the puzzle and the expulsion of the wrongdoer. Crimes are individual, and it is rare for the Christie book to show the mass or group as culpable. *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) may present more than one murderer, but it is made clear that each murderer has an individual grudge against the victim. Any explanations that move away from the individual and place the responsibility for crimes on wider groupings appear as improbable possibilities within Christie's conventionalised positioning of the individual inside a bourgeois value system. Disclosures such as civic corruption, poverty, the breakdown of established institutions and internecine struggles between interest groups are only hinted at. It is the comforting *bien-être* of the probable impossibility – the elaborate murder of a marriage partner, an ingenious way of revenging a past wrong, the cunning concealment of a desire for material gain – that contributes to her success. Moral, social and legal complexities are palliated in her novels, and we are left with a seemingly complex, but fundamentally simple, tale concerning the quest of individual detective. More complex aspects of the narrative lie hidden in the text, as we are directed to the detective's search for 'what has not been told and its reconstruction'.⁴

As a literary producer, Christie was able to complete three such works in a year. Christie moved to Collins from John Lane in 1926, and she stayed with these publishers until her death in 1976. A curious portrait of their productive 'Queen of Crime' is on the cover of some Fontana/Collins paperback editions.⁵ A very old Christie, dressed in black, stares out at the prospective buyer. There are pearls at her neck, and on her wrist is a large, functional-looking watch. Her hands are crossed on her chest in a death pose. The photograph conveys many meanings: sagacity and experience, practicality and longevity, wry humour, the posture of a *grande dame*

21. Other BBC Marple adaptations broadcast since 1984, outside the Christmas period, are *The Moving Finger*, *A Murder is Announced*, *A Pocket Full of Rye* and *Sleeping Murder*.
22. In making such a strong case for the cultural resonance of the country house in Christie's work, I appear to be at variance with Raymond Williams, who argues that her setting is a mere structural device in his *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973) pp. 248–9.

(of the British Empire) and possibly a *Doppelgängerin* for Jane Marple. There is also some suggestion, as in other equally deliberate portraits prominent on book covers, that she should be instantly recognised; that this once most private of literary figures is in the public domain. Such a publicising of Christie can also be seen in Janet Morgan's biography, where its subject is 'Agatha Christie, the world's best-selling author . . . a public institution'. Christie's part in the received heritage of Britain is scarcely elaborated upon by her publishers, and it is necessary to ask how this could be true. As 'The Queen of Crime', she occupies a paramount position in English-language literature, being its most translated and best-selling writer.⁶ For instance, the Penguin 'Christie Million' 1950 imprint alone sold over two and a half million copies. Although any statements about readership, and how and where her texts are read, must be hypothetical, the high public profile of Christie novels is clearly evident. The manufacturing of Christie and her works as part of British tradition and national heritage is seen most clearly, though, in her recent veneration as part of the 'traditional' family Christmas on national television.

Christie's crime narratives had been presented in other media than print during her lifetime. Theatre and wireless were preferred to film and television. In particular, she wrote a body of plays for the stage, one of which, *The Mousetrap* (1952), stands as a semi-permanent memorial to its author as the world's longest-running commercial play. Despite well-crafted adaptations, such as *And Then There Were None* (1945), directed by René Clair, and Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), Christie, who maintained considerable control over her work, became reluctant to sell the film and television rights to her novels.

Part of her reluctance may have stemmed from the Marple adaptations, *Murder She Said* (1961), *Murder at the Gallop* (1963), *Murder Most Foul* (1964) and *Murder Ahoy!* (1964). In these films the plot structure of the originals is tampered with, and Margaret Rutherford's forcefully eccentric, almost androgynous, performance disrupts the idea of Jane Marple as genteel upholder of social convention. Rutherford's Marple belongs more to the crime fiction tradition of the outsider sleuth, a type seen in Christie's Poirot. Few films and no television adaptations were made between those Marple films and Christie's death. The only film production of note was the lavish and highly profitable 'all-star vehicle' of *Murder on*

the *Orient Express* (1974). Appropriate to Christie’s regal status, it is reported that Lord Mountbatten was involved in persuading her to release the rights to EMI.

