



## Is punished in the detective story is not simply criminality but transgression more generally?

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This essay will support the idea that criminality in detective fiction is frequently entangled in ‘a web of concepts.’<sup>1</sup> What is criminal is consistently intertwined with transgressions more generally, and characters that cross boundaries of gender and race will be studied in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and ‘The Sign of Four.’ Having considered the means of transgression, the modes of punishment will be examined in each text. This will set up the focus of the essay, in disputing the view that transgression is universally punished. Rather, the image of the detective as a *licensed* transgressor is questioned across both stories. It will be argued that transgression shifts from being the object of detection to the very subject of the narrative. This can be felt in the work of Chesterton and Christie, both of whom locate the criminal as an artist figure. Whilst this shows a definite change in the genre’s focus, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* articulates an argument found in each story: that transgression is a highly textual construction, both resisted and reinforced by detective fiction.

Winks writes that there are three crimes in detective fiction: offences against ‘one’s neighbour...one’s society...and God.’<sup>2</sup> Winks’s categorisations bound criminal acts with offences as a whole, despite the fact that transgressions are violations of social *norms*, rather than strictly criminal acts. Stallybrass offers a stronger framework when defining transgression as a ‘symbolic inversion...which presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes.’<sup>3</sup> How the individual moves within cultural codes – and is deemed by society to be misbehave - is a clear concern of Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Lady Audley can be seen to transgress social expectations of femininity, and Ingham suggests that these very concepts of female identity are textual. She points to everything from *Jane Eyre* to Victorian conduct books, in suggesting that femininity was an essentially ‘linguistic code:’ typing one as innocent (‘the angel of the house’) or evil (‘the fallen woman’).<sup>4</sup> Braddon seems to voice these same concerns in her narrator’s extensive use of stereotypes, comparing Helen to everything from an angel (she has ‘a pale halo round her head’<sup>5</sup>) to a devil. No shape seems to fit Lady Audley, reflected in the narrator’s anxiety about ‘the most self-assertive [sex]’<sup>6</sup> in general. Therefore, characters in detective fiction frequently transgress boundaries that literature helped instigate.

Reading detective fiction involves untangling the criminal act from what is simply subversive. ‘The Sign of Four’ supports this idea that what society deems transgressive is

<sup>1</sup> Marie-Christine Leps, *Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth-century Discourse*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p.131.

<sup>2</sup> R. W Winks, introduction to *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (London: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p.17.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Stallybrass, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (London: Methuen, 1986), p.14.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Ingham, *The Language of Gender and Class*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p.25.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret*, (London: Penguin, 1998), p.3. All further quotes will refer to the same edition.

<sup>6</sup> Audley, p.208.

essentially inscribed in discourse. For instance, Ellis, in his 1890 study on criminology, wrote that born criminals ‘have projecting ears, thick hair...[and] enormous jaws.’<sup>7</sup> This starkly overlaps with Doyle’s imperialistic imagery, in which Tonga is described as ‘a brown, monkey-faced chap.’<sup>8</sup> Significantly, the only motive Small provides for Tonga’s nature as ‘a bloodthirsty imp’<sup>9</sup> is the very basis of his national origins. Therefore, Tonga is not so much punished for his criminal act – murdering Sholto – but for the fact that he transgresses his role as slave to the British master. He thus inverts the dominant political narrative, and so the charge that detective fiction suffers for frequently ‘dealing with stereotypes’ appears overtly critical.<sup>10</sup> It is the very assumptions of criminality in the Other, and perfection in the feminine, that detective fiction complicates. Typed representations thus articulate the idea that transgression is defined by a network of texts.

