

THE SPIRITS OF DETECTION IN BRITISH WOMEN'S CRIME FICTION

By Susan Rowland

Christie: *Appointment with Death*, Sayers: *The Nine Tailors*, Allingham: *Sweet Danger*,
Marsh: *Death in Ecstasy*, James: *A Taste for Death*, Rendell: *A Judgement in Stone*

Are the crimes to be real sins, or are they to be the mere gestures of animated puppets? Are we to shed blood or only sawdust...? If we wipe out God from the problem we are in very real danger of wiping out man as well.¹

Dorothy L. Sayers (1935)

The sense of the crime and detection genres as inherently metaphysical is important to the novels of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, P.D. James and Ruth Rendell. A religious and mythical dimension is a persistent expression of the detective fiction form, from Agatha Christie's invocation to the 'Immortals' in *The Mysterious Mr Quin*,² to Lord Peter Wimsey suddenly acquiring a god-like perspective, and to Adam Dalgliesh's intimations that professional routines aim to substitute for sacred rituals. As argued elsewhere in my work, the native self-referentiality of the golden age genre enables a fantasy of overcoming death to be included in the rhetorical 'play' or as W.H. Auden put it: '[t]he fantasy... is the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law'.³ In particular, I suggest, the fantasy of a return to Eden is of a regressive return to an innocence before the knowledge of death. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the self-conscious artifice of the golden age genre (and its continued existence within the works of James and Rendell), should construct the detective as a metaphysical figure whose

potency for restoring social order is reinforced by the trappings of neo-divine power. Of course, such an elevation of the detecting persona to myth needs the self-referentiality of the genre in order to permit the visibility of such metaphysics. Specifically, the linking of the detective with divine powers of justice is frequently shadowed by Gothic traces of horror as the negative or demonic possibilities of the supernatural become manifest. Nevertheless, the six queens knowingly operate in a genre that itself believes that justice is possible, however fallible its human representatives prove to be. This entails the literary form endorsing a construction of 'knowledge' as accessible, fixable, stable and traceable through 'signs' or clues. Ultimately, this pre-supposes some kind of stable universe and ties the crime genres back to an earlier literary embodiment of human sins and divine justice: the medieval morality play.⁴ However, before considering the 'divinity' of the detective, it is worth looking at the six queens' historical sense of 'spirits' and the feminine.

Female Novelists and Spiritualist Detection

The development of the detective genre in the nineteenth century occurs at the same period as the emergence of a new religious movement of Spiritualism, the contacting of the deceased by means of a medium in a trance.⁵ Nineteenth century Spiritualism was particularly distinguished by the prominence of female mediums. It seems to have gained resonance from the contemporary cultural definition of the feminine as 'other', so in extreme form as 'occult'. Where the detective genre reflects the secularisation of crime in the rise of the police force and recourse to the law (as a human system rather than a direct expression of divine justice), the detective, in turn, becomes the secularised knight on a quest. Like the divinely endorsed knights of medieval legends, the detective seeks that object which will redeem 'his' community.

The knights on a Grail Quest sought that which will bring the human community into divine communion. His literary descendant, the detective, seeks a secular truth to redeem by restoring the social law, supposedly connected to, but at one remove from, an abstract concept of justice. While the detective genre describes the growing 'humanism' of justice as it becomes popularly conceived as socially centred rather than divine centred, Spiritualism offered an alternative narrative of knowledge and signs. The 'clues' embodied by the (female) medium direct away from the human and secular to the metaphysical; an explicitly non-human centred knowledge in which the strong feminine presences suggest that it could be constructed as a non-human way of knowing. This is not an essentialist argument about women being necessarily 'other' to secular law, but a condition of the construction of the feminine in the nineteenth century. If masculinity claims to exclusively occupy the territory of reason and science, then the feminine becomes by default, suspect, deviant and uncanny. What is significant for the six writers is the way that the four earlier queens enter the debate about Spiritualism and the supposedly occult nature of the feminine. Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, is the prime example of a giant of the genre who was simultaneously an enthusiastic participant in Spiritualism and the occult. Elsewhere I have suggested ways in which some of the six queens mirror this aspect of Doyle, but the golden age writers, in particular, *consciously* address the spiritualist de-stabilisation of the secularisation of knowledge in their novels.

In Christie's *The Sittaford Mystery*, the first intimations of murder actually occur within a séance prompting a concerned friend of the named victim to embark on a journey which will lead to the discovery of the body.⁶ This supernatural intervention in crime detection is allowed to stand for much of the novel and the adventurous young female detective, Emily Trefusis, even plans to consult Conan

Doyle about it.⁷ Although the séance is finally redefined as part of the theatre of crime rather than of its detection, Christie also wrote a volume of stories, *The Hound of Death* in which there is no ‘closure’ excluding occult explanations.⁸ Most eerie is the story of a séance given for the benefit of a bereaved mother, in which the materialised spirit of the dead child is seized upon by the fanatical parent, thereby causing the death of the medium. Her dead feminine form is revealed as shrunken as if her substance had been drained away.⁹ Particularly interesting also, is the trio of roles that recurs in the volume between male occult practitioner and investigator, male psychiatrist (often in one person), and female patient or medium subject. This re-enacts the late nineteenth century transition between regarding female ‘otherness’ as metaphysical symptoms (hence mediumship and Spiritualism), to re-configuring them as medical, as hysteria interpreted by a male doctor.¹⁰ The ‘theatre’ of psychoanalysis comes more and more to replace the séance as the display of femininity.