With Christie’s death, ‘Agatha Christie Ltd.’ has released the rights to more novels to film and television companies. ‘Agatha Christie Ltd.’ was founded in the author’s lifetime, and now consists of the Booker Company and Christie’s closest relatives.⁸ Adaptations made since her death fall into two broad categories: those versions sponsored from the United States for an international market, and British productions aimed primarily at the home audience, but which, with foreign investment and marketing, can be sold elsewhere. A product in the latter category was London Weekend Television’s *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1981), which was made in collaboration with Mobil Showcase. Christie reproductions were well displayed in the programming for British domestic entertainment over the Christmas period 1987, when no less than six filmed versions of Christie texts and a radio play of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* were presented.

Not only the quantity of these reproductions is remarkable, but so too the recurrent notion that they are somehow ‘true-to-the-original’. Her texts, which off screen offer brief pleasures, must be preserved intact on screen. The conservation of the Christie original is seen in three obvious ways: the choice of location, the casting of actors and a strict adherence to the plot formula. Fully ‘authentic’ settings are re-created, including crossovers between the real and fictional worlds of Christie such as the use of Greenway House, Christie’s old home in Devon, for the location for LWT’s *The Seven Dials Mystery*. An entry in the *Radio Times* for Christmas 1987 illustrates this craving after consistent realism. The chief engineer of the Severn Valley Railway apologises for the possible inaccuracy of the trains in the BBC’s *4.50 from Paddington* by stating:

As it is the 50’s . . . strictly speaking, the carriages should have been red and cream – but we hadn’t got enough of those. . . . But it’s not wildly out, because the colours changed after the Great Western Railway was nationalised in 1948, it didn’t all happen overnight.

A railway enthusiast’s response, perhaps, for Christie’s novel is not placed in such a definite historical context. Similarly, the actors for the Christie period pieces are fashioned with great care, and it is

7. Sanders and Lovallo, *The Agatha Christie Companion*, p. 434.
8. *Observer*, 27 December 1987, offers an interesting interview with Christie’s daughter, Rosalind, about the policies of ‘Agatha Christie Ltd.’
9. ‘Week’s Good Cause’, BBC Radio 4, St George’s Day, 23 April 1988.
10. Knight, *Form and Ideology*, p. 117.
11. See Heinrich Meyer’s introduction, ‘Bestseller Research Problems’, in Donald Ray Richards, *The German Bestseller in the 20th Century: A Complete Bibliography and Analysis, 1915–1940* (Berne: Herbert Lang, 1968).
12. Peter Zimmermann, *Der Bauernroman* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche, 1975) p. 99.
13. A much fuller description of *Heimatkichtung, Blut und Boden* and *Trivialliteratur* can be found in the following: Helga Geyer-Ryan, ‘Popular Literature in the Third Reich’, trans. Kiernan Ryan, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham Stencilled Occasional Paper, no. 60, pp. 1–15; Henry and Mary Garland, *The Oxford Companion to German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) p. 357; Hermann Glaser, *The Cultural Roots of National Socialism*, trans. Ernest A. Menze (London: Croon Helm, 1978) pp. 154–62; Uwe K. Ketelsen, *Völkisch-National und Nationalsozialistische Literatur in Deutschland, 1890–1945* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976) *passim*; Walter Nutz, ‘Trivialliteratur Seit 1965’, in Paul Michael Lützeler and Egon Schwarz (eds), *Deutsche Literatur in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965* (Königstein: Athenäum, 1980) pp. 150–63; J. M. Ritchie, *German Literature under National Socialism* (London: Croon Helm, 1983) pp. 8–20, 94–110; Zimmermann, *Der Bauernroman, passim*.
14. Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1978) pp. 421–2.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 423.
16. Mary Louise Pratt lists these activities as assumed female verbal procedures in ‘Linguistic Utopias’, in N. Fabb, D. Attridge, A. Durrant and C. MacCabe (eds), *The Linguistics of Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) p. 54.
17. Although here glib categories of ‘popular’ and ‘élite’ break down, as Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* (1901) was by far the best-selling novel in Germany in the early part of this century (1915–40).
18. Christie, *Autobiography*, p. 13.
19. See the Introduction by Peter Humm, Paul Stigant and Peter Widdowson in their *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History* (London and New York: Methuen 1986), pp. 1–15, for a discussion of how television and film create a fusion of ‘great’ and ‘minor’ literature within the realm of the popular.
20. Simon Frith in ‘The Pleasures of the Hearth’ in *Formations of Pleasure*, ed. Formations Editorial Collective: Tony Bennett et al. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983) pp. 101–23, discusses how the wireless was seen as a ‘radio hearth’ for the family, in the BBC’s Reithian aims of creating a public service and entertainment for a common culture.