Detective fiction foregrounds the ideal terms of feminine and racial performance, before eliminating those who essentially re-write behavioural codes. For instance, whilst Kittredge writes that Lady Audley’s crime is abandoning her child,<sup>11</sup> Helen is punished for betraying the socio-textual belief that there *exists* ‘a perfect lady.’<sup>12</sup> Lady Audley puts this best herself, when confessing ‘I am not like the woman I have read.’<sup>13</sup> The image of exhibiting Tonga is comparable to the framed portrait of Lady Audley: both subjects are constructed as a spectacle. Like Tonga, the woman – recurring in images of Lady Audley standing ‘in the threshold’<sup>14</sup> – attempts to transgress such socio-textual boundaries: Helen seeks greater wealth, whilst Tonga’s voiceless nature means his terms of transgression remain a mystery. Both move beyond the forces that frame them, and Lady Audley’s final incarceration is significantly aligned with an entombment (‘you have brought me to my living grave’<sup>15</sup>). Tonga’s death achieves a similar effect, for in an essay on Chandler, Lawrence writes that ‘you have to kill a thing’<sup>16</sup> in order to conquer it. Both texts signal this sense that detective fiction constructs and then punishes subjects who go off-script. Moreover, by indicating that the very notion of transgression is *textual*, detective fiction asks how one can avoid ‘crossing a line’<sup>17</sup> which is essentially a fiction.

It is thus possible to read against Chemaik’s assertion that ‘the moral legitimacy of the detective figure is never in doubt.’<sup>18</sup> Detective fiction increasingly places the detective himself as a major transgressor, although he goes unpunished: primarily because his transgressions help maintain social order. This can be felt in nineteenth century legal discourse, where Peel empowered the detective to punish ‘all loose, idle and disorderly persons who refused to participate in the regime.’<sup>19</sup> Here, the definition of criminality is inseparable from a description of behavioural transgressions more generally: anyone refusing to co-operate with dominant cultural codes can seemingly be punished at all costs. Detective fiction portrays such ideology in action. For instance, Holmes is presented to be something of ‘a calculating machine,’<sup>20</sup> which can be said to overlap with Robert’s sense of being a ‘smaller wheel [in the] mechanism of the human machine.’<sup>21</sup> Smuggling the transgressor ‘out

<sup>7</sup> Havelock Ellis, *The Criminal*, (London: Walter Scott, 1914), p.90.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Sign of Four’ in *Sherlock Holmes: Selected Stories*, ed. S.C. Roberts, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 137. All further quotes will refer to the same edition.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Sign,’ p.168.

<sup>10</sup> George Grella, ‘The Formal Detective Novel’ in Winks, *Critical Essays*, p.95.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine Kittredge, *Lewd & Notorious*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p.8.

<sup>12</sup> Audley, p.235.

<sup>13</sup> Audley, p.294.

<sup>14</sup> Audley, p.315.

<sup>15</sup> Audley, p.384.

<sup>16</sup> D.H Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, (London: Penguin, 1971), p.71.

<sup>17</sup> Audley, p.347.

<sup>18</sup> Warren Chernaik, *The Art of Detective Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p.104.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Upamanyu Mukherjee, *Crime and Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.68.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Four,’ p.81.

<sup>21</sup> Audley, p.159.

of the reach of justice<sup>22</sup> allows this masculine, social machine to continue. Braddon's narrator certainly promotes the idea that punishing one transgressor ensures that 'good people [are] all happy and at peace.'<sup>23</sup> Therefore, detective writers increasingly use the narrator to interrogate the morality of their hero-figure. For instance, Watson voices a degree of doubt about the very ethics of punishment, stating that Holmes, 'in viewing the matter as an abstract problem...[becomes] positively inhuman.'<sup>24</sup> Holmes's interest in criminality is essentially intellectual, in which the transgressor is merely part of an equation that the detective must solve. It is therefore possible to counteract Thompson's belief that Doyle is 'distinctive in his valorisation of imperialism.'<sup>25</sup> Rather, there is a telling irony in Holmes's wish to 'work it out myself, now that we have gone so far.'<sup>26</sup> For quite how far the detective – and the imperial project itself – could go, without transgressing legal and moral constraints, proves to be a major concern of detective fiction.