Mediums and hysterics produce narratives that were often defined as ‘unreliable’ by male authority, or ‘fictions’. Margery Allingham’s initial work, *Blackerchief Dick*, plunges her straight into this occult stream, arising as it does, from a family séance.¹¹ Even the more orthodoxly Christian, Dorothy L. Sayers, is aware of the occult traces threatening definitions of the feminine. Both *Strong Poison*¹² and *Gaudy Night*¹³ demonstrate the need for the feminine to be purged of the uncanny before Peter can achieve a companionate marriage of equals with Harriet. Disposing of the female poltergeist in Shrewsbury College marks Harriet’s and Peter’s triumph over the occult feminine, a process which begins significantly with Miss Climpson’s assault on classical feminine Spiritualism in *Strong Poison*. It is Miss Climpson’s greatest detecting triumph to seize upon vital evidence to save

the life of Harriet Vane by means of faking a series of seances with a gullible, lonely female employee of a rich, dying woman.¹⁴ Despite the firm refutation of Spiritualism here, it is also portrayed as a specifically feminine method of detection, one closed to Lord Peter yet crucial to his investigation.

What could never be acknowledged by Sayers, but is implicit in *Gaudy Night's* 'dread of Artemis' is the need for a female writer to seek out an alternative metaphysical language or to challenge biblical stereotypes.¹⁵ If we take Christie's Miss Marple of St Mary Mead, she proves not to live up to her setting, neither as a Virgin Mary nor even as a contaminating Eve. Instead, as Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker¹⁶ show, she evolves into *Nemesis* or an 'avenging fury', a classical divinity providing posthumous justice for the vulnerable and innocent.¹⁷ In *Hallowe'en Party*, Hercules Poirot is summoned by Ariadne Oliver, shocked at the murder of a child while she was 'bobbing' for apples.¹⁸ Famed as a great lover of apples, Ariadne can no longer consume them. She becomes an alternative Eve by renouncing the apples of the knowledge of good and evil. It is Poirot who discovers a beautiful garden, explicitly a man-made Eden, to be the key to the crime. Here the 'Adam' of the garden proves not to be the Creator's helpmeet, but Narcissus. His self-absorption leads to another classical legend as he seeks to murder his own daughter citing the sacrifice of Iphigenia.¹⁹ Even P.D. James is aware of the temptation to 'other' metaphysical narratives when she has Cordelia Gray overtly reject a shrine to maternity in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.²⁰ Ruth Rendell calls Wexford 'Silenus' to express his 'otherness' to the police force but points out that his wine imbibing is limited!²¹ Significantly, the Wexford novels continue the narrative of Spiritualism within six queens' writing. In her work, Spiritualism becomes a metaphor for an ultimate in-penetrability of human passion yet still associated with the feminine. A

desperate mother is described as medium-like in *Murder Being Once Done*, ‘awakened from a strange and transcending communion’,²² or a childhood trauma recalled by a disturbed young woman in *A New Lease of Death* is ‘reminiscent... of a mediumistic revelation’.²³

We need to turn now to the detective’s trailing of divine clouds of glory.

Divine Detectives

To a greater or a lesser extent all of the six queens detectives partake of the secular form of the divinely sanctioned knight-errant on a quest for metaphysical justice. Yet the detectives’ relationship to conceptions of divine justice varies enormously. We could, if we wished, place the detectives on a sliding scale from Christie’s as the most intimate with metaphysics to the works of Rendell/Vine as the most secular.

Starting with the most ‘godly’, Agatha Christie provides Mr Harley Quin, who appears spookily to collaborate with a Mr Satterthwaite on investigations, reminding him: ‘I must recommend the Harlequinade to your attention... the Immortals are always Immortal’.²⁴ Satterthwaite, once ‘always in the front row of the stalls of life’²⁵ becomes through Harley Quin, an actor in a drama to achieve justice. Here, the self-referentiality of the genre not only takes on its familiar theatrical metaphor, the presence of Harley Quin defines it explicitly as a *sacred* drama of divine justice. Harley Quin is not a *deus ex-machina* utilising supernatural methods. He embodies a greater knowledge than the merely human characters together with a divine purpose yet functions by prompting Satterthwaite’s investigations. In effect, Harley Quin and Satterthwaite represent a division of divine and human justice that Christie incarnates in the single figures of Hercules Poirot and Miss Marple. Like Miss Marple, who makes the police force ‘just’ and is a vehicle of divine fury,

Poirot's investigations almost always combine the justice of God with the justice of the social law in an unproblematical manner. *Murder on the Orient Express* represents an exception in which the demonising of the victim as *outside* the human community, an 'animal', means that Poirot can allow cosmic justice to be in the hands of the killers.²⁶

Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey is far more self-conscious about the metaphysical implications of his role. Wimsey's self-doubt about the morality of his use of his social privilege to pursue murderers represents generically the tension within the detective function between metaphysical fantasy and secular realism. In Wimsey in particular, the struggle forms an arena for his characterisation. As early as *Whose Body*, Lord Peter has a sense of solving the mystery as if he possessed the eye of God: 'as if he stood outside the world and saw it suspended in infinitely dimensional space... He knew it.'²⁷ Parker is accused of being the doubting Thomas to Wimsey's detecting Christ,²⁸ but this divine expansion of the detecting self is inevitably followed by the psychological horrors of retraction into war hysteria. What is on one level, Wimsey's realistic reaction to moral stress, is on another the return of the psychological to pollute the metaphysical vision embodied in the detective.

Sayers herself evolved a theology of 'making' which is clearly detectable in her fiction. She believed in the possibility of work as a sacrament, that truth to one's 'proper job' is an integrity that permeates to the divine and creates something sacred and enduring outside of oneself.²⁹ Such arguments become part of the discussion of the role of women in society in *Gaudy Night*. It is also possible to see many of Sayers' murderers offending against this 'sacrament' such as the killer lawyer and nurse in *Strong Poison* and *Unnatural Death* respectively.³⁰

Despite very different relationships to the law and police, the detectives of

Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh have a similarly self-consciously theatrical inflection of the notion of the detective as vehicle of divine justice. Albert Campion is never simply identified with the police. Even in *Traitor's Purse* when he is directly working for the police he is hampered by his loss of self.³¹ Ec-centric to the human law, Campion oscillates between a guardian angel figure and the role of killer in his desire to restore a moral metaphysics. On the other hand, Roderick Alleyn is a means of identifying the police with divine justice. No corruption or miscarriage of justice is imaginable in Alleyn's force. Marsh's writing is designed to endorse Alleyn's early assertion that no one is ever wrongly hanged in England, an idealisation, perhaps, only possible to a colonial writer.³² Nevertheless, Alleyn himself is keen to dissociate his professional practice from divine pretensions, exhibiting acute embarrassment when a priest and fellow sleuth calls himself 'a spiritual policeman' in *Singing in the Shrouds*.³³ Yet, whatever Alleyn may himself prefer, his tag of resemblance to a 'monk and grandee' expresses his 'excess' to his secular job, in religious and class terms. Such extra emblems of authority act to bolster the claims he implicitly stands for regarding the infallibility of his profession.