Outside the heritage industry, the symptoms of a new *Home* with residual features of the past can be discovered in the re-emergence of a servant class of cooks, nannies and parlourmaids, and the retreat from the inner cities to the suburbs and beyond. All these cultural artefacts and practices appear to celebrate the past as the principal hope for the future. Such a celebration of the past also extends to the extolling of the good, old values to prepare for the new order. Marple's (and Christie's) Old Toryism, with its comforting exclusion of the belligerent aspects of Monetarist New Toryism, appears a benign anachronism in the 1980s. It is in this wider context that Christie's works and their reproductions are now partially received. A good deal of the satisfaction offered by the BBC's Miss Marple re-creations is in the invitation they extend to emigrate inwards to a world of the *Home* countries.

Notes

1. See John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976) pp. 111–31; *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, ed. H. R. F. Keating (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977) *passim*; Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980) pp. 107–34; Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder* (Harmondsworth, Middx.: Penguin, 1974) pp. 102–4, 110–12, 134–5.
2. A comprehensive listing of Christie's many works is available in Dennis Sanders and Len Lovallo, *The Agatha Christie Companion* (London: W. H. Allen, 1984) *passim*.
3. Catherine Belsey uses this helpful description in 'Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text', in Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (eds), *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) p. 53.
4. Ernst Bloch, 'Philosophische Ansicht des Detektivromans', in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd 9 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965) pp. 242–63. I am indebted to Bloch's distinction between the *detektivisch* and the *detektorisch* aspects of the crime narrative.
5. Rosalind Brunt has commented in a similar way on the image created of and by Barbara Cartland in 'A Career in Love: the Romantic World of Barbara Cartland', in Christopher Pawling (ed.), *Popular Fiction and Social Change* (London: Macmillan, 1984) pp. 127–56.
6. Janet Morgan cites a 1961 UNESCO report, which stated that Christie was the world's best-selling author with her books sold in 102 countries (twice as many as the runner-up, Graham Greene) in her thorough *Agatha Christie: A Biography* (London: Fontana, 1985) p. 326.

not regarded as a contravention of reality when Joan Hickson, 'TV's Miss Marple', takes on the guise of Christie's character to appeal for charity on the radio. After all, as Hickson says, 'She is a fiction, but is real to me.'⁹

The search for the 'authentic' has in part been set up by the demands and conventions of costume drama, and, more generally, by the aesthetic of consistent realism sustained by the medium of television. But the updating of some well-known works on film and television is in contrast to the deliberate 'dating' of the Christie books. For example, the BBC Shakespeare productions, and the James Bond novels, are repeatedly modernised – presumably as a response to a perceived need for 'actuality' in their audiences. The 'dating' of the Christie novels is particularly apparent in the BBC's Marple re-creations. The reason for this appears to be a conjunction between Christie as 'public institution' and a particular construction of Englishness in the Marple books.

II

The Marple novels can be seen as late pastorals, Arcadian versions of both the detective form and village life in the Home Counties, 'a dream of bourgeois rural living without the heights, depths or conflicts of real social activity'.¹⁰ Pastoral may seem an attractive term alongside 'Golden Age', that other much-used description for Christie's fiction. However, at the risk of adding yet another label to be attached to Christie's 'Classic', 'Golden Age' crime writing, I should like to suggest that the German term, *Heimatdichtung*, allows a more successful discussion of the Marple novels. 'Pastoral' has too diffuse and complicated a historical development to be applied with any precision of meaning to Christie's novels.