'What, indeed, does detective fiction do? It creates a problem – the crime – and declares a sole cause: the criminal.'<sup>27</sup> Neither story fits such a formula, as each questions who is *allowed* to be transgressive, and why. In 1865, Justin M'Carthy argued that the novel itself was 'our most influential teacher'<sup>28</sup> in such matters. Thus, if typed depictions of *Tonga* and *Lady Audley* pinpointed the textuality of transgression, detective fiction must also be said to determine grounds for punishment. For instance, Braddon signals that it is the detective novel itself that informs 'us everyday of murders committed in the country.'<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it is the celebrity of the detective figure – 'I haven't read...Wilkie Collins for nothing'<sup>30</sup> – that fuels Robert's need 'to do my duty.'<sup>31</sup> Doyle taps into such an argument when suggesting that literature itself, in its idealisation of the hero-figure, places the detective outside the law. It is Watson's *narrative* that creates Holmes's sense of his own authority, and legitimizes his role as 'the only unofficial detective.'<sup>32</sup> Holmes's consequent 'egotism' is thus inscribed by the very existence of a text 'devoted to [his] special doings.'<sup>33</sup> Therefore, if detective fiction shapes what we deem transgressive, it also helps create, and frequently questions, a detective's 'special doings.'

The development of detective fiction shows a growing awareness that writers were shaping an audience's attitudes to criminality. 'The Sign of Four' dedicates a large segment of narration to one of its offenders (Jonathan Small). This idea that criminality should be allowed to have a voice, and was in itself an art, signals a distinct shift in the genre's focus. As such, this essay will close by suggesting that Christie and Chesterton make the transgressive actor the focal point of their narrative, and greatly de-criminalize the criminal. Detective fiction frequently parallels the detection process to its audience's interpretative strategies. In Braddon's text, how to punish is intrinsically linked to how to *read*: having 'read [Helen's] face,' Robert declares that 'you must seem to me no longer a woman.'<sup>34</sup> Robert is forced to repress all emotional attachments to Helen because an audience's sympathy with criminality would be deemed transgressive. Yet in the *Father Brown* stories, Chesterton makes the identification with the criminal his main theme; going so far as to

<sup>22</sup> *Audley*, p.373.

<sup>23</sup> *Audley*, p.437.

<sup>24</sup> 'Four,' p.75.

<sup>25</sup> Jon Thompson, *Fiction, Crime and Empire*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p.68.

<sup>26</sup> 'Four,' p.138.

<sup>27</sup> Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, David Miller, (London: Verso, 1983), p.144.

<sup>28</sup> Justin M'Carthy, 'Novels With A Purpose' in Lisa Rodensky, *The Crime in Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.3.

<sup>29</sup> *Audley*, p.117.

<sup>30</sup> *Audley*, p.395.

<sup>31</sup> *Audley*, p.56.

<sup>32</sup> 'Four,' p.96.

<sup>33</sup> 'Four,' p.70.

<sup>34</sup> *Audley*, p.346.

describe Flambeau as a ‘colossus of crime.’<sup>35</sup> As such, ‘The Blue Cross’ opens by cataloguing the criminal’s former conquests, and to a great extent reverses the genre’s focus from the celebrity of the detective to the artistry of the transgressor. The narrator of ‘The Blue Cross’ thus makes a significant narratorial slip when writing of ‘his best days (I mean, of course, his worst).’<sup>36</sup> Here, Chesterton hints towards an uneasy acknowledgement of the aesthetics of criminality, marking a definite shift from the genre’s traditions: now ‘the criminal is the creative artist: the detective only the critic.’<sup>37</sup> This must be placed against Chesterton’s early belief that criminals were ‘children of chaos.’<sup>38</sup> The switch in Chesterton’s own views thus runs parallel with the genre’s increasing awareness of the creativity of crime. Moreover, when switching from criminal to Brown’s sidekick, Flambeau suggests that the potential for both criminality and detection, for sin and goodness, is inside every individual: ‘I am a man, and have all devils in my heart.’<sup>39</sup>