Campion and Alleyn, so varied in their positioning to the law, are alike in the way the explicit theatricality of their mysteries promises, in fantasy, a metaphysical redemption. By contrast, James' detectives are one step further from the divine in that secular law cannot represent cosmic justice for this writer. James' depicts a society where the secularisation of justice is characterised as a deliberate rejection of religion with its dreams of moral perfection. For James, the modern state has repeated the error of the Fall in cutting itself off from the promise of justice (from Eden), contained in Christian narratives. Her 'Adam' Dalgliesh stalks a post-lapsarian society, his alienation itself is a symptom of the loss of paradise. Part of

James' attraction to golden age writers and Dorothy L. Sayers in particular, is her sense of the form as expressing an anguished and social need for a sense of the divine. Unfortunately for James, her attachment to social realism as well as her conservative pessimism cuts her work off from much of the metaphysical 'play' of previous writers. James pays particular homage to Sayers in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* when Cordelia Gray, like Harriet Vane in *Gaudy Night*, is so overcome by the beauty of a university city as to imagine it as Eden, a paradise of divine justice. Both Harriet in Oxford and Cordelia in Cambridge are reminded that 'there was a way to hell even from the gates of heaven', but Cordelia, significantly, hears this as one who has never been admitted to this particular 'paradise'.³⁴

Ruth Rendell, as might be expected of a writer most inspired by social injustice, is least concerned to reflect the genre's metaphysical implications. Although a certain uncanniness does surround Wexford's intuitions, he is highly dubious of the social dimensions of religious belief, explaining his dislike of the clergy as '[m]ost of them expected you to worship God in them' in *A New Lease of Death*.³⁵ He is especially grumpy when professions pretend to semi-divine authority as demonstrated by his disputes with Dr Crocker on the priest-like confessional role of the doctor.³⁶ Where James laments her portrayal of the inability of the professions to incarnate religious authority, Rendell deploys a lively scepticism about authority in general and religion in particular. Crucially, Rendell uses social injustice as a kind of alternative metaphysic to structure her work. In *Simisola*, Wexford's relief at his illness being diagnosed as a virus leads him to discuss a medical and secular interpretation of St Paul's conversion.³⁷ This forms a potent prelude to his own later 'conversion' experiences over his racial awareness involving the same Nigerian doctor. It is time to consider the darker side of the metaphysical traces within the

detecting genre.

The Heresy of Detectives

The sublime nature of detectives in occupying a neo-divine position representing a dream of cosmic justice is inevitably haunted by the negative sublime as the occult or demonic. Such a shadowing often takes textual form in the presence of the cult practices, sometimes coded as extra-illegitimate by the use of narcotics to signify 'unnatural' assaults upon the liberal, individual self. In metaphysical terms, the negative sublime, eroding self-agency in 'horror' is the result of detecting in a Fallen world where truth is obscure and signs or clues tricky to follow. If 'divine truth' is opaque, barely reachable or barely conceivable, then detecting as/for God can lapse into the heretical through an almost inevitable transgression beyond the boundaries of a sacred narrative which can never be fully understood. Therefore, in generic terms, the negative sublime is a sense of the unknowable nature of the metaphysical transmuted into the fear of it as alien. In terms of secular modernity (the culture of the detective genre), it is the return of the repressed metaphysical as horror.

Agatha Christie's detectives' intimacy with divine authority allows a unique 'play' with the boundaries of a supposedly secular genre. Harley Quin or *The Hound of Death* can use narrative to refine occult horrors into instruments of divine justice while her more human heroes, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are confident about naming metaphysical evil. This is due to the fact that they contain within themselves the role of divine instrument. Lord Peter Wimsey, as stated, experiences the negative sublime as psychology. The possibility that his role as dispenser of cosmic justice may falter or transgress, is psychically coded into the horrors of his war trauma. For Margery Allingham, occult horror is bound up with her narrative of social authority.

It represents the dark side to her fascination with a mythical, feudal rural hierarchy, inimical to corporate modernity. In early novels, Campion's role is to penetrate occult horror, which in one sense demonstrates his ec-centricity to conventions in demonic form. In another sense he has to discover the social dimensions of the rural occult, whether it is continuous with feudal manifestations of social power as in *Look to the Lady*,³⁸ or potentially subversive of it as in *Sweet Danger*.³⁹

In Allingham's later work, the negative sublime metaphysic is condensed into a theology of sin and madness. Both Jack Havoc in *The Tiger in the Smoke*⁴⁰ and Gerry Hawker in *Hide my Eyes*⁴¹ are portrayed as serial killers with metaphysical dimensions. Jack Havoc's climactic scene occurs in an echoing London church with elderly Canon Avril who diagnoses his vaunted 'science of luck'⁴² as 'the pursuit of Death', invoking 'Evil be thou my Good.'⁴³ This theology of crime is a structure of negative sublime horror that annihilates the self as Avril explains: 'it is the 'only sin which cannot be forgiven because when it has finished with you you are not there to forgive'.⁴⁴ Avril serves to map horror onto a stable metaphysical scheme despite succumbing to a violent assault. Much of the 'horror' of *Hide My Eyes* resides in the absence of a similar figure of metaphysical authority.