Heimatdichtung (regional writing) flourished in Germany in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of this century as part of a wider *Heimatkunst* (regional art) movement. *Heimat* writing included ballad poetry, autobiographical sketches and novels. Drawing on nineteenth-century antecedents such as Gotthelf, Stifter and Storm, the *Heimat* novelists favoured the small town or village as the setting for their books, with the inhabitants of the province as their heroes. Such a setting is used as the location for Gustav Frenssen's *Jörn Uhl* (1901), which enjoyed a remarkable

commercial success, and can be regarded as Germany's first best-seller, selling over 130,000 copies in its first year of publication. *Jörn Uhl* charts the life of a decent, hard-working farmer's son, who tries to preserve the family farm, despite the shiftlessness of his own family and a succession of natural catastrophes. Eventually, Jörn is forced to give up the farm, and he founds a cement works. In this new occupation he can aid the community by maintaining dikes and canals. At the end of his career he is able to review his life's work with satisfaction. Sometimes the *Heimat* novelist locates the text in the city, but then moves its location to the country to emphasise the regenerative value of rural life. This change of setting occurs in Clara Viebig's *Eine Handvoll Erde (A Handful of Earth)* (1915), where a country woman by birth, Mine, who now lives in Berlin, rents a small weekend plot in the country. The novel is resolved by a benefactor buying the freehold of the plot for Mine and her family, thus ensuring them of further contact with the countryside. Unlike Britain, where crime fiction has dominated the best-seller lists, many best-selling novels in the earlier part of this century in Germany were not examples of 'Classic' detective fiction, but were *Heimat* texts of some kind.¹¹ These *Heimat* bestsellers include Paul Keller's *Waldwinter* (1902) and Felicitas Rose's *Heide-schulmeister Uwe Karsten* (1909), both of which had sold over half a million copies by the middle of the century.

The main ideological thrust of the *Heimat* narrative is a consciously anti-urban and anti-cosmopolitan stance, expressed at times in the portrayal of a 'reactionary Utopia'¹² rooted in German soil. Outside pressures threaten this Teutonic haven, and, in the novels with a contemporary setting, this threat very often takes the form of the 'asphalt world' of the city. In many of the works, there is a sense of cultural pessimism. The new urban world puts the traditional farmstead and village at risk. They are presented as the right and natural bases of economic production, and, as such, must be fought for in the face of human and natural dangers. In this backward-looking Arcadia, the organic and natural are emphasised. This organicism was stressed even further in the National Socialist appropriation of the *Heimat* forms in *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) writing and the *Heimat* film, when questions of racial determinism, duty to the fatherland and *völkisch* biological arguments became increasingly prominent.

The concerns of *Heimatkunst* were perpetuated after World War Two in the Federal Republic, in the *Heimatfilm*, for example, the

onwards has assumed a shared sense of citizenship in its viewers; a notion that we are inhabitants of a common, but at the same time pluralistic, culture. This assumed pluralism can be seen in other television detective creations, such as *Taggart*, *Bergener*, *Shoestring* and the *farceur* thriller, *The Beiderbecke Affair*, which make important a distinct regional locality. The presumption of a common culture, though, is nowhere more apparent than on Christmas Day, with our position as subjects of a common realm revived yearly by the Queen's speech.

The programming of a Miss Marple story on Christmas Day, amidst the various other Christie offerings, has produced new categories of meaning for the 'Queen of Crime's' texts. By publishing her novels in October or November, her publishers ensured that her books would be newly available for the Christmas market, and that their author would be associated with the Christmas season in the advertising slogan, 'A Christie for Christmas'. The broadcasting of the Marple text on Christmas Day not only implies continuity and stability, but it also plays on ideas of *Home*. The *Home* element of the Marple novels is brought to the fore in their translation to the screen. The clue puzzle is part of their popularity, of course, and the *bienséance* of her moral and social scheme supports ideas of Christmas as the time of family reconciliation, the 'family hearth' writ large. But, more than anything, I would argue that it is the presentation of *Home* that charms the viewer – *Home* reconstructed through the medium of television as past-ness. The attractive scenes of village life in the opening credits, and the jaunty Percy Grainger-like music underscore this, but it is the location of the texts – the English village with its age-old church, Blue Boar pub, cottages, village green and country house – that has become one of the most potent cultural images of the 1980s. This constructed view of England was also a powerful representation when Christie first began writing, but the historical locations of the BBC Marple texts filmed so far, with their lavishly and meticulously created facsimiles of pre-1960s England, have further provided compelling, and largely invented, visions of peaceful cohabitation and generally lawful behaviour – our recent 'Golden Ages'.²² The heritage industry has manufactured a desire for the English country house in a harmonious England, which can be seen in the surprising persistence of country house and country living magazines, the quasi-ruralism of urban architecture, the Neo-Georgian, Victorian, and Edwardian trends of interior design.

