

**Sleuthing Miss Marple: The Puzzles of Power,
Gender, and Agency in Agatha Christie's
Marple Mysteries.**

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Abstract

Agatha Christie's spinster-sleuth, Miss Marple, is a literary phenomenon who continues to play a part in popular culture more than eighty years after her first appearance in print. The Marple mysteries are unusual in their placement of a woman in the powerful role of the detective, and they are remarkable for depicting an abundance of woman characters in roles that are pivotal to the plot. Throughout the stories, Christie gifts her spinster-sleuth, and her most cunning murderers, with a talent to read and exploit the mutability of gender roles. It is also a demonstrable feature of the stories that murder is depicted as an equal opportunity pursuit. Given the creative problems associated with granting women characters agency in a patriarchal setting, this thesis investigates whether Christie's undeniable conservatism on matters such as class position, national identity, and the 'psychology' of crime, has masked more progressive ideas on gender and the crime fiction genre.

This dissertation is the culmination of an extensive review of historical and political commentaries, autobiographical and biographical considerations of Christie, and scholarly analyses of crime fiction. The study is underpinned by a detailed exploration of the twelve Marple novels and the short stories that comprise *The Thirteen Problems*.

The central argument of this thesis is that engagements with ideas about power, gender, and agency permeate the Marple mysteries. Close examination of Christie's negotiations with the 'rules' of 'golden age' crime fiction, and with broader literary and social traditions, reveals that some quite radical commentary and interventions about gender roles have been concealed beneath the apparently conforming surface of a conventional genre. This study identifies the many instances in which Christie subverts expectations about gender and genre in her iterations of the clue-puzzle, and suggests that gendered incursions are particularly discernible in the uses that are made of the comic and Gothic potentials of the crime fiction genre. This thesis proposes that the Marple mysteries are distinctive for the ways in which Christie uses the stereotypical characterisations, narrative positionings, and plot forms of established narratives to reverse traditional gender expectations.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests that the game-like world of the Marple clue-puzzles encourage reading strategies in which ratiocinative deduction and female ontologies are mutually dependant. This means that an awareness of gender as social performance and an appreciation that conventional expectations are open to ironic manipulation are essential in solving the Marple mysteries. Although Christie's work lacks a formal feminist agenda, the Marple stories allow the inscription of an alternative version of femininity which positions it within a locus of knowledge, power, and reason. It is a recurrent feature of the texts that Christie expands traditional gender paradigms to include ideas about women as intelligent, emotionally robust, capable of action, and even ruthless when they deem it necessary. These are the qualities that allow Marple, an elderly spinster, to get away with solving murder.

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List of Abbreviations of Titles

Marple Novels

<i>Announced</i>	<i>A Murder is Announced</i>
<i>Bertram's</i>	<i>At Bertram's Hotel</i>
<i>Caribbean</i>	<i>A Caribbean Mystery</i>
<i>Library</i>	<i>The Body in the Library</i>
<i>Mirror Crack'd</i>	<i>The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side</i>
<i>Moving</i>	<i>The Moving Finger</i>
<i>Mirrors</i>	<i>They do it with Mirrors</i>
<i>Nemesis</i>	<i>Nemesis</i>
<i>Paddington</i>	<i>4.50 From Paddington</i>
<i>Rye</i>	<i>A Pocket Full Of Rye</i>
<i>Sleeping</i>	<i>Sleeping Murder</i>
<i>Vicarage</i>	<i>The Murder at the Vicarage</i>

Short stories of *The Thirteen Problems*

'BG'	'The Blue Geranium'
'BSP'	'The Blood-Stained Pavement'
'CT'	'A Christmas Tragedy'
'DD'	'Death by Drowning'
'FS'	'The Four Suspects'
'HD'	'The Herb of Death'
'IG'	'Ingots of Gold'
'IHA'	'The Idol House of Astarte'
'TC'	'The Companion'
'TNC'	'The Tuesday Night Club'
'TSP'	'The Thumb Mark of St Peter'