The work of Ngaio Marsh is distinguished both by a persistent attraction to depicting crime through cults and by a post-colonial respect for other religions, in particular the Maori of her native New Zealand. Works such as *Spinsters in Jeopardy*,⁴⁵ which metonymically links orgiastic rites with illegal narcotics, demonstrate an interest in the occult as a sign of western folly and moral exhaustion. Such implied social criticism is wholly distinguished from the integrity of non-western religious beliefs. In terms of Marsh's entire oeuvre, the interest in cults that operate by assaulting the frail western self, is entirely continuous with her concern

with the theatre. Alleyn is the most theatrical of the detectives, who must negotiate the negative sublime of the horrific, drug fuelled cult staginess. He must substitute a sublime drama of detection producing justice through neo-sacred ritual (self-referentially presented as fantasy). His typical denouement through re-enactment of the crime is the emblem of his transformation of police procedure to dramatic and ritualised justice.

P.D. James has no such literary faith. Her detecting figures tend to be *subject to* negative sublime horror *because* they are irretrievably cut off from representing the dream of divine justice. Horror at human selfishness and evil is James' formal mode of representing her metaphysics of the genre. Part of the function of frequent references to the Nazi Holocaust is to provide a textuality of horror as a most acid form of pessimism about secular societies.

Ruth Rendell's fiction is most detached from metaphysics because she fears its potency to embody reactionary forms of social authority. Interestingly, the negative sublime accrues more to Mike Burden than Reg Wexford as his determinedly conservative conventions, reaching deep into his sense of self, are brutally smashed by extremes of irrational desire in *The Veiled One*.⁴⁶

Barbara Vine: Losing the Metaphysics of Form?

Barbara Vine's novels are characterised by the absence of an external detecting figure. This entails the loss of the metaphysical intensity surrounding the detective and the consequent exploration of the difficulty in demonstrating objective, secure, and unified knowledge. However, the loss of knowledge in the detective is met by a subsequent return of the numinous, the mysterious, and neo-mystical in the very unfathomability of human desire. Such a 'theology of un-knowing', explicitly

counters the social conservatism embedded in conventional crime fiction where the detective is a dimension of a divine *narrative*, however ineffable in aspects. For example, in *A Dark-Adapted Eye*, the narrator, Faith is a seeker, rather than a detective, since she searches for understanding rather than the secure knowledge of cousin Jamie's maternity. The identity of his biological mother proves impossible to ascertain.⁴⁷ Such understanding will contribute to Faith's sense of herself as part of a quest for self-construction and self-acceptance. So when she dreams of Vera suckling Jamie 'Madonna-like, tranquil and splendid, her breasts bare',⁴⁸ it is not a clue to an objective 'fact', but a sign to be decoded as subjective emotional truth, directing the reader to a conception of human desire as ultimately unknowable, and sublime.

Explicitly, Vine's re-writing of the metaphysics of form can be considered as an attempt at a more progressive and liberal structuring of ethics. W.H. Auden wrote that 'the job of the detective is to restore the state of grace in which the aesthetic and the ethical are one'.⁴⁹ Barbara Vine's use of Gothic fable and a sublime mysticism of human desire opens up the crime genre to radical possibilities. It is her novels' achievement to still produce the aesthetic and ethical as one.

*Appointment With Death by Agatha Christie (1938)*⁵⁰

This novel exhibits acute metaphysical tension between Christie's very rare *Orient Express* model in which divine justice is finally assigned by the detectives to the ostensible killers, and the more typical identifying of cosmic justice with the human law. Significantly, two thirds of the way through the novel, Hercules Poirot tells a sympathetic suspect that this murder of the gorgon-like Mrs Boynton is *not* to be compared to the Orient Express case. Nevertheless, the early part of the story is devoted to describing the psychological terrorism inflicted by Mrs Boynton on her

adult American family, now travelling in the perilously evocative middle Eastern landscape. The tortured family party encounters Sarah King, a newly qualified doctor, who becomes attracted to the vulnerable Raymond Boynton, Dr Gerard, a psychiatric practitioner, who becomes seriously concerned for the mental health of the youngest Boynton, Ginevra, and Lady Westholme, another forceful woman who is devoted to politics and women's rights.

In the events leading up to Mrs Boynton's death by lethal injection on a desert campsite, the novel's anxiety centres around the potential perversion of the Christian narrative. Can Christianity provide a stable and metaphysical morality in the face of Mrs Boynton's monstrosity, significantly evoked in 'heretical' terms: 'like an arch-priestess of some forgotten cult, like a monstrous swollen female Buddha, sat Mrs Boynton...' (p.76). Sympathetic Sarah King feels tempted to consider expedient death as a sacrifice for the good of the community. Her confidante, Dr Gerard, dryly points out Christian parallels in quoting the specious justification for the 'sacrifice' of Jesus for reasons of social stability. In particular, the temptation to take justice into one's own hands, however provoked, is associated with the temptation of Satan in the high place, offering worldly power to Christ. Christie's detectives (unlike Allingham, for example), always consciously counter the criminal's claiming of the role of God in deciding that some abstract notion of justice can be absolutely severed from human law in the matter of murder. Taking justice into one's own hands is regularly deplored. *Murder on the Orient Express* is the closest exception, but crucially the final 'suspect' to appeal to Poirot speaks of the conspiracy as being 'mad'. She does not claim elevation beyond human law in the matter of a criminal whom all agree has escaped 'legitimate' justice.

Appointment with Death pins its faith finally on Christian humility as the

ingredient of the religious narrative to be taken as a moral guide. The engaging theological debates of Sarah King and Dr Gerard seize upon humility as a possible point of stability amongst the material evidence of clashing religions and warring sects in their middle Eastern tour. Interestingly, Christian humility is translated by Dr Gerard as contentment with one's station in life and contrasted with the truly terrible lust for power exhibited by Mrs Boynton. Such humility, which entirely endorses Poirot's and Miss Marple's attitude to the law (no one should take 'justice' into their own hands), becomes a neat demonstration of the social conservatism inherent in Christie's metaphysics.