(1952) are all in part controlled by Miss Marple. Through her, the community is ensured of survival. And, more often than not, the resolution of the Marple book, with its reinstatement of a stable and comfortable life of the bourgeoisie, its mythical 'return to the beginnings', resembles Christie's own portrayal of her snug, pre-war childhood, where her early days are presented as being happy ever before.¹⁸

In the same way that some German writers lamented alien (*artfremd*) urban influences upon the world of the province, Christie in the Marple texts sees the metropolis as the breeding-ground for widespread depravity and new-fangled ideas. Unlike a broadly constructed idea of pastorality, the countryside is not equated with simplicity and innocence. Without fail, it is made clear in the novels that Jane Marple is well acquainted with wickedness through living in St Mary Mead. Human nature is seen as constant, unchanging, predictable and fixed by birth, whether in the metropolis or in the province. However, it is implied that small-scale social organisations, where individuality is maintained, allow this wickedness to be tracked down and thwarted. Very rarely is human motivation presented as complex, ambiguous and at times inexplicable. Christie makes fun of the 'psychological' writer in her creation of Raymond West, Marple's nephew. Like his aunt, West investigates aberrant human behaviour, but he does not display her decorous gentility, nor her resigned sanguinity about human beings. West, in his modern, difficult, but successful, novels writes about 'such unpleasant people, doing such very odd things'. His work is not to his aunt's taste, versed in the 'official' culture of Shakespeare and Tennyson.

The Marple text itself has been shaped as part of 'official' culture by television and film. Not content with presenting the English person abroad at a historical distance in such products as *The Jewel in the Crown*, *Fortunes of War* and *A Room with a View*, television and film have turned to the Englishwoman at home.¹⁹ The Christie television adaptations by ITV were first shown on Sunday evenings, with their residual connotations of the 'family hearth'.²⁰ In 1984 the BBC produced its first Marple adaptation, *The Body in the Library*, which was shown over the Christmas period in three parts. In 1986 and 1987 a Marple text (*Murder at the Vicarage*, 4.50 from *Paddington*) has been broadcast in a single 'slot' on the very day of the year that celebrates the domestic and familial to the greatest extent, Christmas Day.²¹ British television from its early days

cinematic equivalent of printed literature. Indeed, it is this form of the *Heimatfilm* that was reshaped and problematised by Edgar Reitz in his epic family saga, *Heimat* (1984), filmed in his native Hunsrück. A late example of *Heimatkunst* is perhaps West German television's popular soap opera, *Schwarzwaldklinik* (*Black Forest Clinic*), which combines *Heimat* elements with the doctor-and-nurse tale of best-selling romantic fiction. *Schwarzwaldklinik's* debt to *Heimat* preoccupations can be seen in the idealised portrayal of both the landscape and the clinic. The extended happy family of Professor Brinkmann's chalet-like clinic is positioned against a German forest Utopia (a composite created from thirty-two different location shots and not a drop of acid rain in sight). The stability of his medical haven is continually under pressure from events and visitors from the less idyllic world outside this cosy corner of the Black Forest.

Heimat texts are 'realistic', with dialect forms frequently used to accentuate the regional location, such as Hermann Löns's works set on the Lüneburg Heath. In common with other popular and folk forms, the *Heimat* text is generally resolved by a happy ending. Class, economic and gender antagonisms are placated by the affirmation of belonging to a particular region, village or family. Continuity is stressed, not change. Above all, the importance of *Heimat* is made prominent; a word that conveys many meanings – hearth, country, region, place of origin, home. *Heimatliteratur* can be seen as a response to rapid changes in the socio-political life of Germany from unification onwards. It reveals a crisis in what constituted 'Germany' and being 'German', and in many, but not all, quarters, represented an arch-conservative reaction to a newly industrialised and urbanised world. This is shown to some extent by the great number of texts endorsing the small-scale, indigenous and domestic that are published at times of expansion, modernisation and urbanisation.¹³

The 'Golden Age' crime writers created an idealised version of bourgeois life at a time of great social and political changes, when they perhaps perceived a threat to their own class position. The *Heimtdichter* created an agrarian Utopia as their answer to historical change. I do not wish to make any parallels between the historical positions of the *Heimat* writers and that of Christie, or impose a critical terminology crudely on the Marple books. But, with due caution, these novels may be read as English *Heimtdichtung*, and their recent film and television enactments as *Heimatfilme*.