Hence, if texts authorised the detective’s transgressive nature, Chesterton goes so far as to place detective fiction responsible for crime itself. Flambeau, for instance, is said to base his very methods on ‘Dickens’s style,’<sup>40</sup> and it is arguable that the growing popularity of the detective novel can be located in a fascination with criminality. If the transgressive act becomes expected, its creativity, and the novelty of crime, must partly be what draw readers in. Chesterton references the genre’s increasingly imaginative connection with transgression when Brown ‘[plans] out each of the crimes very carefully...I had murdered them all myself.’<sup>41</sup> Chesterton is thus one of the first writers to locate in detective fiction an element of wish-fulfilment: the text allows readers to safely enact fantasies of transgression. Identification with the detective – so central to Braddon and Doyle’s text – thus parallels an emerging identification with criminality. Unease over such an approach is voiced by Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. He criticises his sister for reading too many detective novels, but crucially, Caroline can only *read* about detection. Her limited agency within the public sphere – an argument that can be traced back to Braddon – is depicted in relation to ‘a dog who has been refused a walk.’<sup>42</sup> There is a certain apprehension, then, about how far one can connect with the criminal, which seems interwoven with a persisting restriction of stereotyped individuals. When ascending to the role of investigator, transgressing expectations of the woman and the priest, both Caroline and Father Brown undermine the image of the assumed detective. Christie and Chesterton thus trace two characters’ transgressions of readerly expectations. Like Holmes and Robert Audley, they go unpunished because they essentially enforce dominant social order.

Rzepka thus writes that ‘detective fiction helps interpolate its readers into conformity,’<sup>43</sup> precisely because they are allowed imaginary transgressions. Whilst this does mark a break from Braddon and Doyle, the Father Brown stories only take identification with criminality to a certain point: Chesterton stops short from telling ‘the story from the inside.’<sup>44</sup> *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* thus enacts detective fiction’s worst fears, for Christie shapes her entire text around the narration of the murderer. Consequently, she inverts the detective/sidekick model: for if Flambeau can switch from transgression to detection, the detective figure is also able to turn to murder. Christie ensures that Poirot is as fooled as the

<sup>35</sup> G. K Chesterton, ‘The Blue Cross,’ *The Penguin Complete Father Brown*, (London: Penguin, 1981), p.9. All further quotes will refer to the same edition.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Cross,’ p.9.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Cross,’ p.12.

<sup>38</sup> G.K Chesterton, *The Defendant*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1901), p.144.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Hammer of God,’ *Complete Father Brown*, p.97

<sup>40</sup> ‘The Flying Stars,’ *Complete Father Brown*, p.54.

<sup>41</sup> ‘The Secret of Father Brown,’ *Complete Father Brown*, p.166.

<sup>42</sup> *Ackroyd*, p.126.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p.22.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Flying Stars,’ p.54.

reader, complimenting Sheppard on the fact that he has ‘kept [his] personality in the background.’<sup>45</sup> This idea of keeping the criminal’s personality ‘in the background’ articulates a wider genre shift: for if Tonga, Lady Audley and even Flambeau were almost treated *as* texts, Christie’s transgressor is our sole means of accessing the novel and its world. *Ackroyd* is the most extreme instance of a wider genre move, for if transgression was previously the object of elimination, it is now the very centre of the narrative. Christie’s approach caused enormous controversy, with Knox writing that ‘*the criminal must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.*’<sup>46</sup> *Ackroyd* showed how detective stories - which have repeatedly established concepts of criminality - have formed literary laws that writers *themselves* must obey.