As the crime and detecting plots work out the novel's metaphysical anxieties, the Christian references give way to those of the theatre, in particular to Shakespeare and Hamlet. Hercules Poirot becomes identified as an external and detached figure who by detecting can heal the corrupt family dynamics of Hamlet. The feared model, that of Hamlet as internal family member trying to restore moral order by revenge killing, is gradually reduced to a merely theatrical possibility. This is embodied in the final pages by Ginevra, *acting* tragic Ophelia to great acclaim, but, in fact, healed by the detective of mental illness, Dr Gerard. She is married to him and now a successful actress so spared the literal 'acting out' of her excessive desires.

Detecting and psychiatry explicitly overlap in *Appointment with Death*. In fact, both Dr Gerard and Poirot are granted parallel and distinct successes that contribute to the moral healing of a distressed community. The novel endorses Dr Gerard's diagnosis of the pernicious effects of Mrs Boynton and his later assessment of her mental condition. It is similar to her daughter, Ginevra's, but open to positive expression in the younger woman. Poirot's methods are even closer to the psychoanalytic 'talking cure' than usual and include an almost priestly mode of guilt

and absolution when he describes to most of the suspects how they *could* have murdered and *why*, but how, in fact, they did not. Poirot is also concerned in a neo-priestly role, to exorcise the ‘demonic’ power of Mrs Boynton. Using psychoanalytic terms to de-mystify the uncanny nature of her dominance: ‘[s]he neither sublimated that intense craving for power – not did she seek to master it...’(p.209), Poirot repeats the late nineteenth century transition from constructing the ‘otherness’ of the feminine in neo-religious to medical-psychoanalytic terms. Although femininity and social power is anathematised in Mrs Boynton, the novel moves to a language of gender and identity which will prove more productive for the feminine and at least, here, gives us Ginevra, the *actress* of feminine, if tragic, potency.

The Nine Tailors by Dorothy L. Sayers (1934)

In this most rural of country house mysteries, the country house itself, becomes a church: the great medieval edifice at Fenchurch St Paul in a mystery embedded in the rural church calendar. As John G. Cawelti describes,⁵¹ the action follows the church year enacting a sacramental drama which seeks to heal a community fractured by disruptive contamination from specifically metropolitan criminals. From Wimsey’s ‘providential’ (p.17) arrival at New Year so that he can be persuaded to replace a sick bell ringer, to the ‘resurrection’ of an extra corpse discovered in Lady Thorpe’s grave at Easter and the final destructive yet cleansing Flood, the crime and detecting stories become fused into a sacred ritual.

This time, Lord Peter Wimsey, the urbane stranger, is not securely identified as a redemptive figure. His first action is to renew social hierarchies by joining the bell ringers, so re-investing his class privilege with social utility (a similar role in village life is performed by the patrician but impecunious Thorpes). Wimsey does

not become merely the detecting force for good in countering the crimes of the London jewel thieves. Years previously the Thorpe's butler, Deacon, engineered the theft of valuable emeralds from a houseguest with the unwitting aid of his wife, Mary, and the complicity of a London jewel thief, Cranton. The emeralds were never found, resulting in financial problems for the Thorpe family. Both Deacon and Cranton were jailed, but Deacon appeared to die shortly after escaping so that the honest Mary Deacon was free to marry a local man, William Thoday. When an extra corpse, apparently mutilated, is discovered in Lady Thorpe's grave, Lord Peter Wimsey is summoned back to investigate. He finally identified the body as Deacon, who has been living under an assumed name in France. A riddle is discovered concerning the powerful presence of the church bells which finally leads to the recovery of the emeralds. Yet the mystery of the death of Deacon, whose battered corpse is traced to the bell tower, is not solved until the disaster of the floods drives the whole community to take shelter in the church.

The Nine Tailors demonstrates Sayers belief that 'work' can function as a sacrament. It is most overt in the hard-working vicar, Mr Venables, who makes no distinction between his earthly parish duties and his Christian principles, for instance in ringing bells for all the dead be they Catholic or battered corpses. In a deliberate linking of the final flood with the biblical deluge, Venables becomes a literal Noah in organising the rescue of the community as the church becomes the Ark. At first, Venables signals the harmony between the work of Wimsey the detective and his own godly devotions in his summoning of Lord Peter and frequent references to the authority of Sherlock Holmes. However, the plot slowly distinguishes human detection from divine justice. Wimsey, baffled for most of the novel about the means of killing Deacon, comes at last to be identified with both murderer and victim,

whereas it is the slightly comic Venables who pronounces that God's justice has been done. Almost falling victim to Deacon's fate by being in the bell tower when a peal is rung, it is Wimsey's minor triumph to realise that the New Year peal that he himself took part in, was the death of Deacon. 'Perhaps God speaks through those mouths of inarticulate metal', says Venables in response (p.298). The sublime detective and judge here is God with Wimsey falling into the negative sublime of horror in the bell tower.

In contrasting Lord Peter to both the masculine heroic model of detecting in Sherlock Holmes and the divine detective in part summoned by, and in part incarnated in, Venables, detecting becomes again a mode of self-discovery and self-identity. The flat fenland landscape is portrayed as 'a world of mirrors' in which a linear detecting narrative of clues leading inexorably to a stable truth, is not yet possible. Wimsey says: '[i]ts like Looking-Glass Country. Takes all the running we can do to stay in the same place'(p.186). In such a pre-symbolic world, Wimsey's detection feels stuck in a mirror stage where he is trying to trace the limits and limbs of the crime in which names and legal identities prove fluid. Here the bells, described as like cats or mirrors (p.245) are semiotic, the voice of the 'other'. The bells' 'language' of sound or riddles has to be decoded in order for fixed knowledge and identities to be constructed. It is Wimsey's experience in the raging bell tower which causes his detective self to enter the symbolic in the discovery of the knowledge of death. Such psychological splitting between murderer and victim restructures the semiotic (feminine) other of the bells into the symbolic as the voice/instrument of divine justice.

The bells as the solution to the mystery plot become the signs of the Mystery, a sacred plot that the detective becomes subject to, not dispenser of. The transition of

the bells from the pre-Oedipal (m)other voice, pre gender and prior to the knowledge of death, to their symbolic reconfiguring in *The Nine Tailors* as divine other, represents an incorporation of gendered otherness into the Christian narrative. They may hang in a patriarchal monument, re-invested with sacred power through its functioning as the Ark, but the bells are still a re-engendering of the divine.