Although Christie's texts do not promote the pronounced regional identity of German *Heimatkultung*, and the ideal state in her novels has little to do with the agricultural world of the German peasant-farmer, or any agricultural world for that matter, the Marple novels share many of the ideological concerns of *Heimat* writing. *Heimat*, as used to describe literary and cinematic texts, has acquired a much broader application since it was used to categorise the work of members of the *Heimatkunst* movement. Nowadays it is widely used to describe works that enshrine or come to terms with a quintessentially 'German' rural experience. I should also like to argue that the Marple books in their printed and more obviously in their filmed forms encapsulate a similarly cherished and narrowly circumscribed picture of England and Englishness. Christie's 'regional writing', which I shall refer to as *Home* writing, is similarly concerned with national and parochial identities, with a desire to site Englishness. And the recent reception of the Marple texts has been coloured to a large extent by a widespread nostalgia for the old values and setting of a traditional England.

III

So how do the Marple texts function as English *Home* writing? Certainly all the books are located in a sheltered provincial England, apart from the occasional visit to London as in *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965), and the transplanting of Jane Marple to an exotic terrain in *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964). Furthermore, questions dealing with both national and regional identities occur throughout the novels, becoming more frequent in the books written after World War Two. A preoccupation with the nature of English self-identity is intensified throughout the works. The distant authority of Jane Marple in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), *The Moving Finger* (1942) and *Sleeping Murder* (written in the 1940s, but published in 1976) gives way to a much more obviously authoritative voice in the later works. Indeed, in writing the later texts, Christie adjusted Marple's age, which by that time must have reached treble figures, to her own, and many aspects of modern Britain that Christie bemoaned when she made herself public in her autobiography (completed 1965, published 1977) are reiterated by Jane Marple. Christie's increasing cultural pessimism about the state of *post bellum*, Welfare State Britain becomes prominent in the Marple books.

ment is intensified by the unusually Gothic inclusion of the elderly Miss Ramsbottom, who preaches hellfire and damnation to the entire brood from her suite of rooms in the cursed Lodge.

The enemy of a stable provincial society is not just capital in false hands, but also foreign influences. Christie's small-scale ideal is at risk from untoward occurrences within, and also alien elements without. Thus the murderer may dwell in, and be regarded as part of the community, but he or she has a personal history that makes them unsuitable for the host community. The zealot, the possessor of an 'artistic temperament', the intellectually frustrated, the adult warped by a difficult childhood, all feature as criminals. More likely, however, is evidence of a disqualifying blemish in the pedigree – a grandparent was not British, a wife is foreign, the person is adopted and is possibly the result of an alliance with an outsider. In the Marple texts, this insider/outsider model extends in a more overt fashion to the minor characters, who are often nationally determined. Hence, Italians are hot-headed, deceitful and fond of blackmailing; Middle Europeans are tricky and hysterical; the French charming but devious; North Americans exhibit an ingenuous frankness, but sadly lack culture. Nearer to *Home*, Scots are portrayed as sternly practical, phlegmatic and thrifty. However, the imprint of acceptability in St Mary Mead is Englishness, which is constituted as balance, common sense, reasonableness, sympathy, a notion of fair play and tradition and an ability to garden. Those qualities are articulated most fully by Miss Jane Marple, spinster of independent means.

At the end of *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962), Cherry and Jim Baker, who have been grafted from Huddersfield onto St Mary Mead, are invited by Jane Marple into her home as her domestic help. The Bakers are unhappy with the deracinated world of the Development, and are integrated, we presume, into the community through Miss Marple's invitation. Yet, Marple is a woman alone, outside an immediate family. Such a contradictory position in the ideological scheme of Christie's works is almost fully naturalised by her active participation in the happy ending. Marple not only heals the body politic by tracking down the guilty, but also supervises the romance plot by taking on a familial role as both grandmother and fairy godmother. The pregnancy of Griselda in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), Jerry Burton's marriage to the erstwhile *enfant sauvage*, Megan, in *The Moving Finger* (1943), the reunion of the supposedly unhappily married couple in *They Do it with Mirrors*