Critical anxiety about Christie’s innovation can be tied to its exact treatment of transgression. The novel actively dramatises how easily readers can be led - by the appropriately named Sheppard - to side with criminal forces. As Braddon and Doyle suggested, there is a sense that who readers value – and deem transgressive – is created in discourse. In ‘The Blue Cross’, for instance, Valentin’s reputation as a ‘great detective’ - built by his reputation in the media - leads him to wrongfully dismiss Brown as ‘round and dull.’<sup>47</sup> Similarly, in *Ackroyd*, Sheppard uses maps and diagrams to signpost his own authority: readers do not question them, and consequently assume the trustworthiness of his narration. The fact that the narration is not noticeably ‘criminal’ counteracts the accusation that Christie’s fiction is snobbish and ‘backwards-looking.’<sup>48</sup> Christie is in fact quite subversive, underwriting the very assumptions of the genre: that a criminal’s mind is somehow different to our own.

Finally, if the development of detective fiction shows a shift in attitudes towards transgression, it also portrays alternative modes of punishment. Auden, paralleling detective fiction with ritual, discusses the catharsis that is achieved when the guilty society has been cleansed.<sup>49</sup> Rather, detective fiction becomes progressively more explicit in suggesting that crime is an intrinsic part of social life, and cannot be removed. Chesterton marks a major change in the genre’s modes of punishment: instead of convicting Flambeau for his crimes, Father Brown offers him a chance to repent. There appears to be a distinct split here between social and spiritual law, for Father Brown firstly follows the rule of God. Chesterton felt that the role of the detective, and the allegorical function of fiction itself, should be to police human nature. Structurally, this marks a significant advance from earlier instances of detective fiction, which ended with the transgressor’s incarceration (*Lady Audley’s Secret*) or his death (‘The Sign of Four’).

However, like Robert Audley and Watson before them, there is still a relative anxiety about what constitutes appropriate punishment. Poirot, when allowing Sheppard to take his own life, essentially places both criminal *and* detective outside the law. Such a decision is relatively shocking, although the emotional response *Ackroyd*’s suicide provokes is deliberately dwarfed by the earlier confession of murder. Christie thus ties the development of detective fiction with the audience’s desensitisation towards criminality; where the greater shock derives from the transgression of genre conventions. Suicide as self-punishment would certainly have met Chesterton’s disapproval, but Christie’s resolution does share with Chesterton a request that the criminal’s own identity be recognised. Poirot may allow the criminal to choose his punishment, but he ensures that he should finish his *narrative* first.

<sup>45</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p.210. All further quotes will refer to the same edition.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Knox, ‘A Detective Story Decalogue,’ in Winks, *Selected Essays*, p.200.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Blue Cross,’ p.10.

<sup>48</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p.62.

<sup>49</sup> W.H Auden, ‘The Guilty Vicarage,’ in Winks, *Selected Essays*, pp.15-24.

There is a sense, in contrast to Auden, that punishing the criminal does not remove criminality, for the text lives on. Making a murderer an artist figure, who both creates and destroys his identity, Christie reverses the transgressor's status as a socio-textual construct. Both her and Chesterton place writers, detectives and criminals on a *continuum* of creativity.

This essay agreed to an extent with the idea that transgressive, rather than strictly criminal acts, are punished in detective fiction. *Lady Audley's Secret* and 'The Sign Of Four' exhibited characters who defied expectations of gender and race. They highlighted the limits of the suggestion that transgression more generally is always punished. For the detective figure frequently operates outside the law, setting up the argument that both transgression and detection be seen as literary constructs. If both crime and punishment have textual origins, there is a consistently subversive attitude towards law-enforcement throughout the genre. What has certainly changed is the narratorial focus: for Christie and Chesterton come to make the transgressor the subject of their narratives. They thus tap into the growing appeal of detective fiction, in that it permits readers fantasies of criminality. It was suggested that the very traditions of the detective form have created rules that authors such as Christie transgress. Therefore, the expansion of transgression throughout the genre - incorporating criminals, detective, writers and readers - points to the very limits of its concept: 'make the definition too narrow, it becomes meaningless; make it too wide and the whole human race becomes involved.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in V. Skultans, *Madness & Morals*, (London: Routledge, 1975), p.172.

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