Sweet Danger by Margery Allingham (1933)

In a typical early Allingham scenario, *Sweet Danger's* criminal problem is modernity as might be guessed from the self-consciously ironised Ruritanian opening. Amiable young Englishman, Guffy Randall, discovers Albert Campion posing as the hereditary Paladin of Averno in a European hotel. Campion is accompanied by his entire court, consisting of more pals of Guffy, Jonathan Eager-Wright and Dicky Farquarson. It is entirely typical of Campion that Guffy and the reader need time to work out whether the principality of Averno is another, hitherto unrevealed aspect of Campion's never-clarified identity or a deliberate impersonation.

Campion's state-sponsored mission turns out to be to recover legal proofs, consisting of a crown, a charter and a receipt that would confirm British title to a tiny central European landmass. Averno has recently acquired political importance by gaining a minute coastline after an earthquake and by the discovery of an oil field. The treasure quest swiftly moves to the Suffolk village of Pontisbright and centres upon the Fitton family, residing in genteel poverty at the Old Mill. The Fittons, consisting of snooty young Hal, gentle Mary and the redoubtable young engineer, Amanda (her first entry into Campion's life), claim to be the legitimate heirs to the Earls of Pontisbright who in turn inherit Averno. Urgency attends Campion's searches since the adventurers endorsed by the hereditary principle, aristocracy and

patriotism, are competing with a dangerous criminal gang headed by financier and big businessman, Brett Savernake. *Sweet Danger* provides a rhetorically self-conscious conflict between a 'romance' plot of feudal knightly values and the corruptions of corporate modernity. The aged Mill house in the pastoral setting of Pontisbright is described as repelling the disruptions of modernism in terms reminiscent of Yeats,⁵² having 'a certain drowsy elegance that was very soothing and comforting in a madly gyrating world' (p.71). Nevertheless, *Sweet Danger* is not a simple rejection of all aspects of modern England, but seeks to recuperate some of the energies of modernity to re-invigorate class values.

In part, the novel is able to stage a successful re-negotiation of rural stability and urban 'progress' by the highly ambivalent manifestations of Campion. No other detective of the six queens would be portrayed to the reader as a potential traitor, disguise himself as a woman and produce, without warning, a double, to distract the criminal gang. Similarly, Pontisbright may be pastoral, but the potent sense of a dark side to the mythologising of feudal values is a legacy of evil and the occult. As the knightly band enter the village, the first 'clue' as an ancient sign of fear while the suspicious doctor tells them that the land is accursed for strangers and that they will succumb to a terrible skin disease if they do not leave at once. Part of Campion's quest is to identify and neutralise the sources of evil indigenous to this paradise.

Just as the self-conscious romance plot blends pre-modern and modern strategies in the aim to legitimate British imperial expansion by mingling the hereditary principle with laws of purchase, so Campion discovers in Pontisbright that an alliance with the feminine can bring him the resources of modern technology. As an accomplished engineer, Amanda's skill with the modern media of the radio means that limitations imposed by the destruction of the ancient Pontisbright Hall can be

overcome. One of the proofs can only be discovered through the tolling of a now destroyed bell, so Amanda rigs up a broadcast of its sister casting from Europe. Modern technology is thus feminised and imported into the archaic treasure hunt plot.

If Campion's growing friendship with Amanda allows him to re-invent the Allingham mythical rurality with technological support, his knightly quest identity is reinforced by the need to then rescue Amanda from the occult powers of Pontisbright. Amanda is vulnerable to the black magic of the doctor because she half-believes his Gothic theologies. From this oppressive aspect of pre-modern rurality, Campion must save Amanda from becoming a literal human sacrifice. Yet, as well as protecting the heroine from pre-modernity, the defeat of the doctor's summoning of pagan deities is a re-establishing of social boundaries. In taking Brett Savernake's stooge, Peaky Doyle, to be 'Ashtaroth', the doctor's Gothic swaps positions of master/servant just as he also blurs boundaries of healer/sacrificer in his own activities.

Sweet Danger re-writes imperialism as romance with the power to vanquish the Gothic and occult and repel the criminal horrors of corporatism. Allingham's rural-based myth of class stability is allowed to gain strength from technology and a more adventurous femininity. Campion's famous ambivalence allows the self-conscious re-invention of tradition in an essentially comic form.

Death in Ecstasy by Ngaio Marsh (1936)

Here we have a story in total contrast to Sayers' *The Nine Tailors* in a rivalry between the detective and the 'priest' in embodying the justice of God. It is a contest where the outcome is over-determined by the obviously bogus criminal nature of the

figure claiming spiritual authority.

Journalist Nigel Bathgate, calls upon his friend, Chief Inspector Alleyn, when his curiosity about a London cult of the House of the Sacred Flame causes him to witness the poisoning of an attractive initiate, Cara Quayne. This occurs mid-ceremony during a parody of the Christian Mass. Alleyn soon realises that Father Jasper Garnette's orgiastic cult is literally the opium of the people as it also operates as a means of addicting its adherents to narcotics. Suspects include neo-parodic American, Samuel Ogden, sexually voracious Mrs Candour, bitter spinster Miss Wade, worshipper of Cara Quayne, M.de Ravigne, opium addict Maurice Pringle and his concerned fiancée, Janey Jenkins. Typically for Marsh, the self-referential nature of golden age fiction, unites with a rhetoric of theatre surrounding the cult. The fact that the theatricality of this pseudo-religion may prove dangerously continuous with the drama of legal proceedings (where the inquest is described as 'a sort of curtain-raiser to the murder trial' (p.204)), perhaps accounts for Alleyn's insistence that the law *never* makes mistakes where hanging is an issue. Alleyn's law must not be theatrical in the bogus sense. The story of *Death in Ecstasy* teaches the reader to trust Alleyn's judgement as he proves the aesthetic and the moral to be undivided in their condemnation of the House of the Sacred Flame.