The redecoration of Gossington Hall in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962) is ostentatious, and the grand plans for the garden are unsuitable for an English country house. Marina Gregg, the Hall's owner, is a chronically rootless and exceedingly wealthy American film-star. Her 'improvements' are in contrast to the familiar use and links with tradition that the Hall suggested in Dolly Bantry's days in *The Body in the Library* (1942). Dolly Bantry, Miss Marple's friend, now inhabits the lodge. The idea that the newly rich are unable to employ their money prudently is seen in the completely valueless collection of archaeological bric-à-brac amassed in a Citizen Kane fashion by old Mr Crackenthorpe in 4.50 *from Paddington* (1957). The Crackenthorpe money is newly acquired from the manufacture of biscuits, Crackenthorpe's Crunchies and CrackerJacks, delicacies that Jane Marple, needless to say, has never savoured. The family is doomed to live in the Neo-Gothic pile of Rutherford Hall. In Christie's work, the Victorian mansion, like Timon's villa, epitomises ugliness, impracticality and social pretension, in contrast to the modesty and well-proportioned elegance of the Georgian house. The Crackenthorpe family is a combination of north of England grit, and, as old Crackenthorpe proudly relates, the descendants of kings, going back to before the Normans. This mixed lineage of plebeian and patrician has produced children who do not display the hallmarks of good breeding, such as Flash Alfred, the financial crook, and Cedric, the penniless painter. The motif of the moral and physical decline of the once flourishing business family is not only confined to Christie's texts, of course, but occurs in a wide range of modern fictions, popular and élite, from Susan Howatch to Thomas Mann.¹⁷

Corruption going hand in hand with business and mixed breeding is delineated much more acutely in *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953). The Fortescue family's money has been made from dealing with money. The original Fortescues were a cross-breed of Central European Fontescu and English Ramsbottom. There are two sons, Lancelot and Percival, who inhabit the baneful Yewtree Lodge, somewhere in the suburbs of London. Adele, the elder Fortescue's wife, 'was a manicurist on the look-out for big money', whilst Percival's wife, a Mackenzie, was a hospital nurse. Yewtree Lodge is the Fortescue's suburban country mansion, but it is far too much 'city' rather than country, and the whole family is shown to be either unscrupulous or deeply unhappy, as none of the family's members occupies any proper place in society. A sense of displace-

In *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962), the physical decline of Marple's health is paralleled by a deterioration in the environment of her native St Mary Mead. She laments the passing of the old, and is saddened by the 'intemperate' modernisation, which, to her mind, finds its worst expression in the sinisterly named 'Development' on the outskirts of the village. The Development is an 'estate' of new houses, and clearly violates Christie/Marple ideas of *Home*. It stands outside the collective value system of the village proper. Order, tradition, rank and a sense of place have been replaced by atomisation, stratification, impersonality and *anomie*.

The pre-war organisation of St Mary Mead is presented as the natural and preferred economic and social system. When subjected to change, this arrangement can have grave consequences for the well-being of the individuals. This is shown by the way some of the motives for murder in the later novels stem directly from post-war realities, such as the perceived excessive burden of taxation in 4.50 *from Paddington* (1957), and a zealous devotion to the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents in *They Do it with Mirrors* (1952). In that novel, the point is put that money spent on treating young offenders would be better used to give poor, but not delinquent, children the chance of work. The care lavished on young offenders is seen as modish and ill-advised, as the boys are outside any accepted value system. Integration into this system for the boy of humble means comes in the form of appropriate employment.

In German *Heimat* texts, the work process is often made prominent to illustrate both the stability and closeness to the soil of the old agrarian order, or the upheavals created by the new city world, as seen in the difficulties rural newcomers have in adjusting to urban employment. Similarly, Christie calls attention to the organisation and distribution of occupations in her Marple novels, emphasising how traditional divisions of labour enable her social arrangements to 'work'. The received notion of the Christie detective novel is that it deals merely with the life of a leisured middle class. Though this is broadly true, Christie discusses and describes day-to-day circumstances of work much more frequently than in many more self-consciously literary works concerned with such participants. The carrying out of domestic chores, shopping, cleaning, clerical work, looking after the sick, raising children, the hiring and firing of servants; all these activities are recorded in detail. These mainly female pursuits also function as a means of crowding the action of the narrative, and diverting the reader from the 'truth' of the deviant behaviour of the criminal.