The 'theology' of the cult works by exploiting divisions between world religions, in claiming to be a narrative of spirit and ecstasy combining all, and by parodying well known sacraments. On the one hand, Alleyn's aesthetic (soon moral) distaste distances the cult from readers' perceptions of Christianity. On the other hand, within the self-conscious play of the genre (conflated here with theatricality), religious authority *as such* is made Gothic. Religion in self-conscious fictional mode becomes the subject of the detective's quest since there is a need to restore

boundaries that have been transgressed in the Gothic collapse of sexuality and religion, crime and worship, authority and exploitation. Religion as theatre thereby surrenders to the secular authority of the police. *Death in Ecstasy* re-visits with self-conscious artifice, a vital tension in the evolution of the modern state of the law and hence of detective fiction itself: the transition between religious and secular legitimation.

However, it is only Alleyn's hybridity that allows such a transition to the satisfaction of the reader. In this very early Marsh work, Alleyn's charisma is strongly inflected with social authority. He is likened to an Oxbridge 'don', a suggestion of the 'army' and of course is far superior in class position to his professional role. Such indications make Alleyn both excessive to, and a bolster of, the professional authority of the police. But he is also here likened to a 'faun' and eroticised by being the unwilling recipient of overt attentions from suspect, Mrs. Candour. Astoundingly, Alleyn reveals that he once became a member of a Protestant sect, the Plymouth Brothers, for two months as an undergraduate (p.66). Alleyn's detecting exploits his uncanny 'otherness' to the law in order to provide a narrative of the detective's extra-legal engagement with the crime. This functions, in Marsh's case, to recuperate the surplus energies within the legal system. The creation later of Troy, artist and squeamish dissenter on the topic of capital punishment, shows the difficulties inherent in absorbing narrative and social tensions into a police dominated structure.

Here, Alleyn's priestly rival for authority over knowledge, the hypnotic Father Garnette, is quickly shown as to be an emblem of theatre sliding easily into crime. He is initially described as druid-like, an actor, a saint, a mid-west purveyor of patent medicines whose ability to drug with words is literalised into drug dealing. It

is Alleyn's task to defend the modern secular and individual self from such bogus psychic assaults. More emphatically than in later novels, the social order restored by Alleyn is the patriarchal sexual order. *Death in Ecstasy* is an instance of overt homophobia in Marsh's work. Distaste at the sexual exploitation of Father Garnette's initiation of attractive women, is extended to indict the unpleasantly portrayed homosexuality of two young male acolytes. Fortunately, the homophobia remains incidental to the murder plot, which is traced to the commercial exploitation of drugs, but much of Alleyn's energy goes into the restoration of the conventional heterosexual couple, Maurice and Janey. This novel demonstrates the golden age linkage between moral order and conventional sexuality in acute form. Sayers may manage a limited lesbian aesthetic in works such as *Unnatural Death*,⁵³ but we remember how Alleyn disrupts the relationship of Troy and her devoted more 'mannish' companion, Katti Bostock (painter of plumbers), in *Artists in Crime*.⁵⁵

A Taste for Death by P.D. James (1986)⁵⁶

Written at the height of British Conservative triumphalism in the 1980's (the era of Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister), the crime plot centres on the discovery of two corpses in a neglected London church: that of a tramp and a prominent government minister. The murder of Sir Paul Berowne proves not to be a random killing, but conforms to golden age aesthetics in being bound up with his household. Its members consist of unfaithful wife, Barbara, her lover, surgeon Stephen Lampart, her brother, Dominic Swayne, Berowne's mother, Lady Ursula (desperate to secure the inheritance of the child Barbara is carrying), Berowne's estranged daughter, Sarah, now embroiled in far left politics, neglected spinster-housekeeper Miss Matlock, Halliwell, the soldier-chauffeur and other acquaintances. *A Taste for Death*

resembles a country house murder where the edifice is not only transported to the modern and political pressures of the capital city, but is symbolically divided between the empty Victorian church where the bodies are found and the architectural glories of Berowne's Soane house. Much is made of the beauties of the house, described as a blend of the classic and Gothic (p.109). It is the task of Adam Dalgliesh's detection to eliminate the 'Gothic' from the Soane household, even if he cannot remove the stain of crime. Unsurprisingly, he does locate the murderer within incestuous familial passions. Additionally, the final showdown in the flat of his new working-class subordinate, Inspector Kate Miskin, serves to purge her fears for her own moral integrity. Taking Kate's aged and dependent grandmother hostage, the murderer taunts Kate by suggesting that eliminating the sick, old woman would solve Kate's current domestic problems. In response, Kate discovers anew her familial love and gratitude towards her grandmother, so confirming her ability to have a viable secular morality.

If Dalgliesh is able to purge the Gothic from the Soane house, represented psychically by his contaminating vision of the corpses superimposed upon its architectural perfections, he is quite unable to heal the split between religious and secular authority substantiated in the two key settings. Unlike Ngaio Marsh, James will not concede the legitimacy of the divorce between religious and secular authority. She situates in the consciousness of Dalgliesh both the painful division and the limiting inability to reconcile state and church that she perceives as the key to the 'Fallen' nature of modern Britain. Much of Dalgliesh's interior meditation upon secular and spiritual authority is played out in his psychological relationship to the victim, Paul Berowne. In many ways Dalgliesh recognises himself in Berowne whom he knew slightly. Through the victim, Dalgliesh traces the outlines of his own

sensibility and failures in love: ‘[I]f he had a splinter of ice in the heart, then so have I’ (p.260). Yet Berowne’s transportation from a Soane House to obscure unvisited church is more than physical. As a result of what he calls ‘an experience of God’, (p.262) the politician is prepared to renounce his worldly power and live a more spiritual existence in ways that lead directly to his killing. When the unimpressive vicar, Father Barnes, tells Dalgliesh that he thought he saw holy signs of stigmata on Paul Berowne, Dalgliesh is shocked at ‘the bizarre intrusion of irrationality into a job so firmly rooted in the search for evidence which would stand up in court, documented, demonstrable, real’ (p.55). By refusing to engage with spiritual signs, Dalgliesh turns away from the option that Berowne comes to represent for him: he refuses to become Berowne, concluding: ‘[w]hatever Berowne found in that dingy vestry, it isn’t open to me even to look for it’ (296). Consequently, despite Dalgliesh’s strong sense of police professionalism striving to perform a *ritual* function in modern society, the narrative moves towards a sense of tragedy in which modern work rituals largely fail to redeem a social order.

In addition, the detecting strategies serve to demonstrate the limitations as well as the sublime potentiality of the crime genre. That icon of iron-willed conservative nostalgia, Lady Ursula, succeeds in her aim to foster the Berowne dynasty by retaining control of the wayward Barbara. This faithless widow is known to be pregnant with a male Berowne heir. Lady Ursula points out to Dalgliesh what he has already discovered, the poverty of police rituals in the penetration of moral truth. Police reports cannot possibly encapsulate the intensities of human relations: ‘you’re a poet... [y]ou can’t possibly believe that what you deal in is the truth’ (p.413), she says. Just as Berowne’s religious experience proves unrepresentable and thereby incomprehensible, so the detecting genre itself (in James’ employment of

literary realism), is forced to retreat from the claim to represent truths of crime and desire. Only in the sublime retreat from representation can religion and detective writing be momentarily reconciled.

Golden age fiction never claimed to be realism: its 'truths' are consciously artificial and ironised. It can, therefore, 'play' with detective fiction as a 'solution' to the social trauma of crime. For P.D. James as a deliberate novelist of literary realism, the limits of representation are tragic indeed.

A Judgement in Stone by Ruth Rendell (1977)⁵⁶

The opening sentence of *A Judgement in Stone* gives the reader the 'what', 'who' and 'why' of this detective-less crime fiction: 'Eunice Parchman killed the Coverdale family because she could not read and write' (p.7). Here we have no god-like detective to solve the crime and metonymically heal the trauma in society. The motivation of illiteracy locates deviance within social and material conditions, but the attempt of the novel to trace the outlines of stable knowledge surrounding the crimes will lapse into the Gothic as desire proves sublime. The novel depicts with intensity a social deprivation that proves explicitly impervious to the resources of the British welfare state and middle class do-gooding.

The story of Eunice's crimes is that of a servant revenging herself on well-meaning but unintentionally cruel class superiors. The Coverdales' fatal flaw is to dream of living in some past age of live-in servants at the same time as thinking well of themselves. Consequently, they persist in trying to ameliorate Eunice's lot while she is desperate to conceal her illiteracy. Working class deprivation condenses into educational deprivation in Eunice's background. *A Judgement in Stone's* achievement is to portray a tragedy of social class without relinquishing individual

portrayals of a complacent middle class family totally unaware of the socially conditioned limitations of their perceptions. The Coverdales, unfortunately, are an extremely literate lot. Giles, studious son of wife, Jacqueline, spends much of his days in literary fantasy. He adores his stepsister, Melinda, in what he likes to imagine is a Gothic incestuous passion drawn from reading Edgar Allen Poe or Emily Bronte. Such self-conscious Gothic indulgence is explicitly contrasted to the far more elemental Gothic presence of Eunice. It is she who is truly marginal to society, excluded by class deprivation, repressed by social forces she cannot comprehend. Such deprivation is unwittingly, but not innocently exploited when the Coverdales take her on as a servant. It is Eunice whose desire is potent with Gothic horror as her deprived and unformed self erupts into violence.

A Judgement in Stone is not only a study of educational and class intersections but of literature and literacy structuring the social. On one level, the Coverdales love of literature is fatally contaminated by class complacency as they try to live out a fantasy of a Victorian novel with deferential servants. Their home is Lowfield Hall, a name resonant with *Jane Eyre* references of Lowood and Thornfield. However, Rendell's novel is a re-writing of *Jane Eyre* that liberates the violence repressed in the madness of Bertha Rochester and the long years starved of human affection suffered by Jane. As a combination of Bertha and Jane, Eunice's story takes 'literature' beyond the class fantasies of the Coverdales and into the symbolic of society as a whole. For 'writing' is here portrayed as the currency of human society. If 'literature' provides a unifying set of cultural references (even if subject to lapsing into dangerous class fantasy), then being *literate* is portrayed as the ability to use symbols, not only the ability to communicate, but to be defined as a separate self among others in a social context. Eunice's exclusion from reading and

writing is not only, then, an exclusion from most social transactions, it means she has never become a socialised self, she resides, terrifyingly in the semiotic, excluded from the symbolic of society. As an unformed being, it is unsurprising that the husband of Joan, her insane co-killer, calls her 'Miss Frankenstein' (p.107), a 'name' that brings her into the symbolic of literature, but only as monster. More typically, Eunice is 'a stone age woman petrified into stone' (p,160), Gothic and semiotic.

Eunice can only be truly comprehended by society by a violent assault upon it. As a murderer, the symbolic recognises her and her illiteracy as she is forced to reveal it in court. She has to fulfil the literary and violent destiny of her literary reference as 'Miss Frankenstein'. In fact, Eunice's 'mirror stage' occurs when the official representatives of the social-symbolic, the police, name her as the killer. Illiteracy means that she has misconstrued incriminating evidence and so the police discover a tape recording of herself and Joan in the act of shooting. When she hears herself as separate from herself on the tape and simultaneously sees herself in a mirror, she faints. At last, she experiences her subjectivity as split and enters the symbolic as a murderer. In a harsh but apt image of social conventions for deprived Eunice, her birth into the symbolic is her entry into prison.

The accomplice, Joan, is driven by religious mania shown to derive from a past of sexual and gender oppression. Joan's dangerous embrace of the semiotic of madness takes the form of metaphors of mediumship and possession. The traces of religion (and in particular Spiritualism), that accrue even to Rendell's detectives have been excluded from this novel's form only to return as crime. Secular modernity, portrayed in the realism of *A Judgement in Stone*, is shadowed by irrationality, superstition and religion. Religious mania becomes another of Rendell's Gothic powers of desire.