Much *Heimat* writing in German has been classified by literary critics as *Trivialliteratur*, 'trivial' literature. I have never liked this term with its seemingly *a priori* assumption of triteness and worthlessness in the object of study. But in an oblique way it does seem a rather appropriate description of aspects of Christie's St Mary Mead fiction. The answer to the mysterious in Christie's secular world can be found in the trivial and humdrum: a conceit well visualised in the designs for the covers of some paperback editions. Here, in the manner of Magritte, everyday banal objects, the clues in the puzzle, take on an enigmatic significance. Such an interest in the trivial is continued, and takes on a heightened form, in Ruth Rendell's crime fiction, where Marks and Spencer's pre-cooked meals and copies of *What Car?* become a way of encoding social behaviour for her isolated and disturbed characters. In Christie's novels, though, the enigma of the object relates directly to the elucidation of the crime. In the Marple novels, the practical and observant female makes a better detective than the intellectual or extravagant male – a reversal of the Holmes/Wimsey/ Poirot types. This presumption is further reflected in Christie's own writing. Her sketches for clue puzzles resemble shopping lists and itineraries. Her plots are carefully organised and neatly managed. Throughout her career, her style of writing remained plain, matter-of-fact and unembellished. As Christie remarks in her autobiography, her way of writing is eminently serviceable, and she would not wish to overreach herself by attempting to imitate another writer's.¹⁴

Attention to the practical and to the small-scale recognises the frequently unrecorded home life of women, albeit confined to a specific and privileged class. It is this area of personal influence that Christie describes with affection in her autobiography, including such heroism as successfully chloroforming a hedgehog that had become entangled in a tennis net.¹⁵ Similar everyday, and, on occasion, exceptional, chores are carried out in the Marple novel amidst preponderantly female conversation. Planting suggestions, gossip as a means of supporting and controlling, talking repetitively, often to inanimate objects – all these activities have their uses.¹⁶ Jane Marple uses all these procedures to discover the criminal, and also to disguise her own sagacity. After all, she is only 'a harmless old pussy'.

The authorisation of the domestic, and the positive value placed on female talk, are at once progressive and conservative – progressive, in that they give worth to the circumstances of female domestic life, but conservative in that the texts limit women's

influence to the domestic. This conservatism is seen strikingly in Christie's creation of Lucy Eylesbarrow in *4.50 from Paddington* (1957). Eylesbarrow has taken a First in Mathematics at Oxford, but has rejected an academic career in favour of becoming a kind of super-domestic. The post-war servant problem means that Lucy is in great demand because of her domestic ingenuity and versatility. By the transference of her powers of reasoning and deduction from the academic to the domestic, Lucy's intelligence is tamed. This is shown not to be the case with Clothilde Bradbury-Scott in *Nemesis* (1971). Her superior education, academic ability and handsome appearance have led her to frustration and insanity. Women who live or work outside the social organisation of home and family tend to come to grief. It is the showgirl, the painter, the dancer, the orphaned servant or schoolgirl who become victims of crimes. Above all, the woman who has married into a different class is at risk. The showgirl or manicurist who has married a doctor or businessman is doubly damned as artificial and *arriviste*.

The other side of this social arrangement, the public world of men, does not, however, get as sympathetic a portrayal as the private domain of women. Although there is usually a romance subplot in the novels, the heroes of the romantic fiction of Christie's day – the doctor, the businessman and his sons – are drawn unfavourably. Women, in the Marple books, are the true inheritors and guardians of hearth and home. Moreover, the businessman and his male relations are viewed as singularly inimical to the stability of the Marple world. Actual economic transactions tend not to take place within the author's preferred class. This 'anti-capital capitalism' means that money is virtually absent from the lives of the good citizens of St Mary Mead. When Miss Marple is left £20,000 by the 'incredibly rich' businessman, Mr Rafiel, in *Nemesis* (1971), it comes as a breach of etiquette. Cash transactions are limited to shop-keepers, entrepreneurs, blackmailers and murderers. In St Mary Mead, which is a community based on rank rather than wealth, the representatives of this miniaturised society – the vicar, the solicitor, the colonel, the doctor, the parlourmaid, the fish shop boy – are all assigned a place. Like the chairs at Berran's Hotel, they are all individual, but part of the same establishment. As in the *Heimat* narratives, the principal disturbance to this small-scale organisation is often seen to be money, especially excessive wealth in the hands of those individuals who are not organically linked to the community.